

Section 1: Theory and Research

The Early Influence of Moreno and Psychodrama on Theodore Sarbin and Role Theory

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Theodore Sarbin (1911–2005) was a significant figure in the field of role theory, social psychology, narrative psychology, and constructivism. Because constructivism has become a more prominent trend in psychology and psychotherapy, it is of historical interest to note how Sarbin's work was influenced by Moreno and, in turn, to recognize Sarbin's relevance to the advance of Moreno's contributions today.

KEYWORDS: History of psychology; psychodrama; role theory; Sarbin; Moreno.

In recent years, psychology has witnessed the development of what might be called a narrative perspective within the discipline. By this we mean the emergence of a distinctive concern with story and storylike constructions in psychological research and practice over the past two decades (e.g., Crossley, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber, 1998). The growth of narrative concerns in the healing and social sciences in the last 20 years has been profound. More than a thousand resources (e.g., books, chapters, articles) involving narrative concerns have been added annually to the PsycINFO database since the mid-1990s (Hevern, 2004a). Narrative thought is also one of the philosophical foundations of psychodrama (Blatner, 2000, p. 55).

Along with Jerome S. Bruner's (1986) influential essay on "Two Modes of Thought" (paradigmatic versus narrative), Theodore R. Sarbin's (1986) edited volume *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* serves as both a convenient marker for the appearance of this constructivist perspective and an expression of its parameters. Sarbin's career, in turn, drew on a variety of influences in his life, and this article will focus on his interactions

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with J. L. Moreno, whom Sarbin first met early in his career, in the 1940s.

From the 1950s forward, Theodore Sarbin became one of the leaders in the field of social role theory (Sarbin, 1954; Sarbin and Allen, 1968). Across a wide range of academic and clinical research studies at both the University of California at Berkeley and the University of California at Santa Cruz from the 1950s to the 1980s, he consistently deployed concepts related to theater, drama, and acting on stage as central to explaining behavior psychologically (Sarbin, 2005). As we note later, Sarbin eventually incorporated his concern with role into narrative psychology as a distinctive understanding of human behavior. However, his initial formulation of role theory came with the publication of his first article on role-taking in Moreno's journal, *Sociometry*, in 1943.

SARBIN'S BACKGROUND

A high school dropout originally, Sarbin completed his BA in two years at the Ohio State University and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1936. Sarbin's encounter with J. R. Kantor's interbehavioral psychology (Mountjoy and Hansor, 1989) in the summer of 1936 began to erode his commitment to the behaviorist creed. After completing a one-year master's at Case Western Reserve University, he returned to Ohio State for the 1937–38 academic year to complete his doctoral coursework. That year he learned hypnosis and, with classmate Joseph Friedlander, began research on hypnotizability using Rorschach cards as stimuli with hypnotized subjects who were asked to think of themselves as different people (e.g., a female participant was asked under hypnosis to imagine that she was, in one session, Madame Curie and, in another session, Mae West; see Friedlander and Sarbin, 1938). This work, Sarbin claims, "confirmed my belief that hypnosis was more than the mechanical expression of a mental disposition released through the verbal behavior of the therapist. . . . I found myself interpreting the actions of the subject as somehow similar to the performances of stage actors" (1994, p. 14).

For three years beginning in 1938, Sarbin worked at the University of Minnesota as a student counselor while completing a dissertation on clinical and actuarial prediction for Ohio State. At the University of Minnesota, probably around 1940, Sarbin heard University of Wisconsin psychiatrist Norman A. Cameron present a talk about paranoid schizophrenic patients to members of the Psi Chi chapter. Cameron claimed that the root difficulty of such patients lay not in some Freudian conflict or medical disability but in their ineptness in carrying out the roles demanded of them in their social worlds (Cameron, 1943, 1950). For Sarbin, hearing Cameron's theory of inept role-taking proved to be pivotal.

In 1941, Sarbin moved to the University of Chicago as a Social Science Research Council postdoctoral fellow and remained there until 1943. He worked with urban sociologist Ernest Burgess and absorbed the thinking of George

Herbert Mead as it echoed through that venue almost a decade after Mead's death. For Sarbin, Mead's thinking offered a more general social psychology of roles that set Cameron's thesis about inept role-taking in a broader context. At the university's medical school, he collaborated with physician Julian Lewis on a study of hypnotic suggestion and psychosomatic responses (Lewis and Sarbin, 1943). This research further confirmed him in a role-based explanation for hypnotic phenomena. Finally, he did extensive clinical work with psychiatric patients at another teaching hospital and was frequently called on to provide clinical hypnotic treatment for various psychiatric and psychosomatic conditions.

In the mid-1940s, Sarbin had several interactions with Moreno, who also significantly influenced the evolution of his thinking, and more details of this interaction will be noted later.

After a brief stint in private practice in Chicago, Sarbin moved to Los Angeles, where again he set up a clinical practice. In 1948, Sarbin moved to Berkeley and began teaching clinical psychology at the University of California the next year. Thereafter, Sarbin pursued his career in both social and clinical psychology, evolving toward narrative psychology.

Another influence on Sarbin, beginning in the 1950s, was the pioneering work of Erving Goffman (1922–1982), a noted social psychologist whose book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is taken by many to signal the advent of dramaturgical notions in the social sciences (Goffman, 1959; Sarbin, 2003). However, as this article notes, the idea of drama as a key metaphor for describing the complexity of psychosocial interactions was already established for Sarbin from his interactions with Moreno. Nevertheless, Goffman's work complements Sarbin's (Brissett and Edgley, 1990/2006).

MORENO'S INFLUENCE

Jacob L. Moreno (1889–1974) was not only the developer of psychodrama and sociometry but also a pioneer in the field of social psychology in his development of role theory (Thomas and Biddle, 1966, pp. 5–7). Further history of Moreno is provided in Blatner (2000), Hare and Hare (1996), and Marineau (1989), and he is included in a list of pioneers in narrative psychology (Hevern, 2004b). In 1937, Moreno launched the journal *Sociometry*, with Columbia University social psychologist Gardner Murphy as its editor and with Harvard's Gordon Allport and other prominent figures on its editorial board. This is when Sarbin and Moreno first entered into a brief but influential professional relationship. In the last year of his life, Sarbin (2005) wrote,

During my post-doctoral fellowship period my inchoate ideas about role-taking were sharpened in dialogues with J. L. Moreno, who had initiated the

use of drama as a therapeutic tool and who encouraged me to write my first systematic article on role-taking (1943). (p. 29)

Furthermore, Sarbin wrote to Hevern in 2004,

I think it was in the spring of 1942 that I spent a week at the Beacon Institute with Moreno and his staff. I also visited him in the New York city office. I elected to spend time with him partly as a result of my having become immersed in the role theory writings of G. H. Mead. A year or two later, Moreno visited me in Los Angeles and we had some good conversations. My stay at the Institute was rewarding. I watched Moreno at work with patients in which he directed the psychodramas. I subsequently employed psychodramatic techniques in my own practice. Moreno offered to set me up as a West Coast branch of his Institute but I declined. We had a very good relationship. He was a charismatic teacher. (Sarbin, personal communication, April 9, 2004)

Examining two of his early articles (Sarbin, 1943, 1945) in the journal *Sociometry* in light of this response, it becomes clear that Sarbin was summarizing a number of experiences he did not talk about in his published autobiographical essays (Sarbin, 1994, 2005). The meetings with Moreno at the Beacon Institute and in New York City mentioned in his personal communication were followed in 1943 by Sarbin's use of psychodrama during the six months he worked at the Elgin State Hospital near Chicago (Sarbin, 1943). His protagonists in these productions were often diagnosed with schizophrenia and its supposed intractable course, but Sarbin witnessed positive responses from these patients when he used psychodrama.

That same year he published his first article on the concept of role-taking in *Sociometry* (Sarbin, 1943), and by the August issue he was listed as a contributing editor to the journal, a position he kept until 1950, by which time he was teaching in Berkeley, California. A second but rarely cited article in 1945 describes quite positively another short but incomplete psychodramatic experience Sarbin had at Illinois's Lincoln State School, probably in the second half of 1943, a venue he also does not mention in either autobiographical statement. In this setting, he worked with mentally retarded patients using psychodrama, again with clearly positive effect.

Despite some politic citations of Moreno's work in his 1943 article on role-taking, Sarbin's overall ideas as expressed in that article more generally reflect the influence of others besides Moreno. His exposure to J. R. Kantor appears to be related to Sarbin's (1943) positions on two issues: his opinion that the actual event (i.e., what specifically happens in an interaction) is fundamental and his rejection of mentalism (whether in the guise of psychodynamics or otherwise) and a focus on whole organism. Sarbin's experiences with hypnosis in both the clinical setting and the experimental laboratory are mirrored in his understanding

that prior experiences underlie roles and that role-taking occurs at varying levels of consciousness (which he later called role involvement; see Sarbin, 1954). That role-taking can be understood as coordinate with the concept of the self echoes the thinking of G. H. Mead. Also, Cameron had established for Sarbin the idea that inept role-taking was a key to psychopathology.

However, in light of both of their contributions, it is fair to point to four ways in which Sarbin was affected by Moreno:

- Psychodrama as a source of role-playing method has been a quasiexperimental approach that tests and validates role theory with both patients and those not in clinical contexts. Whereas Sarbin believed that he could show the role theoretic basis of hypnotic trance via traditional experimental approaches, Moreno's dramaturgical methods opened a far broader and more accessible demonstration of the relationship between psychiatric disorders and role. His successful use of psychodrama with significantly impaired clients strengthened Sarbin's determination to advance role theoretic approaches to clinical problems and disorders.
- Sarbin developed greater respect for the patient's potential to expand role-taking abilities. Coordinating with the previous theme, Sarbin's engagement with patients mirrored in some respects what he saw in Moreno: a confidence that these patients could discover more adequate ways of living daily life no matter what psychiatric label was applied to them or their situation. In Hevern's discussions with Sarbin in the summer of 2004, it was clear that he deeply appreciated Moreno's willingness to champion his patients' potential against the prevailing pessimism of other psychiatric theorists and clinicians.
- Moreno helped support Sarbin's willingness to adopt a nonconformist stance vis-à-vis standard models. Although the personality styles of these two men were in many respects like night and day—Sarbin hadn't the slightest narcissistic edge in his dealings with anyone—both men advocated conceptions that their peers often found incomprehensible. Sarbin seems to have admired Moreno's willingness to advocate on behalf of the nonconventional in his thinking.
- Moreno further affirmed Sarbin at an early stage of his career as a clinician and researcher. The attention Moreno gave Sarbin and his inclusion of Sarbin's work in his journal brought this newly minted PhD into the company of a range of quite influential senior researchers and theoreticians in psychology and sociology. It also came at the point when Sarbin was choosing the direction of his professional work and at a time of significant changes in his own personal life.

CONCLUSION

A major shift in psychology and psychotherapy began in the 1980s, partaking of recognitions that resonated with the turn toward postmodernist epistemology. The reasons for this interpretive turn were multiple, but the shift was stimulated somewhat by the controversy over false memories in therapy and other challenges to archeological motifs in treatment (see DeRivera and Sarbin, 1998). The search for an objective truth about the patient's past that could then be addressed and corrected was increasingly realized to be elusive, masked by layers of imagery, "screen memories," and internal associations. Instead, the idea grew that the problem lay not so much in the facts of the past as in the stories patients told themselves about those memories or impressions, and that it was sufficient to simply help patients retell their stories in more constructive ways. (In a way, Moreno worked with this idea beginning in the 1930s with his approach to first validating the phenomenal reality of his patients' worlds and then gradually reframing that reality through psychodrama.)

Beginning in the 1980s, Sarbin articulated this constructivist position, by embracing the narrative metaphor, and wove the story-making idea together with the dramaturgical perspective. This was the idea that our lives are experienced not as discrete and abstract elements but in terms of interweaving stories, with varying degrees of continuity and coherence. He called this notion the narratory principle (Sarbin, 1994). The concept of role is intrinsic to the dramaturgical perspective, and Sarbin had been a significant writer about role theory since the 1940s. That was also when his first articles on role theory appeared in Moreno's journal, and he spent some time studying with Moreno at the Beacon Institute and in New York City.

There continues to be a need to elaborate the further implications of role theory, to systematize its concepts, and to apply them in more creative ways. The aim of this article is to motivate some study of Sarbin's writings and relate his ideas with the wider trend to apply some of Moreno's ideas about role, drama, and story.

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