
Section 2: Case Studies

Empty Chair Grief Work From a Psychodrama Perspective

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Counselors often use the empty chair method to help clients confront unresolved issues with an absent person. This article compares the empty chair approach created by Jacob Levy Moreno, who developed psychodrama, and Friedrich Perls, who developed gestalt therapy. The article also shows how psychodrama is applied in a one-on-one counseling setting. Psychodrama is most often used in group counseling. The case study demonstrates psychodrama à deux. It reflects a widower's search for meaning and his adjustment to the loss of his wife.

KEYWORDS: Aging; grief; grief counseling; depression; loss of spouse; psychodrama; psychodrama à deux; role reversal.

This article tracks the case study of Paul, recently widowed, who has not received professional help to deal with his loss. The purpose of the article is to demonstrate the use and function of the empty chair and role reversal, as explained and demonstrated by J. L. Moreno. A distinction is made between the applications of the empty chair method by Perls and Moreno.

CASE STUDY

Paul sits mindlessly staring at the television. It has been nine months since his beloved Carmen died. He spends most of his days in that chair, except for when he goes shopping, attends church, or is with his friends. Funny thing about friends. Soon after Carmen died they called and included him in different

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activities. Now, after almost a year, they don't come around very often. Paul knows part of that is his fault. He would rather be alone most of the time. He tells his friends, "I just don't enjoy things without Carmen." Paul has never been a person who talks openly about his feelings or problems. Yet Paul has said to very close friends, "I still talk to her. Do you think that is wrong?" His friends tell him they don't think so, but it would be a good idea for him to talk to someone who helps people who have lost a loved one.

I met Paul about 10 months after his wife died. During our first session I determined that Paul was an instrumental griever, as compared with an intuitive griever. Instrumental griever think through and solve problems in an attempt to master their environment (Doka and Martin, 2010, pp. 70–75).

Paul grieved cognitively, and therefore talked about his relationship with Carmen, his wife. Rather than using "feeling" words, he was more apt to describe activities he experienced with Carmen.

Knowing he missed talking things over with Carmen, I decided to use the empty chair technique so he could "talk" with her to find a way to live more comfortably with his grief.

Many writers mention using the gestalt empty chair technique. I prefer to use the empty chair technique shaped by Moreno in his psychodrama method. According to Moreno, the empty chair method requires that the absent person be brought to the session by role reversal rather than by asking the client to speak *as if* the person is in the chair. Moreno believed that pretense diluted the power of the process. Therefore, a counselor using the psychodramatic method asks the client to sit in the empty chair and "be" the absent person. While the client is in the empty chair, the counselor "interviews" the absent person and gathers valuable information about the absent person and also ensures that the absent person becomes existentially present. That is, the empty chair is no longer empty; it is occupied by the absent person, and the client can quite easily see the absent person present in the moment. In my opinion, Moreno's role reversal approach is more compelling and brings the experience more completely into the moment than the gestalt approach (Moreno & Moreno, 1975). Let me demonstrate.

In the second session with Paul, I say, "Paul, please put that empty chair across from you. I want to meet Carmen, and the best way to do that is to talk to her. I want you to be Carmen. I want you to sit in that chair the way Carmen sits in a chair. I want you to capture the way Carmen answers questions. I want you to be Carmen in every way you can. You know Carmen better than anyone, so I know you can do that." Notice that I try to be clear about what I want him to do. He is with me to get help; therefore, I need to manage the session with authority but without doing harm, as Moreno (1973) cautions.

Paul sits in the empty chair. I say, "Carmen, thank you for being here. How old were you when you died?" (Begin with the least threatening questions first.)

Paul (as Carmen) says, "I was 62 and Paul was 64."

I ask, "How did you die?"

Paul answers (as Carmen), "I died from lung cancer."

I continue, "What did you love most about Paul?"

Paul (as Carmen) says, "He was good to me. We did almost everything together, and we always made decisions together."

I respond, "Carmen, Paul is here. He has missed you very, very much. I think he needs to talk to you."

I have established the presence of Carmen. I have discovered that Paul saw himself and Carmen as inseparable. Therefore, his grief is connected to the loss of an active participant in his life. Of course, connected to that is the sadness with which he continues to live. Now, as we progress, Carmen's presence is no pretense. She is clearly in our session.

I continue the session and say, "Please reverse roles and be Paul." Paul moves back to his seat and looks at the "empty" chair that now holds Carmen. I say, "Paul, many thoughts have crossed your mind during the lonely days since Carmen died. She is here. Tell her about those thoughts."

Paul looks intently at the chair and in a quiet voice says, "I have really missed talking things over with you. You always did so many little things like stopping and starting the newspaper when we were gone and buying the kind of food that was healthy for me. I relied on you to do so many of those little things just caring for me. I tell you, Carmen, I feel really lost without you. But you know what, Carmen? What I probably miss most is just hearing you in the house! It is just so darn quiet, I don't know what to do."

The dialogue continues along these lines until I think Paul has come full circle. We must now move toward an encounter with Carmen focused on how Paul can move forward. I have found that one of the best ways to do this is by creating a "wisdom figure." In this case, I endow Carmen with wisdom. I say, "Paul, Carmen has been gone almost a year; she has been endowed with wisdom beyond what we mortals possess. Talk to her about where you must go from here."

Paul looks at Carmen and says, "I'm not going to stop mourning and being sad, but I know I can't continue staring at the TV set. I just am not sure what I should do." Paul reverses roles with Carmen, and I say to him, "Carmen, you have been able to watch Paul, and you have wisdom to help him. He has made it clear he is not ready to stop mourning your loss, but he thinks it is time to do more than watch TV. Tell him what to do."

What I have done by giving Carmen the gift of wisdom is to empower Paul to get beyond his self-imposed isolation. Be aware that this may not happen until the third or fourth session. I have truncated this session to remind readers of the power of psychodrama role reversal and to illustrate that the power lies within the client.

I leave Paul in the role of Carmen. He says (as Carmen), "Paul, you know you have not been alone. I have been there in spirit. It is time you begin to do some things that get you moving out of the house. Your friends from the plant have asked you to come to their card games, and I know the church is always looking for ushers. You know how to get started doing things. You always did woodworking around the house. I know that Casa de los Niños always needs someone to do small jobs for the center. The thing is, Paul, I don't want you to forget me, nor do I want you to shrivel up and die." I say, "Reverse roles." Paul returns to his own chair, and I move the empty chair away. I then ask, "What did you learn?" He answers, "I learned that I don't need to stop grieving, but I can start living on my own."

I have been struck by the frequency with which the gestalt empty chair technique is mentioned in publications about grief work instead of the psychodrama empty chair method. One reason is that Perls was skilled at creating a public image, whereas Moreno was less publicly known. The other reason is that psychodrama has been cloistered behind an extensive set of training standards, and it is essentially a group therapy method steeped in sociometry. I hope this article underscores the power of using psychodrama à deux. Moreno clearly declared the legitimacy of psychodrama in one-on-one counseling. I want this article to emphasize that role reversal in psychodrama is important and that its effectiveness rests with how the absent person is created.

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