

PSYCHO-OPERA: A NEW CONCEPT COMBINING OPERA AND PSYCHODRAMA

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This paper is being written to describe to music therapists, psychodramatists and those in related fields a newly developed technique called psycho-opera, which we believe has a place in psychotherapy. In this paper we will describe how psycho-opera emerged, its theoretical rationale, how it can be used and what value it has in the psychotherapeutic repertoire.

Psycho-opera, which is based on the concept of psychodrama, employs singing as a means of communication rather than speech. As a therapeutic modality it may be used as an experience in and of itself or as an adjunct to other therapies. It is unique in that it focuses on the lighter side of life and stresses having a good time in a group. Humor is present in some form in every psycho-opera.

THE ORIGIN OF PSYCHO-OPERA

Psycho-opera, which is derived from the psychodramatic techniques of J. L. Moreno, was developed spontaneously by Tobi Klein. At the time she was studying psychodrama and in between psychodrama sessions, she played the piano for her own enjoyment. As she was playing and people began coming into the room, they were invited to join with her, singing in a playful way, about whatever came to mind. The directions were sung to those around the piano in a recitative and they responded in the same manner. Before long all those in the room were involved, either singing, dancing, clapping or beating time to the music.

Tobi sang suggestions to the group for a theme about which they could all sing. As these themes were developed, she continued to play the piano, underscoring the ideas of the singers by her accompaniment, and serving as a conductor from the piano to hold the group together and expand the themes into larger vignettes.

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THE THEORY OF PSYCHO-OPERA

In his book on Psychodrama, J. L. Moreno* stated that the development of psychodrama and psycho-music has illustrated clearly how every man, not only the professional, possesses the ability to create and produce drama and music in his own style. Each man uses his own body and his own vocal chords to produce musical rhythms. Psycho-opera is similar in many ways to other psychodramatic procedures; it is a psycho-musical drama centering on four themes. First is the idea of participation wherein the group members become involved and each is able to participate passively as well as actively. Participants develop a social theme and crystallize that theme as an opera. Another area in which psycho-opera resembles psychodrama is in its emphasis on individuality; each participant is able to join the collective without losing his individual characteristics.

The fourth idea which psycho-opera shares in common with psychodrama is that of spontaneous leadership arising from the group. The difference between the two is that in psycho-opera, the leader does not necessarily follow up on problems and enact them psychodramatically. It is possible to use psycho-opera as a psychodramatic warm up and to then progress to regular psychodrama. Psycho-opera may also be used to help people develop their creativity and spontaneity.

The opera form was chosen for psycho-opera because it incorporates the use of voice, drama, movement, dance, solo and chorus. It gives the members of the group the option of singing in a recitative style, while those with good singing voices can use their voices in operatic style. It enables each person to assume a variety of roles, to use humor, sadness, joy or anger as his feelings dictate; to become a sound, to become a stage prop, a chorus member or a leading soloist; or the members can create a scene or change a scene. As Moreno stressed in his writing, everyone has a drama inside of him waiting to be released. One does not have to make up a drama, whether set to music or not—the drama within is based on one's life experience.

Music when used in a group has many advantages in that it can unite the group, and provide a common experience and mood. It can also change moods through the alternation of major and minor modes. Varied effects can be produced through changing rhythms, which may be jazzy, lyrical, slow, fast, jumpy, martial, happy, etc. Using a range of dynamics, the music can be soft and gentle, or loud and dramatic. With the music as a common bond, members of the group can join together, and those who are lacking rhythmic or pitch abilities, or are insecure about their capacity to participate, can follow the stronger members or leaders. They can join in by clapping or

*Moreno, J. L. Psychodrama, Vol. 1, Fourth Ed. (Beacon House, Inc., Beacon, N.Y. 1972).

marching, or sing as part of a group chorus without feeling that their musical shortcomings are showing.

The singing voice is used exclusively throughout psycho-opera for several reasons. Many people, such as aphasics, stutterers, regressed psychotics and the moderately retarded, have severely limited speech, but are able to sing. They can communicate more through their singing voices than through their speaking voices. Greater variety of inflection and expression are possible in the singing voice than in ordinary speech. Dynamic range is expanded in singing, and the element of rhythm in singing, whether slow or fast, helps build up excitement, retain interest, and stimulate the group.

In psycho-opera, the music is combined with a series of scenes, which are spontaneously developed by the participants. All interactions are done with the singing voice, and there is no speaking permitted during the time of the opera. There is no preparation required, because in psycho-opera, a spontaneous opera is created using the innate talents of the group.

THE STRUCTURAL PROCESS OF PSYCHO-OPERA

The format for psycho-opera is derived from Moreno's format for psychodrama. There is a warm-up, then the action, and finally, the sharing. One of the basic distinctions is that psycho-opera does not focus on problems. It can be used to deal with problems, but its primary goal is to help people to develop and rehabilitate themselves and learn to have a good time. In many forms of psychotherapy there is great emphasis on problems, but most therapy does not deal with the capacity of people to enjoy themselves nor does it try to harness their potential creative and spontaneous abilities.

Many of those who take part in a psycho-opera group may be aware of their problems, but they are often unable to come to a gathering, to let themselves go, or have a good time in a social setting. They do not know how to come away from the sidelines and get involved in the action. The use of humor and make-believe in both roles and voices in psycho-opera helps those who are shy, and they find themselves able to interact with others in the group, whereas they may hold back in a more intensive, serious psychodrama.

Although psycho-opera is as serious in purpose as is psychodrama, its primary goal is to help people get involved with other people, and not necessarily to focus on personal problems. The content and themes that arise in psycho-opera may be similar to those in psychodrama, but the manner in which they are worked through is different.

A TYPICAL PSYCHO-OPERA SESSION

Although the leader of a psycho-opera session might work from a piano, guitar, drum or other instrument, both of the authors lead their sessions from

the piano. In a typical session, the leader is seated at the piano playing familiar songs as the participants enter the room. The songs are chosen to create a related, friendly atmosphere in which all can join and feel at ease. Some of the songs are chosen by the leader, while others are suggested by the group. This is the warm-up part of the session and lasts about fifteen minutes. The group can consist of from 15 to 25 members, and they may reflect a variety of ages and backgrounds.

Examples of songs used in the warm-up are: "Go Tell It on the Mountain," "Day is Done," "The Saints Go Marching In," "Spinning Wheel," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "If I Had a Hammer," and "Blowin' In The Wind." However, in working with special ethnic and racial groups, these warm-up songs can be varied by the leader to songs that are familiar and comfortable for that particular group. The warm-up songs are played with a strong, lively rhythmic accompaniment and as people enter the room they are encouraged to stand informally around the piano while singing or keeping time to the music.

Following the warm-up, the leader asks everyone to sit down on chairs arranged in a horse-shoe shape around the piano. Then the leader explains in song how the session is to proceed, namely, that all communication is to be sung rather than spoken. The singing is generally done in a recitative style with the leader and group members making up any kind of melody that comes to mind, not a known or necessarily repeatable song. The leader, with one or two assistants sings to introduce himself, and then, in a recitative, encourages each person to stand, introduce himself, give his name, or tell something about himself, what he does, or what he would like to do. For example, one person might say, "My name is Joe, I'm a social worker, but I really would like to be a famous violinist." The leader might suggest that he play a make-believe violin and simulate the sounds the violin would play, or that he invite others to come up and join him in forming an orchestra around him. When he finishes his "concert" he would be asked to look around the room and call upon another person whom he would like to meet, and ask that person to introduce himself. This process goes on until everyone present has sung an introduction.

From time to time, the leaders encourage the group members to join in as a chorus, to comment, in echo-like repetition, on some particular phrase or word that has been sung. This response has an effect somewhat like the Greek chorus in the traditional Greek theatre. During pauses in the opera, the leader may take the initiative of carrying on or changing the rhythmic accompaniment, changing the key or dynamics, or varying the mode to keep up the momentum. However, the purpose of the accompaniment is to support and flow out of the opera, not to dominate the action. Regardless of the instrument used, the musical background must be supportive but not intrusive.

In the experience of both of the authors, there are many times during a psycho-opera when a great deal of humor and even comic description arise, along with some more serious feelings. Movement and gestures seem to illustrate the themes and generally follow the singing rather than precede it. A theme which was used with an interesting development was the theme of the meat boycott during the time of meat shortages and price increases.

As soon as the leader suggested the theme of a meat boycott, everyone spontaneously arranged themselves as articles in a supermarket. Each person introduced himself as an item on the shelf. Then they placed themselves in the supermarket according to the departments they belonged in. After the introductions, the strawberry in the fruit department, and the cheesecake in the cake department, wanted to get together. There was a spontaneous love duet between the strawberry and the cheesecake, and the strawberry was invited to move to the cake area to be close to the cheese cake. There was also a duel between the meat and the fish, with the entire group choosing sides, cheering and singing for either the meat or the fish. While this was happening, one person was a popcorn, and kept jumping up and down, not participating with the others. Later during the period of sharing, this led to a discussion of that person's tendency to isolate himself in groups since the popcorn was the only one not joining the group.

Another method for developing a theme is to have the leader ask the group to sit down on the floor in a circle. The leader or the assistants then begin to sing a story, and ask each person to add a verse to the story when it reaches him in the circle. Often these verses turn out to be very humorous, while others are sad, gory, imaginative and/or fanciful. In order to pick up the thread of the story, everyone present must pay close attention to the singer before him, so as to be prepared to continue the tale when his turn comes. While the story may begin very simply, it may take on colorful twists and turns, moving into strange scenes and environments, with many characters being added, some of which are weird and frightening. Others modify the story to make it romantic and beautiful.

Sometimes at the conclusion of the theme section, or story development, the leader may ask the group to lie down on the floor on their backs, with feet together in the center like the spokes of a wheel. Everyone is asked to close his eyes and start to hum, listening to each other, and trying to feel when the others are ready to get up together, first to a sitting position, then to stand, joining hands, and singing words which express how they feel at the moment, or to express the theme of the session which is just being concluded. At the end the leader or an assistant sings goodby to signal the close of the opera.

A typical session lasts about an hour and a half, and is followed by the sharing portion, in which there is a group discussion of what has taken place.

Many in the group often feel quite elated and exhilarated at the end of the session.

THE TRAINING OF A PSYCHO-OPERA DIRECTOR

Because of the combination of skills and interests required to conduct psycho-opera sessions, the number of people who have used psycho-opera as a therapeutic modality is somewhat limited. Whenever it has been used, it has met with extremely enthusiastic response from therapists of a variety of disciplines. Many of these therapists have been the participants in psycho-opera groups, as well as observers.

The combination of skills and training which are essential to therapists conducting psycho-opera sessions are training as a psychotherapist with skill in the use of psychodrama, group dynamics, and experience in the use of music with groups. The leader should be someone who enjoys being with people, who is at ease with a musical instrument, and who likes having fun in a group. Special musical and psychodramatic sensitivity are needed in order to follow the singer, provide mood changes, sustain moods, or give support. The leader facilitates the development of the opera, keeps it moving, and finally brings it to a conclusion. He also encourages members of the group to take on a role, join the chorus, get involved with another actor, or to begin another scene.

While the leader does not need to be classically trained in music, it is helpful if he is sufficiently skilled in both the use of his instrument and relaxed about using his own singing voice so that his playing and singing are secondary to his carrying out his part as the opera leader.

THE ROLE OF THE PSYCHO-OPERA LEADER

One of the chief functions of the leader is to help the members of the group to relax. A leader who has an ordinary singing voice rather than an operatic voice, seems to be able to set the group at ease more quickly. The leader and his assistants serve as models for the session, and if they have a good time, the others will join in with the spirit of the session. The leader provides the structure, makes the connections, and like an orchestra conductor, gives the opera cohesion.

Familiarity with the members of the group is helpful, but with an unfamiliar or new group it is also possible to do a psycho-opera. The leader must be prepared with a variety of topics or themes which serve as the basis around which opera can be developed. However, wherever possible, the participants need to feel that the opera they produce is their own creation. The more the group takes over, the better they feel. If the leaders push a shy member to participate, the sense of spontaneity is lost, and the anxiety level of the group is raised. It is best to have individuals volunteer to perform a role, rather than

coercing someone to participate. There should be a sense that each member is free to change a role or to add to it in any way he chooses.

THE ROLE OF ASSISTANTS

The ideal staff complement for conducting a psycho-opera session is one director and two assistants. With the leader seated at the piano (or occupied with his particular instrument) the auxiliaries are needed because they are free to stand and sit with the rest of the group. They can model and assist those who may be hesitant or shy about getting involved. The assistants help the leader produce the opera. Their function is to assist the leader, carry out his suggestions and wishes while at the same time encouraging participation of group members. If the assistants have never attended a psycho-opera session, it is helpful if they are briefed in advance. It is also useful if they are familiar with the concepts of psychodrama such as: role reversal, double, become the object, and modeling. The idea is that they must know enough of the technique to assist in making an opera develop from a series of small vignettes.

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATION

Psycho-opera was first used by Ms. Klein in 1969 and has been used by both authors and others trained by the authors since that time. Initially it was used in a general hospital on a psychiatric ward. To date it has not been used by the authors for long term therapy or on-going sessions; more often it is used as a special therapeutic or training session.

Although psycho-opera has been used by the authors with both hospitalized patients and others, it seems more difficult to conduct with psychotic patients than with other people. It seems most helpful when used with individuals who function well in everyday life, but are socially very constricted and reticent about getting involved in something new or spontaneous. Such a person is unlikely to try new experiences, and is unable to get up by himself and join in a group activity. Those who are most difficult to reach with this technique are people who throughout their lives have felt self-conscious and who often avoid social situations out of shyness or fear.

CONCLUSION

Psycho-opera, based on the psychodramatic techniques of J. L. Moreno, employs music in a new way, and for new purposes. It is more than just a sing-along with music, or a party game. The purpose of psycho-opera is to break down barriers, improve the range of communication, both on the verbal and non-verbal levels, and to reduce inhibition.

One effect of psycho-opera is that a shy, withdrawn member of the group is able to express himself more openly. Since the interaction is sometimes gamelike, the participants can freely exaggerate both their movements and expressions. They can use their voices openly and act less rigidly than in more traditional forms of group therapy.

Psycho-opera can focus on themes of a wide ranging nature that are on the minds of those present. The themes vary from those that are personal, to some that are strictly political or even economic. Although psycho-opera can be considered to be another therapeutic modality to be added to those currently available, it has one unique feature. In addition to the value it has in creating a feeling of group cohesion, and releasing tension and inhibition, it is also a source of fun and pleasant surprises. Psycho-opera may be summarized as a group process which encourages spontaneity, creativity, freer movement, and the use of humor within a musical setting.