

The Use of Psychodrama and Sociodrama in Barbershops

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ShopTalk: Share. Heal. Grow., a community-based volunteer project, uses psychodrama and sociodrama in barbershops and has proved to be a very creative way to enhance conversations being facilitated by a psychodramatist-in-training at inner-city barbershops. Creating a structure that facilitates people's right to speak frankly with their opinions respected and the willingness of community members to support one another is important to establish.

KEYWORDS: Sociodrama; psychodrama; Black men; Black-owned barbershops; community empowerment; conversations.

WHAT IS *SHOPTALK: SHARE. HEAL. GROW.*?

ShopTalk: Share. Heal. Grow. is a community-based project given rebirth after the uprising in Baltimore, Maryland, in the spring of 2015. It has a mission to engage the African-American community led by African-American practitioners (including substance abuse professionals, clergy, community empowerment persons, etc.) in discussions that uplift, heal, and inspire people to provide support for each other by sharing their own wisdom and knowledge in a safe, supportive environment—in barbershops owned by African-Americans. Male and female barbers/stylists and customers were all involved in these events.

ShopTalk: Share. Heal. Grow. uses psychodrama, sociodrama, and other action-based techniques to engage members of the community. These facilitated conversations and exercises aim to interact with participants inside of barbershops in order to discuss a number of topics that impact the African-American community, including violence, politics, forgiveness, and drug and alcohol abuse. This format allows the community to experience each other differently and offers solutions to these issues. It's important to use an action method such as sociodrama in barbershops because of its open environment and no agreement to confidentiality. Sociodrama forms a collective story on a topic that is relevant to

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the participants. This action structure opens creative outlets for full involvement and self-expression because it is not a one-person story.

In their book, *Sociodrama: Who's in Your Shoes?*, Sternberg and Garcia (1989) stated that

Sociodrama is a group action method in which participants act out agreed-upon social situations spontaneously. Sociodrama helps people to express their thoughts and feelings, solve problems, and clarify their values. Rather than simply discussing social issues, sociodrama gets people out of their chairs and exploring in action topics of interest to them.

Further, stated the authors,

. . . as they explore various issues, they put themselves in other people's shoes in order to understand themselves and others better. One of the reasons sociodrama works so well is that it taps into the truth about humanity that we are each more alike than we are different. Sociodrama speaks to both sides of the brain, with its action/reflection components. It is a kinesthetic, intuitive, affective and cognitive educational technique. Sociodrama has as its goals: catharsis (expression of feelings), insight (new perception) and role training (behavioral practice).

Other topics that have been discussed are mental health, self-medication, and the application of "Life's Lubricants" (meaning, "golden rules" one may use when life gets rough, tough, and sticky, like love, hope, and laughter). Written referral information about where to go to access mental health, spiritual, and emotional wellness resources in the community are handed out to shop-goers to follow-up in the future, if they desire.

HOW DID THIS IDEA COME TO BE BORN?

Eight years ago, I wanted to celebrate my deceased dad's upcoming birthday and asked my siblings to participate. One of my brothers reacted in anger at the idea. He would not participate because, "Daddy was a bad, violent person. Screw him!" he exclaimed. Daddy had been dead for about 20 years at that point. I wondered why there was so much reactivation, venom, and upset. Upon further questioning, no additional answers came from my brother. I thought that if this was happening to my brother then perhaps others were experiencing the same thing. Maybe the barbershop would make a good place to have meaningful conversations. I was not sure.

Several weeks later, I received my answer while testing out my hypothesis at my old barbershop. It was confirmed that going into barbershops was God-ordained when I first pitched my idea to the guys there. During that visit, I interacted with a 51-year-old man. While sitting in the barber's chair, he disclosed

for first time ever to anyone that he'd been sexually assaulted as a 6 year old. He went on to describe how that incident changed his life "for bad." "I became a fighter and got into a lot of trouble, like being expelled from school for fighting and drinking alcohol. No one was ever going to mess with me again," he declared. He had been getting his hair cut by the same barber pretty much every week for the past 5 years. "We've talked about everything, but I wasn't ready to talk about this until now, I guess," stated the customer. Barbers act as trusted confidants and guides to their customers. They are often trusted to cut the hair of generations of the same family.

Everyone is involved in and benefits from the conversations. For example, there was a barber who joined in on the topic of trust several years ago. He became present to the important responsibility of being such a trusting and influential figure for people in the community that he began to well up with emotions. Before leaving the barbershop that day, he called me back over to his chair and thanked me for reminding him that he had made a commitment a long time ago. He said he "prayed for the opportunity to be the type of man who is respected by others in the community," and then he went to barber school. "It is not time to hang up my clippers," as he had been feeling recently, he exclaimed. After this interaction, I moved forward with certainty and conviction recruiting other barbershops to open their doors and other professionals to join in leading the conversations.

CAN WE REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE GOING INTO BARBERSHOPS?

Then I had no psychodrama training, just a desire to make a difference. This project is the second iteration of the one I conducted 8 years ago called, "Haircuts and Healing Conversations." The initial round included a cadre of human service professionals (social workers, substance abuse and professional counselors, and clergy members) who embarked on a day of healing and reconciliation in the city of Baltimore. Up to 16 people were dispatched out into six barbershops throughout the day in a morning shift and an afternoon shift, including a professional camera crew that volunteered their services. The raw video footage was edited into a DVD called, "Haircuts and Healing Conversations: A Day of Healing." Black t-shirts emblazoned with this slogan and a striking black and white silhouette image of a barber with clippers cutting a customer's hair were worn by our teams.

I believe the project was successful. The evidence is mostly anecdotal, in that we noticed that our previsit planning and goals set with the barbershop owners were fulfilled. They were as follows:

1. To inform all shop personnel of the event and get alignment. We were well received upon entering the shops.
2. To make known to patrons via discussions and flyers placed around the shops that everyone would be asked to sign an informed consent form during this event. There were no obvious objections noted.

3. The conversational spaces were well managed. People voluntarily raised their hands to speak, disagreements did not cause conflict, and there was active participation throughout the sessions.

Additionally, a Baltimore city government official heard about the events and he pledged a portion of his food budget to the next round of visits. This gave us the idea to have a Father's Day focused discussion which was fast approaching. The community really appreciated and rallied around these events.

CAN ACTION METHODS EFFECTIVELY BE USED IN URBAN BARBERSHOPS?

I have now logged over 500 hr of psychodrama training and still have a desire to make a difference in the lives of people in the African-American community. *ShopTalk* was ushered into service as a response to Baltimore's civil unrest in early May 2015. I was eager to do something to impact the violence, conflict, and hurt that was happening. After talking to a few curious people at the so-called "epicenter" of the riots and at the subsequent law enforcement's major tactical response and staging area—Penn-North (an intersection in West Baltimore)—I knew that another round of going into barbershops was in order. I thought that my interests, talents, and skills would best be utilized by facilitating engaging conversations in one of our community institutions—the barbershop. This is the place where barbers are often the ear and mouthpiece of the community. Lots of different conversations are had at the barbershop.

A Psychodrama Example

An example of a method used during these conversations is the following: Hearts were extremely heavy in the barbershop where just two days earlier, a father had killed his two sons, then himself in a murder-suicide tragedy. They all were regular patrons of the barbershop. At the conclusion of a 2.5-hr session in a barbershop in East Baltimore during the summer of 2015, two empty chairs facing each other were placed in the middle of the shop in order to give people an opportunity to make closing remarks psychodramatically. One of the chairs was for whomever wanted to sit in. The other chair was to imagine a person or an inanimate object in it that the participant wanted to say something to.

I modeled the empty chair conversation by placing my late father in the chair. I thanked him for giving me life and forgave him for making it a rough one.

All of a sudden, a young man who had been actively participating for the entire session jumped in the empty chair and began speaking to the other one. He was very warmed up. I briefly stopped him to ascertain who he had placed in the other chair. He softly said, "God is in the empty chair." I quickly looked around the shop. Everyone was staring at the center of the shop with curiosity as if they were watching some performers on TV and was separate from what they were about to experience. I took two big steps back and he continued. "Something powerful was about to happen," I said to myself.

He bent back over to tie his shoes, so I thought. Then slowly, he rose up in his chair, one vertebra at a time (as my yoga instructor directs me), such that his

back was now straight against the back of the chair. His face was already fixated on the other chair and no one could deny he was sitting in the revered presence of God just several inches away from him.

"I thank you God for saving me from childhood sexual abuse." His voice increased. "I thank you for delivering me from drugs and alcohol and incarceration, and all the violence." His voice grew steady and convicted. "And most importantly, God, I thank you for directing my path to this barbershop this morning because I did not set out to come this way. I know it was you who guided me here today to be a part of this discussion. THANK YOU, GOD!" There was now stunned silence in the room. They all were grabbed by the power of his speaking—his conviction—and pulled in, "front and center" to the monologue. I looked around again and noticed that no one moved, spoke, or seemingly breathed, until he got up from his seat and walked out the front door. As people were able to reorient themselves back to the barbershop, he received a standing ovation.

"I don't know why I actually came here today," he later pondered. Another barbershop patron said, stopping him mid-sentence, "I know why. You needed to liberate others with your story," and gave him a heartfelt embrace.

A Sociodrama Example

I have been trained to listen for when someone talks about another person, especially when there is a stark contrast in opinions between the person speaking and who they are talking about. For example, when an older person starts a sentence saying, "Those young people are _____." Or, a young person says, "They (referring to an older person) think we don't know anything." Those words are a cue for me to set up two chairs facing each other and have an impromptu sociodramatic interaction between the two opposing sides.

One time in a barbershop, an older man in his 70s said the magic words. He began by saying, "Those young people are lost these days." I interjected, brought out another chair facing where he was sitting, and said, "Here, have a conversation with that young person." Often times people are caught off guard and give me a look like, "Hey man, no one's in that chair." So I have to repeat or restate the directive. They are eventually able to project someone onto the empty chair and pick up their volume, intensity, and point of view. That was the case this time. After he made his statement, I invited others to occupy the chair and respond as a young person. No one immediately jumped in the chair, so I sat and exclaimed, "You all failed us!" That surprised him a bit, as his eyes got wider and he leaned back in his chair. I extended the invitation again but now both roles were up for grabs. "Who'd like to play either role?" I asked, gesturing to both chairs now facing each other in the middle of the barbershop. There were several rounds of sociodramatic interactions between a "young person" and an "older person" until the conversation naturally ended. As I reflected on this matter, I later learned that the hesitation from those present was most likely due to them being insufficiently warmed up to action.

Additionally, in an open and active environment such as a barbershop, it is important to establish several things up front: (1) ground rules—the do's and

don'ts; (2) structure—what to expect; and (3) timeframe—how long the event will last. Providing this information to everyone up front will go a long way to create a sense of alignment and buy-in.

CONCLUSIONS

ShopTalk: Share. Heal. Grow. is a powerful vehicle for engaging people in urban barbershops. One thing became very clear after interacting with people in barbershops is that if a safe space is created, people are more willing to have conversations that matter, and even enact sociodramas with each other, with respect, humility, and fun. Using action methods in barbershops seemed to pull people in to the conversation quickly, thereby causing deeper connections and heartfelt-experiences with “strangers” to develop.

REFERENCE

Sternberg, P., & Garcia, A., (1989). *Sociometry: Who's in your shoes?* New York, NY: Praeger.