

Pre-Warm-Up in Russian Psychodrama Groups: A Cultural Approach

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ABSTRACT. This article, based on practical psychodrama experience with “frozen” Russian groups, deals with the problem of warm-up, using “no” and “avoidance” reactions on the microdramatic level. In the broad cultural context of modern reality in what was formerly the Soviet Union, the following phenomena are especially significant: (a) prevailing “no” and “avoidance” reactions that reflect defensive and masking behavior, (b) speaker/passive audience relations that supplant an actor/involved audience, (c) a large store of unexpressed reactions that cause new stimuli to be experienced as if within a tightly pressured mass with indistinct layers and structure. The authors offer a concept of structured pre-warm-up processes designed to activate rigidly stagnated emotions and to build on them for the further phases of classic psychodrama.

RUSSIA HAS ALWAYS BEEN FAMOUS for its frost, and, although nowadays the political climate is changed, the problem of social and psychological “defrosting” remains. People have gained some freedom of physical and verbal expression, but they continue to be emotionally frozen. The natural interaction between body and mind has become disrupted. Zerka Moreno (1984, p. 13) has said, “Warming up to psychodrama may proceed differently from culture to culture and appropriate changes in the application of the method should be made.” Based on our experience with Russian psychodrama audiences, we have worked out certain procedures that we have designated *pre-warm-up*, or *defrosting techniques*, which can be organically combined with traditional psychodramatic methods. These techniques may also be applicable in work with especially cold or stagnated individuals or groups in other cultures. We do not present these pre-warm-ups here as a new form of warm-up but rather as a useful bank of “yes” reactions to support already existing warm-ups (Blatner, 1988; Sacks, 1967). Our goal is to prevent a preponderance of what we

have called “no” reactions from rendering whole sessions with these resistant groups totally impotent. We have described the closely connected and mutually dependent “no” reactions and “avoidance” reactions elsewhere (Kroll, Mikhailova, & Serdiouk, in press).

In our practice, we have noticed that even when a person is individually warmed up, energy transmission does not necessarily carry over to the group. The transmission of energy from individual to individual presupposes certain assumptions about the possibility of an exchange of positive reactions. Normally, in some other countries, these assumptions would be taken for granted. For citizens of the former Soviet Union, such energy transmission is especially difficult. We have found it easier to overcome this problem on the subsocial level, that is, without requiring interaction among the members. Instead, we present a chain of simple, step-by-step exercises to the group.

Some Cultural Factors in Contemporary Russia

We base our principles of pre-warm-up on an analysis of traditional Russian behavior. For the present study, the following stereotypes were especially important:

- Prevailing “no” and “avoidance” reactions expressing defensive and masking mechanisms
- Speaker/passive audience relations as opposed to actor/active audience relations
- A large store of unexpressed internal reactions that cause stimuli to be experienced as if from within a tightly compressed mass of indistinct layers

These aspects of Russian behavioral tradition are closely interwoven. Our purpose here is to understand them enough to be able to work within their constraints, rather than to undertake a full analysis of their nature. A Russian person tends not to accept any offered information and expresses this tendency implicitly or explicitly in “avoidance” reactions and “no” reactions. The chain of “no” reactions comes easier than the “yes” chain.

The Russian social environment and the anti-aesthetic spatial surroundings of everyday life help create an ethic of absence and of non-communication. In his Noble lecture, Josef Brodsky wisely noted that “aesthetics is the mother of ethics.” The aesthetics of Russian everyday life is one source of the characteristic blocking of psychic energy and unexpressiveness in the mysterious “Russian mentality.” This may be less true of the aesthetic environment in villages, but the total psychological

result is similar to that in cities and towns. It also helps account for the special passivity of the individual in a psychodramatic group.

A beloved image in Russian art and literature has always been that of wide-open spaces. The theme continually recurs in folk songs, poetry, and the works of classical Russian writers. As in its later version associated with the American West, open spaces have symbolized a feeling of and a longing for freedom. One of the paradoxes with which we are confronted here is that Russians no longer like these open spaces. Our modern historical experience has made them an image less of freedom than of homelessness, endless effort, and danger. In our present culture, only a safely enclosed, intimate space can be experienced positively. In Soviet architecture, huge perspectives and open plazas belong exclusively to the realm of official buildings. The very word *horizon*, for example, has been totally compromised by official demagoguery. Open space makes one feel less cozy, more uncomfortable, and lost. It calls up associations of coldness and hopelessness. At best, one becomes detached from the city surroundings; at worst, one is traumatized by the nonhumanistic style of city planning and design and its monotony of forms and colors. The ugly background of everyday life gives rise to evasive eye movements, with people looking down, aside, or nowhere. Aesthetically sensitive people have worked out a whole strategy of looking-without-seeing. There are almost no eye-traps that might be expected from advertising or in shop windows. An old Russian expression refers to something dull and ugly as "nothing to stop one's eyes on." The typical man, sitting at an official meeting, gazes with an unseeing eye. He does not look at, but through, whatever is before him. Instead of normal focusing, there is a frozen stare. Neither is there the normal defocusing resulting in a continuous, panoramic, perceptual field. Just as the visual channel remains insulated from new information, the auditory channel is choked with senseless, useless noise. Everyday surroundings are polluted by sound. In offices, factories, trains, and even in the streets, people are forced to listen to the radio continuously. They can neither switch it off nor choose the program. This compulsory auditory background creates a general skepticism about verbal information, especially when it is given by one person.

The paucity of choices in everyday life is reflected in a general decrease of selective activity. The very act of choosing is simply not reinforced by behavioral experience. These people feel themselves to be objects of transportation in a public vehicle rather than the subjects of movement. In the communal space of a bus or subway, where people are pressed into a crowd, the passengers cannot articulate their own movements distinctly or distinguish their body sensations. They show low kinesthetic sensitivity. If they are driving, they have difficulty making spatial decisions. It is

no wonder that members of Russian psychodrama groups show diminished sensibility with respect to distance, direction, vision, audition, and kinesthetic experience.

A cold heaviness and permanent tiredness keep the body always on the verge of breakdown. When a person's emergency stock of energy is consumed at one time, he or she compensates later by exhibiting lassitude in an attempt to replenish that strength. The cramming together of the population, the narrowness of private areas in apartments in the former Soviet Union, and the general lack of privacy break down the natural borders of personal space.

The repulsive and alienating nature of these facets of Russian Confederation reality pushes one's feelings away, turning them back inside the personality where they are stored like multileveled psychological fossils. Like bricks of peat, these feelings are not easy to ignite, but once lit, they burn for a long time and generate great heat. This personality structure has both advantages and disadvantages for the individual, but it is most certainly a rich mine of material for the psychologist.

This mass of repressed and compressed feelings is protected by layer upon layer of "no" reactions that were gradually accumulated over time. By carefully removing taboos, we gradually gain access, not to a single suppressed feeling waiting to be acted out, but to a tangled "peat brick" of feelings. They are compressed, and they diffuse into each other so that distinct strata of feelings cannot be easily defined and classified. In psychodrama, one comes to expect not a bright, theatrically effective explosion of a main suppressed feeling but the rolling out of a long chain of feelings, each link of which is significant.

In comparison with this complicated process, Western psychodrama sometimes looks to us shockingly like a conveyer belt of highly standardized and predictable feelings, where one person is crying, another ready to cry about a sudden insight of his/her love or hatred of his/her stepmother or bride/bridegroom, while the third one holds tissues for them both. Rather than the standard packing of the dramas of more open cultures, we deal with feelings in complex entanglements and need to use a different method for apportioning and separating them.

A person who has not sufficiently experienced the role of spectator toward his or her own feelings and who has not perceived them fully cannot suddenly become a protagonist and express these feelings. In addition to that, the role of the sociometric star in Russian tradition requires superdistinctness, completely incompatible with the complex tangle of non-acted-out human reactions accumulated during a long period of stagnation. To envy a star is a helpless and hopeless feeling because the Russian social "spectator" is frozen in his position for years, if not for-

ever. Role reversal with a star is hardly possible. Envy of the star is buried internally and is only partly conscious. The attitude toward those who are actively involved is ambivalent. They may be seen as show-offs. The reversibility of the star and spectator positions in the therapeutic space must be carefully shown to the group members, with special attention given to the nonverbal, behavioral aspects. The process of self-identification with a star must first be corrected by transforming the image of the star from "a speaker in a presidium" to "an actor freely expressing himself on a stage." The social dichotomy of speaker/passive audience must give way to the theatrical dichotomy of actor/involved audience.

A person used to sitting passively listening to a speaker and voting only "for" is certainly not ready to become a protagonist. In this situation, there is no potential space for his or her personal story. Such a person knows by experience that the faintest hope for something positive or interesting can easily be replaced by disappointment. The spectator has been used and made a fool of too many times and is always ready to feel deceived once more. To preserve himself from these continual disappointments, "the man in a meeting" is quick to use the mechanism of noninvolvement. It is a habit, a rule, and even an element of an ethical code. ("We" [in the hall] don't care for "them" [on the presidium] and their tricks.) Practically all that goes on in public is discredited in the individual's mind, but the resistance to the official version does not mean that a person has a ready alternative opinion. "The man in a meeting" shows formal loyalty and imitates involvement while slightly parodying it, but internally he says "no" or "I don't want to listen to this." For this reason, different parts of his body express noncongruent and often contradictory attitudes toward reality. Eyes and eyebrows appear to be alert and attentive; the mouth meanwhile is the mouth of a sleeping person. A straight back shows active presence, whereas the hands look dead, and so on. The bodily expression as a whole is static. "The man in a meeting" is inclined to express minimal communicative reactions and is untrained in the art of dialogue and polylogue. At best, he is able to pronounce a long domineering monologue, shifting to the presidium in his imagination while the rest of the group goes out of communication. The warm-up of an individual does not generalize in such a group automatically. It requires permanent infusions of heat, especially in the pre-warm-up stage.

Modifications in Technique

Our strategy evolved out of practical experience with Russian groups under these circumstances and is based on close attention being given to

microdramatic phenomena. The contradictions, minor resistances, or energy blocks within the individual's behavior correspond to the social patterns mentioned above. Metaphorically speaking, within the individual, "inner" protagonists, auxiliaries, and audiences can be found; they often are mute, untrained, and separated: their communication is to be restored. Our attempt is to facilitate the mechanisms of microexpression and microresponse. The localization and the decrease of scale increase the feeling of safety and confidence. Minor communicative and self-communicative actions also tend to intensify the "capillary system" of psychological phenomena where "no" and "avoidance" reactions are not so thoroughly standardized and automatic.

To release the means of bodily expression at the smallest atomic level, we prefer to work with subsocial psychodramatic patterns and to activate the substructures of primarily nonverbal resonance within the individual as well as within the group. Nonverbal warm-ups are, of course, familiar in psychodrama as well as in the training of actors, and here Galper's (1970) nonverbal communication exercises were especially helpful, whereas Fine's (1959) typical nonverbal warm-ups, consisting of only one or two steps, were insufficient for our frozen Russian groups. To obtain tele on this level, we needed to create a special psychological space for an echo first within each individual, then within small subgroups, and finally within the whole group.

We learned that it was absolutely essential to have the participants act out different microdramatic "no" reactions before these reactions could begin to resonate and make cold loops in the atmosphere of the group. The director had to make use of the necessary techniques to forestall the spread of the "no" and "avoidance" reactions before these reached the critical quantity. The negative reactions appeared in the form of noninvolvement, alienation, tension, watchfulness, or nonverbal behavior marking the attitude of a skeptical onlooker. We did not ignore, deny, or suppress these reactions. On the contrary, we tried to use them all, emphasizing our permission to experience negative feelings and to express and share them. By acknowledging the "no" reactions and by allowing a response to them, we thus inspired the first positive reaction. Coordinating the negative microdramatic actions became a "yes" response for all group members to each other and to the director.

By suggesting a great variety of different forms of such reactions, we facilitate flexibility and make experiencing, expressing, and sharing them less automatic. Group members are taught to train the muscles of their emotional body and articulate the transformation of microdramatic feelings. They practice shifting these feelings in time (connecting the present sensation with the preceding one and with the sensation that might

follow), in space, and in different scales. In this way, we attempt to help the group members master certain easily changeable physical and psychological distances between parts of the body and between the protagonist and the double (auxiliary, chorus, director, and audience). We draw their attention to small body-mind connections. In this mental limbering up, multiple identification complexes are released. This controlled non-verbal acting out helps tease out some of the many tangled threads of the personality. This method contains two systems or chains of practical techniques.

The Body Mirror Technique

The first chain is based on physical identification that we call the *body mirror*. Although the principle of mirroring is widely used in psychotherapeutic culture, the meaning of the term differs from school to school. Our mirror has features that make it useful not only as a system of techniques but also as a short “tuning” procedure (Kroll & Mikhailova, 1985). Our body mirror is a group technique. The participants stand or sit in a circle and simultaneously “reflect” the behavior of a designated member. After serving as the model, the reflected member then rejoins the group in mirroring the next member. Thus, everyone participates in a perpetual process of movement that only rarely requires intervention by the leader. (This format has similar applicability in other techniques, such as role reversal, doubling, and protagonist/chorus interactions). The exercise takes approximately 10 to 15 minutes, by which time everyone has had the opportunity to play the main character at least once and often several times.

In a short statement, the director introduces the body mirror and then gives a series of simple directions. It is suggested that each individual part of the body has acquired the full capability of expressing any emotion. One’s forefinger (shoulder, neck, ankle, etc.) may become the “competent representative” of the whole body, expressing everything the body has to say. Because there is no opportunity for one’s usual gestures to be used, the movements necessarily become more spontaneous (assuming that the atmosphere in the mirroring group is sufficiently stimulating). Embedded in this seemingly simple instruction is a set of important preconditions for later psychodramas. There is the idea of mutual tuning through mirroring and the implicit permission to do new and strange things. There are no standard patterns because nobody knows, for example, what a “hungry finger” or a “fussy shoulder” looks like and what movements are right for them. The variety of roles for different parts of the body reminds one that there is a whole team inside each of us and

that the inner relations of that team may be complicated. Through our body mirror, we also introduce the “as if” principle, essential for psychodrama, with an instruction like this: “Please, move your elbow as if it were (lazy, crazy, businesslike, playful, or whatever seems appropriate to the director) and we will try to do the same, as if we were your mirror.” The technique also offers great opportunity to reveal and even to explore the range of “no” reactions and “no” attitudes typical of any particular group, Russian or otherwise.

The strategy of joining the resistance can also be employed within this process of group mirroring. The body mirror can be used as a magnifying lens, highlighting the picture of various minor resistances, ambivalent behavior, unconscious nonverbal responses, or of whatever it is focused on. Normally, all these inner voices are mixed, overlapped, suppressed, or masked. We try to give living space to small, nonconventional units of expressive behavior, so they can be perceived separately and accepted.

A pre-warm-up using this technique occurred during a 3-hour psychodramatic session with a group of professionals. After greeting the group, the first director began: “Here is a simple tool to help us get more in tune with each other. [To a young lady in the circle]: Please, make any movement you like with your hand, one that is not too difficult to follow. We’ll try to copy it as if we were a mirror. We needn’t change sides, because this mirror reflects your right hand with our right hands. Please, everybody, try to be as precise as possible. [The group starts mirroring.] Try to feel the movements as if your whole personality were there inside this hand. If you [the young lady] get tired or bored or don’t know what to do, just pass the movement to your neighbor and join the mirror.” After five people have been mirrored and the mirror has become technically correct, the director continued, “Now let your hand get scornful or arrogant; now move your hand as if it were watchful, timid. After four ‘timid’ hands, move as a self-assured hand that knows how it should be.”

The “self-assured hand” in this group caused a series of nonsympathetic theatrical movements, showing a deep negative attitude. A person, who by his behavior had influenced the director to give this instruction, later produced associations and feelings about it. All the examples given above had to do with reactions of different people in the group. We usually give a new instruction to two or three persons before the main subject, toward whom the exercise is aimed, is to act. Thus, we start pacing for his possible defensive behavior in advance.

Meanwhile, the series went on: “Well . . . now let us shift attention to our fingers and choose one of them that could move as if it were mali-

cious and evil. [Seven evil fingers were shown with a lot of variations, visible enjoyment, and physical involvement of the whole arm.] Go back now to our hands; let them move as if they don't care at all . . . pardon the expression, indecent hands . . . [Both hands are involved and the whole arm is active.] . . . hands that show off . . . don't forget about precise mirroring. . . ." The emotional involvement now was high, although after some extended laughter, there was again a danger of losing concentration. The scope of the movements enlarged, and some of the participants felt like standing up. "Let's move our feet as if they were irritated. That's not the same as the feet of a person who is irritated (after mirroring five people). Now, move our feet as if they were menacing, stern, mad feet. Let's move our shoulders as if they were capricious or stubborn shoulders or tricky shoulders. Let us move two hands as if they were seeking contact." The positive response showed that the pre-warm-up had succeeded and could be finished. The group later confirmed that the procedure had mobilized a great deal of energy. All the participants gave strong positive feedback.

Subgrouping to Build Group Cohesion

Another set of pre-warm-up techniques requires a series of exercises for two, three, or more partners, working simultaneously in subgroups. The goals of these techniques are as follows:

- To promote the maximum emotional involvement of the whole group and to prevent reproducing the "speaker/passive audience" pattern with its cold and hostile periphery
- To create a dramatic partnership within a small, comfortable, imaginary psychodramatic "chamber," similar to the closed, intimate space in which a Russian is most comfortable
- To develop new channels of communication by the use of mutual alienation tendencies
- To facilitate a maximum number of nonverbal modes of contact on a subsocial level
- To conduct an indirect analysis of latent "no" reactions and to encourage their expression and partial acting out.

Small subgroups enhance the feeling of safety. Positive individual experiences grow into a general atmosphere of the group. The atmosphere of safety is vital. Without it, any psychodrama evaporates quickly in Russian groups because of their previous negative social learning. Maintenance of this atmosphere requires constant surveillance.

After a short relaxation, we begin by working in dyads. Everyone

chooses a partner and, contrary to expectation, is instructed not to rush into direct contact. They are asked only to be together for some moments while thinking about some minor personal matter. They may muse about the weather, an annoying sound, a meal, or a family tradition and then to share some recollected experiences. They are asked only to try to be sincere as speakers and attentive as listeners.

The suggestion for role reversal is accepted quite naturally after this and can be accompanied by an instruction to exchange seats (the first place reversal). This exercise takes no more than 3 or 4 minutes but is enough to introduce the principles of dialogue, of free choice of a minor feeling, and of the experience of free expression in a safe, interpersonal space. Everyone contacts two or three different partners, each time discussing a new topic. They may also be instructed to alternate positive and negative feelings.

The group task is then expanded by the suggestion to work in triads. While one person, for example, tells about something boring or slightly disturbing, another one is to react to the content or to the very fact of communication in a variety of negative ways. Most of these negative reactions are to be nonverbal, with no more than two being verbal (such as interruption or sarcastic questioning). Everyone goes through all the positions (2 minutes each), and then all of them share their impressions about the others' ways of expressing "no" and "avoidance."

The next exercise in triads consists of a chain of descriptions of a small situation from everyday life with two accompanying feelings. After two or three sentences, the floor is given to the next participant, who repeats the situation and goes on by describing the feeling altered appropriately for himself or herself. The third person then takes a turn until six versions have been described, or two cycles around the triad. Then another member of the triad introduces a totally new situation-feeling combination for the next two circles of the relay until each person has had the chance to begin such a cycle. This helps the members become aware of the gradual alteration of their feelings according to the development of a situation or even independently of a situation. The initiator of the situation may disagree inwardly with its further treatment by the others, experiencing the impulse to object, reconstructing his or her own "true" logic of these minor feelings. The members of the triad may also "try on" the roles of protagonist or double for the first time, in a sliding, nonfixed, and therefore, easy way.

Larger Subgroup Techniques

We next reconfigure the group into subgroups of five. Participants then present to the other four as many of their own personal avoidance

signs as they can. They may include postural messages, spacial orientation, evasive eye movements, and so on, and may flow into each other without pause. Thus, everyone gets an opportunity to act out a major part of his or her stock of reactions of this kind. The “quintad” stands in a circle with closed eyes and joins hands in the center to sense the differences in manual communication. These last two exercises embody the contrasting tendencies of alienation and closeness. They also concretize and act out the “no” reactions that appeared in the process of the reconstruction of the larger subgroups.

The participants are next asked to show each other their nonverbal signs of detachment, using changes of distance, bodily movements, eye activity, and so on. This fosters the awareness that each person provokes different detachment reactions.

The last instruction for the groups of five is for everyone to ask three short questions about himself or herself without answering them. The response elicited in this exercise is primarily verbal and complements the nonverbal channels of contact used in the earlier exercises. At the same time, leaving the questions unanswered brings additional emotional safety. For many people, this situation feels strange, and the blocked impulse to reply makes the experience seem incomplete and unbalanced. This discomfort, of course, actually facilitates further action.

In the next stage, the group is reconfigured into circles of eight members. They are all asked to introduce themselves, each to each, pronouncing their names with a different intonation every time. Everyone gives a nonverbal sign of acceptance. The members then play with an imaginary balloon. This introduces an “as if” character to their play and facilitates the aiming of communication.

By contrast, the following exercise starts from a more meditative process. To maximize the opportunity for complete “yes” reactions, the director asks everyone to recall or imagine himself or herself in some pleasant landscape and to share this experience with the others. They are, in some way, to show the tempo or rhythm that is natural for them, describing a space that later may be placed on stage.

Two short exercises conclude the pre-warm-up session: With closed eyes, everyone is asked to envision “snapshots” of the others unwittingly taken during the pre-warm-up. Last, they are asked, without moving, to imagine in detail, the process of standing up, similar to not answering when questioned, in the exercise described above.

With a stock of “yes” reactions and sensory experiences having been evoked and expressed via usual and unusual communicative routes, new channels of perception are opened. All this prepares the group for the next stage of classical psychodrama.

These two series are, naturally, only examples of possible ways of working with microscale “no” reactions, using material available with “cold” Russian psychodramatic groups. No matter how special these groups are, we suspect that any director, by choosing and combining the necessary elements according to the requirements of the situation and the moment, may find something helpful in them. The techniques also seem promising for sociodramatic practice. The part of the session that we call pre-warm-up serves as a powerful lever for microdramatic reactions. The extent to which it helps mobilize stagnated feelings makes it certainly worth the time investment. It reliably facilitates the shift from potential to kinetic psychic energy. Stanislavsky advised that a gun on the wall in the first act of a good play must shoot in the last act.

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