

Let's Play *Moreno*

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ABSTRACT. Although Moreno was arguably one of the most creative and productive thinkers of his time, his ideas are hard to follow because of his lack of coherence. In certain instances, the theory he produced seems less a theory and more a collection of musings. In this article, the author suggests a more cogent process for examining, organizing, and extending Moreno's conceptualizations to make them a more convincing theoretical exposition, one that is more user-friendly and useful. The author presents the process as a game that any number can play and wants the rules of the game to entice more psychodramatists to play by reducing the sense of competition and promoting spontaneity, creativity, and fun. The author credits Adam Blatner with endeavoring to engage the psychodrama community in this type of endeavor.

Key words: game for psychodrama community, J. L. Moreno's theories, spontaneity

The game's afoot.

A game within a game within a game . . .

THROUGH THIS ARTICLE, I HOPE TO ENCOURAGE the psychodrama community to engage in the kind of dialectic interaction necessary to keep Moreno's conceptualization of social connections and interactions vital and developing. What I have in mind is similar to, if not the same as, what Adam Blatner has tried with little success to engender on-line, using the ASGPP list-serve (Grouptalk). I want to review the rules of the game, as Blatner has developed them; to examine why they do not work well on the Internet; and to modify them accordingly. I address that goal by sharing part of my perspective on Social Atom Theory (SAT) in a manner different from that which has been employed by others (e.g., Remer, 2000).

Background

I attribute the game and offer a tribute to Blatner so that readers understand what and how he contributed to my impetus for the game. Recently, my wife and I were visiting the Blatners. Both Blatners, bright people and strong presences, like to explore any and every topic that arises in intellectual conversation. Because the four of us have been immersed in sociometric theory and applica-

tion for a long time, we find those a common ground, and often a focal point, for most of our discussions, regardless of how far afield the topic happens to be.

Although Blatner has always been interested in a wide variety of areas and perspectives, in the past I have often found our interactions somewhat daunting. Despite verbal encouragement to engage in the give-and-take of a dialectic process, I have been hesitant and reticent. At this visit, however, Blatner explicitly changed the rules of the game. He consciously made an effort to distribute the “gives” (offering information, views, and opinions) and the “takes” (listening, paraphrasing, questioning, and clarifying) evenly—often acknowledging his own tendency to want to be the giver rather than the taker. The change had a significant impact for me, opening up the process and affecting its tenor. It also led to conceptualizing this process as a kind of game.

Making a Game of It

The interaction with the Blatners was fun, exciting, and energizing. It was also productive. We were children at play, and just like them, we learned from and enjoyed each other and ourselves. That atmosphere was essential to both the process and the product. The idea of considering the exchange as a game occurred to me, because of the fun and informality and because structuring some rules to help us and others do it again in the future seemed possible and beneficial. (That Blatner & Blatner [1988] have talked about adult play did not hurt either.)

Why a Game

To a mathematician, the mention of interpersonal relationships brings to mind models generated by game theory. Those games are predominantly predicated on competition (zero-sum games), with little attention to cooperation, except as the teams compete. The game proposed here is very cooperative and certainly not zero-sum.

The idea of an interaction’s being a game has certain connotations. Games are played; they need not be taken seriously (not that at times they are not). Games can be fun (not that at times they are not). Games usually are not “real life,” so mistakes are expected and are not irreparable (not that they are not at times). Games have rules.

The Rules of the Game

The name of the game is *Moreno*. Why *Moreno*? Because it is triggered by the challenge inherent in the way Moreno presented his thoughts, ideas, conceptualizations—that is, by trying to read and make meaning from his writ-

ings. The process employs Moreno's (1951, 1953) Canon of Creativity with the interplay of conserve and spontaneity and chaotic dialectic interaction in which making meaning is a self-affine and fractal-generating process (Remer, 1996, 2000). Although the game grew from examining the validity and contributions of Moreno's conceptualizations in relation to their being a cogent theory, it can be played with whatever ideas one desires to apply to it.

The rules of the game are as follows:

1. Suspend evaluation as much as possible, at least in a challenging sense. The goal is exploration. Participants' being genuinely inquisitive and interested fosters the type of interaction that is most productive. Actively listen to all that the presenter of an idea has to say before responding. When responding, start by reflecting or repeating the meaning of what has been said, as you understand it. Clarify what is misunderstood until an adequately common meaning is reached. Then react or question. Nothing is gained by responding before you and the others know to what you are reacting. In fact, in many cases, those involved in the interaction have a clearer understanding and an accurate knowledge of the specifics as a result of the active-listening process.

2. Before disagreeing or adding to someone else's comments, acknowledge the content with which you agree. Being heard and validated, even if only in part, nurtures one's sense of trust and safety in the interaction.

3. Take turns, using the first two rules. Give and take from those involved in the interaction is necessary. Everyone needs and has the right to be heard and validated. By doing so, not only can the immediate interaction be furthered, but future ones will also be promoted.

4. If any of the preceding rules is violated, gently inform the transgressor. If the problem continues, intervene more assertively. Do not allow the rules to be ignored.

Although the rules are relatively few, simple to state, and probably familiar, being the same as those for group or couples therapy, their implementation is another matter. Blatner warned of succumbing to the strong tendency to slip into a more challenging mode. Reminding oneself to stay with and trust in the process is a good additional rule to keep in mind. The game should be played interactively, dynamically, and irreverently, but that applies to the content, not to the players.

Playing the Game With Social Atom Theory

The idea of characterizing this interaction as a game started with Blatner's asking me to explain why I value SAT as highly as I do. SAT seemed the most appropriate example for this article. To illustrate what happens, I present part

of a dialogue between Blatner (B) and myself (R). The game starts with Blatner speaking.

B: You and I disagree on the value of SAT as viable theory. I'd like to hear why you think it is a valuable theory.

R: OK. I guess because I find SAT useful.

B: How so?

R: Like any good theory, it focuses on a phenomenon that requires description.

B: I'm not sure I'd call Moreno's ideas a theory—maybe more a collection of insights and speculations that has been exceptionally productive and provocative. What makes them a theory?

R: I would agree that the ideas are somewhat loose and Moreno's way of writing isn't easy to follow. Still the constructs do form connections, a nomothetic net. So it does have descriptive, if not explanatory, power. I think it does have heuristic worth.

B: What would you say it explains?

R: Well it helps me describe and explain some things about relationships. How long-term relationships happen and are maintained.

B: Fine. I'll buy that, but what does it do for us that other social psychology explanations don't?

R: I'm not sure it does describe anything not covered by other theories. I'm not sure it needs to. It does give me a tool to help others understand some of the difficulties they are experiencing and what to do about them.

B: For example?

R: Well, say you move to a new place. How do you go about making social connections? You know, by looking for collectives to join.

B: So SAT, or at least the implication you draw from it, says to look for others you can resonate with. What more is there to say than go find people you share interests with?

R: SAT does a bit more than just say to find people with whom you have something in common. It suggests how to identify those groups and once you do, how to make connections.

B: Maybe it does offer some ideas about how to locate collectives, but how does it help in making connections?

R: Well, take me for example. I'm usually fairly uncomfortable in new groups. I see myself as a closet introvert. After I get to know people, I'm OK. So I have a hard time getting into conversations.

B: You don't find meeting new people easy. How does SAT help after you locate a group to get involved with?

R: First, SAT defines a collective explicitly. As a group of people sharing a common interest, I know I will have a common warm-up with the group members.

B: A collective by definition has a purpose. Fine. And . . . ?

R: Say you go to a group meeting, like a cocktail party, for instance. You walk in knowing you have to find someone to connect with and that isn't going to be easy. So whom do you choose? Because you are an isolate, at least as far as this group is concerned, you look for people who most likely will be easy to meet. You don't look to break into conversations between those who look as if they know each other—at least I don't. You look for other possible isolates. Who are they? Well, they are the people like me on the periphery of the group.

B: That sounds like a good idea, something different and useful. I don't think of that as part of SAT though.

R: True, that part comes from sociometry, but the two are linked. I also don't think SAT helps much with the actual ways to interact, but other parts of sociometric theory, such as spontaneity and role training, do.

B: Say more about what makes you react more to some people than others.

R: Now we're talking about why people are at different levels of a social atom. I think those bonds are influenced by mutual warm-ups. It's more than just warm-ups though. I think role reciprocities and telic bonds figure in. The more of any of those influences, the stronger the relationship.

Our interaction continued for quite a while, focusing on the particulars of SAT, such as the quantitative and qualitative aspects of social atom levels, and moving off to such related tangential areas as the connections to other sub-theories and to such theories as the Chaos Theory (ChT). It produced a clarification of some ideas and links with others that I had not recognized previously. I also realized that my understanding of SAT was not quite the same as the understanding of those from whom the theory had sprung. I had added some nuances, redefined a few terms, and made useful connections to other ideas, much of which I had not articulated clearly and had not communicated to others. That realization became the motivation for my clarifying the formulation of SAT and reporting it (Remer, 2001).

Social Atom Theory—A Conceptualization

Some closure to the previous dialogue is needed. To provide that closure; to present a possible product; to lead to some further observations about SAT as a viable theory; and, most important, to present a contrasting form for discussing the benefits of and problems with this type of interaction, I developed

my formulation of SAT, which is printed in the companion article in this issue of *The International Journal of Action Methods* (pp. 74–83). It is brief, but complete enough I hope, to promote further dialogue about the process and its viability as a theory.

When playing *Moreno* with SAT, there are specific points of reflection. They can serve as avenues for further exploration of the development of SAT and as models for the kinds of explorations the game is designed to provoke.

If Moreno were alive today, one can suppose that he would likely formulate his ideas about bonding along the atomic rather than the astronomic perspective. He would be borrowing from the theories of strong and weak atomic forces, such as electron-proton bonds. Who knows what he might have done with mesons, quarks, and the like to suggest analogies for interpersonal positive and negative warm-ups and the intrapsychic spontaneity processes. The possibilities of such metaphors generate the following questions that are interesting to contemplate and perhaps heuristic as well:

- Is tele, like an electrical charge, an on/off phenomenon, or is it always present to some degree?

If tele could be measured, could mathematical models be generated to calculate how much is present in a relationship?

- Are models other than “gravitational attraction” better fits for explaining the interactive complexity of attractions (e.g., “the hunter/prey function” from the Chaos theory) between two people or among more than two (the “three-object problem”)? Would other models better explain the variations in the patterns of relationships (e.g., sensitivities to conditions—the “butterfly” effect)?

- Is the number of the relationships one is able to maintain at different levels of the social atom bounded? How many warm-ups or role reciprocities are needed to move between levels? How are the numbers determined or influenced by resources available? Are they the same for every individual?

- Could the threshold (quantum leap) characteristic of moving between levels be informed by looking at how mathematicians address such discontinuities (e.g., the Heaviside function, functionals)?

Such questions are worth contemplating.

Pros and Cons of the Game

Let’s return to the idea of using a game approach to engender involvement and interaction that will produce theoretical insights and modifications. The game approach has some pluses and some problems that need to be overcome or accepted as limitations.

Pluses: Production of New Insights and Extensions

If played by the rules, the game has much to offer for the production of new insights and extensions of SAT or any other theory. Like brainstorming, the process is designed to promote a synergistic interaction, based on cooperation and pooling of knowledge rather than on competition. The more input from participants with diverse backgrounds and styles in the production of new patterns of understanding, the more creative the output. As a “making meaning,” process, this one is chaotic (Remer, 1996, 2000) and, as such, it yields variations that are novel, yet incorporate the previous patterns of understanding. Moreno would probably label it “creativity” or “spontaneity” because it incorporates the Canon of Creativity (Moreno, 1951; Remer, 1996).

The game is chaotic, according to ChT definition. As such, applying ChT perspective (e.g., viewing the process as mapping different aspects of the phase space of the phenomenon in question) allows better understanding of the “game” process (i.e., its self-affine, fractal, and self-organizing nature) and what it has to offer (Remer, 2000). The dynamic qualities demand interaction in a social sense and produce interaction in a mathematical sense; the more the better. Accordingly, immediacy is optimal, because it promotes the most spontaneity and least evaluation. The immediacy, particularly in contrast to a written manuscript, also provides an opportunity for recognition of the lack of understanding. Unfamiliar terms (e.g., pheromones, Heaviside function, functional, self-affine, fractal, self-organizing, butterfly effect, and even tele/telic bond, sociometry, and sociostasis) or metaphors (e.g., hunter/prey, three-object problem, the physical atom) can be defined or clarified, promoting cross-fertilization of ideas from different individuals, disciplines, cultures, schools, theories, or whatever (see Remer, 2001). Although these conditions encourage high energy, the dynamism is a drawback.

Minuses: Challenges to Further Development and Use

One benefit of a slower process, like the writing of and reacting to a manuscript, is having a product—a conserve. The preservation of the ideas generated allows more reflection on what is being said and makes the loss of any potential resources less likely. The conserve, however, is more open to interpretation without clarification and correction of misperceptions and misconceptions of all participants—at least without problematic time lag. And, frankly, live, immediate interaction is more fun.

If the game is played on-line, establishing the rules of the game is more difficult. People enter the interaction unknown to the others until they communicate their presence. Violating the rules is easier because no one is present to remind and correct or to intervene assertively in a heated exchange. Face-to-

face interactions, however, can also be more intimidating. Role and status considerations (e.g., publication, name recognition, level of credentialing) can impede interaction by making egalitarian, cooperative, collaborative relationships difficult to achieve. Facility with those types of exchanges can make the rules, even if implemented, less than optimally effective. Another disadvantage is that “getting together” and making time for playing the game is difficult. Everyone has more to do in life (e.g., gainful employment) than to play *Moreno*, no matter how gratifying the process and the outcomes.

Possible Answers and Improvements

Having played the game, I am gratified and encouraged by the outcome. I believe it offers an opportunity to further the impact of Morenean thought that publication does not. Still, its shortcomings must be recognized and addressed.

On-line dialogue or “multilogue” appears to be an optimal solution—a compromise between face-to-face interaction and publication. So why has that not worked very well, and what can be done to allow us to play the game effectively? A number of reasons come immediately to mind. First, no obvious product or record results from the interactions unless someone takes the responsibility for producing one. Even on-line interactions, which do produce annals of a sort, do not usually generate a concise, organized, easily accessible account. Second, the discussions are rather haphazard, with no scheduled time reserved for focusing on a particular topic. Third, status differences can still influence contribution. Fourth, a certain facility or comfort with technological resources and the availability of them are required.

Technology is available to overcome many of the problems. For example, Indiana University has developed a decision-making lab (Froehle, 1998) that allows immediate interaction of participants through computers, while making and preserving a record of all contributions. The contributors to the interaction are anonymous. A moderator function is also available so that all responses can be viewed or reviewed before being shared commonly. Other approaches are also available, such as conference telephone calls, distance learning, or interactive telecasting.

Organizers can arrange times to play the game face to face. Small groups of collaborators can (and already do) get together for that purpose. Time might be set aside before, after, or during conferences with the intent of convening a group to play the game on a specified topic. In fact, work groups, task forces, and conferences designed for that purpose might be arranged.

The biggest obstacle to address is the need for some cogent record of the game yield. Because of the dynamic denotation of the game, no true, finished product ever can or should be possible. At best, the game reaches a pause. Someone then organizes, summarizes, and reports the interim results. The

process and work-product can easily be as important as the final conserve and much more difficult to capture. The game, obviously, requires more consideration to tune it up.

Conclusions

I will continue to play *Moreno*, now that I have experienced its impact firsthand. The possible benefits seem worth the efforts, and its problems seem like challenges and opportunities. Any number can play—in fact, Blatner would like to see that happen. All readers are invited to play *Moreno* too. I do not know where this suggestion will take us; still such a “multilogue” should be an interesting experiment.

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