

THE CASE FOR THE "OPEN" PSYCHODRAMATIC SESSION
A DIALOGUE

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"Hey, what's this I hear about you directing psychodramas that are "open" to the public? I should think that a person who is as much concerned with ethical issues as you are would be dead against such sessions. Don't you realize the great harm that can be done in exposing people before the eyes of others with whom they must live? I'm really surprised at you!"

"Just a minute. You have your facts wrong. First of all, I have not been directing "psychodrama" sessions in public. The dramas that I have been leading were specifically designated as "sociodramas" and during them, great care was taken to keep the focus on larger social issues and away from those which would be of personal concern only to particular individuals. Secondly, the sessions were not presented to the public. They were done on the request of an organized group in the community which felt that it could achieve its own aims by having us conduct a series of sociodramas concerning subjects that were of particular concern to it. However, it is true that we have been seriously considering the possibility of changing from sociodramas to psychodramas and making the sessions available to the general public."

"Well, perhaps it was not your aim up to now to have full-fledged psychodramas, but I have it on the authority of someone who has attended several of your sessions that from time to time you have become involved in the personal lives and problems of individuals in the course of dramatic presentations. Will you deny that this is true?"

"No, I won't deny it, but, as you may know, such involvement is an important part of the experience. The very nature of the sociodrama is to explore general social problems, or at least problems that are of concern to the group within which they are produced, and usually the raw material for such a drama is drawn from the experiences of the people who are participating. It is this use of real experiences that gives the performance its reality and indeed, its effectiveness."

"But how can you condone the exposing of personal material before large groups of people, many of whom do not know or care for the individuals

on the stage? Don't you feel that all of us have the right to respect for our privacy; the right to keep secret our weaknesses and inadequacies?"

"Of course I do, and I would never think of forcing a person to be a participant in a psychodrama or a sociodrama against his will. All of our actors are volunteer subjects. They are willing to participate in the dramas for they feel that there is much more to be gained than lost by so doing. As long as they participate knowing the nature of the technique and of their own free will, I can see nothing unethical about these activities."

"Yes, but do the people who act in your dramas fully comprehend the nature of what they are doing before they become involved? It seems to me that a person cannot understand what the sociodrama involves until he has actually been a participant. How then can a person be aware of what it involves before he has experienced participation in one?"

"You have a good point there. However, it is my opinion that it is a prime responsibility of the director to indicate to potential participants the nature of the activity, to mention that there may be some revelation of personal material and to leave it up to the individual concerned whether or not he desires to take part. Indeed, I believe that it is the responsibility of the director to orient the entire audience to the significance of what may take place and to inform them that anyone who remains once the session has begun may become personally involved in the drama. I do believe it would be wrong for an individual to be invited to participate, indeed, even to attend a session, without first having been given an orientation which would enable him to decide whether or not he wants to become involved in such an experience. It may be true that one cannot comprehend the full impact of the drama except through personal participation, nevertheless, I feel that a competent orientation on the part of the director can accomplish a great deal in preventing people from becoming involved unawares."

"You say that when people chose to participate, they feel that more can be gained than lost from the experience. I wish you would explain just what it is that would prompt people to get involved in what seems to me to be quite a risky activity."

"Well, as I have already said, the psycho- or sociodrama is an activity which enables people to explore areas of personal or group concern which are significant to them. If anything is wrong in our culture it is a belief in secretiveness; that each person must live in his own cave, scrupulously hiding the crises of his life from the vision of his neighbors. The psychodramatic method stands as the facilitator of communication par excellence. It provides participants with a new look at the reality of human relations, a

view which enables them to realize that others have the same kinds of problems as their own; moreover, it enables them to look more clearly at their own lives and to perceive relationships of which they were formerly unaware. The psychodramatic experience enables the subject to break through his fears and other barriers to communication and shows him that the world does not necessarily consist of hostile aggressors but rather of other human beings who share his difficulties and who have unmeasured stores of acceptance, sympathy and respect for his problems."

"Well, I may agree that people are much too secretive and that a lot of the pain of mankind may be directly attributed to people's fears and their inability to communicate with themselves and others, but accepting the real world in which we live, it would seem somewhat dangerous to attempt a public unfolding of human problems by the use of the open-to-the-public psychodrama. People have constructed psychological defenses because of real threats that they may have experienced during their lives. Who are we to tear away such defenses before we are first able to guarantee a world free from threat; something that we are not prepared to do, at least at this time?"

"I don't agree! Many of the so-called threats that you refer to are imagined, not real at all. It is only as people dare to openly view themselves and others that they can overcome the barriers to communication and discover that many of their fears are really unfounded."

"This may all be true on a theoretical level, but practically speaking, I just can't see how it can be done. You expose people before their friends and associates and you will never be forgiven. Circumstances being what they are, you just can't get away with it. The average person is just waiting for some morsel of gossip to be uncovered so that he can toss it around among his friends. People can be irreparably hurt by the indiscriminate exposure of themselves that is inherent in these dramatic methods. Perhaps in a closed group where feelings of confidentiality and intimacy have been established, such unveiling can be tolerable, but in an open session, in the presence of an unscreened, untrained and not necessarily sympathetic audience, such exposure might well be dangerous."

"You certainly have a good point there, one which is hard to refute. Indeed, this is perhaps the fundamental reason why so many people are critical of open sessions. They simply don't wish to risk the possibility of anyone being hurt through his participation.

"Let me try to explore this point in the following manner. First, it should be noted that the sociodrama and indeed, the psychodrama are group techniques. Such dramas are functions of the concerns of the people on the

stage; but even more so, they are functions of the groups which give rise to them. There is no drama at all until a group is formed and a problem is identified within and by the group. The action on the stage develops out of and is relevant to the group itself, and in my experience, there is little that can be carried out on the stage to which the group itself does not give its sanction. Because the drama has emerged from the group, the group shares the responsibility for what happens during the course of the drama. The director serves as a catalyst to bring into action on the stage the content inherent in the problems that are being presented by the group members.

It is obvious, of course, that the director assumes a great deal of responsibility in producing a drama. It is his task to help the drama unfold; but it is also his task, and a demanding one at that, to protect the actors on the stage and indeed, the group itself from getting into situations that are too intense for them to handle. It is a large part of the skill of the competent director to be able to gauge the depth to which the drama has gone and to keep the action at a tolerable level of intensity. It is also his responsibility to keep the group discussions before, during and after the stage performance so focused that they remain at a level which is profitable to the group.

Now, you talk about the 'unscreened, untrained and not necessarily sympathetic audience' before which the exposure of personal material may be dangerous. My answer is that a drama that is properly conducted, one which grows out of the needs and the concerns of the group and one which through competent direction is kept within the bounds set for it by the group, will be a function of the group and of every member of that group. In a sense, the people on the stage become the personal representatives of the people in the audience and are concerned with the working out of problems that are of real concern to both parties, the actors and the persons in the audience. It is only in the case of dramas that are prematurely forced onto the stage, dramas which are not really a function of the group present, that the audience or at least certain members of the audience may take on the role of spectators rather than that of participants; and in looking on as spectators, may become tale-bearers and gossips. The degree to which the drama succeeds in capturing the minds and the hearts of the audience is of course, in large measure a function of the skill, experience and sensitivity of the director. I would have to agree that in the hands of an unskilled director, some unpleasant situations might develop. Another safeguard then, rests in the ability of the director to keep control of the dramatic action and the group discussion and to guide them into productive rather than destructive channels.

It may be true that some audience members may have come to the session motivated by curiosity or even out of malice, but even these individuals, with the guidance of a skilled director, may soon find themselves a part of the group working out personally significant problems. There seems to be something about the technique which affects even the most callous. My guess is that there are few people who can remain untouched by the human material that is revealed in the psychodrama. Those few who might initially be unaffected, might well be those who are in the greatest need of having the experience of participating with others. Indeed, it is one of the strengths of the psychodrama that it reaches out from the stage into the emotions of the members of the audience, arousing feelings of strong identification and sympathy which few other media are able to produce.

Now let me return to a question that was implicit in your first remarks. You ask why a person who is concerned with professional ethics would risk conducting open sessions. I think this matter bears some real consideration. Although we have so far confined ourselves to sociodramas, this question relates similarly to open sessions of psychodrama.

You are, no doubt, concerned with the matter of confidentiality; that is, whether the producing of open sessions may not violate professional ethics in the sense that private material is made public. I admit that I have as yet not been able to fully resolve this rather sensitive issue, however, I would like to forward the hypothesis that directing open sessions is not a violation of one's professional responsibilities. It seems to me that if the director is fully qualified and if various safeguards are observed, little if any harm should come to participants.

I have already indicated that I consider it to be necessary for potential participants to be properly oriented to the method and allowed freedom of choice as to whether or not they desire to take part. In addition, it has been suggested that it is the director's task to keep the session at an appropriate depth, one at which the group is able to handle whatever may be exposed. The danger that you fear would possibly occur when, in spite of these safeguards, an individual, in the course of a drama, reveals material that he either did not want to reveal or that he was not aware would be revealed. In other words, although the individual may have volunteered to take part knowing that something of himself might be exposed, he may find after the drama is over, that material has emerged which puts him in a rather awkward and exposed position. Indeed, the very nature of the drama is such that it may tend to pull the subject deeper into personal material than he had at first intended.

Although this might indeed be an unpleasant position, I feel that a person involved in psychodrama must always risk such revelation. As I have said, the chances are, and of this the participants must be convinced, that there is more to be gained than lost by opening up one's inner world.

Now, as to the person who has something real to conceal, for one reason or another, the only absolute safeguard is for him to refrain from participating in the psychodramatic session. If he does choose to take part, he must be prepared to face the consequences. In this sense, the psychodrama is like any other investigative technique. If one were to voluntarily submit to the public administration of a lie detecting test or certain 'truth' drugs or any other searching type of device, he would have to be prepared to accept whatever might be disclosed. The nature of the psychodrama is the portrayal of truth and the subject must be ready to accept the truth."

"Accepting what you have said, how would you handle the person who chooses to take part in a drama and then, in the course of it, discloses a problem of great personal import and urgency? You certainly are not in a position to provide the necessary therapy in a single session. Isn't it possible that you may start a process of revelation that cannot be left dangling, one that must be immediately followed up by professional efforts if the person is not going to suffer?"

"It is true that in a single open session, there may be no provision for following up problems which may be unfolded on the stage. But the psychodramatic experience may well serve to prompt individuals to actively seek means outside of the group which can help them to resolve their problems. And of course, there is nothing to prevent the trained personnel present at the sessions from attempting to guide such individuals into the proper channels. Indeed, it might be the ethical responsibility of the professional persons to suggest to such subjects their need for professional help. In this way, the open session might serve to start troubled members of the community on their way to the resolution of their difficulties under the guidance of professional help."

"Before we close, I have one other question: I have heard that at some of the hospitals where psychodrama is employed as a therapeutic device, therapeutic sessions have been opened to anyone who might be interested. Don't you think that this is going a little too far?"

"I'm afraid my answer has to be the same as it was regarding public sessions outside of the hospital setting. I believe it is incumbent upon the director to orient potential members of the audience concerning the nature

of the process and of the possibility that they too, by virtue of their presence, may become participants, either as observers or as actors on the stage.

I believe that it is part of the code of psychodrama that those present during a drama should be prepared and *willing to participate in the action* itself if the course of the drama seems to require it. Indeed, I feel that this is perhaps the only basis upon which people should be admitted to psychodramas, either in the hospital setting or elsewhere. I am very strongly against the practice in some institutions, where people are allowed to observe *psychodramatic sessions through a one-way vision screen*. Either such persons should be physically present in the room where the others may call upon them to be participants or, at least, to share their reactions during or after the session, or they should be completely excluded. Psychodrama, in my estimation, should not be made into an incidental amusement. It is a tool of *psychological analysis* in which all in attendance should be prepared to give as well as to receive as equals. No observer, in my estimation, has the ethical right to be present, unless he is at the same time prepared to assume the obligations of participating and sharing his own reactions."