

Creating Your Living: Applying Psychodramatic Methods In Everyday Life

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There are a number of techniques you can use, adapted from psychodrama, that may be of practical use in your everyday life. Psychodrama is a kind of therapy in which people role play the situations in their lives rather than simply talking about them. The role playing is improvisational, and cultivating the capacity for spontaneity and creativity is fundamental to this process. The man who invented psychodrama, Dr. Jacob L. Moreno (1889-1974), felt that creativity was a key dynamic and should be maximized in people's lives. For him it was even a spiritual dynamic.

Psychodramatic methods are useful in many contexts besides therapy, though. They offer a sort of laboratory for exploring psycho-social problems and developing skills, so they've been applied also in business, education, religion, and even the home. This program will focus on this last context, how you can use this rich complex of concepts and techniques to enhance your everyday living.

In William Shakespeare's play, *As You Like It* (Act 2, Scene 7), his character, Jacques, gives a well-known speech called "The Seven Ages of Man" that begins with, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages..."

My point is that we don't have to think of ourselves as merely players. We can also be the co-playwrights and co-directors, and in becoming more self-reflective, more conscious of our capacity to choose and modulate the way we play our roles, we can play with that playing, experiment and vary the performance, thus making it all more creative. In being more creative, we also become more adaptive and effective, and we become more free than we ever thought we could be. External circumstance presents a range of realistic limitations, but many internal limitations can be transcended. We can learn to stop responding automatically to a host of obsolete or overgeneralized personal and social assumptions, rules, and expectations, and instead, bring more creativity and consciousness into our lives.

When you know you're playing roles, you can *play with* the way you play them, you can explore how that role playing goes, experiment with alternative attitudes and behaviors, and create new ways to relate in your everyday life. I'll be showing you one way to weave creativity into your everyday life by weaving in a kind of ongoing improvisational role-playing, making your life a bit more playfully dramatic.

My background is as a psychiatrist who has always been interested in the art of psychotherapy—but not the Freudian type—psychoanalysis was too lacking in a number of elements that make for vitality and creativity. I discovered psychodrama as an alternative—therapeutic role playing—and it became a bit of a sub-specialty in some ways. I did a lot of ordinary good psychiatry and psychotherapy, but this more role-playing way of thinking and working was a powerful influence.

Indeed, the general principles and techniques of psychodrama arose from the earlier interests of the fellow who invented psychodrama—Jacob L. Moreno. Before developing this approach as a kind of group psychiatric treatment, he had a side interest, a sort of avocational interest in improvisational drama—and Moreno was one of the pioneers of this type of thing. It's better known now—more as a form of comedy, but applied drama has many other ways of being used in culture—and Moreno was the leader of one of the first improv troupes, which he called the Theatre of Spontaneity, back around 1921 in Vienna, before Moreno emigrated to the United States.

Moreno was also interested in applied social psychology, and experimented with some of the first self-help groups—now again lots of people use this approach, but it requires a breaking down of the idea that only an expert can be a leader. Moreno was an early pioneer, then, of a more egalitarian interactive group process—and it didn't have to be called therapy. Just folks working together, sharing stories together. So there's the interest in theatre, and reviving literature, and in groups and social psychology—but these were really partly outgrowths of the fascination Moreno had as a young man with creativity and spontaneity, the curious vitality of these processes when applied in child-rearing, recreation, religion, social action, existence. I'm not going to go further with Moreno's biography, but this much is to note that the theme of creativity is most heuristic—a term for an idea that generates many ideas and subsequently, even other methods.

Channels of Creativity

Occasionally, creativity emerges from the contemplations of the prepared mind, and much literature addresses the inspirational processes of various inventors, artists, scientists. Moreno noted, however, that a great deal of creativity emerges from improvisation, getting out there and messing around with the problem, trying different things, and trying them again.

In short, he was talking about the functions of a laboratory. Creativity emerges from the opening of the mind, the imagination, to input from the cortex. Now neuroscience has shown that under states of anxiety or fear—such as the fear of making a mistake—the limbic systems tends to dominate and the mind tends to operate along more familiar and conservative channels. Some shift to reducing the anxiety is needed.

That shift is achieved through making the experiments more fail-safe, structured so that a mistake is no big deal, instead of resulting in the blowing up of a laboratory (in the case of a chemistry laboratory), or alienating friends or being burned as a heretic, in the case of an imagined psychosocial laboratory. Another way to describe this context that is more tentative, provisional, fail safe, is to recognize it as a form of play. Things are held “as if” rather than statements reflecting final judgment. There's room to intervene and say, “That didn't work too well, let's try it over differently,” which is what characterizes rehearsals in drama or music.

The idea I'm presenting for your consideration is that of weaving play contexts into your everyday life. You can say, “Okay, let's explore this. Let's set up an imaginary scenario.” “Let's role play possible ways you and I could deal with this.” “Okay, I'm not sure how to play this; let me try out some different possibilities.” “Would you let me see if I understand you by my sort of role playing you, trying to imagine what your point or concern is?”

This is a skill set that gets more fluid and useful as you practice it. It may be awkward at first—a little less so if you've done any drama training—but even ordinary drama training isn't exactly what this is. This is more improvisational.

Now there are a number of concepts and techniques that spin off of this basic idea: The first is the concept of role. This is a major tool. A derivative of drama, it originally referred to the rolled up script of the early theatre, and then the part the script expressed. >From that, the word has expanded to the part not only a person plays, but any complex system within a greater system—so you'll see papers on the role of methane in the biosphere, or the role of computers in modern money exchange.

Role Talk

Role has become a particularly useful unit of human behavior, sort of analogous to the way the concept of note works within music. It can be tremendously varied, and in retrospect, one might say it was always present—but actual notation in music is only a few hundred years old.

Role is useful also because we all see plays and can follow the idea—it's familiar—people playing parts. You can read more about applied role theory on my website:

<http://www.blatner.com/adam/level2/roletheory.htm>

<http://www.blatner.com/adam/psyntbk/RoleAnalysis.html>

One problem with this language is that it really should be learned in association with active exercises, through experience, as one might learn to swim or ride a bicycle. It's not just a group of concepts. So to get some feel for what is involved, let's do an exercise: This technique is also described on my website as Imaginative Interviews: A Psychodramatic Warm-up for Developing Role-Playing Skills <Http://www.blatner.com/adam/pdntbk/talksho.htm>

(Also see handouts)

(At this point, the workshop was introduced to the technique of role taking through the exercise called the Talk Show Host Game. It was demonstrated, then participants broke into dyads and, taking turns, one would interview the other in an imagined role.)

This role taking is, of course, the basis for drama. We all did it as kids, so it's a kind of re-learning. What needs to be unlearned somewhat is the pervasive language of secondary education, that tends to move in the direction of abstraction and generalizations. There's a place for this left-brain development, of course, but in our culture, it gets overused while the more specific imagery and language of the more dramatic, right-brain, world is neglected. So there's a re-learning and re-balancing in doing these imaginative exercises.

The Dramatic Metaphor

Moreno's work involves not only using the "user-friendly" language of role talk, but also beginning to *think* about life as if it were an ongoing kind of improvised drama: This is the application of the powerful metaphor of life as a kind of play—by no means a new idea, as noted by the quote by Shakespeare earlier. There is even a school of social psychology that uses this approach. However, psychodrama adds another dimension, that of inviting those who use this metaphor to not only analyze situations in life as if they were elements in a play, but to go further and implement also the roles of those who *create* plays: the actors, directors, playwrights, critics, audience. Again, in contrast to Shakespeare's quote, we are *not* merely players, but we can co-create how that scene will be played, how it might be played differently, better, with more freedom and openness.

The dramatic metaphor thus makes more concrete the idea of role distance, that the actor is not overly identified with the role played, the better to modify the ways it is played so that the feelings are communicated more effectively to the audience. This dis-identification, this being in the role and also a bit apart from it, has resonances also with Buddhism. The most creative stance is in being able to both participate in life, and at the same time not have one's sense of self totally involved in the role that is being played. This figurative stepping-back, which is actually concretized in the psychodramatic technique called "the mirror," is really the foundation of what is called "psychological-mindedness."

Life as drama is a particularly powerful and evocative metaphor because it offers many useful associated ideas. The differentiation between the player of the role, the actor, and the person or governing consciousness who chooses when and how to play that role, the inner playwright-director, has been discussed. Another product of thinking about life as drama is the integration of imagination into thought, especially the dramatic dialogue that could conceivably make a situation worse or better. One must learn to shift from analytical problem solving at this point to a more subjective and receptive stance, permitting the autonomous imagination to operate, "hearing" the voices.

Thus, in considering an interpersonal problem, the technique is to approach it as if the people were not the actual people having the problem, but rather were the scriptwriters planning the script for a situation comedy or television soap opera. The goal, though, is to consider how, instead of allowing the characters to behave foolishly and reap the consequences of these actions, imagining them behaving wisely. The question to ask is, "what might be the most uplifting, sensitive, tactful, encouraging, or otherwise positive reaction at this moment?" Imagining themselves as scriptwriters for this scene, they then work to come up with the most refined rather than coarsest interactions. (And sometimes, as scriptwriters will do to break the tension and loosen themselves up, the most outrageous possibilities might be entertained as a warming-up process. This is the technique of "doing it in the worst possible way." It functions as a cathartic acknowledgment of the mixed feelings aroused and the temptations to act from baser desires.)

Warming Up

Another concept derived from psychodrama and also known well in the other creative arts is the need for warming-up. In many contexts in our culture, this process is not sufficiently appreciated. People often expect others and themselves to be able to plunge right in, to offer nicely packaged ideas. In a sense, that is what many testing situations in higher education call for, and thereby imply that it is the major mode of discourse. But in fact, for many situations, probably most of them, we become involved gradually. Creative ideas are brought forward as the mind relaxes and becomes more spontaneous, and this occurs in the course of practice in a somewhat playful context.

People can learn to say this explicitly: "Now let's just warm up to this gradually." We can help people give themselves room to maneuver more comfortably by modeling various phrases for doing so. Showing how to help others to warm up naturally is also helpful. For example, I say to clients who feel flustered at not having their thoughts arranged nicely, "It's okay. Just start anywhere and we'll work together to warm up to the relevant issues."

Becoming More Specific

One of the more common problems in contemporary culture is the use of generalities in conversation when the actual meanings are in fact ambiguous. The introduction of psychological terms has added to this tendency to be abstract—and when used excessively, it’s called “psychobabble.” Thus, many clients (and therapists) throw around words that are quite non-specific. The psychodramatic requirement to stage a scene invites a movement from the abstract to the concrete in discourse. I say to people, “I don’t know what those words mean. If I can’t see it as if it were on television, in a documentary or in a play, then I’m not really getting what you’re trying to tell me. Let’s break it down...” Then I ask questions about place, time, who is present, their ages, and other questions relevant to the predicament. I really do use the answers to set up a scene in my imagination, and if I can’t picture it, I just keep asking more questions. This process of becoming more specific helps bring out details and allows for the questioning of interpretations that had not been possible when the psychobabble terms were used.

We must recognize also that generalization and a retreat into excessive abstraction is actually a defensive maneuver, a way of avoiding having to really think about the situation and its ambiguities. For example, by describing a problem in which “he was aggressive to me,” there is an implied conclusion, a blaming, with a corresponding avoidance of the investigation of the possibilities that the other person may have been reacting to something the speaker was doing, or the speaker may have been overreacting to the others’ reasonable level of assertiveness, or other possibilities. No real problem-solving can proceed without the investigation of such alternative hypotheses, and this through the re-presentation of the details of the scene. Physical action is even better than narration because it adds the power of nonverbal communications and the sense of directness in encounter that brings forth the most authentic feelings.

Another quality about specific imagery is that it cuts through the use of generalization as a defense against feelings. In doing grief work, helping the bereaved to picture specific memories, in great detail, often becomes the catalyst of the healing catharsis (Blatner, 2000b)

Replay

The common norm in contemporary culture is an artificial one, based on school tests, finished performances, and the like: It seems as if “you only get one chance and that’s it,” in contrast to an equally plausible norm in many instances, if we would only claim it: “If it’s not working, let’s try it again differently.” This is the essence of play, some room to maneuver. In playing jazz music or doing musical rehearsal, or dramatic rehearsal, for that matter, the key is having room to try it again, play it over, experiment with slight or moderate variations in approach. So life may be approached not as a finished production, but as a work-in-progress, an ongoing improvisational rehearsal.

People can be taught to actually build this into relationships. If one gets into a friction-filled situation, she can say, “Wait, let’s try this interaction again from the top. I’d like to approach it from a different angle.” Or, “Gee, that approach didn’t work. Please let me take it over.” This implies a kind of apology and begins to de-escalate the conflict, turning it into an exploration of why there was a problem to begin with.

Role Reversal

Learning to shift frames of reference, relinquish one's own egocentric perspective even for just a little while, and imagine what it's like to be in the other person's situation, this is not only the heart of what Moreno called "encounter," but it is perhaps the single most important and powerful technique in psychodrama. It is incredibly helpful to use this in one's closest relationships, and often it is useful in other group settings. Simply saying, "Wait, let me look at this from your point of view," begins to open things up.

The skill in role reversal involves learning to think like an actor. It takes a bit of practice; there's a knack. Part of it isn't exactly the classical role reversal as described by Moreno, but rather speaking from the imagined role and then inviting the person for whom one is empathizing to comment, make corrections; then trying it again until the other person says, "Yes, that's how I feel," or "Now I know you understand my point of view."

As an example, imagine a situation in which a couple is discussing the possibilities of making a major move across the country, weighing both advantages and disadvantages. The husband finds it difficult to give arguments, but seems to be getting more uncomfortable. The wife generously relinquishes her point of view and imagines what it's like to be in her husband's situation, opening her imagination to subtle clues. Less rational and even mildly potentially shameful ideas come to mind, such as, "I just don't want to let go of my comfortable surroundings. I know I'm supposed to not be afraid of change, but it's not so much fear as wondering—well, why should we? Is it really worth it?—it's not as if we *have* to make this move, after all!"

The husband breathes a sigh of relief and says, his voice cracking, "Yes, and I was afraid to admit this even to myself—I'm really not all that much of an adventurer." The wife then says, "I know it, and I really care about your feelings, even if they're not all that noble."

One of the obstacles to be overcome is the prevalent belief that "If I admit that your point of view seems plausible, then I have no power in asserting a contrary viewpoint." Expressed thus explicitly, it may be seen to be logically fallacious. It is very possible for two people in a conflict to be entertaining plausible opposing viewpoints. Only the regrettably all-too-common immature and simplistic modes of good versus bad thinking cannot appreciate this. But people do have a bit of this residue, and so some practice is needed. Role reversal begins to make this shift operational.

Inner Dialogue

One of the more useful skills is that of addressing one's own confusion or perplexity or inner conflict as if one had several different characters on an inner stage. The problem is that people tend to engage in many subtle disqualifying maneuvers, the different parts interrupting and clouding the issues so it is as if "I can't hear myself think!" The meta-role becomes an active mediator, committed to remaining neutral (at least at the outset) and to respectfully hearing each part, and also to firmly stopping the opposing voices from interrupting. This takes a little practice, but becomes quite rewarding once one gains the knack of it. It can be done in writing, in a journal, either as a dialogue between two parts or a triologue with one part interrogating, drawing out, empathizing, and mediating, yet remaining open to both sides. Or it can be done with a close friend, saying, "Part of me wants ... while this other part of me thinks.."

The trick is to keep the dialogue going for a while, first drawing out into the full discussion the most honest expressions of need and concern. Often the first or second go-round won't hit these deeper levels. Only after all the "subpersonality" roles have been heard can the mediator meta-role then operate to consciously begin to consider creative alternatives or compromises.

Another technique is to begin to consciously add new roles to the inner dialogue. Sometimes this conflict involves a harshly self-critical part and a vulnerable "inner child." What's needed, perhaps, is a third role, a "defense attorney" who can vigorously answer some of the habits of inner persecution. Alternatively, one might introduce a "management trainer" who dialogues with the self-critical part in teaching it to make more constructive criticisms, and to deliver these encouragingly rather than via humiliation. Other new roles may be created for many other circumstances. The goal here is not only role refinement, but also role expansion.

Inner dialogue may be externalized in the service of spiritual exploration. One can invite one's higher power, in the form of some spiritual entity personified, and engage in a dialogue with that being. Again, the point is to keep the questioning and response going for a goodly number of interchanges, to not allow oneself to feel intimidated, to imagine that the higher power really wants to respond and answer all possible questions. People find this process cuts gradually through layers of cliché and often, in the spontaneity of role reversing and daring to identify with the higher power, finding oneself coming up with wiser responses than were known previously (Blatner, 1999a).

Self-Assertion

Anger may be expressed at different levels of intensity, each of which can be thought of as a different role behavior. From the mildest request to more forceful expressions to hysterical loss of control in rage, these levels can be played with, and (except for the rage), practiced. The more people can learn the skills of expressing the intermediate levels of anger and self-assertion, the more they can also learn to escalate gradually, with warning, and with confidence. To "use" one's temper thus prevents people from "losing" their temper, and in the other direction, those who tend to be too unassertive learn more moderate yet effective ways to express their needs without having to feel as if they are "too mean."

I can imagine a series of role play situations in which people demonstrate, discuss, give feedback, and begin to feel familiar with role behaviors that are beyond their ordinary role repertoire. Associated behaviors include voice projection—indeed, many therapists have a great deal of difficulty raising their voice—not screaming, but just speaking loudly and forcefully. Role playing these as if the group was in "acting training" is a way to expand the role repertoire.

Non-Verbal Communications

In a similar way, learning to become more aware of one's own habitual nonverbal reaction patterns, and to stretch oneself in learning some variations, becomes an important element of interpersonal competence and flexibility. Also, people can learn (by doing) about the ranges and types of nonverbal behavior, so as to comment on these elements in the course of daily interactions (Blatner, 2002).

Many interpersonal frictions at home and at work are due to the *way* things are expressed, the facial expression, voice tone, posture, etc. It really helps to bring this up, because otherwise people tend to slip into denial, asking only to have the content of their speech registered, but not the tone.

People need to be validated in saying, “No, the way something is said communicates often as much if not more than what is said, and the way you said that was (and then describe the behavior, or even better, enact it as a mirror).”

Dream Work

People don't have to be in therapy in order to develop an ongoing relationship with their own subconscious mind. A goodly number of books on doing dream work may be found in self-help sections of bookstores. Psychodrama adds a couple of techniques: (1) For insight, one way to better understand a puzzling element in a dream is to take the role of that element, whether it be a person, animal, or inanimate object. The knack involves imagining what it might be like to be that item— what occurs to us in role will naturally carry our projections, our own selection of qualities. If we dream of a cat, and become that cat, and say, “I don't care about people,” that's our own intuitive association, not an objective description. (2) For further exploration, allow the different personified elements to directly dialogue with each other, because in the dynamism of an encounter again new intuitions come to the surface of awareness. In short, re-create the dream as if it were an actual memory of a puzzling event. This often brings up more personal understandings, instead of letting others, even if they're therapists, come up with “interpretations.” It's always better for people to discover their own meanings.

Social and Emotional Skill Learning

One of the most far-reaching applications of psychodrama is in the area of the development of social and emotional skills (Blatner, 1995). In schools and at the workplace, a wide range of abilities are being addressed (Goleman, 1995, 1998). Although some of this learning may be taught using lectures, discussions, and books, the component skills are best acquired using the more experiential and holistically involving vehicle of role playing or sociodrama.

Some ways that this may be pursued include the following:

- General spontaneity training, helping people to improvise in their thinking and behavior
- Learning about nonverbal communications, how to use their own body, face, and action to express themselves congruently, and to comment on incongruence in others
- Assertiveness training, learning how to make boundaries and gain access to others' attention in modulated ways
- Empathy training, using role reversal to understand others
- Role analysis, participating in doubling and sharing in others' enactments, sociodrama to explore unfamiliar social roles
- Role training, learning how to interview for jobs, present self in new social situations, using feedback, modeling, and replay
- Conflict resolution, learning how to get support, clarify issues, and negotiate
- Self-understanding, using soliloquy, mirror, doubling, and other techniques

Deepening Personal Meaning

Personal meaning isn't a single formula or doctrine, but rather a felt experience, most commonly deriving from the weaving together of a variety of component experiences:

- telling one's own story to others (and being a good audience to others' stories, through which we can validate and stimulate the imaginations and understandings of each other)
- learning to discover the story-like themes in the mundane eventfulness of life
- beginning to recognize the general cultural themes that resonate with our personal life stories, thus helping to transform them into "personal mythologies"
- creating and revising a variety of ceremonies and rituals so that they become more relevant and vital, sensitive to the particulars of the people and situation involved, and more inclusive of the individuals who come together as the audience or participants

Once again, in these endeavors, about which a fair amount has begun to be written, there is a place for psychodramatic methods. Such action techniques and general principles offer ways for helping people to experience these processes more vividly, and to anchor the experiences in their deeper sense of becoming selfhood. For example, I have suggested elsewhere (Blatner, 2001b) that psychodramatists could potentially apply their knowledge about group dynamics, psychology, art and drama, and spirituality in becoming, literally, "Masters of Ceremony," facilitating the more creative use of ritual and celebration in our culture.

Sociometry

Can groups of people begin to more systematically give themselves feedback about their own dynamics? The developers of the aforementioned T-Group were influenced by Moreno, and the elements of group dynamics became manifest somewhat in the subsequent encounter group movement. However, one set of dynamics generally overlooked was that category of interactions that first stimulated Moreno to develop his approaches to group therapy—how the various group members feel insofar as their *preference* to be or do more with certain others in the group, and also not to be with certain others (Blatner, 1994). This is even more valid if the questions about preference are framed in regard to certain role dimensions. In other words, Moreno began to address the dynamics of rapport, and how these relate to the level of group cohesion. Even today, few groups dare to tread into this sensitive realm—Moreno was certainly a visionary on this issue. People may nowadays disclose their sexual fantasies more readily than discuss how they feel about each other in terms of preference.

Indeed, many of the dynamics of jealousy described by psychoanalysts as part of the psychosexual development of middle childhood may actually relate as much if not more to emerging sociometric dynamics. These issues become re-played and intensified during the pre-adolescent and early adolescent years, especially regarding cliques, clubs, being "in" or "out," and other peer-group interactions. They have the added dimension of comparisons regarding social status related to sexual attractiveness—who has matured earlier, too early, styles and fashions in dress, etc.

It's time such issues be woven into the general curriculum of social and emotional learning in the schools. There are some fundamental notions that still are not only not taught, but I question whether most teachers even know them! Kids and adults tend to work better in groups that they have selected based on their own preferences rather than assigned arbitrarily. There isn't just one criterion for "popularity," but different kids need help in discovering their own criteria, and based on that, for finding others who share their "sociotelic" preferences—i.e., common interests. Then, within those groups, and occasionally from other groups, a person finds a few others with whom some personal sense of rapport is felt—a "psyche-telic" connection.

However, if one doesn't "click" with another person, that doesn't mean that there is any need to blame oneself or the other. Such lessons may be important for overall social development.

Conclusion

There are many other ways, techniques, and ideas that have been developed and are continuing to be developed that take psychodrama into the realm of helping people live their ordinary lives more effectively (Booth, 1997; Blatner, 2003: 43-45). These are tools and there are no fixed answers or guaranteed results. Still, it's better to use tools and have some strategies than to simply blunder through or, worse, react in the old ways that, though familiar, generally were either ineffective or even counterproductive. This whole chapter is presently being expanded into an expanded and revised version of the 1985 monograph, *Creating Your Living*.

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