

"THE THINGS INSIDE:" PSYCHODRAMA WITH DELINQUENT ADOLESCENTS

PATRICIA CARPENTER

SALEK SANDBERG

*Clinic for Child Study
Wayne County Juvenile Court
Detroit, Michigan 48207*

He always wanted to explain
things, but no one cared.

He wanted to carve it in
stone, or write it in the sky
And it would be only him
and the sky and the things
inside him that needed saying.

This is the story of some young people who had almost given up trying to say the things inside, because "no one cared," but who found a way to do so through fantasy activity in the form of psychodrama.

The youngsters were 16 delinquent adolescents, of both sexes, aged 15-16 who had been referred to the Wayne County Juvenile Court for offenses such as home and school truancy, drug abuse, fighting, stealing, sex offenses, etc. These youngsters participated in a Clinic psychodrama group that ran weekly for 30 sessions from November 1970 to June 1971. The group was directed by Mr. Sandberg, who had had previous experience with psychodrama in a hospital setting, while Dr. Carpenter, who had 10 years of experience using various other forms of psychotherapy with delinquents served as an assistant and auxiliary ego.

The group utilized the techniques of role playing and feeling expression developed by Moreno (1965). The authors felt that psychodrama was an especially suitable medium for delinquent youngsters for several reasons. First, we felt that their lack of empathy for others might be altered by the role playing and role reversal involved. Second, their communication skills were notoriously poor, and we hoped through this medium to teach them alternative techniques. Another reason is the delinquent's protective shell that prevents depth and intimacy with others and blocks off feelings from awareness. We felt

that the emotional impact of psychodrama might break through this shell in a way that more traditional therapy techniques cannot. Finally, delinquents typically do not indulge in fantasy activity, but instead act out their impulses without awareness of the feelings stimulating them. We wanted through this medium to encourage acting out in fantasy rather than in life, and to stimulate a greater degree of fantasy activity as a necessary personality resource when stress was great. The fact that psychodrama combines action and fantasy makes it an ideal technique for this purpose.

Psychodrama with delinquents has not been used extensively. Most of the work done has been limited to specific purposes such as diagnosis, vocational training, or altering classroom behavior (see references). Some more extensive therapy was done by Bordon (1940) and Eliasoph (1958), while Corsini (1958) has worked with prisoners and delinquent psychopaths. These investigators report some success with this technique although rigorous experimental designs have not been utilized and conclusions are not supported by data.

We have therapeutic agreement and behavior indices (failure to be in further trouble at home, school, or the community) of improvement in 7 of the 10 who were major participants, and in 11 of the total 16, even though some of these were either not involved to a great degree in the dramas enacted or attended few sessions. Despite our lack of experimental data, however, we feel it is valuable to describe our group because of the extraordinary intensity of feeling expressed on occasions, and the variety of techniques utilized.

We used most of the usual psychodrama techniques in our group, but with modifications of our own. We discovered quite early in our sessions that darkening the room freed our youngsters from inhibitions and promoted intimacy. We used only one or two dim lamps from that point on, and occasionally had sessions in black light. We also found that structure, especially in the warm-up period, was extremely important. Allowing our teenagers to spontaneously choose roles, raise problems or enact dramas simply did not work. Our worst sessions were those that were relatively unplanned. It was necessary to give each session a focus, done by music, poetry, fortune tellings, drawings or devices such as the Magic Shop. Spontaneity was also a part of the experience, however, as themes raised in these warm-ups were then selected by the therapists as the focus of dramas.

The Magic Shop was one of our most revealing techniques. We used this at about our fifth session, asking the youngsters to come and buy whatever they wished. Much to our amazement, a boy who had until then sat in total isolation without participation, asked to buy "love and a perpetual high." Another uninvolved boy asked to buy "friendship." Scenes were then played around obtaining love or friendship and giving in order to do so.

Our reading of poetry led to the kids themselves bringing in poems of their own, or at times poems they liked. One such poem was the one quoted at the beginning of this article brought by a girl who had been withdrawn and uninvolved until then. She pointed out that its author had committed suicide a few days after writing it. When the poem was read, it had a tremendous emotional impact on the group because it expressed what so many of them also felt: the gradual death of feelings—"the things inside that needed saying didn't need it anymore"—because of the rigid, emotionally barren environments in which they lived. After the poem was read, Sally, the girl who had brought it in, and another girl were asked to play scenes focusing on depression and suicide, and Sally was able to bring out her anger at her mother for her rejection of her

in an apparently cathartic manner. At the same time, she was shown through doubling by the therapists how her mother felt and offered an alternative way to approach her. This scene began a process in Sally that helped her go home, where institutional placement had previously been contemplated.

One of the prevailing themes of both group discussion and psychodrama was that of trust. The youngsters often voiced their inability to trust adults, including the therapists. They continuously expressed both needs to reach out and fear of being hurt if they showed their feelings.

This concern about trust was focused upon by a girl who brought up St. Exupery's *The Little Prince* which she had been reading, stressing the idea it expressed that grownups could not understand children. At the next session, the passage from this book about the fox was read to the group by one of the therapists since it epitomized their problems about dependency and closeness. They were totally unable to respond at the time, since the whole area was so anxiety-arousing, but following that they asked to paint the walls of the room we used to make it theirs. The next topic raised by them was that of love. Poems were read and scenes played with a focus on love. Interestingly, one iron-clad defensive boy, in a rare display of feelings, expressed the idea that "you could die without love." Many of the scenes of depression played by our group members expressed the isolation, loneliness and despair they felt because their fears of closeness and inability to trust prevented them from experiencing love. Attempts by the therapists to focus on this central dilemma of the delinquent were only partially successful, as it apparently aroused too much anxiety. Nonetheless, later behavior of many of the youngsters suggested that something got through to them.

One of the major problems we experienced in the group was the reluctance and, at times, refusal of members to play roles in the dramas. Some never participated and others in only a minimal fashion. Although this meant that the therapists were more often involved either in doubling or in actual roles, which may have been useful in terms

of providing acceptable models, it also made the experience of less value for those who failed to take part, and aroused some hostility in those who did participate. Attendance, too, was a problem at times, especially when participation was minimal, and some lost interest.

We have recently begun a new group, using techniques designed to alleviate these problems. We are using behavior modification techniques since we are paying the youngsters both for attendance and role participation. This group has a limited time period, and we have asked each member to sign a contract agreeing to attend, and to participate as sincerely as possible in the dramas. So far, after two sessions, participation and attendance are both excellent.

The idea of combining behavior therapy with psychodrama initially seemed incongruous in view of its emphasis on spontaneity and its highly emotional quality, making it so often resemble an art rather than a science. Nonetheless, as Sturm (1965) has so effectively pointed out, psychodrama may readily be conceptualized in terms of behavior therapy and our use of reinforcements to stimulate participation seems quite appropriate.

Certainly our psychodrama seemed to be a curious alchemy of both science and art. Structure, planning, and suitable reinforce-

ments were essential, and without them, we could not have run our group, nor played dramas. The emotional impact of the acting, however, the cutting through defenses to reach the feelings of loneliness and yearning for love experienced by these superficially hard, tough, uncaring delinquents was even more crucial in both insight and behavioral change. Somehow by using our own feelings, we found a way to reach "the things inside that needed saying" and help our youngsters say them.

REFERENCES

- BORDON, R. The use of psychodrama in an institution for delinquent girls. *Sociometry*, 1940, 3, 81-90.
- CORSINI, R. J. Psychodrama with a psychopath. *Group Psychotherapy*, 1958, 11, 33-99.
- ELIASOPH, E. A group therapy psychodrama program at Berkshire Industrial Farm. *Group Psychotherapy*, 1958, 11, 57-63.
- FERINDEN, W. E. Behavioristic psychodrama: A technique for modifying aggressive behavior in children. *Group Psychotherapy*, 1971, 24, 101-106.
- LASSNER, R. Playwriting and acting as diagnostic-therapeutic techniques with delinquents. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 1947, 3, 349-356.
- MORENO, Z. T. Psychodramatic rules, techniques, and adjunctive methods. *Group Psychotherapy*, 1965, 18, 73-86.
- PERL, W. R. Use of fantasy for a breakthrough in psychotherapy groups of hard-to-reach delinquent boys. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 1963, 13, 27-33.
- STURM, I. E. The behavioristic aspect of psychodrama. *Group Psychotherapy*, 1965, 18, 50-64.