

Symmetric and Asymmetric Roles: a Training Exercise

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Describe symmetric and asymmetric roles. Prepare an exercise where your trainees participate in at least one symmetric role and one asymmetric role in a training exercise.

Dalmiro Bustos, esteemed psychiatrist, psychodramatist and professor of the University of Cordoba, Argentina took on the challenge of extending J. L. Moreno's choice as a physician to "understand human suffering in a systematic way, without having to resort to classical formulations about psychopathology...Moreno always felt strongly against using the ideology underlying psychiatric formulations and instead offered a new way of looking at human suffering which was more sympathetic and based on health rather than pathology." 1 In his chapter "Wings and roots" in Psychodrama Since Moreno (1994) Bustos expands the view of role clusters and the clustering effect (spontaneity from one role being accessed for another role) to a view of role interdependence and dependence, role passivity and role interactions which compel a person to share, rival and compete.

Roles are described as symmetric when the interactors in those roles have the same status and power balance, for example, neighbor/neighbor, friend/friend, student/student. Asymmetric roles are role interactions involving hierarchical differentiations, one interactor being dependent in some way on the other, such as parent/child, teacher/student, or therapist/client. Along with the flow of energy between persons interacting in roles comes the capacity to invest spontaneity into the role. Individuals may also foster autonomy or to dampen the mood and thwart the emergence of the spontaneity state.

In a training group, where the skills and strengths of facilitators and individuals vary, the movement between symmetric roles and asymmetric roles fluctuates as trainees practice roles which give a momentary power imbalance to a person who is ordinarily among their peers. Director/protagonist (asymmetric) may be the current priority however their longer term relationship is that of trainee/trainee (symmetric). For this reason having ample time to process the various choice points, including aspects of the director/protagonist relationship, facilitates the learning to be gained from this aspect of role theory and the "parallel process" of role dependence-to-autonomy interaction, a theme often explored in dramas.

Possible exercises for the training group

(1) The shoulder massage: Have trainees assemble into pairs for an exercise where each knows ahead of time that shoulder massage will be the activity. First one person is seated and the other person stands behind to give the shoulder massage. The seated person states: "My shoulder needs a bit of massage." The other person states, "I don't know very much about massage, I'm not an expert or anything, but I would be glad to try to massage

your shoulder."Â The massage proceeds for about a minute and a half. The facilitator times the interaction. The pair, switch and repeat the procedure.

Next, the same pairs experience the same interaction with one difference. The seated person states, "My shoulder needs a bit of massage." The other person states, "Oh, that's no problem. I am an expert on massage, and will be glad to help you." The massage proceeds for a minute and a half. They switch again and maintain the one difference. The trainees then discuss any differences they noticed between the two shoulder massages. The first was more a symmetric role interaction and the second was an asymmetric role interaction.

The kind of comments I have heard in follow-up discussion is that the first massage felt more personal and the second more professional, as though something was being done to the person rather than for the person. It is an interesting experience.

(2) Two or three trainees gather in an area and are asked to create a private small club-house space as though they were in their early teens. Then they spend fifteen minutes in the space talking about their issues with their parents. (Symmetric roles) This is followed by a change in place, seated in an adult persons' living room where one by one they take a role of adult listening to and offering assistance as an interested adult to the other person or persons as they talk about their parent(s). The trainees discuss what they experienced and the differences they noticed, particularly what interactions assisted their spontaneity state and which ones dampened it.

1. Dalmiro Bustos, "Wings and roots" in Psychodrama since Moreno (1994) edited by Paul Holmes, Marcia Karp and Michael Watson. London, Routledge.(pgs. 64-76) , p.68-69.

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