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PSYCHODRAMA IN THE TREATMENT PROGRAM OF A JUVENILE COURT¹

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The ever-increasing case load in the juvenile courts is presenting a serious problem. A typical example of the present staggering number of juvenile problems is the situation in the District of Columbia where over 17,000 juvenile cases were handled in the past year. The cost of providing necessary facilities is constantly increasing. Existing correctional institutions are continuously overtaxed.

In spite of considerable effort expended by our correctional and social agencies, the rate of recidivism remains high. Certainly there is much in our present approach to the problem that is lacking. Most juvenile deviants benefit in varying degrees from a stay at a correctional institution. Let us assume that a boy makes a satisfactory institutional adjustment at the institution. He finds acceptance, develops a feeling of belonging, acquires new skills, learns new values and gains in insight and judgment. In most cases, he is then discharged back into the pathological family milieu. There he usually encounters the same rejection and lack of love, the same lack of understanding of his needs. Once again he is exposed to denial, frustration and punishment. Finding home again unbearable, he once more escapes to his gang on the streets.

It is clear that in such instances, parents have not really learned to understand the needs of their children. They have failed to recognize in what areas they are delinquent, rather than their children. How can we better promote understanding between such children and their parents? How can we make parents sufficiently aware of the great need for love, companionship and the other basic needs of their children?

¹ See Hans Illing, this JOURNAL, 48, 4, 387-393 where references to other articles and books on this subject may be found.

CHILD-PARENTAL COMMUNICATION A BASIC

Communication is the basic requirement for therapy.¹ Without communication, there is no therapy. This, then brings up the big question of how communication can be best achieved. Secondly, does all communication necessarily have to be verbalized? What are the best media for achieving a higher degree of communication?

Further, we are fully aware of the special problems of relating and making contact with individuals who are suffering from strong feelings of rejection and hostility. With such persons even our best efforts are often fruitless.

Therefore, we have been constantly searching for better methods of communicating in a therapeutic sense with them. Among these, we have utilized psychodrama and group therapy. For we have found that psychodrama provided the necessary warmup and release of repressed affectivity to spark really productive group psychotherapeutic sessions. The psychodrama sessions were usually truly psychodramatic in that the protagonist was the patient himself, even though most or all of the supporting auxiliary characters were improvised. However, in some instances, resistance on the part of the patient made it necessary to utilize the role playing method in which the role of the patient was played by another, and the actors mirrored the problematic conflict laden relationships to the patient.

TREATMENT LONG MISDIRECTED

In the treatment of juvenile delinquency, therapy has long been misdirected at the product of parental deficiencies, namely the child, rather than at the primary etiologic basis of the child's difficulties, the parent or parent-surrogates (teacher, matron, etc.).

Thus, I have with the kind assistance of a very

wise and humane judge (Alfred Noyes, Montgomery County Juvenile Court) been enabled to set up a psychodrama clinic which has as its primary task the treatment of the parents—in short helping parents to become more understanding of the major needs of their children.² The aim of the clinic for parents is not to condemn parents, but to open their eyes. We have found that the majority of them wish to be good parents and to raise children of whom they can be proud, but that very often they do not know how to accomplish this objective. All too often they blindly repeat the errors their own parents had made with them. This of course not only is painfully experienced as rejection by the child sowing the initially seed of asocial hostility, but also provides the “*Modus Operandi*”, the blueprint for dealing with others, for handling, or shall we say mishandling, other people. Revenge for hurts is conceived by the unconscious in subtle ways. The unconscious feels and expresses hate blindly, indiscriminately. All too often, to the child the so-called “bad parents” reflect the world as bad. In childhood the relationship with the parents is paramount and loving one’s parents means desiring to please them and the world—to work constructively, creatively with a growing desire to give to the beloved persons around them. Loving one’s parents means loving the world, while hatred and fear of parents implies the opposite. Hate towards parents is often not directly expressed, but discharged as acts of hurting, taking, destroying—of seeking not to please but to be defiant and disobedient. These destructive feelings are often so intense, threatening, and disturbing to the child that failing to gain external expression, they are often repressed and turned inwardly in masochistic episodes of “hurting self in order to hurt father and mother”. That is one method of forcing the issue, or getting back at the parent. There are other methods such as displacing the hostility towards a difficult teacher, and creating a crisis in school. Here we have the unconscious mechanism of the “masochistic protest”.

SWALLOWING THE MONSTER

In analyzing the child’s inner feelings, we see that he has unconsciously assimilated the oppressive hurting parent. He too, becomes a harsh

² In this instance the authority of the court is being used therapeutically to promote better understanding and relations between parents and children.

judge of others as well as himself. His sadistic ego can masochistically turn against himself or be sadistically externalized. He has in a sense, as has been so beautifully portrayed in our psychodrama skits, “swallowed the Monster”. The cruel, rejecting parent has tragically become internalized, so “Tyranny begets Tyrants.”

Thus the clinic for parents not only tries to help the parent understand his child and his needs better but aims at trying to help the parent understand himself. The subjective approach to parental-child counseling can never be successful. It is useless to tell a parent or child that they should behave in a certain manner towards each other, that they should love one another, and all that is implied. It is necessary to get at their incapacity to love one another—the reasons for the rejecting attitudes and the mutual hatred. Love can only exist when inwardly motivated and only after feelings of hate and fear have been resolved.

We find that the child who performs psychodramatically before his own parents frequently seizes upon the occasion to protest dramatically his grievances and to exact revenge from his parents. He loses no time in portraying his parents or teachers as unbearable, cruel, unjustly oppressive in robbing them of their social freedom and pleasures, overly strict, critical. It goes without saying that very often the child seizes upon the protective immunity and spontaneity which the psychodrama session provides to somewhat overexaggerate and as they usually express it, to really put their parents “on the spot”, or “in the frying pan”. However, communicability is very definitely established. The child gets rid of a great deal of pent-up feeling and usually gains some significant insights as a result of the skit and the analytic discussion of the dynamics which follows.

Sometimes, a single such session can instill sufficient insight into the parents as to result in a radical change in the parental attitudes.

FURTHERING IDENTIFICATION

Whenever possible, an attempt is made to get together a group of parents whose children have all been charged with a similar offense. For instance, a boy acted out how he had come to the decision to steal a car. How badly he wanted a car! How often when he wanted something, he felt his parents could not feel or realize how badly

he wanted that something! Besides, what was the use—they had never shown much interest in him and his pleasures. They called upon him only when there were chores to do and when they wanted to criticize or punish him. He was convinced as a result of this that they never wanted him as a son in the first place. Once, he even contemplated the thought that possibly they weren't even his real parents. "They didn't act like they were." When parents loved their children they wanted to make them happy instead of sad." They often gave them things that to John symbolized love—birthday presents, Christmas gifts. John began early to feel despairing—"What's the use!" Nobody really cares for me—I've just got to look out for myself—nobody else will." So, John stole the car that he wanted so badly. It wasn't too difficult. Afterwards, he had mixed feelings of guilt mingled with satisfaction; also, of fear of being caught and punished. He thought, "I'd better give the car back before it's too late," and another voice kept saying, "Don't be a sucker—it's a beautiful car—keep it!" So, John felt torn, ambivalent—as he put it later, his indecision and inner guilt made it easier for the police to catch him. It also became clear as a result of the acting out that there was a deeper mechanism at work. John unconsciously was seeking to change his parents' attitude toward him. He was resorting to an earlier method. When he was a little boy, he could sometimes wring concessions from his mother by refusing to eat, by going to bed hungry. These oral-masochistic episodes of self-inflicted hurt in order to unconsciously strike back at his parents he had discovered worked effectively. In the soliloquy during the skit, he found himself saying as he intrapsychically and dramatically relived the episode, "Mother and Dad, you'll be sorry for all this—I know that you are ashamed of all the scandal and now you have to go to court—and you always thought so much of our family name. Now, you can go to court and see what you've brought on yourselves. If you hadn't treated me like you did, I never would have gotten into all this trouble. You're going to have to treat me differently from now on, or I'll get into trouble again. Sure, I'll suffer if I'm caught, but you'll suffer too. The more I suffer, the more you'll suffer. It's worth it—anyway, what do I care about life or the future, if you don't love me? So, John's unconscious spoke spontaneously during the soliloquy.

Later, John confirmed that he had been un-

aware that he had been punishing himself. In fact, he seemed initially surprised to hear such an interpretation, but soon conceded that it could be so. We see that John unconsciously, desperately wanted the love, interest, and acceptance of his parents. In fact, he was willing to risk even self-destruction to get it. Of course, the parents had been blind to John's great need for love. They had, like most parents, attributed John's behavior to something constitutionally wrong with his character. "Certainly, we had nothing to do with John being the way he is. After all, look at his brother Ralph. He is so obedient, so studious. He never gave us a bit of trouble." Of course what they had failed to realize, as we later discovered, was that Ralph's spirit had been broken completely and that he was subject to states of anxiety and depression. He had ceased long ago to oppose his parents—especially his father who had really hurt him with that belt buckle when he was a little boy. Ralph conceded that he didn't want to get hurt, so he gave in, no matter what, but his brother John never gave in, regardless of how much the father hit him. In fact, the more he punished John, the worse John defied him. Later it was discovered that John's father had unconsciously identified him with a brother whom he had always hated and detested.

VALUE OF TOTAL FAMILY APPROACH

Juvenile courts today fully recognize the need for understanding the problems with which they are dealing. They realize too, that solutions for emotional conflicts in juvenile deviants must be found or the result will be that such children may continue to pursue criminal careers. They recognize further that a symptomatic or palliative approach cannot yield results. When such cases are referred to correctional agencies, it is vitally necessary that they sufficiently understand the principal problems confronting these children. Lacking such adequate information, these agencies are hampered in their planning of a constructive treatment program for the child. The value of getting at the total family situation is evident. Social factors such as absentee working parents and the effect this has on their children can be effectively explored. As aforementioned, the emotionally disturbed child is unable to communicate satisfactorily and all too often, parents

feel too guilty and embarrassed—even when they possess insight—to frankly discuss their child's problem and their own difficulties in dealing with the situation.

It is my firm conviction that the present procedure of separating the child from the parent and the inference that the child is a "bad child" who must be removed from the community is in itself harmful to the therapeutic process. Similarly, the separation of the child from the parent is often interpreted by parents in the light of, "We are bad parents, and therefore unfit for the child". It is clear that such an implication can only create deep resentment and resistance within the parents. In the final analysis, this can be very harmful to the entire treatment process since the parents often as a result unconsciously sabotage the treatment plan.

Where there are serious emotional disturbances, communication between child and parent is usually impaired. Thus, new means for communication must be established.

As aforementioned, psychodrama presents the unique possibility of treating both parents and child as a family unit, permitting them to gain insight and understanding of each other's problems and conflicts.

In our investigations, we have found that psychodrama can be an excellent tool for accomplishing these objectives. Permit me to illustrate with the following example:

Bob, a 15 year-old, is quite emotionally disturbed. He is not only having severe conflicts with his parents and siblings, but is facing expulsion from school, where he has been labeled as a trouble-maker. Bob has mixed feelings about his mother and dad; he resents them deeply and yet at the same time admits that he desires their love and companionship. With the aid of psychodramatically-trained auxiliaries, Bob undertakes the acting out of his emotional problems at home and at school in various stages of development. His parents and the parents of other problem children are in the audience. On the stage his parents are able to observe the total dynamic portrayal of their family life as Bob sees it. In role-reversals, Bob portrays himself, his parents, his siblings, and other significant people in his life.

We have found that the parents who witness such portrayals usually react very strongly. Often they are profoundly stunned by the new insights gained.

In Bob's case, his father remarked, "Why, I never thought my boy felt that way! Why didn't he tell me? Why didn't he talk things over?" Actually, Bob felt too threatened by his dad to "talk things over". Besides, he thought his dad wasn't interested.

When Bob got rather excited during the skit, he cried, "Why do you move us all over the country? Every time I make a few friends, I've got to leave them. That's what happened in Chicago", he remarked bitterly. Again directing his remarks towards his father, he continued, "You're more interested in being made a sucker of by your drunken friends than in your own son!" Later he screamed, "Why don't they let me be by myself. Why do they want to regiment my life!" (He felt that he had never had an identity of his own.) He expressed his bitter resentment at being forced to study subjects in school which had no meaning for him. Then he cried, "All they tell me at school is that I got a high IQ and I ought to do better. I'm tired of being pushed around!" (Bob unconsciously equated being pushed around with being rejected.)

Not only Bob's parents, but also the other parents in the audience were markedly affected by the skit with its intense outpouring of emotion, because of being involved in similar problems, they could usually identify readily with the psychodramatic presentation. This was clearly indicated by the rather lively discussion which followed the presentation. There was not a person in the auditorium who felt that Bob should be punished for being a so-called 'juvenile delinquent'. It was obvious to all that Bob had been a victim, rather than a cause of the conflict at home. The judge and the probation officer who witnessed the performance were able to gain valuable insight into the etiology of Bob's problems.

TECHNIQUE FOR EVADING EGO-DEFENSES

Psychodrama affords an unusual technique for rapidly and effectively revealing many of the deeper conflicts of problem children. It provides methods for circumventing ego-defenses and resistances in order to get at the underlying repressed conflicts. Such presentations not only provide an effective catharsis for the protagonist and help him to gain valuable insights into his problems, but also afford an opportunity to study

the dynamic emotional inter-relationship within the family and school situation. The discussions which were conducted following the skits provided opportunities for parents and children, not only to vent their own feelings, but to gain new insights into the problems of their children. We found further that the court personnel—judges, probation officers, case workers and psychologists—were as a result also enabled to gain a better understanding of the problems involved. It was now possible for them to see the dynamic interrelating of the family as a whole.

Let us consider the case of Gladys, a 16 year-old high school girl, who was presenting a serious behavior problem in that she was beyond parental control, had on a number of occasions assaulted her mother physically, and was continually defying her. In addition, she had taken up a friendship with a young married man, who himself had a criminal record. She had failed to adjust to her peer group in school. Gladys showed little affection toward human beings, but had developed quite an attachment to dogs and horses, and she spent a great deal of her time riding. She had only one close girl-friend, a 16 year-old Amazon called Joan, who was even more defiant and independent in her behavior than was Gladys. It appears that Gladys idealized Joan and strove to emulate her.

I was called in on the case at the time when Gladys was being tried at the juvenile court on charges of being beyond parental control. She had spent several days and nights in a rather antiquated county jail, where she for the first time, had had an opportunity to actually observe the manner in which offenders were treated. I was able to persuade the judge to put her on probation with the stipulation that she receive psychotherapy. A favorable rapport was initiated as a result of my intervention in her behalf.

Following her release, she participated in several psychodrama sessions. As a result of the acting out in which, for the most part, teen-age auxiliary egos were used, Gladys was able to bring out the following:

For many years she had been under the illusion that her mother had been responsible for the breaking up of her parents' marriage, (when she was only 9 years old), by her infidelity to Gladys' father. Actually, careful examination of the history of the case revealed that the opposite was true—that it was the father who had been unfaithful. Thus, for a number of years, Gladys

had blamed her mother for having been denied a father. To make matters worse, the acting out further revealed the father was "cold and 100 percent self-centered", as Gladys put it. For the past two years, he hadn't even once communicated with her, she protested bitterly. Then, in the next breath, "I don't ever want to see him again. I don't need him."

Further complicating the situation was the disclosure that the father had married an European Jewish refugee, Ruth, who was a professional woman. A clue to Gladys' deep hostility towards Ruth was first revealed when she exclaimed, in talking to the mother-figure, "And I don't like those Jewish men you run around with, either." (Unconsciously, it also meant, "I don't want you to be like father who deserted me for a Jewish woman.")

From the beginning Ruth had been unable to understand Gladys, and regarded her as a serious threat. It was clear that Gladys was still unconsciously pursuing the affections and attentions of her cold, unloving father. In acting out, Gladys stated at one point bitterly "Just when I thought I at last had father to myself, along comes this woman". She then told of how envious she had previously been towards her mother, of how possessive of her father she had felt. It was a clear example of the "electra complex".

Gladys unconsciously was always trying to wrest a man from a woman and take her place. First, it was to tear her father from her mother, (and intense rivalry and jealousy still exist), then it was father from Ruth and now it is Johnny from his wife.

Ruth personally revealed as a defense for her attitude towards the child that Gladys' mother had been using her as a tool with which to break up their marriage.

As a result of these disclosures, Gladys was able to develop a new insight into the reasons for her pursuing Johnny, the young married man. "You know", she exclaimed, "I can now see that he's as cold and self-centered as my father. Could it be that I'm still subconsciously trying to win back my father in the person of Johnny?" Later, she acted out the humiliating and painful experiences of her mother and her shattered ideal of womanhood. She has now reached the point where she is wondering whether her rejection of femininity, her increased tendency toward masculinization—being in the driver's seat, wearing pants, and riding

horses—was all a part of her theory that men don't get hurt as easily as women; after all, she didn't want to be as big a sucker as her mother had been. Further, father was passive—unaffectionate. She had to always go to Daddy to kiss him and to seek affection which usually wasn't forthcoming. Hence, she had assumed the defenses of being independent, striving to be defiant, aggressive, dominant, and possessive.

As a result of these insights, Gladys is beginning to gradually drop these defenses to assume a more normal, social and feminine attitude. She has come to realize that her anti-Semitic feelings were a result of her feelings toward Ruth. The opportunity to act out with a peer group had afforded the opportunity to once more feeling understood and accepted by teen-agers, by whom she had formerly felt so rejected. Gladys always used to say, "Teenagers aren't any fun", and she sought out adult companionship instead. Now she has found that "Teenagers can be fun!"

FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT

A further application of psychodrama is that used at Boys' Village where we have attempted to improve the insight and skill of staff members by this method. They have learned to improve their techniques in handling the boys through lessons learned in the psychodramas. For example, a boy wished to act out the role of his male cottagemaster. He did so in a demonstrative, loud and authoritative manner, shouting and shaking his fist at the other boys until they assumed cowed, submissive attitudes. When he finished he was asked by the Director (psychiatrist) if that was the way Mr. S—— had acted. One large lad came forward, his face drawn with anger, eyes flashing. He said, "No, Doctor, it ain't quite like that—I'll show you." He asked for a leather glove and roughly pulled the shirt off another boy. Then he simulated a severe blow in the area of the heart. "You see", he boasted, "That's what you get when you cross me—and my glove leaves few marks, so watch your step!" The other boy cowered, for he had actually been subjected to this kind of treatment. It so happened that the cottage master in question was present in the audience. His embarrassment at the situation re-enactment in front of the other staff members was apparent. But, more important, his seeing himself as others saw him made a deep impression, leading to what appeared to be a rather fundamental change in his behavior with the boys. He stopped using this disciplinary

method and has since made attempts to use more humane procedures in dealing with his charges.

Another example of the insight gained through psychodrama for staff members occurred in the case of a boy acting out his feelings about running away from the corrective school. He seemed to center his attention on a certain staff member. The boy had inquired about the possibility of obtaining a weekend furlough and release from the school in the near future. The staff member had painted a rather hopeless picture of the possibilities. The boy in role-reversal acted out the part of the staff member in the conference, and then portrayed himself as feeling desperately unhappy, homesick and despairing to get home. Then only did he make the decision to run away. He did so, was caught and underwent disciplinary action including prolongation of his incarceration. In the discussion following the psychodrama, the boy broke down, cried, saying, "Why didn't he tell me the truth—that I was up for a weekend furlough and was being considered for release? Why did he want to torment me and drive me to do it?" The staff member involved was deeply impressed with this psychodrama and outburst. He saw how he had been unconsciously hurting others as well as this boy in the same way. Lasting impression was made not only on him, but also on other staff members who were present. This carried over into improved relationships with the boys.

For those who wish to use psychodrama for similar purposes in correctional institutions, I have the following advice:

1. The therapist should direct the performance, including the selection of and instructions to the auxiliary actors so that they will be able to help the protagonist to re-enact real life situations. Scenes should be short, with assisting actors being briefed before each scene.
2. It helps to have a stage with lighting equipment so the audience can be darkened for each scene. Intense realism is attempted when necessary, supplemented with language and movement that is dynamic. For instance, the father slaps the son with force and emotion, so that the son feels really humiliated as in the original life situation.
3. Let the protagonist re-experience the original conflict situation. Often the other boys in the audience can identify with him and thus gain insight from the performance. We often permit boys to spontaneously act out experiences which they recall by identification and association.
4. The Director should encourage spontaneous

participation in the discussion following the skit. Use of pertinent questions help. (Here, stress the value of Moreno's role-reversal technique. Ego-doubling also very helpful. Note: author's method of reversing the double with protagonist.)

Psychodrama has the great advantage that larger groups can be treated. In fact, often the larger the participating audience, the greater is the therapeutic impact.

Psychodrama, as applied in the aforementioned examples, affords a valuable possibility for encouraging the prompt resort by the courts to treatment, rather than punishment, in the handling of juvenile behavioral problems. Psychodrama

furthermore clearly demonstrates how all too often the child is a victim of an unhappy home and marital situation; and that having erected defenses against the intolerable situation at home, the child is then penalized for these. This sort of punishment every juvenile will react to as unjust. It is just such injustices, as conceived in the minds of these problem children, that lead to a growing feeling of bitterness and rejection toward society as a whole. . . . Problem children are only the "problems" which parents and parental surrogates create. Unfortunately, this is often done unawaredly by parents so that they know not what they are doing to their own child.