

"A Large-Family Sociodrama"

by Herb Propper, Ph.D., T.E.P.

Johnson (VT) State College, USA

co-director, Houston and Oklahoma Psychodrama Institutes

This sociodrama took place during one session of an intensive 3-weekend college course in Sociodrama for Adult Degree students. The group consisted of 13 students, 3 male and 10 female, ranging in age from late 20s to mid-40s, none of whom had any prior experience in psychodrama or sociodrama. The session in question occurred during the 3rd weekend, so the students had begun to develop some feeling for sociodrama and a degree of group cohesion.

Since this session was the initial one of the final weekend, the warmup consisted of 2 action sociograms, 'whom have you felt most connected to since the last session?' and 'with whom do you most want more connection today?' In the latter, participants were given the opportunity to make 3 choices. The group theme emerged during the sharing, first voiced by a sociometric star in the 2nd sociogram. The theme of 'Comfort in Visiting Family at Holidays' was quickly established. The degree of importance of this theme was confirmed by a sociogram depicting strength of positive/negative feelings toward the situation, as indicated by distance from a center point. A large majority of the group clustered in the center, except for 2 members, who did agree they could benefit from exploration of the theme.

Roles were established by identifying various role clusters, e.g. Parents, Visiting Adult Children, In-laws and Grandparents, marked by chairs. Each participant chose a general role area, then through interactive discussion defined their roles more specifically, including relationships with other family members. I felt that it was important for each participant to connect to the action to enhance group cohesion and to avoid isolation of those 2 members who were initially not as strongly connected to the theme as the remaining group members.

Action began with the entire family gathering around a table with food and drink to meet and socialize. Brief individual soliloquies about initial feelings were produced through a series of freezes in the interaction. After mingling again for a short time, I directed the group to explore surplus reality by imaginatively sprinkling them with 'Magic Honesty Dust.' I then asked them to tell other family members briefly what they really thought of them, and returned to interaction from their polite but sometimes false surface.

The action was deepened by my asking "Who needs to have a Heart-to-Heart Talk with whom?" This sociometric criterion produced 2 clusters: Dad with Younger Son and Older Daughter, who carried resentments toward Dad, and Daughter-in-Law (wife of Younger son) with Mom. Before exploring these scenes, I asked the remainder of the group in their roles as other family members what they wanted or needed by the end of this family gathering, which anticipated the closure scene for the action. Interviews with the 5 roles regarding their issues with one another produced the strongest warmup from Mom--Sister-in-Law. The group agreed to explore this scene and to contract to do the Dad-Brother-Sister scene if time permitted (it did not for this session; instead that scene became the enactment for the following session). I asked the group to remain in their Family Member roles, so they became observer/witnesses both as themselves and in role.

The action consisted of 2 scenes, the first between Mom and Daughter-in-Law and the second between Mom and Younger Son (Daughter-in-Law's Husband). Daughter-in-Law was angry with Mom for belittling Younger Son's drinking while ignoring her own. Daughter-in-Law resisted Mom's attempts to placate her and gloss over flaws. Mom appears overly protective and solitious for Younger Son. In role reversal, when directed to soliloquize about underlying feelings and thoughts they're reluctant to express, Daughter-in-Law as Mom becomes less defensive and admits her responsibility for the situation (viz., drinking problems of herself and her son), while Mom as Daughter-in-Law begins to uncover feelings of pain and rejection beneath the anger of the role. Returning to their own roles, they begin to make headway in expressing their own feelings and acknowledging those of the other. When the rest of the group, in their family roles as witness/observers, are invited to express their perceptions, the 2nd Daughter-in-Law tells them to stop arguing over Son/Husband as if he's 4 years old. Asked to show this in action, she produces

sculpture of each pulling Son/Husband (on his knees) from opposite sides, saying "you belong to me!" This sculpture was produced using other family members as stand-ins, so Mom and Daughter-in-Law can observe as well. Returning to the interaction, Mom and Daughter-in-Law both acknowledge the truth of the sculpture, which leads to Mom's need to talk to Son directly, without Daughter-in-Law in between them. Daughter-in-Law agrees that her own anger toward Mom can be dealt with separately, in other drama.

This leads to 2nd scene, between Mom and Younger Son. Before the confrontation, I ask each role to choose another family member as 'Supporter' [ally Double]. Son chooses his Wife [Daughter-in-Law]; Mom chooses Younger Daughter. Initially Mom tries to 'guilt-trip' Son by listing his shortcomings; Son is angry and resistant. Through soliloquies and directorial prompting, each role begins to express underlying unsatisfied needs and take responsibility for ways in which each defeats open, honest interaction. 'Supporter' roles provide positive support for each with a hand on shoulder. Mom confesses that she masks her feelings, protects herself by talking too much without listening; Son confesses fear of showing real self, fear of rejection, and frustration for perceived lack of respect by parents of his authentic self and his own choices. Mom also admits she doesn't yet know how to make him feel safer and more accepted. In role reversal, Son as Mom shows a solution: "Show you're as glad to see me as my siblings." In own roles, Mom accepts the suggestion, and they make a contract to try to be better listener and give more consideration for the other in future. The scene ends with Mom inviting Son and Daughter-in-Law for an intimate dinner with no sibling rivals. With my prompting, Mom asks Dad, from his observer role, if he likes that solution, and Son asks Daughter-in-Law, from her 'Supporter' role. Both support this.

In a brief resolution scene, Mom, Dad, Son and Daughter-in-Law make a formal announcement of their agreed-upon solution to the rest of the group in their respective family roles. They show their new relationship concretely in a sculpture of 'new bridges between them.' As a final reminder, they pose for a 'sociodramatic' photo taken by a family member. The closure of the action consisted of the remainder of the family members simultaneously taking the opportunity to satisfy some of their needs expressed earlier after the 'Heart-to-Heart Talk' sociogram.

Sharing revealed some significant connections to actual life situations, including those in which group members felt blocked in making family relationships more satisfying. One commented on experiencing the power of an 'As If' situation and role-training practice to effect more satisfying outcomes in real life. In processing, a student raised the question of whether as director I always look for a 'happy ending.' This led to a very fruitful discussion of Moreno's goal of 'Spontaneous Man' and the search for mutual satisfaction of needs, i.e. moving towards 'win/win' solutions rather than 'win/lose.' The group was generally very understanding and responded positively to these ideas.