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The Subjective Genogram: An Action Therapy Tool for Family of Origin Work

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While a person's extended family of origin typically provides numerous role models for expressive behavior, only a limited number of these are incorporated into one's role repertoire.

Wiener's (1999) Dramaturgic Model posits two of five theatrical meta-roles needed for adequate psychosocial functioning: the embodying, expressing Performer; and the responsive, self-witnessing Spectator. A case example illustrates the combined use of a "subjective genogram" (an impressionistic visual representation of the client's family of origin) in identifying the client's limited meta-roles and of dramatic role-play in expanding the client's emotional role repertoire.

KEYWORDS: Role-play; dramatic enactment; family-of-origin; genogram; Dramaturgic Model.

This article describes techniques developed from "The Family Inside You," a series of workshops for professional actors that I first created in 1992-93. These workshops were designed to teach actors more about their own families and to impart the rudiments of Family Systems thinking.

This helped actors better understand scripts and the personal choices at their disposal in order to create a stage character. In the course of reviewing the patterns of attitudes, stories, and behaviors arising from thirty-two years of psychotherapeutic practice, it occurred to me that clients were quite limited in the use they made of "introjected" parents and other family members as role models. That is, clients typically patterned themselves after one parent and identified with only a selective few characteristics of that person. Seen in this way, clients could, like actors, be encouraged to try out different family role models for reconstructing their own characters, rather than settling for being assigned an "understudy" role to these parental introjects.

Theater improvisation games and improvised dramatic enactments are role-playing methods that have long been employed in drama therapy for psychosocial assessment and skills-training, and as therapeutic interventions (Wiener, 1994; Emunah, 1994). According to Wiener's (1999) Dramaturgic Model, there are five theatrical meta-roles necessary for adequate psychosocial functioning. Two of these are particularly relevant to interpersonal functioning: Embodying, and Expressing (the Performer, which creates, actively interprets, and enacts roles, thereby enabling choice in how to present self to others. Responsive Self-Witnessing (the Spectator), which passively interprets, evaluates, witnesses, and receives the roles performed by self and others. A deficiency in Performer capacity results in people living with little expression, observing their lives rather than experiencing their agency to live them directly, and reacting rather than acting. A deficiency in Spectator capacity leaves people in social situations unable to perform appropriately, evaluate accurately, or choose wisely. In many cases, two therapeutically complementary goals are to improve both Performer functioning (expanding clients' expressive range of performance in social situations) and Spectator functioning (facilitating clients'

awareness of the impact of their performances on others). A client's family-of-origin experiences provide significant models for overcoming both Performer and Spectator deficiencies.

In preparation for the work of expanding a client's role and emotional repertoire during group, family, or individual therapy, a specific and detailed exploration of the client's family of origin is necessary. Two tools aid such exploration: a conventional genogram (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999), which is a standardized mapping and organizing tool; and a "subjective genogram" (Wiener, 1998), described below, which provides a more phenomenological, direct way of representation. By way of analogy, the experience of a city might be conveyed by means of a street map (corresponding to a conventional genogram), or by a painting of street life (corresponding to a subjective genogram). Each provides useful, though different, information.

A subjective genogram is constructed by the client on a large sheet of paper using crayons or colored markers. The client is instructed to represent family or relationship networks impressionistically, using shapes, sizes, relative positions, and colors to convey his or her sense of these relationships. For example, Father and relatives on his side of the family might be depicted as small, grey, cloud-like figures in the lower left quadrant; Mother might be a large, jagged red and orange mass just above center; Sister might appear as a smaller yellow blob, crosshatched with orange stripes, just under Mother's figure and connected to her by tangled red filaments. Upon completion I have the client explain the drawing to me. Then I ask follow-up questions about unexplained features, including persons omitted, and elicit emotional reactions to the material described. In group or family therapy clients have the option of explaining their subjective genograms to one another. This assists in learning one another's feelings about their families and invites processing around similarities and differences.

Once the genograms are constructed and explored in conventional ways, family patterns are identified around such themes as status (i.e., ways of displaying relative importance of self), competence, temperament and emotional expressiveness, competitiveness/cooperativeness, and role flexibility. Clients then move from their detached description of family stories to greater involvement by offering dialogue and enacting scenes in which they impersonate selected other family members. Once enactment is completed, we discuss similarities and differences between their own character and that of their family members, emotional reactions to impersonating family members, and the ease or difficulty experienced in enactment. This exercise promotes expansion of the client's Performer and Spectator role functions.

CASE EXAMPLE: PAULA

Paula, a 38-year-old client in individual therapy, readily identified the way in which she displayed anger similar to her father's. She had long received feedback that she appeared "hot-tempered," a description that did not fit her sense of self. Indeed, her clinical presentation was defensive and fearful. In her attempts to avoid getting angry, she would give up or withdraw socially, to her considerable frustration. Upon inquiry, Paula described how other family members expressed anger. She was asked to choose a family member's expression of anger that was most compatible with her self-concept. She immediately selected her paternal grandmother.

In a vignette with a dishonest auto mechanic, Paula as the mechanic's customer was instructed to play anger as her grandmother would. Although the scene seemed realistic, her character's anger at being cheated appeared inhibited. Moreover, the result did not satisfy her. Paula was more conscious of suppressing or altering her typical hot-tempered responses than of playing Grandmother authentically.

An examination of her subjective genogram revealed that Paula and her father (along with a few other relatives on her father's side) were depicted as spiky, complicated figures with a lot of within-figure detail. By contrast, Paternal Grandmother was drawn as a swirling, loose "cloud" with diffuse boundaries, a faintly shaded light blue color, and no complicating details. The only commonality between Paula's figure and Grandmother's were their proximity (close together in the lower right quadrant of the paper) and the same light blue color (although Paula's figure, a small, mostly gray oval, had several pale colors, including her father's orange). Paula's interpretation was that the shared characteristic (represented by the light blue color) with her grandmother was a spiritual and ethical sensitivity, a quality lacking in her father. Grandma could become quite angry toward someone lacking consideration. Paula remembered how her grandmother had gotten very angry at a rude waitress, demanding an apology from the waitress and manager both. Paula, age nine at the time of the incident, had been deeply impressed by her grandmother's cool but unflinching purpose, and wished to incorporate this quality into her own repertoire. Paula evidently equated "assertively handling frustrating situations while staying in emotional control" with "displaying anger." Grandmother's performance in the restaurant, which had become a model for Paula, was not easily reconciled with her own, father-like, "hot" anger. As a result, she felt unable to both "be herself" and handle anger-provoking situations like Grandmother.

Returning to action, we then revisited the vignette with the dishonest auto mechanic. Paula objected to the direction to play an exaggerated version of her father, stating that she did not wish to be like him. She accepted this challenge after framing the goal as a means to experience where her anger started. Paula started shouting, cursing, and threatening the mechanic in a rapidly mounting frenzy. In marked contrast to the first enactment, her character reacted

intensely to being thought so ignorant, confused, or unassertive as to be swindled brazenly. The scene ended after the emotional catharsis. Paula's shared insight was that her character "couldn't stand the insult of being taken advantage of." Upon further inquiry, Paula also had the insight that, unlike her father, "Grandma wouldn't be threatened-she'd be determined to let him know he couldn't get away with that stuff." Paula began to integrate an understanding of the differences between the reactions of her father and grandmother.

To this point, Paula had made coordinated use of the enactments to strengthen her Performer function, and of the reflective discussion to enhance her Spectator function. In order to anchor the integration of these functions, Paula was asked to draw another subjective genogram of her family of origin, this time with the mindset of "expressing anger" as the theme. In contrast to her previous rendition, this drawing showed the figure representing her father as smaller and less complicated, with less within-figure detail, and orange streaks located only on the side away from Paula's figure. Grandmother was now drawn as a larger, more saturated blue cloud with a sharp boundary, and with two blue arcs, one connecting her to Paula's own figure and the other arcing toward, but not reaching, Paula's father. The figures of Paula and her grandmother were now almost touching, near the center of the paper. Paula's oval figure, larger than before, was multicolored, with an orange quadrant separated by a blue line and orange filaments reaching from her figure's orange quadrant toward, but not touching, the figure of her father.

Paula then took on each role in this new subjective genogram by giving a brief, twenty-second monologue on "expressing anger" with body movement and gestures. As Father, Paula did a rendition of a howling, writhing, frenzied creature, whose entire dialog was the repeated phrase, "I'm better than you are, and don't you forget it!" In an interview, this Father answered every question with this same phrase while shaking his fist.

In role as Grandma, Paula stood slightly stooped, wringing her hands and saying apologetically how sorry she was that her son had turned out to be so ill tempered. During Grandma's interview the hope was expressed that her granddaughter would grow up a "better person" than her son.

Finally, the character Paula danced about with long, flowing gestures while repeating the alternating phrases "I can rise above anger," and "I won't become my father." When interviewed, Paula kept the flowing, dancing movement as she stated that she could escape from turning into her father by modeling herself after Grandma. Paula had the further insight that she was not responsible for her father's behavior, thereby avoiding the guilt her grandmother felt. "I'm not going to be either a pushover or a hothead," Paula declared. "I can learn from both without becoming either."

At our next session, Paula seemed more confident and relaxed. She reported having had two social encounters in which she felt stronger and calmer, making it unnecessary for her to activate anger, though she saw the "opportunity" to allow anger to surface. Instead, she handled both incidents assertively, and was appropriately emotionally expressive, to her great satisfaction. Through the final four sessions of therapy, Paula continued to demonstrate these gains in her Performer and Spectator skills.

NOTE

"Paula" gave her permission for this material to be published. The client's name and identifying information have been altered to protect confidentiality.

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