

Chapter 3 Working Principles To Guide Practice

The practice of sociodrama depends on how the director understands the purpose of sociodrama and how it works. In this chapter I describe the basic principles or assumptions that sit behind my practice. These descriptions are a work in progress and collectively form what is in effect a framework for sociodrama.

Moreno's high level description of sociodrama and its purpose is relatively simple: "*The group approach ... of analysing and treating social problems*" (1977). In sociodrama we are concerned with our social roles and our collective identity as a group or sub-group in society or in an organisation, and with making sense of the way the group operates. The purpose in sociodrama is to focus on social and organisational issues with a view to understanding our position and making changes. Like all Morenian action methods it is a tool for social transformation.

However as a director I need to know how this high level description translates into practice. This is so that I can separate principles from techniques. Working from principles rather than techniques means I have more scope as a director to adapt the method to meet the situation. The principles I describe below include, what sociodrama is, thinking systemically, how sociodrama creates change, deepening warm up and creating a unified warm up.

3.1 What Sociodrama Is

Here is a working description of what sociodrama is in practice.

Sociodrama is a learning method that creates deep understanding of the social systems that shape us individually and collectively.

Through sociodrama we can experience and come to understand the nature of our social systems and their influence upon our personal and group roles and relationships. With this understanding we can better address some of the collective issues that face us.

3.2 Thinking Systemically

A sociodramatist needs to think in terms of social systems. To do this means the director thinks systemically about a presenting situation and identifies the various parts of the system and the dynamics between those parts so that the group learns about what shapes its behaviour. Systemic thinking involves making descriptions about such things as the roles, relationships, rules, norms, behaviours, patterns and social forces operating in the social system.

A 'social system' is a term that loosely describes the field of complex inter-relationships around a presenting social issue. Systems can be as large or as small as the issue being described. There is no right way to describe a system as that always depends on your viewpoint and why you want to explore it. Naming something as a system allows us to look for organising principles, patterns of behaviour and points of leverage. It allows us to discuss complex issues in a way that can develop insight and understanding (Browne 1996).

We can think of social systems as being subject to social forces that provoke or resist change. These forces operate on elements of the system and relationships between them. In this context it is useful to distinguish between social forces that are external events and those that are our collective responses to events. The social forces we have no control over are typically external events, such as our history, economic conditions and natural disasters. The social forces which we do have some control over derive from our collective response to such events. This distinction allows the sociodramatist to focus participants on finding actions they can take rather than remaining helpless.

As an example of a large scale social force, the Great Depression of 1929-33 meant that jobs and money were scarce for the great majority of people. The Depression itself was an external event which was outside our control. As a society, our collective response to the experience of unemployment, poverty and being dependent on welfare created a fear of debt and a focus on job security that has shaped attitudes to money and work for several generations. These attitudes entered our culture and are passed on to our children as a set of values to live by. They became part of what Moreno termed the 'cultural conserve' of Australian society. While we had no control over the Depression occurring, we do have control over whether we will go along with this social force and whether we still live by these values.

Similarly, in organisations and families, there are social forces that shape behaviour in groups, such as conventions around status, politeness or difference. Some of these are overt, “*Nobody challenges the boss’ ideas*”, and some are held unconsciously as assumptions about life, “*conflict is to be avoided*”.

Depending on the issues a group or organisation faces and the purpose for it is meeting, through sociodrama we can examine the effect of relevant social forces on the group. By definition one person cannot easily change a social system or an organisation but collectively individuals can create structures and build relationships, in effect a subculture, that will contain, mitigate or redirect these social forces. We can do little to influence external events but we can manage our responses differently and influence what aspects of our culture gets conserved and what gets re-examined.

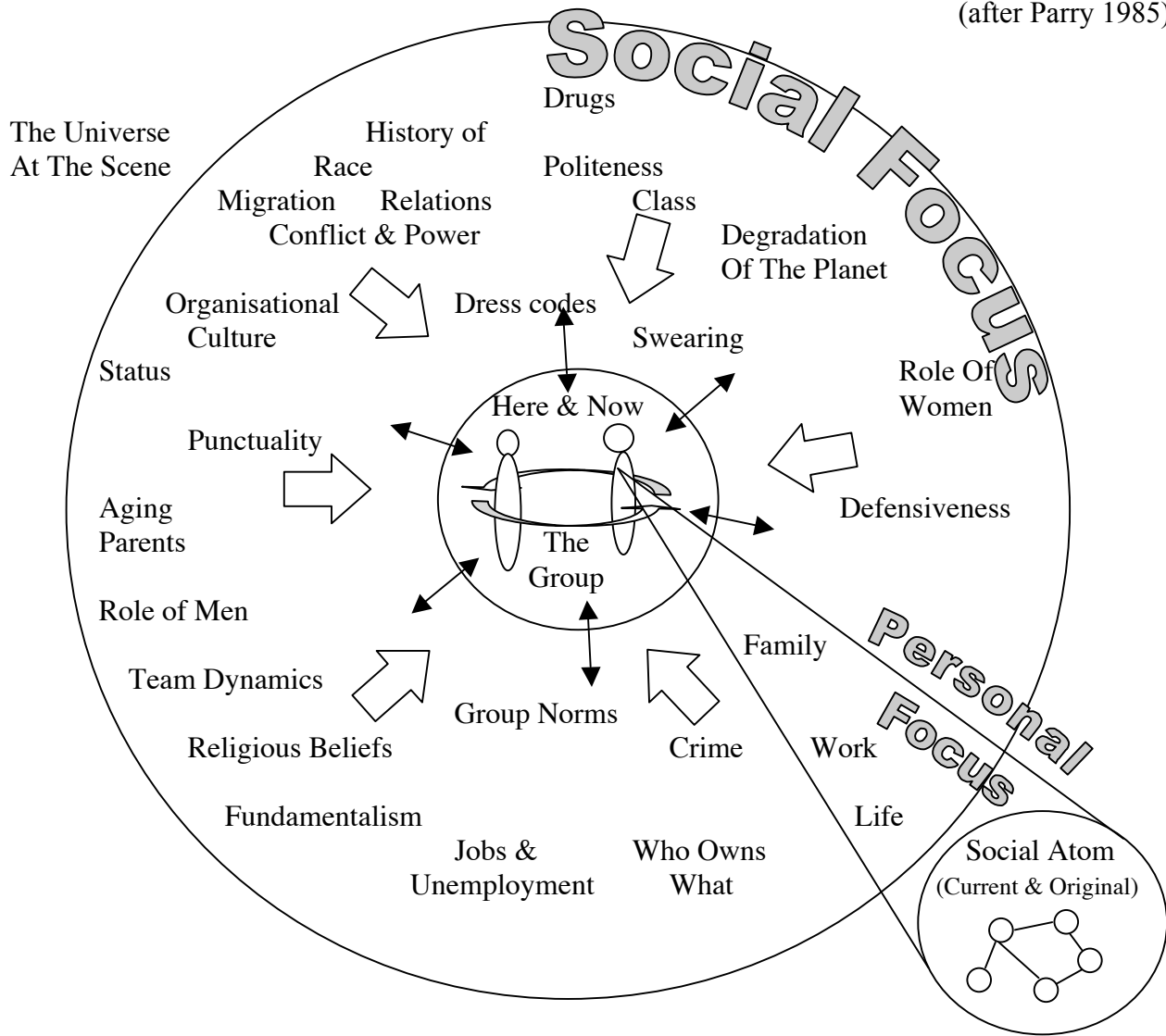
3.2.1 What does this mean for the sociodramatist?

Thinking systemically is not as straightforward as it sounds. In even the simplest meeting there is a lot going on. The complex reality of people is automatically there in every scene. The sociodrama director works with this reality but trains his or her perception to notice the social system at the scene, what social forces are operating and how they influence behaviour. In any given moment the social, the group and the personal world are all present. The director needs to keep aware of all three and hold the focus on those elements (such as patterns, data, forces and relationships) that relate to the purpose of the group. The director’s job is to work with the participants and bring out the value for them. The aim is for participants to see the dynamic forces operating in the situation and understand their roles in it.

The diagram below illustrates the sociodramatist’s systemic focus. The director pays attention to the social forces alive in the life of group members while at the same time being aware of the impact in the personal world of individual group members.

Diagram 1 Sociodrama As The Exploration Of How Social Forces Shape Us Collectively

(after Parry 1985)



As a result of systemic thinking the director and participants can more deeply understand the social forces that shape us and therefore begin to transform both ourselves and the situations that we face. The purpose is to create change.

A working description of how sociodrama creates change:

The transformative power of a sociodrama emerges when participants:

- *develop action-insight from their experience of exploring a relevant social system as-it-is*

- *generate sufficient spontaneity to intervene in that social system and reconfigure it (i.e. go beyond the cultural conserve)*

In any situation we do have choice about what to focus on. In fact the director must maintain a sense of choice so other people realise it is possible. If the director loses it then others go down the tube! Part of the benefit of understanding the forces involved, is that participants see those which they can do something about, influence or where they can take action and those that are out of their control.

In most dilemmas or stuck situations people don't realise that they are starting from a single position because they are focused on their view. For example, "*I can't say anything because I'm the junior person here*" or, "*Swearing is allowed here. It's a man's world*".

In setting out a scene participants start to experience other points of view and this begins to broaden their perspective. As they develop insight through exploration, their energy gets released and they bring their excitement to bear on the situation they face. I think of this as action-insight.

An example of this occurred in a group session on classroom behaviour. We set out in action how the school discipline system worked in practice. In the enactment it was clear that the demand that students be punished undermined their ability to learn from their mistakes and manage their own behaviour. This demand also forced teachers to apply escalating punishments and had a negative effect on their relationships with students. In the enactment group members got a sense of the powerful social forces (parental expectations, the need to show who's in charge) behind that discipline system and the ways in which the principal, deputy, teachers and students (key elements in the system) were affected. Strong feelings emerged in the group and they generated ideas about what they could do to improve the situation. This is where the spontaneity generated is reapplied to the situation to reshape it.

Systemic thinking and sociodramatic principles can be applied even when there is no group. This can happen in a one to one conversation with a manager about what is driving the behaviour in a team, drawing diagrams together on the whiteboard (used as a stage) to show the relationships and the forces impacting on what is happening.

All transformation, in Moreno's terms, works on the basis of co-creating and being co-responsible for what occurs (Marineau 1989). The sociodramatist works interactively, with a genuine spirit of enquiry – not as an expert there to tell the group or manager what the problem is and what they have to do. As a rule of thumb, one of the outcomes of sociodrama is that participants more effectively intervene in their social systems. Hence, in the group example above, the true test of this work is whether the spontaneity generated is sufficient to assist those teachers to intervene in their own school.

Thinking systemically is an essential starting point for the director however conducting an effective sociodrama in a group requires an understanding of what is involved in warm up.

3.3 Warm Up

The development of action-insight and the release of spontaneity into the social system occurs as the director holds the purpose of the group, and works with the warm up to co-create and be affected by the enactment. Within Morenian methodology the concept of warm up has a central place because it is such a fundamental element in the success of the method. Warm up is the key to unlocking the doors so that participants experience themselves flowing with free choice rather than acting out of narrow roles in constrained situations.

Warm up is best known as a theatrical term referring to what actors do to get ready for a performance or rehearsal. In developing his theories Moreno drew on concepts from the traditional theatre (Marineau 1989) and expanded on the process of warm up in the expression of spontaneity, and warm up to role. For the purpose of this paper, I focus on particular aspects of warm up that relate to directing a sociodrama.

- i) Deepening the Warm Up
- ii) Creating and Maintaining a Unified Warm Up

3.3.1 Deepening The Warm Up

One of the tasks of the director is to manage the warm up to a sociodrama so that it deepens and serves the purpose of the group. Three aspects of deepening warm up include understanding warm up as a process of becoming absorbed in a role, holding the group warm up at the level

where the work of the group is, and sustaining a parallel warm up to both the social and personal worlds of the group members.

One useful way to think of warm up is as a process of giving attention to someone or something and becoming absorbed in that state¹. We warm up to what we give attention to and become absorbed in a role (thought, feeling and action) in relation to what we give attention to. Therefore the process of giving attention is the vehicle by which we get into role. The more we give attention to someone or something the more we become absorbed in the role.

The degree of warm up refers to the extent that participants bring their personal selves into a role and become absorbed in the role. The more they do this, the more they warm up to their own spontaneity and hence bring out the core issues in the various roles. This has a major impact on their experience, in how they make sense of (integrate) the drama and on learning outcomes.

For example in a session on giving feedback to staff, the manager is distracted over a recent meeting with an important user of his services. The more attention he gives to this the more he enters the role of '*worried provider of IT services*'. If this role persists it is unlikely that the work of the group will get done adequately. So the director intervenes in the warm up, and draws group members' attention to each other, to their purpose and bringing out roles more needed to meet that purpose. "Among your staff, whose performance are you most wanting to develop?" This evokes the role of '*thoughtful leader*'.

So a participant becomes warmed up or absorbed in a role. However every role exists within a system and, when evoked, the role has to go somewhere. It must be put to service in meeting the purpose of the group. The question for the director is, what is the focus that the group needs to sustain so that the work gets done.

A second aspect of warm up is that the director manages the degree of warm up so it matches the work focus of the group². There are three broad levels of work focus, see diagram 2 below.

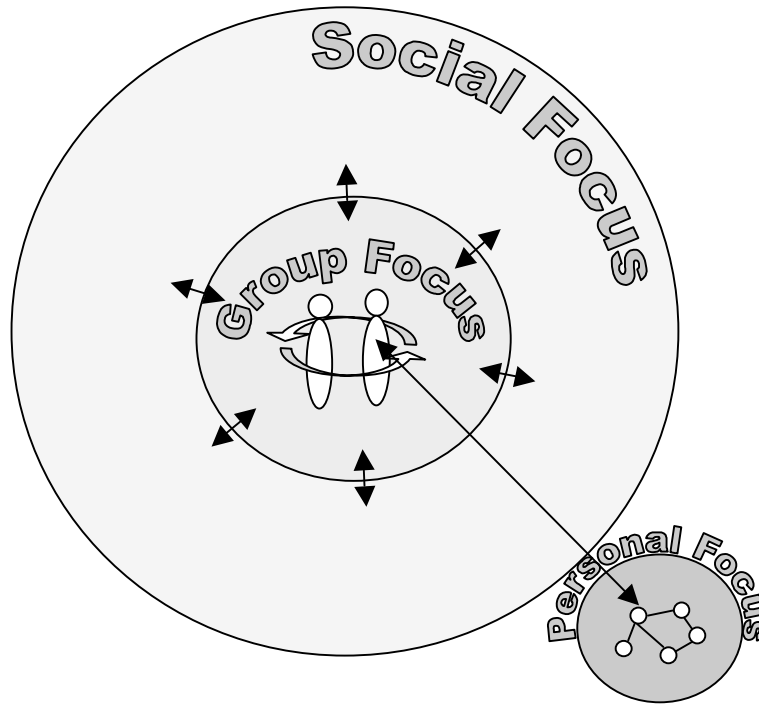
- a) Social Focus is concerned with the outer, external world of human society,

¹ This description of warm up is attributed to Lynette Clayton.

² This section is based on Warren Parry's concept of 'Levels of Warm Up' (1985).

- b) Group Focus is concerned with the dynamics in the group of participants who are present in the room, and
- c) Personal Focus is concerned with the internal personal world of an individual, with more intimate or deeper issues, often relating to their original social atom.

Diagram 2 *The Level of Work Focus*



These levels co-exist all the time and intersect. For example, a dispute between a staff member and their boss exists at all three levels. It is, at the same time, an industrial relations problems in the organisation, a dynamic between two people (if both are present) and a personal issue for one or the other. The sociodrama director holds to the purpose of the group and focuses on the level of work required to meet that purpose. The director then manages the warm up so participants remain focused at the level required.

It is worth noting that group members tend to want to continue at the deepest layer of warm up created in the group. It is human nature to seek to get to the personal. In contrast, when we work with social forces and social systems there is an opposing tendency to go into the abstract as we make generalizations about complex systems. This takes the warm up to a less personal level and

reduces the depth of warm up unless a parallel warm up to the personal is sustained by the director.

The third aspect of warm up is sustaining a parallel warm up in participants.

From looking at how children learn and play Moreno categorised roles as; somatic (eater, sleeper, breather); social (doctor, policeman, sports fan); and psychodramatic (that captures the unique way an individual enacts that role). However it would be a mistake to assume that sociodrama works with social roles and psychodrama works with psychodramatic roles. All three types of roles are present all the time.

If the director only works at the level of social roles this will create a tendency to stay stereotyped and superficial. From such enactments we don't get much learning, we just get performance. Social and personal roles already co-exist and the director sustains a parallel warm up that is both personally and socially focused. A warm up to the personal is important because effective learning occurs only when we are touched deeply at an individual level. If we are not individually affected then we do not care much about what happens. The enactment will seem trivial or hollow. In addition, unless we are engaged personally then we cannot be effectively engaged at a group level. However a warm up to the social is equally important so that we can work on our collective issues.

But if the warm up to the personal dominates then the social focus can get lost. If the warm up to the social dominates then there is little possibility for the experience to touch participants at any depth. Exploring with a social focus is in no way less intense, less relevant or less important than exploring from a personal focus. In one sense going for the closely personal issues is easier. In reality the social and personal are inextricable.

The point is that the director selects the degree of warm up and the level of work so that they are congruent with the group purpose. In a sociodrama the purpose of the group will not be met if the director encourages individuals to focus solely on their personal work. Nor will a sociodrama be meaningful if the group members focus solely on social roles.

3.3.2 Creating And Maintaining A Unified Warm Up

At the same time as deepening the warm up the director pays attention to whether the group is unified in its warm up to achieving its purpose. In creating a unified warm up to a sociodrama it is important to influence the initial contact with participants and to shape the question that frames the work of the group.

Warm up is highly individual and often contradictory. To be effective the director needs to recognise and work with the here-and-now life of the group – whatever is attracting the attention of group members. The task of the director is to take account of the existing individual warm ups in the group, refine them to a single focus thus creating a group warm up. The purpose of doing this is so that the spontaneity of group members can be applied to what the group is there to do. Managing the warm up effectively is a critical part of Morenian methodology. It is not too much to say that “everything depends on the warm up” and hence planning the warm up phase is important. This is particularly true of sociodrama (Parry 1985).

The first time participants hear or read about the forthcoming session is a significant point in their warm up. The initial announcement to participants in a meeting, by email or in a brochure or conference program usually states the purpose of the group session and what might be gained from it. Participants will immediately have a response to the announcement (excitement, dread, ambivalence and so on) and will bring this to the group session. Planning a sociodrama requires that the director think about what to say to the participants prior to the session and at the beginning of the session so that they generate a positive warm up to the work.

As part of my work I consider the key roles I want to evoke in participants so that the session is successful. For most organisational work I plan for participants to warm up to the progressive role of *active learner*. But for a sociodrama I have found that something more is needed. The most helpful role is one where participants come prepared to make sense of their own experience in the here-and-now exploration of the group issue. So I deliberately warm up group members to the role of *social investigator* exploring a social system and to each other as *co-explorers*.

I have found that the role of co-explorer allows more spontaneity to be brought to the presenting issue and, as a group, we enter the issue collaboratively, as companions. This also takes the

pressure off me as the director having to come up with the answer and that assists me to access my own spontaneity. Once a warm up is created prior to the session then the director needs to build on it once the session begins.

One effective way to crystallise a unified warm up and to hold the group's attention on the presenting issue is to reframe that issue as a question for the group to explore. This approach, developed and taught by Dr. G Max Clayton, is referred to as the "Sociodramatic Question".

The issue facing the group is expressed in such a way that the group as a whole can warm up to it as relevant both to them personally and as a suitable focus for the work of the group. In itself a powerful sociodramatic question creates a unifying purpose in the group. It is a way of holding the purpose in front of the group. It helps the group to stay focused and to mobilize their resources. The framing of the purpose in this way is a critical step in creating a good sociodrama. The question can come from the group (*group-centred*) or it can be set by the director (*director-directed*) and advertised as the purpose of the session.

The following are sociodramatic questions I have used in my work:

- ◆ How can we have healthy power relations in a detention centre?
- ◆ How can we intervene in schools to bring spontaneity into stuck situations?
- ◆ How can we work more effectively together to build reconciliation?

The director uses the sociodramatic question as the basis for generating action and setting it in the here and now context of living. It is the basis for learning and producing insight. At the end of the drama the group returns to the sociodramatic question to see the logical 'whole' of their exploration and make sense of their individual and collective experience.

3.3.3 The Use of Language in Warm Up

At each stage the language used by the director is significant. It is a major determinant of the depth of a sociodrama. In directing a sociodrama the director uses language to frame the work focus, to create the warm up needed to do the work, to articulate the sociodramatic question. Language is one of the most powerful ways to intervene in or sustain a warm up. It is important

that the director is aware how language shapes roles and role relationships and sets the degree of warm up.

For example, in a sociodrama with youth workers concerned with the influence of politics on unemployment the director selects the degree of warm up and the level of work to focus on through their choice of words. If the director says: “*Consider a typical politician, with all their concerns. What would be the main issue here?*” then he or she is choosing a social focus with a low degree of warm up. The participants will respond with generalizations. The enactment will have little emotional impact and there will be a feeling of ‘so what?’.

However, if the director says “*Imagine you become involved in politics, with all your existing values and philosophies, what would be the main issue here?*” then the participants’ warm up changes significantly. The level of work has a personal focus and the degree of warm up is deeper. The responses will be much more authentic. The enactment has a stronger sense of reality that will enhance the learning from the experience.

The language used shapes what the group pays attention to. Consider the following statements:

- “*Why do I keep recreating the same pattern of events in my life?*” This is an “I” invitation to join in a personal search for understanding. It offers the role of ‘*interested researcher*’.
- “*How can we maintain our integrity as employees in a reactive bureaucracy?*” This is a “we” invitation to become part of a group exploring a social issue, in the role of ‘*committed co-explorer*’.

When used by group members, the use of ‘*we*’, rather than ‘*I*’, often indicates whether they are ready to join with others to a common purpose. The use of ‘*we*’ evokes collective responsibility. The use of ‘*I*’ evokes personal responsibility. Both are necessary to the work of the group. However, in creating a unifying warm up to the sociodramatic question the director emphasises collective responsibility to the presenting issue.

In addition, the use of ‘*why*’, rather than ‘*how*’, indicates whether the focus is on explanation or on exploration. I have found that in shaping either a collective or a personal inquiry, ‘*why?*’ is not a particularly useful question. ‘*Why?*’ demands reasons behind a situation and usually evokes

rationalisations and blame. The implication is that once we have a reasonable explanation we can then relax. The possibility for action declines. ‘*Why?*’ holds understanding as the primary goal; action, if it happens, is secondary.

By contrast, a much more useful question is ‘*how*’. This warms us up to our curiosity, ingenuity and exploration. ‘*How*’ lets us focus on our response to the system in question and on action to move things along. ‘*How*’ leads to a role that is more concerned with transformation. A sociodramatic question is more powerful when ‘*how*’ and ‘*we*’ are used.

It is through such refinements in the use of language that the principles of warm up are brought to bear in creating a unified group ready to do the work they are there for.

In summary, by drawing on principles of systemic thinking and warm up the director is in a powerful position to create an effective environment to direct a sociodrama.