Doubling, Spontaneity Creativity and Encounter

DRAFT Tuesday, 1 December 2015

*Spontaneity operates in the present, now and here; it propels the individual towards an adequate response to a new situation or a new response to an old situation. It is… the least developed among the factors operating in our world; it is most frequently discouraged and restrained by cultural devices.*

Moreno 1978:42

## Introduction

That spontaneity propels us to newness and adequacy has at its roots the idea that humans can be conscious creators, unlike things or other animals. Moreno said spontaneity could be trained. This is not skill training, rather learning the ability to propel ourselves towards newness and adequacy. Newness is to overcome the old cultural devices that discourage and restrain us. Adequacy? How do we judge that? It requires a comprehensive understanding, a vision, of how we can progress humanity. Creativity abounds and bursts around us and in us. Because we are always in interaction we can judge adequacy by the qualities of the relationship that are progressive such as closeness, growing and healing.

These ideas are on my mind when an energised couple walk into my room and begin to tear each other apart. They let fly with accusations and judgement, escalating as they compete for the loudest invectives. What does spontaneity training look like? Is my loud cry of *Stop!* that brings this drama to a pause a step in that direction?

The main idea I put forward in this article is that when working with people *in a relationship* we can train them to be spontaneous, to develop new and adequate roles. The adequacy is evident in the degree of connection and empathy developed between the two, the emerging creativity in the relationship. People are full of the cultural obstacles, internalised imperatives to fight. They carry an arsenal of beliefs that tells them people can't change, that they should be compatible. They have well meaning parents and friends say they should split up. They have tried everything and feel think they have been betrayed. These obstacles need to be overcome so they recover the connection, at a deep level that resolves the conflict.

They have the need and the yearning for a loving relationship and they have capacity to create loving relationships. They need help to stop doing the old and to learn new roles. In most cases some simple interventions will create a 180 degree turn in even the most difficult relationships. Will creativity prevail over destruction? First step: warm up.

In couple work we look at the role relationships – the role pairs that determine the relational the space between the two people.

The couple who are destroying each other have *warmed up* to that destruction in some way, perhaps a long time ago and they have come to me for help. I need to have a good warm up to stay there in that moment and be of use, and to enable the loving forces in them to be stronger than the cultural imperatives to fight. Something, perhaps the very ideas I'm writing here are needed and big picture attitudes and sustaining theories are needed to build a new warm up. *Stop!* is not bad, but far from enough. To build their relationship they need to speak freely from the heart *without blame and criticism*. Patterns of blame and criticism linked to verbal and physical abuse are common in the culture and engrained in the language. These patterns must be stopped.

My cry of *Stop!* led to a split second of silence. In that moment I sit next to the man slightly lower and slightly behind him. I am him, I let myself be him, I let his thoughts and feelings flow in me. I express them with sound. *Ahhhh! Ohhhh!* I feel immense pain and sadness and I can see how the woman in front of me is angry and dark. If looks could kill I’d be dead. As I let another, more fragile Ahhhh! come forth I see a small shift in her eyes, and I find myself saying I love you so much!

Immediately I move to double her. By her side I find myself looking into the man’s eyes and saying, *I am in so much doubt and pain, I can't stand it any more.*

## Doubling

Notice I found a level of truth in them that was not blaming or critical. Doubling is a psychodramatic technique that assists the protagonist to be more self aware, self-accepting, expressive, *and adequate.* Doubling is a form of spontaneity training. Spontaneity is present in an encounter when old patterns in the relationship are disrupted and we see authentic experience meet with authentic experience.

People find it difficult to step into each other’s shoes when they are hurt and full of rage; there is the tendency to lapse in to old futile patterns. When directing such a drama we become a therapeutic guide. As a double we can assist the full expression of the bodily energy to be liberating for the protagonist, and *at the same time* hold the listener by not attacking them.

In an encounter with both parties present, there needs to be clarity about who is the protagonist and who is the auxiliary (visitor, listener, witness, analyst, validator, empathiser). Both the protagonist and the auxiliary can be doubled to assist the connection.

Doubling a person means to become that person. The double aims to express the experience of the protagonist in the moment. The protagonist will be enlivened by the experience of being doubled. The art is to find the *adequate* response that matches bodily experience.

The doubling will enable full expression, without blame, and move the protagonist to the underlying unmet need. The initial steps may be partial as they are going against the old pattern of accusation and judgement. As the process unfolds it may become clear that the unmet need has a history, a story. The old idea that it was all the partners fault that I feel pain doing looses its grip. This leads to the possibility of an enactment of the original social atom, and its repair. Each partner then sees the other more clearly.

Doubling is best learned in practice. Dan Wile has developed it extensively in Collaborative Couple Therapy[[1]](#endnote-1). His example and writing have been influential in the couple therapy modalities developed by Harville Hendrix, Hedy Schleifer and the Gottmans. His description of doubling is to enact the conversation the couple would be having if they were not fighting.

## Speaking from the heart

Catharsis of abreaction has always been somewhat controversial, “affect regulation” and “containment” being preferred by many therapeutic endeavours. If the drama unfolds in a progressive way there is no containment by the protagonist, and no regulation and the catharsis can happen with spontaneity that includes building connection, even in response to another who is highly destructive. Doubling the underlying feelings of vulnerability can prevent matching destruction with symmetrical destruction.

The following steps guide a process that reduces blame and at the same time opens the possibility of a catharsis. The framework is a guide; the steps may follow a different path. The double follows the protagonist’s warm up, voicing those things that are already propelling the person forward

* + - * When I see … (hear, smell - set the scene)
      * Then I think … (the story I tell myself - soliloquy)
      * Then I feel … (e.g. sad, glad, scared, vulnerable – maximise)
      * What I do then… (coping behaviour?)
      * I yearn for … (un-met need e.g. connection, security, fun)
      * The first image from childhood that comes to mind … (childhood scene)

The use of these lead-lines is a form of doubling; they assist to make the unconscious conscious. At the same time they eliminate expression of blame and judgement. The lead-lines are often enough, sometimes I will double more fully, for example, I move next to one partner and look at the other. I experience anger or other feelings and use them to speak from the heart… here is an example, this is the lead up to the healing childhood drama with the protagonist described earlier.

Therapist as Double: When I see you walk away I think you will never come back. I think you think I am worthless. I start to think I’ll just give up on you, on the relationship. What is the point! I think you don’t love me. To be honest, I think I have been a fool…

Protagonist: No, I don’t think I have been a fool, I just don’t know where we went wrong… I feel very sad.

Partner as auxiliary: You feel very sad. You feel alone.

Strong feelings that were obscured by blame now emerge, they can lead to a childhood scene that fuelled the current feelings, which can be enacted while the partner is an active audience member.

Protagonist: I feel so alone, scared.

Double: I yearn to be seen and valued.

Protagonist (to partner): Yes, I don’t need you to fix anything, I want you to know how painful it is when you just ignore me.

Notice how the blame has crept back in with the words *you just ignore me*. We now go back to identify what is seen and heard that triggers the thoughts and feelings.

Double: I think you ignore me when…

Protagonist: When you go out and don’t text me and turn up at all hours.

Double: Then I think…

Protagonist: Then I think you don’t care about me.

Double: And I feel…

Protagonist: Worthless, alone and scared.

Double: I yearn for…

Protagonist: I yearn for someone who will think of me, keep my needs in mind.

Double: The first image from childhood that comes to mind…

Protagonist: Ah, I remember being home alone when my parents were at work. The neighbour…

Consider this scene from another moment with this couple:

Protagonist (facing the mother enacted by an auxiliary ego): You are not a mother. I had to be my own mother, I had to be *your* mother, you don't know what a mother is. You took your own rage out on me.

Double, (Notices the clenched fist and maximises the action by showing the impulse to attack the parent.): You were not there for me!

Protagonist: You’re useless, pathetic, and spineless. I hate you. You are a coward.

This is a description of a drama that one of the partners in the couple did with cushions and myself as the voice of the auxiliary egos and the double. Expression is full. There is a “balancing the scales of justice”. It is a moment of eye for eye and tooth for tooth. Safely the protagonist is able to reach a point where the anger turns into tears.

Her partner is present as a witness to this parent child interaction is. I am aware that in this work she is dealing with a dynamic that is present in the relationship with him. We got to the mother scene *because* it came to mind in the relationship with her partner*.*

“You’re useless, pathetic, and spineless. I hate you. You are a coward.”

These are words she might say to him. The good thing is that he can see that some of this anger is driven by an original wound and that it is not all him. As a therapist I see that the parent child dynamic infects the adult relationship and that this vilifying approach will not work in the current relationship.

I double her extensively in a variety of ways that I think led her to being *more expressive* with her partner and her parents. Here are some of the forms of doubling I used over several sessions, I describe the process in a condensed form:

Double: When I hear you say…

Protagonist (to her mother): When I hear you say… I will never amount to anything… then I think you don't even know me. I think you are scared of me and that you want to keep me down.

As the double I notice the blaming word “useless” and I think the protagonist has more to say about this. Simply describing what she sees and hears, naming her direct experience is not just my idea of a progressive thing to do at this moment. I am in tune with the protagonist’s desire to hear herself say the words that as a child she did not have the words for. She is now being more specific and expressing her thoughts.

Double: When I think you are scared of me…

Protagonist: I want to attack you and hurt you. I'll show you who I am!

Her thoughts lead to her feelings and actions. The role where she is so angry and vilifying is transforming as she more consciously expresses her experience in more detail. The doubling I do is in line with what is emerging in her *and* it pulls her from the familiar path of name calling, “You are a bitch!” is never far away.

Double: Who I am is…

I say this as I think it will enable her to identify her needs… and it does.

Protagonist: I am a girl, I'm a kid. I need protection. I need you see me. To teach me.

I need you to be here for me. I need you to hold me and tell me you love me.

Double: I feel…

Protagonist: I feel so alone,

Role reversals follow.

The mother, father and the protagonist as an older nurturing self embrace the child and there is a heartfelt mutuality. Softly the words come and include, “I am sorry. I will be here for you.” A new trust bond is achieved.

As this is couple therapy there will be similar process the partner is going through. In this session he is a strong witness (an auxiliary) and able to tell the protagonist what he notices:

Auxiliary: I notice you know exactly what you need, and that when you make that clear you get what you need!

He was also an auxiliary ego, being the father in the enactment. By way of sharing he says:

“As you father I see how, like him I need to be told how to be with you.”

## Anger and Spontaneity

The process above is familiar to most of us who have participated in psychodrama groups. Notice however that there is the emergence of a distinct philosophy and practice that has evolved out of doing a lot of couple work. The raw expression of blame and hate is not useful. Enactment of the childhood scene is not a rehearsal for living. Moreno spoke of pathological spontaneity. When is the expression adequate and when does it cease to be that?

Expression of blame, criticism and shaming is not the liberating part of the process; what is progressive is the identification of pain, vulnerability and the expression of a need. In couple therapy (perhaps in all therapy?) the anger and associated thoughts and feelings towards the partner are best maximised as expressions from the heart that do not include blame or criticism. A visceral scream is better than blame. Spontaneity training is a fitting description. Vitality, originality and being in the moment are qualities associated with psychodramatic spontaneity. I have found that doubling that transforms all forms of blame, criticism and shaming enables these qualities in the protagonist.

## Psychodramatic Interpersonal Therapy

Moreno speaks of a co-unconscious and co-conscious for people who are deeply entwined in emotional bonds. I have been using the word *significance* for that. For relationships like these he advocated "... an active form of psychotherapy in which the personal and interpersonal problems … are treated at the same time." (Moreno 1977:233) In an encounter, the full and free expression of feeling is to be done in such a way so that *at the same time* a connection is built with the other partner. Each partner has a part to play in this. The ability to do this is not common in our culture. For most people it is unfamiliar, and has to be learned.

This leads to the scene where a free flowing enactment with her original family takes place. We move from the encounter where both are physically present to the childhood scene, with the parents being enacted by an auxiliary. It is useful to make the distinction between reality and what is known in psychodrama as surplus reality. As Zerka Moreno put it: “the deepest catharsis in psychodrama comes from doing those scenes, those interactions, those moments that do not, cannot, and are not ever likely to happen in real life, for whatever reason.” (Moreno, Blomkvist and Rutzel, 2000:18).

At the end of the scene I ask the partner to tell the protagonist what he has noticed. The partner shares his observations and experience. He puts the old pattern into a new context. “I can see why you get so angry with me - it is so like what happened to you as a child.” This is the beginning of the development of new roles in each partner. The roles are named and strengthened.

WL: Tell each other one thing you might now do differently...

She: I will trust you more to understand how I feel.

WL: How will you do that?

She: Try not to attack you all the time.

WL: What will you do instead?

She: Ask you to tune into how I feel.

A similar process leads to the point where he says, “I will let you know when I’m coming home and stick to that. It will be easier to do if I can trust you wont attack me.”

The power of moving through the blame in the other for pain to expressing the experience directly is in its own way cathartic. The outcome of the work with this couple leads to (at least) a warm up to action. Putting this into practice is their creativity, there in them all along, needing liberation from cultural constraints.

## Language

There is more at involved than enabling the expression of strong feelings in a non-judgemental way. Our language confuses feelings with judgements. (Rosenberg, 2003:40) The following are not feelings: rejected, abused, manipulated, punished, controlled, pressured, there are many such word that fuse a thought and a feeling.

For example:

Cornered — ‘I am feeling cornered.’ means ‘I think *you* are cornering me’. The listener is bound to pick up on the attack, and will find it hard to be an auxiliary. A more useful way of putting it is ‘I think you are cornering me.’ This is crucial as it now enables the person to continue to think and feel… ‘When I think you want to control me then I feel powerless and scared.’ The thought may or may not be true, yet the feeling is there, it is exposed, and possibly has its origins in the original social and cultural atom.

Good doubling will assist the protagonist to untangle these linguistic traps, enabling more visceral healing possibilities.

## Conclusion

To sum it up: it is important to ‘follow the progressive’ *and* to ‘follow the protagonist’ at the same time. To trust that both can be done at the same time is to trust the health at the core of our humanity.

I sometimes reflect on why Moreno called his major book on sociometry and spontaneity: *Who Shall Survive?* In my psychodramatic work with many couples I see how violent, destructive and deadly patterns can be transformed, impacting on family dynamics of future generations. Transforming outdated patterns into new adequate ways of being is essential to our survival. If we develop the means to do this on a large scale, as Moreno advocated, we might have a chance.

# Bibliography

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## Endnotes

1. Dan Wile - Website <http://danwile.com/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)