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WHEN PUPPETS SPEAK: DIALECTICAL PSYCHODRAMA WITHIN DEVELOPMENTAL CHILD PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Rigid relational representations often contribute substantially to children's psychosocial problems. One of the core tasks of any developmental child psychotherapy is therefore to trace and chart these (relational) representations. The present article illustrates how a child-oriented protocol of the action sociogram is a valid candidate for dealing with these representations. It outlines the theoretical basis of the protocol, describes the construction and application of the action sociogram, and reviews the possibilities offered by the protocol.

Schemas and mental representations about family relationships are at the center of psychosocial developmental models. These representations contain information about oneself, others, and one's relation to others (Shields, Ryan, & Cichetti, 2001). They originate in early relationships and affect the development and quality of present and future relationships and the regulation of behavior and emotions. Adaptive representations are associated with elements such as academic competencies, social acceptance, and self-esteem (Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996). Maladaptive representations constitute an obvious risk for subsequent psychosocial development (Blatt, 1995; Harter, 1998). A core feature of maladaptive representations is the absence of flexibility. In other words, it is not only the content itself that is problematic but also the incapacity to reflexively view oneself and others from new, alternative perspectives (Allen, Bleiberg, & Haslam-Hopwood, 2003; Tyson, 2005). Therapy aims to break the deadlock in this process by helping to discover alternative

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perspectives in a secure climate. This is fully in line with the basic principle of *developmental help* (Fonagy & Target, 1997, 1998).

A therapeutically practicable frame of reference that incorporates these mental representations in a theory of personality and personality development is the phenomenological-dialectical personality model (Phe-Di PModel) of Verhofstadt-Denève (2000, 2001a, 2001b). The *phenomenological aspect* refers to the unique subjective meanings that every individual grants to him- or herself, significant others, and his or her environment. The starting point of the model is Williams James's I-Me Self-model (James, 1962). The Phe-Di PModel describes the person (James's "Self") as a dynamic relation between "I" and "Me," in which the "I" as the subject pole (see James's "self-as-knower") is capable of reflecting on the "Me," the object pole (see James's "self-as-known"). This notion of the self as a dynamic interplay between "I" and "Me" can also be found in constructivist theories (Guidano, 1995; Hermans, 2006; Neimeyer, 1993, 1995). Based on this self-reflective process, the model distinguishes six fundamental phenomenological constructions of self that can be considered the concretization of the relational representations: Self-Image (Who am I?), Alter-Image (Who are the others?), Meta-Self (What image do the others have of me?), Ideal-Self (Who would I like to be?), Ideal-Alter (How should the others ideally be?), and Ideal-Meta-Self (What image should the others have of me?). These self-dimensions comprise personal characteristics and living conditions, different temporal dimensions, a differentiation between internal and external aspects, and various levels of consciousness—from unconscious/unknown to conscious/known. As in the constructivist way of thinking, the reflection of the I on the Me is regarded as more comprehensive than conventional self-reflection; the Me contains not only the self but also the whole social and object world (Verhofstadt-Denève, 2003). This notion of an extended and multivoiced self underscores the intersubjective nature of the self, one of the cornerstones of constructivist theories (Guidano, 1995; Neimeyer, 1993). Because these six main parts of the self can interact and be in conflict, the Phe-Di PModel accentuates the dynamic nature of the self. This dynamic nature is reflected in the dialectic aspect of the model.

The *dialectic aspect* refers to the underlying driving force of the development process. This dialectic process is triadic (thesis, antithesis, and synthesis), with a higher-level synthesis being achieved through a double negation. This synthesis, or *Aufhebung*, at the same time preserves the core aspects of the original image, generates a new meaning (the original image is complemented with the information derived from the opposite image), and destroys the original image. (For an elaboration, see Verhofstadt-Denève, 2000, 2001a, 2001b.)

Because children discover themselves, others, and the world via their core relationships, active interaction with significant others in a secure climate enriches the internal representations or self-constructions. When such interactions are absent or are one-sidedly negative, even temporarily, self-constructions may become rigid and personality development stagnates. Psychotherapy should then offer a secure interrelational activity that stimulates self-reflection and mentalization.¹ One of the methods for activating such dialectic processes is psychodrama. In this article, we will illustrate how a specific psychodrama technique, the action sociogram, makes it possible to exteriorize the rigid self-constructions and make them more flexible.

When Puppets Start Talking

The Action Sociogram

Psychodrama is a psychotherapy that helps clients by representing situations in an individual, family, and group setting instead of simply talking about them (Blatner, 1975, 1995). Scenes from the past, the present, and the future, imaginary or real, are given an emotional intensity by expressing them here and now (Blatner, 1995). In this way, inner images and their associated meanings are (re)actualized, recognized, and evaluated (Cuvelier, 1976). Psychodrama integrates the approach of cognitive analysis with that of involvement through participation, experience (Blatner, 1975), and action-orientation (Dillen & Serneels, 2002).

The *action sociogram* is a central psychodrama technique with an explicit relational component. This technique is an action-oriented elaboration of the social-atom concept, the figure or the diagram representing the smallest core of individuals with whom

the person has a significant positive or negative bond (Moreno, 1934). In the action sociogram, the protagonist uses other group members or objects to represent his or her significant others in space at a rational-affective distance (Dayton, 1994; Verhofstadt-Denève, 2003). This makes it possible not only to explore one's own imaginary world, meet antagonists, and reintegrate split-off parts of the self but also to rearrange images of experiences on the basis of dialectic action (Cuvelier, 1993; Verhofstadt-Denève, 2003; Verhofstadt-Denève et al., 2004). The protagonist not only talks *about* his or her imaginary significant others but also *with* and *through* them. The combination of action and involvement makes this psychodrama technique a powerful method for working on relational representations with children.

The Construction of a Child-Oriented Protocol

Although the action sociogram is a core strategy within psychodrama, a standardized child-oriented protocol has been absent so far. Given the growing importance of evidence-based approaches and the accompanying protocols² (Keijser, Van Minnen, & Hoogduin, 2004; Mansfield & Addis, 2001), we developed a semi-structured protocol adapted to the capacities of children aged 7 to 12 (Verhofstadt-Denève et al., 2004). The protocol for adults and young adults developed by Verhofstadt-Denève (2003), the Phe-Di Pmodel, and the literature on child psychotherapy constitute the three main levers for this construction.

The Adult Protocol

The semi-structured protocol of the action sociogram for (young) adults (Verhofstadt-Denève, 2003) is a group protocol consisting of three phases. In the first phase, the real phenomenological situation is charted, in particular the social atom as it is perceived here and now by the protagonist. This is done by using chairs or group members. Starting from this real phase, the ideal image can be explored (i.e., "What would you wish to change about the current situation?"). This phase investigates not only the protagonist's perceptions but also those of the significant others, as construed by the protagonist. This is done by role changing, a technique at the

heart of the psychodrama process, in which the protagonist takes the place of the antagonist and vice versa.

On the basis of the action-oriented exploration of the real and the ideal image, the second phase investigates, jointly with the protagonist, possible ways of approaching the ideal image (i.e., "What would help to bring this ideal situation closer?"). It is examined in what way each of the significant others and the protagonist can contribute to the process.

The final phase is the feedback phase. The protagonist is asked how he or she has applied the solutions that were explored during the second phase in his or her daily life (i.e., "Have you done what you said you were going to do? How did this make you feel? How did the others react?"). Cognitions, emotions, and actions are examined in greater depth, and alternatives may be formulated. These alternatives can then be enacted.

These three phases take place in group sessions lasting two hours each. Each session follows the classical psychodrama pattern, starting with a warm-up, followed by an action phase, and closed by a sharing phase. For a concrete elaboration, we refer to Verhofstadt-Denève (2003).

Child-Oriented Adaptations

Therapeutic work with children covering family experiences and their associated constructions is complex because of the numerous development-related factors, such as children's shorter attention spans, less developed means of verbal expression, and limited role-taking skills (Ronen, 2003; Shields et al., 2001). Moreover, there are doubts about the validity of (young) children's perceptions obtained via verbal methods because of response tendencies (e.g., social desirability), defensive idealization, and the means of verbal expression (Harter, 1990). To cope with these limitations, the adult protocol was modified in its structure (shorter, more varied sessions), materials (from chairs to puppets), and technique (concrete, focused questions). For the child protocol, we refer to Table 1 and to Verhofstadt-Denève et al. (2004). More information on the material (Children's Psychodrama-Puppets Kit) is available at www.psychodramapuppets.be.

TABLE 1 The semi-structured protocol of the individual action sociogram for children.

Phases	Phase A Phenomenological reality	Phase B Ideal Image	Phase C Means of adjustment	Phase D Feedback and adjustment
Warm-up	- general warm-up - introduction of the social atom method	(- general warm-up) - introduction of the current image	(- general warm-up) - reflection on the previous phase	Brief reflection on the previous phase
Action	- a puppet as a symbol for self - puppets as symbols for significant others	- shift to the desired situation - exploration of the ideal image - checking the ideal situation	- looking for a possible solution - trying out the solution - message - desymbolization	- scene in which the solution was tested - attention to obstacles - desymbolization
Sharing	- checking the current image - message - desymbolization - brief reflection - here-and-now	- message - desymbolization - brief reflection - here-and-now	- message - desymbolization - brief reflection - here-and-now	- three-puppet technique

Short and varied sessions. Because of children's shorter attention and motivation spans, we opted for individual sessions that lasted one hour at most and applied a variety of techniques and media. A regular session had physical, verbal, and play-oriented components. This variety prevented a lengthy action phase involving too many and too long role changes, which are very tiring, both psychologically and physically (Lousada, 1998).

Four short phases. Because long and complex scenes are confusing and have a negative impact on the child's and the director's spontaneity, we opted for short, focused phases. In addition, it appeared difficult for most children to elaborate the real and the ideal images simultaneously during one phase. The first phase of the adult protocol (the concretization of the real and the ideal phenomenological image) was therefore split into two phases: one for the phenomenological reality and one for the phenomenological ideal image.

The use of puppets. The complexity of child-oriented work became evident when we tried to use chairs to represent significant others, as we did in the original protocol. The children found the chairs dull, boring, and repetitive. Moreover, the chairs appeared to be too abstract for role taking and jeopardized the process of "becoming" the other.

One way of overcoming these shortcomings was to involve the children by using dynamic techniques, such as puppet play (e.g., the Family Dialogue Set by Balmbra, 1997; the Kvebæk Sculpture Technique, 2004; and the Doll Stories Completion Test by Verschueren, Marcoen, and Schoefs, 1996). Various studies show that these methods allow children to talk openly about both the negative and the positive aspects of their experiences, about themselves and about others (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990). Indeed, puppets constitute a dynamic and familiar medium that enables children to communicate using their own words, pacing, and needs. Furthermore, puppets create the required distance ("It's not my family, they're only puppets"), so that hidden or threatening feelings and thoughts can be expressed in a secure setting (Hall, Kaduson, & Schaefer, 2002). The introduction of the puppets raised the spontaneity of the dialectic process and eased the alternation of the different images.

Two kinds of puppets were introduced: human puppets and animal or fantasy puppets. The human puppets are plain, naked terrycloth puppets equipped with eyes; they are mainly meant to represent the significant others and oneself. Because the puppets are "naked," the first thing one can do is to fit the puppets with clothes, hair, and a mouth. This activity allows the child to create his or her phenomenological reality almost literally on stage. By dressing the puppet, the child can give a concrete shape to images of self and others. This concreteness has a dual function. First, the activity of dressing the puppet introduces the child into the situation affectively and cognitively (warm up). This raises the child's emotional-situational involvement and breaks through the expectations of speaking about, introducing an element of curiosity and playfulness. Second, the dynamic and age-specific aspect of the puppets improves role-taking skills and facilitates role changes.

The puppet set was complemented with animal and fantasy figures, which are often part of a child's phenomenological reality. Landy (1984) suggested that animal puppets are ideal projective means for communicating negative and aggressive themes. Our own experience shows that these figures are also functional for expressing positive feelings. In addition, they leave even more room for distance or disguise, which proved necessary for some children.

Concrete dialogues via the puppets. During the play (the action phase), the dialogues were conducted explicitly via the puppets. Both the children and the therapists spoke through puppets only. This enabled the therapists to communicate their understanding of perceptions in a nonthreatening way (Hall et al., 2002).³ This dialogic mirroring of the child's cognitions and emotions stimulates not only perceptions of being felt and listened to, but also a reflective function through reciprocal mentalization (Fonagy & Target, 1997).

The Action Sociogram in Practice

Case Background

Simon is a 10-year-old boy who was referred to child and juvenile psychiatry by his parents because of behavior problems.

He is the younger of two children in a two-parent family; his sister, Cathy, is 13 years old. There are frequent escalating conflicts at home during which Simon throws tantrums. He is insecure, has a deep fear of failure and a predominantly negative self-image. After the intake phase, the following multiaxial diagnosis was established: Axis I: behavior problems, dyslexia, disorthography, and ADHD; Axis III: epilepsy; and Axis IV: problems within the primary support group, notably escalating conflicts within the family.

On the basis of the diagnosis, it was decided to start a residential treatment involving both individual and family-oriented work. Simon's individual treatment focused on (a) remedying the learning problems, (b) tackling the behavior problems through a combination of individual psychotherapy and medication, (c) resolving the family conflicts, and (d) raising his self-appreciation. For the latter two items, the individual action sociogram was used. In total, Simon attended four psychodrama sessions, each one lasting one hour. Besides these individual sessions, Simon's residential treatment existed of speech therapy, creative therapy, play therapy, and group psychotherapy. During the week, Simon stayed in the psychiatric ward in a group of 12 children aged 6 to 12 years. Every weekend there were planned home visits. These home visits were evaluated and prepared during the two weekly parental guidance sessions.

Psychodrama Participants

In the case example below, there are three important participants. First is the protagonist (P). This is the person (in this case Simon) whose life, or aspects of whose life, are explored in the psychodrama session. Second is the director, or psychodramatist (D), who leads the warm up, action, and sharing. Third is the codirector (CO), who is an extension of the protagonist and director.

Phase A: Concretizing the Phenomenological Reality

This first phase of the protocol comprises an exploration of Simon's current self-constructions (Self-Image, Alter-Image, and Meta-Self).

WARM-UP

General warm-up exercise. This is a pleasant exercise intended to create a secure climate of creative possibilities and confidence. Depending on the aims of the therapy and the child's individuality, there are kinetic exercises, internalization exercises (for instance, guided fantasy exercises), or a combination of both (Dayton, 1994; Shearon, 1980; Taylor, 1998; Wilkins, 1999).

Introduction of the action sociogram. Next, D introduces the action sociogram: "Today, we're going to discuss your family—but we'll do this in a very special way: We'll use puppets!"

Simon is asked to represent his family by means of puppets. Meanwhile, D and CO also make puppets representing themselves. Simon chooses a puppet for every member of the family and gives it clothes, hair, and a mouth. He makes a puppet for himself first, then for his mother, his sister, and his father, complemented by Stripe (a cat) and Blackie (a dog). For each puppet, this is followed by a short introductory dialogue. We will illustrate this by means of the introduction of the father puppet:

D: Fine. Who else is there?

P: My dad.

D: Your dad. Why don't you choose a puppet for your dad?

P (while dressing the puppet in a black shirt and trousers): Dad likes wearing shirts. And he often wears black. (Alter-Image)

D: Then you resemble each other, because you told me that you also like wearing black.

P: That's what everyone says, yes. (Meta-Self)

P (while choosing a mouth for the puppet): And he talks a lot, but I'm an even greater talker than him. (Alter-Image, Self-Image)

Choosing and dressing the puppets is a first action-oriented exploration of self-constructions. Indeed, while dressing the puppets, D and Simon discover how Simon views his family members (Alter-Image) and himself (Self-Image). Moreover, by creating the puppets, Simon is introduced affectively and situationally into the theme (warm up).

Now that all significant figures have been introduced, CO is introduced, as well. The technique of doubling⁴ is explained by

means of an example, so that Simon clearly knows it is his own phenomenological constructions that are at the center of the session. Next, a carpet is spread on the floor; it serves as the house to which Simon can invite the members of his family: "Let's create a nice place, *your* place, where we can invite everyone."

ACTION

A puppet as a symbol for himself. From here on, the puppets do the talking. Simon picks up his I-puppet and enters his house. D asks Simon to describe his house so as to further introduce him affectively and situationally. Next, Simon (the I-puppet) is asked to choose a spot in the house where he feels at ease. In the meantime, CO and D are sitting at the edge of the carpet holding their puppets. D starts a conversation through his puppet with Simon (I-puppet):

D: Simon, you just told me that you like wearing skating trousers; you must like skating then?

P (through the I-puppet): Yes, very much. (Self-Image)

CO (double): I'm very proud I can skate so well.

D: Are you, Simon?

P (through I-puppet): Yes. (Self-Image)

D: Now tell me Simon, how are things at home?

P (through I-puppet): Sometimes we quarrel and sometimes we don't. (condition of the Self-Image)

D: And how does that make you feel?

P (through I-puppet): It makes me feel bad. (Self-Image)

Puppets as symbols for significant others. After introducing himself (the I-puppet, Self-Image), Simon introduces his phenomenological constructions of the other family members. D greets every puppet enthusiastically. The brief dialogue between the D-puppet and the Other-puppet provides information about the Alter-Image (for instance, "Dad, what do you do for a living?"), after which the Meta-Self is explored immediately (for instance, "Dad, what do you think of Simon?"). The conversation is closed by checking how the I-puppet feels and by giving the Other-puppet a place in the house (fixing the affective-emotional dis-

tance). Then the next significant other can come in. We illustrate the type of dialogue conducted through the interaction with the Father-puppet: Simon has already introduced his sister, who said that they sometimes get along well and sometimes don't.

D: Hi dad. Tell us, what do you do for a living?

P (through father-puppet): I'm a bank manager. (Alter-Image)

D: So you have to work a lot?

P (through father-puppet): I have to work very, very hard. I have little time for my children, but in the weekends we go for it.
(Alter-Image)

D: And your son, what's he like?

P (through father-puppet): He gets angry quickly, but he's a nice kid.
(Meta-Self)

D: Does it make you feel bad when he gets angry?

P (through father-puppet): Sometimes it does. (Alter-Image) He even pushed me against the door once, when he got angry. (Meta-Self)

D: Do you know why he gets angry?

P (through father-puppet): Yes, he makes too much about nothing and then starts swearing and kicking. (Meta-Self)

CO (double): And I think a child shouldn't do this to his father.

P (through father-puppet): Yes, that's right. (Meta-Self)

D: So things aren't always easy?

P (through father-puppet): No. But I must say that he's a good badminton player. (Meta-Self)

D: So on the one hand, it would seem that you get along well and do a lot of things together, and that you even resemble each other a bit. But on the other hand, I understand that things aren't always easy?

P (through father-puppet): Yes.

D: Simon, what do you say? (Return to Self-Image)

P (through I-puppet): I can get really angry when I have to do things I don't like, and also if I can't have it my own way. (Self-Image)

D: So you don't like it when they, for example, say you're not allowed to watch telly—this makes you really mad?

P (through I-puppet): Yes.

D: Simon, you can now give your dad a place in the house.

This passage illustrates the concrete probing of characteristics and conditions of the Alter-Image and Meta-Self. Simon not only talks *about* significant others but also *to* and *with* them (externalization of self-dialogues). These dialogues make the working-through of the family relationships (significance, distance, etc.) more concrete than in a classic verbal dialogue. This concrete nature is better adapted to children's cognitive capacities and makes it easier for them to grasp the situation (Cuvelier, 1993). In addition, this direct action keeps them from rationalizing and talking detachedly about the situation—two defense mechanisms.

The self-dialogues are characterized by an inherent dialectic process. Indeed, the empathy with the Father-puppet can be construed as the antithesis phase following the introduction of the I-puppet (Self-Image, thesis phase). By becoming his dad (Alter-Image), Simon "ignores" himself by shifting attention or focus. The synthesis phase marks the return to the I-puppet: "Simon, what do you say?" When answering this question, Simon "ignores" the Alter-Image and becomes himself again (Self-Image, synthesis). Such dialectic swings can have a clarifying effect on both poles in the process (in this case: Self-Image and Alter-Image).

Now that dad has been given his place, Simon introduces his mother, Blackie, and Stripe consecutively. All the figures are questioned following the same pattern (Alter-Image and Meta-Self) and then given their place in the house. For the arrangement of Simon, see Figure 1.

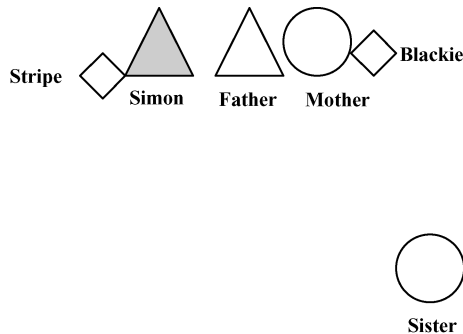


FIGURE 1 Schematic representation of Simon's current social atom (Phase A).

Checking the real situation. While standing (the meta position), Simon checks jointly with D whether everyone has been given the place that corresponds to the home situation as Simon currently perceives it. If necessary, Simon can still make changes.

Message. At the end of this session, Simon is given the opportunity to say something (a wish, an order, etc.) in a soft or loud voice. Addressing his mother, father, and sister, Simon says that he hopes that everything will be all right soon. To Stripe and Blackie he says that he hopes they'll be allowed to come soon. These contents already clearly reflect wishes. In the development of the ideal image (Phase B), this will be further concretized.

Desymbolization. Next, the puppets are desymbolized by undressing them while saying the phrase, "This is no longer [name], but just a puppet," and putting them back into the box.

Sharing. As a reflection on the session, Simon says that he has worked hard today. Then the session is closed explicitly ("And this ends our puppet play"). It is verified whether Simon is back in the here-and-now by asking concrete questions about the reality of the moment ("What are you going to do now? Where are we now?"). The aim of these questions is to prevent Simon from remaining fixated on the projections on the objects.

CONCLUSION

Thanks to the direct concreteness of this playful method, Simon rapidly succeeded in making several family dynamics more explicit during the first session. Indeed, the first phase often yields a diagnostic overview of the child's complex perceptions of his social network.

Phase B: Concretizing the Ideal Image

The aim of the second phase is to concretize the ideal social atom in terms of the affective and semantic content of the Ideal-Self, Ideal-Alter, and Ideal-Meta-Self.

WARM-UP

General warm-up exercise. See Phase A.

Introduction of the current image. A link is established with the previous sessions by reinstalling the current social atom ("Do you remember what we did last time? Have you thought about it? Shall we create your room again and invite everyone in again?"). Simon makes some changes compared with the previous session (see Figure 2, Part A).

ACTION

Shift to the desired situation.

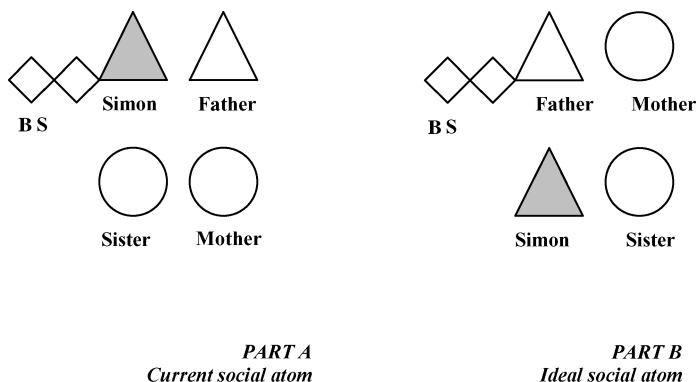
D: So that's the situation at home now. Is there anything you'd like to change?

P: I'd like to quarrel less.

D: Could you show this by using your puppets?

P: Yes. (Simon changes the position of the puppets (see Figure 2, Part B).

Exploration of the ideal image. The main aim of this stage is to explore the ideal situation. Using the puppets Simon examines what the different members of the family think of the new situation, what the possible advantages and disadvantages are, and whether this is what he really wants. The elaboration is done by



Note. B = Blackie (dog) and S = Stripe (cat)

FIGURE 2 Representation of the current social atom (Part A) and the ideal social atom (Part B).

interviewing the different puppets and/or enacting a concrete desired situation.

With Simon we choose the interview technique in order to explore the feelings and thoughts of the different antagonists. This exploration leads to an initial assessment of what makes this desired situation so special. Every puppet is allowed a say (Ideal-Alter and Ideal-Meta-Self), and the I-puppet can react after each intervention (dialectic process). This is what his sister says:

D (addressing the Sister-puppet): Hi, Cathy.

P (through Sister-puppet): Hi.

D: How does it feel, sitting next to your brother again?

P (through Sister-puppet): I rather like it. (Ideal Alter-Image)

D: Strange isn't it, sitting next to each other now, while before you were always quarrelling and you weren't allowed to sit next to each other? How does it feel now, sitting next to each other?

P (through Sister-puppet): My brother's very nice. (Ideal Meta-Self)

D: So how come you always used to quarrel?

P (through Sister-puppet): Perhaps we didn't have the same opinions? (Alter-Image)

D: So you had different opinions about certain things. Your brother says that you used to be a difficult character. Would you agree?

P (through Sister-puppet): Yes. Sometimes I was difficult and sometimes I wasn't. (Alter-Image)

D: And your brother?

P (through Sister-puppet): Er ... he's unpredictable. (Meta-Self)

D (addressing the I-puppet): So if I've understood things correctly, you don't always have the same opinion about things. Cathy says she can be difficult but that you can also be difficult at times. So you're both to blame a bit for the quarrels. Perhaps both of you could do something about it?

P (through I-puppet): Yes.

Checking the ideal situation. Next, D and Simon leave the puppets in the ideal configuration and look (standing up) whether this configuration is really the situation Simon wishes. For the synthesis, D asks Simon to enumerate the changes:

D: Could you repeat what has changed?

P: My sister and I get along better now; we no longer fight.

D: And has anything changed between you and your mum and dad?

P: Yes, I've learned to listen much better now.

Message and desymbolization. See Phase A. This time, Simon says to all the puppets that he hopes his wish will come true.

SHARING

As a reflection on this session, D asks Simon what he would like to retain from this session. Simon says the idea that they could become friends again is important. D suggests that during the next session they can examine how this could be achieved. The closing of this phase is analogous to that of Phase A.

Phase C: Concretizing the Possible Changes

Phases A and B constitute the core of the protocol, focusing on the affective-cognitive exploration of the real and the ideal image. These phases can be complemented by a learning phase (Phase C) and a feedback phase (Phase D). Both phases are optional because of the degree of difficulty involved. First, not every child is capable of working out adjustments or solutions and trying them out in daily reality (for instance, because they are in an institution). Second, the child must not be made to feel guilty by conveying the implicit message that he or she can find a solution or that he or she should change.

However, with Simon we did develop Phases C and D because the puppets clearly enabled him to address sensitive themes. The puppets were the necessary mediated step that allowed him to see the need for change and kept him motivated for further treatment.

WARM-UP

While the initial phases encourage action and interiorization through explicit warm-up exercises, this is less necessary in the subsequent phases. Quite often, a reflection on the previous session ("Have you thought about all this in the meantime? How did you feel during the session? Could you repeat what you felt to be

important during the previous session?”) is sufficient to set the stage for the relational puppet work.

Simon brings the puppets to life again and constructs the ideal situation in his “house” (see Figure 2, Part B). He summarizes his wishes: “I wish we shouldn’t be fighting any more and that I should be able to listen better.” This wish is the starting point of the new session, the aim of which is to examine together with Simon how each party can contribute to his ideal situation.

ACTION

Looking for a solution. In this phase, D and Simon will seek ways of bringing the ideal situation closer. Because it is obviously far from easy for a child to come up with solutions, a concrete problematic situation (in this case, a quarrel) is used as a starting point.

D: Tell me, Simon, what could you and the others do to make you get on with each other better?

P (through I-puppet): I don’t know.

D: Shall we try to play-act a quarrel? We could then examine how you could do things differently.

P (through I-puppet): Fine.

D: Simon, can you remember a situation in which you and your sister had a fight?

P (through I-puppet): Yes. Last Sunday, I wanted to give my sister a kiss before we left. She refused to give me a kiss, and then I said that I was going to miss her and she said “So what?”

D: Where did this happen?

P (through I-puppet): In the bathroom, she was making up her hair.

D: Why don’t we make a bathroom somewhere in your house?

P (through I-puppet): Right here: Here’s the bath and here’s the washbasin.

D: Now tell me what happened.

P (through I-puppet): I went to see mum and dad.

D: Could you show me how, using the puppets?

P walks his puppet over to the mum and dad puppets. The scene is now enacted with the puppets as in a classic psychodrama. D pays attention to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the actors in the scene—and of the sister and Simon in particular.

After the exploration of the “real” quarrel scene, Simon plays the scene as he would have liked it: He and his sister tell each other that they are going to miss each other. Here again, great attention is paid to the feelings and thoughts of the different actors (Simon and sister) and to the differences with the real scene.

Trying out a solution. Together with Simon we examined what makes this scene different. Simon says that in the ideal situation he had the courage to say what he was really thinking. It is therefore suggested that he might simply tell his sister what he does not like. This is tried out with the puppets, after which Simon says, “Mum also said that I should talk more. That’s my problem, that I don’t talk enough.” It is agreed that Simon is now going to apply this at home, as well.

Message and desymbolization. See Phases A and B.

SHARING

D asks Simon to tell him what the most important element in the session has been. Simon says: “That I should talk more. I’m going to try this out by next time.” For the explicit closing, see previous phases.

Phase D: Feedback and Adjustment

This phase consists of feedback on Simon’s attempts to change. Referring to the previous session, we examined what actions have been undertaken and whether Simon has thought about them in the meantime. The “actions in the field” are reviewed and if necessary adjusted via active exploration.

Simon says he had another argument with his sister the previous weekend, but that he told his sister how he felt when she was short with him. This is enacted using the puppets. Special attention is paid to (a) the feelings and thoughts of both actors, (b) the difference with earlier fights, and (c) any remaining obstacles and their solutions. During enacting, Simon perceives that if he has the courage to express his feelings, his sister responds in a milder way and stops teasing him. Simon says that if he expresses what he feels, he will be much less inclined to get angry, swear, or kick.

To close this phase and the series of psychodrama sessions, D introduces the three-puppet technique:

D: Look, I have three special puppets here.

P: How's that?

D: The first puppet is going to tell us what lessons you learned here, the second what you enjoyed here, and the third what you didn't enjoy here. You can make the puppets talk by lifting them up and saying anything you wish to say.

P (through the "lessons" puppet): I've learned that I have to talk instead of getting angry straightaway.

P (through the "positive" puppet): It was nice that I could make wishes all the time.

P (through the "negative" puppet): I sometimes had to talk too much here, and I don't like talking much.

Follow Up

Throughout the sessions, Simon gained an understanding of the different relationships, the effects of the conflicts on the members of his family, and the share of the different members. Together with Simon, fragments from the video recording of the sessions were played and discussed during a meeting with his parents. The parents said they were surprised to see that Simon had gained such broad insights. The parents agreed that they would incite Simon to talk about his feelings instead of expressing them through his behavior. When Simon was about to become aggressive, his parents would stop him and incite him to (self-)reflection by asking concrete questions.

During an evaluation session that was organized after four weeks, the parents said they had noticed some improvements already. Simon had become noticeably calmer, especially toward his sister, and he was better capable of expressing his discontent in more acceptable ways. This evolution was noticed in Simon's residential community, as well.

Discussion

Studies show that rigid misinterpretations can contribute to the development of psychopathology. Therefore, breaking through

these rigid relational representations is one of the basic aims of developmental psychotherapy (Fonagy & Target, 1997, 1998). However, in child psychotherapy this is a complex task because of children's insufficiently developed role-taking and verbalization skills. The present article illustrated how the semi-structured application of the action sociogram can counteract these limitations. The case study demonstrates how the action sociogram can be applied within developmental therapy in order to stimulate the internal dialectic processes in a secure and playful manner. Children are able to investigate their personal world in a nonthreatening way. Using puppets, they can become and meet their significant others in a specific time and setting (Verhofstadt-Denève et al., 2004). As Hermans (2001) stated, the I constructs a multivoiced world in which the child is not only able to talk about but also talk with a variety of imaginal others. Via this cognitive-affective exploration of the relational climate (or problem), the action sociogram meets the following primary therapy aims of child therapy.

First, the relived action intensifies the mentalization or reflection process. The concrete dialogues between the therapist and the puppets explicitly kindle the child's mental processes about self, the others, and the world. The child is invited to change roles with his or her significant others and to view the situation from their perspective. The exteriorizations of the inner constructions can therefore give a first impetus to break through the rigid representations of oneself in one's world.

Second, going through the different phases can cause a child's representational system to become more flexible. Indeed, role changes and concrete dialogues can help to discover new content. For instance, Simon's role change with his Sister-puppet helped him to discover that she cannot possibly know how he feels if he does not tell her. The initially rigid Alter-Image ("She defies me and does so on purpose") became more flexible ("She doesn't understand me because I don't tell her how I feel"). Doublings by the therapists can also contribute to this process, as they explicitly voice the child's unspoken (or unconscious) thoughts and feelings. In other words, doublings enable the child to discover alternative interpretations.

Third, this action technique improves the child's structuring capacity. By expressing his representational world in action, Simon literally grasped his problematic reality (Cuvelier, 1993)

and gained insight into how others perceive conflicts and how everyone can contribute toward solving them. Moreover, exploring these situations provided Simon the distance required for working through the experienced action. This step was a kind of mirroring in which Simon viewed his world before him in a structured manner. This created a feeling of control over the complex situation and prevented feelings of helplessness and apathy. Giving the protagonist the opportunity to propose a solution, to try it out, and to practice it also stimulates this sense of control. On the stage, the child can experiment with solutions and skills in a secure environment. As a result, the protagonist can gain the positive experience required for putting his or her new skills or solutions into practice. During Phase C, Simon experienced how talking about his feelings can prevent certain conflicts. Experiencing a success, but also listening to his antagonists' positive reactions, gave him the necessary positive feedback.

Fourth, the action sociogram offers an opportunity to reinforce positive emotions and to stimulate positive self-appreciation. Positive emotions broaden the focus of attention and engender a more flexible and spontaneous mental process (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Fredrickson et al., 2003). In addition, positive self-appreciation raises a buffer against fear and depression (Harter, 1998). It is therefore crucial during the concrete dialogues to probe for the antagonists' positive feelings about the protagonist and, if necessary, to stimulate this process through doubling. For instance, a double enabled Simon to express his pride about his skating abilities (positive Self-Image), while the Father-puppet said how good a badminton player Simon is (positive Meta-Self). The positive feelings are also nurtured through pleasant warm-up exercises and the introduction of humor.

The action sociogram thus offers a powerful technique for achieving various general developmental therapy aims in a secure, child-oriented way. However, action techniques involve more than the automatic application of techniques. They should be founded on a secure therapeutic climate and a theoretical framework (Verhofstadt-Denève, 2003). As a theoretical framework, the Phe-Di PModel is suggested. This psychotherapy model gives a concrete description of the content of the representational system and the driving force of self-actualization—namely, dialectic

processes. In addition, it applies the following fundamental developmental principles:

1. *The creation of a secure climate.* Only when we feel secure are we ready for internal and external (self-)exploration. This climate is created via a strong emphasis on the warm-up phase and the use of familiar projection material.
2. *The creation of a play area.* The “as if” nature of the process provides ample scope for presenting threatening material without being disloyal, and for experimenting without negative consequences.
3. *Setting borders and a predictable structure.* The protocol has a logical and partly repetitive development going from peripheral to central, ensuring security and predictability.
4. *Adjusting the protocol if required.* First, the protocol needs to be adapted creatively to the child’s needs and capacities. Second, the relative importance of the different phases is determined by the specific therapy aims. A therapist may decide to space a given phase over several sessions in order to address a specific theme, such as current grief or the expression of emotions within the family. Incidentally, the protocol can also be applied within a diagnostic process for family relationships and attachment representations. In this case, the focus is on Phases A and B, and during the dialogues information is gathered about the significant relationships at the emotional and cognitive levels. Third, in spite of the added value provided by a cotherapist, a director alone can also implement the protocol.

Founded on a therapeutic model and on principles from developmental psychology, the semi-structured application of the action sociogram is a powerful method for stimulating self-reflection (mentalization). As such this method corresponds to some basic principles of constructivist psychotherapy. First, this method starts from the constructivist tenet that human beings are creative socially embedded meaning-making agents (Guidano, 1995; Neimeyer, 1993, 1995). The action sociogram corresponds perfectly with the intersubjective and multivoiced conceptualization of the self within constructivism (Hermans, 2001). Second, in concordance with constructivist thinking, the overarching goal of therapy is explorative rather than corrective (Guidano,

1995; Neimeyer, 1993, 1995). The action sociogram attempts to facilitate the exploration of personal meanings and the enrichment of the construct repertoire. Third, the intervention incorporates some form of enactment of deep role relationships (Dale & Lyddon, 2000). This is realized via the role-taking technique and vivid dialogues between the self-constructions. Fourth, the dynamic process of creativity is reflected in the semi-structured nature of the protocol. On a concrete level, we underscore this creativity by allowing the child to change the construction both within and between sessions.

The added value of this method resides in the emotional and cognitive working-through of the problem during the puppet play (Phases A and B), followed by concrete learning episodes (Phases C and D). However, the child protocol is not a panacea; studies are underway to describe its specific effects. Still, the protocol clearly stimulates the process or, as George Kelly (1955) wrote, the rigid system of constructs is put into motion again.

Notes

1. Mentalization refers to the capacity to recognize intentions and feelings in oneself and in others, to understand one's own behavior and interpersonal behavior in terms of mental states, and to situate all this within a psychic reality (Fonagy et al., 2002).
2. The introduction of treatment protocols is sometimes called "a little revolution" (Wilson, 1996). Yet they are met with controversy and ambivalence from diverse therapeutic schools (including psychodrama and constructivism; Addis, Wade, & Hatgis, 1999; Castonguay et al., 1999; Wilson, 1996). One of the critiques is that such manuals go against spontaneity and creativity, two basic tenets of constructivist and psychodramatical work. However, proponents accentuate the methodological advantages of the manuals (i.e., the training of therapists and the further development of therapy research because of standardization). We see the construction of this protocol as a necessary step in an actualization movement of psychodrama, because it enables effective communication about the technique, and further effect research. Therefore, we conceptualize the manual as a broad theoretically based framework that needs to be adapted to therapy goals and clients' needs.
3. Consistent with Martin Buber, Moreno (the father of psychodrama) early on underscored the fundamental importance of dialogues as truly empathically reciprocal contacts or encounters between I and You (Apter, 2003; Moreno, 1964). Psychodrama can therefore also be understood as a therapy of relationships.

4. In the technique of doubling, a member of the group or the codirector expresses what the protagonist is thinking via words or gestures (Blatner, 1995; 's-Gravendijk, 1983; Verhofstadt-Denève, 2001a), always checking whether the protagonist accepts or rejects the content of the doubling.

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