Chapter 6

Let's face it

Mirroring in psychodrama

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> I was looking at myself in the mirror the other day and saw the face of an aged person – gray hair, wrinkles around tired eyes, dry aged skin – and asked, 'Who is this old man that is reflecting my image?' Realizing that this was still me, I wondered, 'Is this the same me as the one I have lived with for over 50 years?' There was no point in shutting my eyes for the truth. Sighing, I answered my own question with some resentment: 'Yes, I guess so. It seems I have grown old.' Facing the image of myself in the mirror, urged me to face myself.

Looking at ourselves in the mirror forces us to repeatedly come to terms with who we are, even though we continually change. This process of 'mirroring' is in fact a central and inherent part of 'being in the world,' since it helps us through life to synchronize the reciprocal interaction between the outer world and ourselves. But mirroring is not only a process in which we are watching reflections of ourselves in a 'looking-glass.' The term is also used as a description of the general process of parental responsiveness to their children, and it was chosen by J. L. Moreno (1946) to depict a central therapeutic technique within psychodrama. It is this latter aspect of 'mirroring' that will be the focus of this chapter. After a brief introduction of the classical practice and theory of mirroring in psychodrama, I will suggest a developmental theoretical perspective of three kinds of mirroring from the point of view of social psychology, object relations theory and self-psychology. It is my hope that this perspective will provide an advance in the integration of contemporary developments both in psychoanalytic and psychodramatic theory.

Practice

A 16-year old teenage girl joined an inpatient psychodrama group because she had developed symptoms of anorexia nervosa with a distorted body image. In one session, she enacted a scene in which she tried out for the cheerleading team, comparing herself to the other girls. Her image of a

cheerleader was a thin, blonde, and chipper girl wearing a short skirt. Comparing herself to the other good-looking girls, she felt that she didn't have a chance to be accepted because she was too fat. Suddenly overwhelmed by despair, she ran right out of the gymnasium, deciding that she had to make a total change in her appearance. She went on a strict and exaggerated diet, which finally brought her to the hospital in a serious state of anorexia. After the enactment of this scene in the group, she started to cry silently and sat down on the floor. The director asked her to watch as another girl played her role in the original cheerleading competition. The girl went through the motions of the troubled teenager and made a point in emphasizing her sense of 'inadequate' body image. After the enactment, the anorexic girl said, 'But you are so beautiful! You would have been surely picked for the team.' The director urged her again to take her role within the scene and listen to her own words to herself: 'But you are so beautiful! You would have been surely picked for the team.' Hearing these words coming from herself, rather than from another person, made them so much more meaningful and effective. It was a definite sign of progress in her therapy. It was the first time anybody had heard her say something positive about herself.

The technique used by the director in this psychodrama is called 'mirroring.' In this technique, another person in the group (sometimes called the 'auxiliary ego') is asked to portray the role of the protagonist, who watches the enactment of himself or herself from outside as if looking into a mirror. Following the portrayal, the protagonist is usually encouraged to comment on what he or she has observed and/or to re-enter into the action (Hollander 1967).

Mirroring may depict a general portrayal of how the protagonist is coming across in a specific situation, providing an opportunity for the protagonist to get a more distant perspective of his or her behavior. Recently, a protagonist who was watching himself approaching his boss in a timid fashion, shouted, 'Stand up for yourself and tell him what you want! He is not your father, you know.' Seeing himself from outside made it easier to understand what was going on in the interaction and to let insight evolve from within himself, rather than from somebody else.

While care should be taken not to make a caricature mockery presentation of the protagonist that would hurt their feelings, the auxiliary ego may exaggerate one or more aspects of the protagonist's behavior. Depending on the purpose of the portrayal (and what the protagonist should be faced with), the auxiliary ego may be urged to exaggerate body language (e.g. posture and voice tone) to make the protagonist aware of discrepancies between verbal messages and physical expression. For example, a person may say that he is not angry while his entire body posture depicts anger (which he is unable to express).

Mirroring is also frequently used as a warm-up exercise within psychodrama groups. As such, it may focus on the outer signs of our inner state of

mind and give an opportunity for some feedback. One such exercise is the simple mirroring in pairs. Two persons stand or sit facing each other, about one meter apart. One is himself or herself, the other is the 'mirror.' Moving only from the waist up, the person begins to make simple gestures or movements while the 'mirror' person duplicates the movements as best as possible. This exercise can also be made in a small or large group with multiple mirrors duplicating the words and movements of one of the group members at a time. Sometimes, real mirrors can be used to work on some or another part of our body image. This may be especially useful when there is a problem in this area and there is a tendency to shy away from mirrors. Participants may then be asked to really take a good look at themselves, and to describe their body and its parts (their height, weight, hair color and type, skin, hands, feet, etc.) and to share their feelings about these parts (Blatner and Blatner 1997).

Technically, the mirror is primarily a feedback method to let the protagonist see a reflection of himself or herself from outside. As in an instant video replay, an auxiliary ego repeats an event that the protagonist has just completed. The psychological distance allows a more realistic appraisal of oneself.

The interpersonal dynamics and psychological resonance of mirroring are not only manifested within classical psychodrama. The improvisational method of playback theatre seems also to be based on some mirroring principles. Someone tells a story or moment from their life, chooses actors to play the different roles, then watches as their story is immediately re-created and given artistic shape. Similarly, the behavioral technique of modeling includes certain mirroring aspects.

The mirroring concept

Pendergast (2003) shows how throughout its history *the mirror* has symbolized vanity, self-examination and the limits of human understanding. The mirroring concept is based on the simple fact that we are unable to really see ourselves from outside. We need someone or something from outside to reflect who we are.

In western culture, as illustrated in fairy tales and Greek mythology, the mirroring concept is an archetype for self-infatuation and idealization, as well as disillusionment and destruction. The stories commonly describe a person who first watches himself or herself with admiration in a mirror but who later is confronted with the fact that he or she is not the center of the universe. The most well-known examples are perhaps the idealized self-reflections of Narcissus and the stepmother of Snow White, who both end in misery.

In the story of Narcissus, the handsome son of a god discovers his own image in the fountain and immediately falls in love with himself. While

feeling okay with oneself may be a prerequisite for feeling okay with others, Narcissus' exaggerated self-love becomes a curse, since it prevents him from also loving others. In fact, it became the model for what modern psychiatry has called a 'narcissistic personality disorder': a person who has a grandiose sense of self-importance but who is too self-centered and self-absorbed to have any empathy or concern for others. Such people have been found to be excessively prideful in order to compensate for their fragile self-esteem, and as a consequence, they are driven to constantly seek admiration and attention, but are unable to develop any meaningful interpersonal relations with others.

Similarly, in the story of Snow White, the stepmother stands in front of her magic looking-glass and asks, 'Mirror, mirror on the wall. Who is fairest of them all?', The mirror answers, 'You, O Queen, are the fairest of all!' Later in this story, however, the threatening image of Snow White is introduced by the mirror, who always tells the truth. Snow White evokes the envy of the Queen, and since the Queen is unable to develop a more realistic self-image that is devoid of outside comparison, she becomes consumed with hatred. In this story, mirroring not only represents the instrument for an idealized self-image, but also emphasizes the importance of realistic appraisal of a person.

In sum, both stories delineate a normative and universal two-stage process of idealization and confrontation that is involved in all mirroring. These are also the two main components of the use of the psychodramatic mirror technique. To paraphrase the Queen's question to the mirror in the story of Snow White, we yearn for the psychodrama group to provide us with first a positive and idealized picture of ourselves to gain strength and self-confidence, and also with a correct portrayal that will help us deal with ourselves in a more realistic and differentiated manner. In effect we are asking, 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, tell me who is the fairest of them all? Tell me if I am the fairest of all, or . . . if not . . . if I am just Me . . . if you will still love me, or if I can still love myself?' Facing our mirror image in such a manner may thus help us in the gradual process of facing ourselves.

Theory

From a theoretical perspective, the psychodramatic mirroring technique is based on universal interpersonal feedback processes that evolve during our entire lifespan to reinforce our sense of self. We continue to rely on the various more or less appreciative responses towards us all through life. But mirroring is not limited to the responses of other human beings towards us. There are an endless number of things and events that mirror us in every aspect of life.

The enthusiastic welcome of an affectionate pet will make us feel momentarily good, while the unconditional love of a mother will leave a

permanent imprint. As one of the characters in the first of the bestselling Harry Potter books tells our young hero, 'A love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. . . . to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin' (Rowling 1997: 216).

But mirroring is an even more universal process. In addition to the sense of being either accepted or rejected by our intimate family, we may feel either included or excluded by society in general, or experience either a fortunate or catastrophic destiny by Mother Nature. All such extraneous events will in some way reflect upon how we interpret the way the world looks at us and how we, as a result, look at ourselves in the world. Even the weather may have an enormous mirroring influence on how we feel about ourselves, letting either the sun shine on us, or the rain pull us down. Similarly, the seasons of the year may infuse us with energies that are inspiring either growth or hibernation. Every environment is sending a subliminal mirroring message to us, indicating that we are either part of it or separated from it. People who are more aware of such messages may search in nature for the kinds of mirroring influences that they need at certain times in their lives – from the trees in the forest, the waves of the ocean, the open views at the mountain-top, the desolate silence of the desert or the bustle of urban locations. These are places where we might find some peace and balance within ourselves, and where we feel at home and can enjoy the environmental mirroring.

Finally, traumatic life events may also have a profound and long-lasting mirroring influence on us. Such tragic events may not only make us feel vulnerable, anxious and depressed, but will also affect the way we look at the world as more or less predictable and benevolent. In addition, if we have been abused, molested or tortured by other human beings, we may become suspicious of other people and later develop a sense of worthlessness and inferiority that is clearly connected to the maltreatment which we endured. 'I was treated as an object,' said a woman who had been raped, 'and I still feel like one.' Her sense of self had been transformed from being a lovable person to one without value – from a 'you' to an 'it' – and she had internalized that sense of self.

Thus it seems that the self is comprised of a kind of mirroring, or reflected appraisal of the various responses we get from people in the social world, from environmental states and from the more or less traumatic events in our lives. However, the first sense of our 'self' seems to evolve as a result of the mirroring that we experienced during the first years of life.

Stages in the development of the self

Watching a person pass through the various stages of child development makes it possible to delineate a few universal stages of the development of

the self. In his paper on the spontaneity theory of child development, Moreno (1944) described the following stages:

1 All-identity – the other person is a part of the infant.
2 The infant centering attention upon the other stranger part of himself.
3 The infant lifting the other part from the continuity of experience and leaving all other parts out, including himself.
4 The infant placing himself actively in the other part and acting its role.
5 The infant acting in the role of the other, towards someone else.

These five stages represent, according to Moreno, the psychological bases for all 'self–and' role processes: 'It is an image-building and co-action process' (p. 62). The five stages were later reformulated by Z. T. Moreno (1975) into three phases of child development:

- The first universe, or 'matrix of all-identity' (primary narcissism) in which 'I am the total universe.'
- The second universe of differentiated all-identity, in which other people are perceived as separate from one another, but the child is not yet aware that he or she does not control them. In psychoanalytic terminology, this would represent a kind of part-object, or partly separated self-object.
- The third universe of differentiation, in which there is a breach between fantasy and reality and a sense that 'I am not the world, there is another world outside me.'

These three stages are presented here, not as elaborate theories of psychological child development, but as historic forerunners of, and as a theoretical basis for, the use of the main psychodramatic techniques and the three kinds of mirroring presented below.

One of the advances in theory in psychodrama has been the writing that shows how all the central psychodramatic techniques that were developed by J. L. and Z. T. Moreno may be understood and explained within the framework of normative child development (Leutz 1974; Krüger 1997). These psychodramatic techniques and their association with stages of development may be summarized as follows:

1 *Soliloquy* (talking aloud in the role and associating freely) is based in the first phase of 'all identity' and primary narcissism (also known as the 'symbiotic' phase).
2 *Doubling* (the auxiliary is expressing the inner thoughts and feelings of the protagonist) is based on the second phase of partial differentiation, since the child does not yet experience the mother as a separate object.

3 *Mirroring* (the outside reflection) is also based on the second phase of partial differentiation, within the subphase of separation–individuation.
4 *Role reversal* (the protagonist reverses role with the auxiliary) is based on the third phase of differentiation between 'self' and 'other' or when object constancy (the sense that the other person exists even if he or she is out of sight) has been achieved.

Soliloquy, doubling, mirroring and role reversal are not only basic techniques in the process of psychodrama therapy for adults, but are also essential for the adequate psychosocial growth of children. In other words, people who are given the opportunity to express themselves freely, and who are provided with adequate mirroring, doubling and role reversal, will continue to develop and grow. All of these techniques are put in motion with the active help of 'auxiliary egos,' the therapeutic assistants who help the protagonist fill the various 'significant other' roles in the psychodrama in the same way as children use their parents as natural untrained auxiliary ego objects that help the infant get started in life (Moreno and Moreno 1959).

However, since the interpersonal theories of Moreno must be considered outdated and too fragmented, mirroring should be also understood from the point of view of social psychology (G. H. Mead and C. H. Cooley), object relations theory (M. Mahler and D. W. Winnicott) and self-psychology (H. Kohut), which seem to be congruent with Morenian conceptions. From such an integrative broad theoretical perspective, I suggest a differentiation between three kinds of mirroring:

- Idealizing mirroring;
- Validating mirroring; and
- Subjective mirroring.

These kinds of mirroring underscore our intrinsic (self-object) relationship needs for merging with an idealized object, for alter-ego reflection and for adversarial and subjective responses to ourselves. This gradual process of self-development is schematically presented in Table 6.1.

Idealizing mirroring

'If I love myself as my mother loved me, I will be OK.'

Mirroring during the first phase of earliest childhood refers to the various parental idealization responses to the child's first entrance upon the stage of life. The parents admire everything about their newborn child: 'How sweet he is! How wonderful and perfect she looks!' While the baby does not look

Table 6.1 Mirroring in Psychodrama

Universe: (Moreno 1975)	First universe: 'All-identity'	Second universe: 'Differentiated all-identity'	Third universe: 'Differentiation'
Feedback	Idealization	Validation	Evaluative
Evaluation	Positive	Neutral reflection	Critical (subjective/ objective)
Phase of child development	Autistic	Separation-individuation	Self-object constancy
Self-differentiation	Symbiosis: Me	Part object: Me–I	Self
Theory of self	Self-psychology	Object relations	Social psychology

very different from other babies, parents view it as the most wonderful creature in the world and, in normal circumstances, they extend their unconditional love to the child in every possible manner. This first stage of mirroring is characterized by 'idealization' and helps the child to be accepted into the family of humankind.

This idealizing mirroring is congruent with Kohut and Goldberg's (1984) suggestion that healthy (narcissistic) self-development proceeds from adequate responsiveness of caregivers to the child's vital emotional needs, including:

- *alter-ego (or auxiliary ego) needs* – children need to be involved with others to develop
- *idealizing (or doubling) needs* – children need to feel attached to a loving caregiver who can hold them
- *mirroring needs* – children need to feel understood and appreciated.

If these needs are not met in childhood, and throughout the lifespan, psychological problems will occur. Neglectful parenting – either physical or emotional neglect or worse, abuse – can result in derailments of self development and impair the individual's ability to form healthy relationships (Stern 1985, 2004).

Feeling understood and appreciated seems to be a basic human desire all through life, and is a part of the regular attitude of successful therapists to their clients. Whether calling it 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers 1957), 'adequate empathy' or 'idealized transference,' it seems to be a powerful curative factor in many interpersonal therapies. Such mirroring of a good object does not convey a 'realistic reflection' of a looking-glass mirror, but is a decidedly positive and appreciative reflection of the client. Some of J. L. Moreno's students have described that he often conveyed such a positive attitude towards them, which made them feel special. Some of

them have quoted him saying, 'Yes!' loudly when they entered the room, as if he was affirming their very existence. Others (Marcia Karp, personal communication) remember him saying, 'You are a genius!' Such idealized mirroring surely was a boost for the self of these adult students.

Validating mirroring

> When I look I am seen, so I exist.
>
> (Winnicott 1971: 134)

As the child grows up, his or her mirroring needs will also change. Idealizing mirroring will leave place for a more neutral and validating, but still empathic, responsiveness of the parent to the developing child's separation–individuation needs. This kind of mirroring may be understood within object-relations theory, which emphasizes the importance of early self- and object relationships on our lives, and in which there is a gradual internalization of a reliable and stable mother image.

According to Mahler (1979), the child goes through a normal autistic and symbiotic phase before entering the important subphases of separation–individuation proper (including differentiation, practicing and rapprochement) to finally reach object constancy. During the first phase of symbiosis, affect mirroring is regarded as very important. An attuned parent would display empathic responses through eye contact, facial and vocal expression, touch, holding, movement, etc. Winnicott (1971) suggests that the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face, in which the baby sees him or herself. The mother's gaze upon her infant is thus a founding experience for the child's development of a sense of self as a loved and supported individual. The mirroring look establishes a template for the child's ego as a site for something good and wanted.

One of our most crucial needs in order to develop an authentic personality is to receive such 'validation' mirroring. As children, we needed to have our true feelings – our true self – mirrored, in order to help us develop trust in our own experiences. When this does not happen, painful wounds develop and we feel that we cannot be ourselves. However, when we receive empathic attunement (validating mirroring), this nurturing environment allows the blossoming of the true self of the child.

Being accurately understood by a non-judgmental other person can be very helpful. In psychodrama, the protagonist is encouraged to present his or her own truth in a completely subjective manner (no matter how distorted this may appear to the spectator). This affirmation by the psychodramatist of a protagonist's personal truth and unique experience of reality is called 'existential validation,' and it provides a formidable empowerment of the growth of an inner self (Kellermann 1992: 114). It is therefore understandable that most mirroring scenes within psychodrama constitute

simple repetitions of the earlier action, in order for the protagonist to confirm that he or she has been seen and heard.

Evaluative mirroring

> *A group member to another*: When I meet you, I feel enriched. Because you look at me from another perspective.

Evaluative mirroring is not exclusively positive or neutral; it may contain other kinds of feedback as well, including friendly critique. It is a highly subjective view of the protagonist that brings in a new and sociometric perspective of the situation, which acknowledges the fact that people function as magnets. Like in energy fields with a positive and a negative pole, people can be either drawn to one another in sympathy, or be repulsed by one another in antipathy through the effect of interpersonal chemistry, or 'tele' as Moreno (1946) liked to call it. Positive expressions of delight in another person's activities signal that these are accepted as legitimate, while other expressions of dislike, may give a more critical message of disapproval. Such more differentiated mirroring responses promote socialization and reality testing and may correct biased perception of ourselves and of others.

For example, Bob presented a scene in which he quarreled with his wife. He stated his case and argued that she did not pay enough attention to him and neglected his needs. A woman in the role of his wife presented the other side of the story, throwing fuel on the already overheated marital conflict. And so it went on in what seemed to be an endless battle of words and accusations. The director used the mirror technique in an effort to break the deadlock. He asked Bob to step out of the scene and watch it all from outside (as if in a mirror), with another man playing the role of himself.

Watching the fight as a spectator, Bob listened carefully to both partners. The person playing Bob exaggerated the husband's 'child–parent' interaction, rather than the 'adult–adult' position (in terms used by Transactional Analysis, he was in a child ego state). At that point, the wife ended a sentence with 'but you are not my son, Bob. You are my husband!' Hearing and seeing this from outside the scene seemed to allow Bob to absorb his wife's message in a less defensive manner, and he started to laugh at himself, admitting to the group that it apparently had been a concealed and largely unconscious wish in him to be treated by his wife as a child, and that he would have to relinquish it if he wanted to save his marriage.

This kind of mirroring has its theoretical roots in social psychology. Cooley (1902) used the metaphor of the self as a mirror, or a 'looking-glass self,' to illustrate the idea that individuals' sense of self is primarily formed as a result of their perceptions of how others perceive them. That is, the

appraisals of others act as mirror reflections that provide the information which individuals use to define their own sense of self. The view of mirroring within social psychology maintains that children develop in interaction with certain main caretakers who either stimulate or inhibit their emotional and cognitive growth as well as their sense of self. These significant others convey an outer social reality with which the child can identify. In the dialogue with this outer social reality, the child becomes an object for itself, thus developing a self as object ('me'). The self as object, or the social self, is the first conception of a self and grows from the perceptions and responses of other people. Sooner or later, however, the child starts to question its view of outer social reality and the self as subject ('I') develops. This subjective part of the self responds from within, in the here and now, on the spur of the moment. While self as object is conventional, demanding socialization and conformity, the self as subject breaks out in spontaneous, uninhibited and sometimes impulsive actions. Mead pointed out that 'it is through taking the role of the other that a person is able to come back on himself and so direct his own process of communication' (Mead 1934). This is a process replayed in every psychodrama session.

Although the self is a product of socio-symbolic interaction, it is not merely a passive reflection of the generalized other. The individual's response to the social world is active: he or she *decides* what to do *in the light of* the attitudes of others. The conduct is not mechanically determined by such attitudinal structures. In psychodrama, and in many other forms of group psychotherapy, we are not only encouraged to take upon ourselves the attitudes of others towards ourselves, but also to express our own spontaneous and authentic responses to this outside influence. This continual struggle between the 'Me' and the 'I' within ourselves is highlighted in this third kind of psychodramatic mirroring, and is possibly a universal conflict in most human beings. At one point or another (as manifested in the normative adolescent separation–individuation and differentiation process) we will assert ourselves against the significant others.

Conclusion

Mirroring as a developmental process

Mirroring is a most pivotal concept in human growth. It involves the provision of outside feedback that can be positive, neutral or constructively critical. People seem to need positive affirmation and validation on a regular basis and few influences can have such a profound effect on a person's behavior as praise and affirmation. In addition, people need also to be confronted with areas that can be improved and, when presented in a constructive and caring fashion, they can make good use of information on how to improve shortcomings.

If the psychodrama group is sufficiently supportive, there is a potential for a powerful feedback cycle that can be set in motion within the psychodramatic mirroring technique. This will include reassurance, validation and subjective interpersonal feedback. At the first level of this feedback cycle, there will be only positive idealization. At the second level, there will be a simple and 'neutral' repetition of what was seen, without a value judgment. At the third level, however, there is clear value judgment that can either be accepted or rejected by the protagonist. This value judgment does not pretend to be objective or tell the 'truth' but is an expression of one or the other position that is held by the outside world. Such feedback gives the opportunity to enter into an inner dance between the parts of ourselves that prefer to play to the tunes of others and those that rather would play to the tunes of ourselves.

These three kinds of mirroring – the idealizing, validating and subjective mirroring – clearly represent a process of interpersonal growth in which a person moves from a primitive and egocentric state to a more mature level of self-development. Protagonists who are suffering from the effects of earlier deprivation and interpersonal trauma may be more suspicious and distrustful towards others, and may therefore need a more extended period of holding, containing and idealizing mirroring. Others who have a more integrated sense of self, and a clear sense of separateness, autonomy and independence, may be able to enter into a more reciprocal relation in which subjective mirroring and honest interpersonal feedback are a part of the process.

All interpersonal approaches to psychotherapy, including psychodrama, provide clients with an opportunity to enhance their self-understanding through some of these kinds of mirroring responses. The mirroring technique can thus help us to become more aware of ourselves. It can bring the unique gift of self-discovery. But mirroring also holds the key to something much more valuable: to discover who we want to be. Whatever we see in the mirror, we are not forced to accept all our present personal qualities. We have within ourselves the power to change and become someone that we might like better. Psychodramatic mirroring enables the protagonist to look at himself or herself and to objectively assess what he or she sees. The idea is to liberate ourselves from self-limiting conceptions and become the person we were intended to become.

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