A Psychodrama Strategy for Conflictual Interpersonal Relationships: Theory and Practice

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Abstract:

The present article suggests the application of a strategy, originating from psychodrama, for tackling interpersonal conflicts, in which the direct dialogue between two opposing protagonists is prepared step-by-step through an indirect intrapersonal phenomenological dialogue, where both protagonists simultaneously operate as actor and as silent observer; this method is referred to as the "Simultaneous Action-Observer Strategy" (SA-OS).

The first part of the article briefly explores the theoretical background, with a special emphasis on the Phenomenological-Dialectical Personality Model (Phe-Di PModel). The second part describes the procedure through its five action stages, each accompanied with a spatial representation of the consecutive actions and a theoretical interpretation in relation to the Phe-Di PModel in both the actor- and observer-mode.

The article concludes with a discussion of some variants of the SA-OS and an attempt at explaining its power: i.e. in relation to recent neurological insights and the notion of "Empathic Accuracy"(EA).

Keywords: psychodrama, conflict, dialectics, observer-mode, actor-mode, mirroring, mentalising, empathic accuracy

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Peace cannot be kept by force;
It can only be achieved by understanding.
Albert Einstein

Introduction

According to Ickes (2003), discord between two persons (independently of the nature of the relationship, e.g. partner-, family- or work-relationship) often results from a lack of mutual *Empathic Accuracy (EA).* EA refers to how accurately one person can infer the thoughts and feelings of another person. In adult relationships, EA correlates with stable romantic relationships (Simpson *et al.*, 1995). In the final discussion, we will argue that the psychodramatical "Simultaneous Action-Observer Strategy" (SA-OS) fully meets the essential conditions for improving the EA of both partners in the relationship: thus, hopefully, reducing conflicts.

The psychodrama literature offers a number of action techniques for dealing with conflicts: such as role-reversal[1] by the two protagonists (Moreno, 1934; Moreno & Moreno, 1969; Deutch

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[1]   The *role-reversal* technique, borrowed from psychodrama, is based on the assumption that if both protagonists put themselves in the position of the other, they will be forced to take a new view of the situation and hopefully reconcile their differences (Kellermann, 1992).

& Muney, 1968; Kellermann, 1996; Verhofstadt-Denève, 2000, 2012), sometimes with the use of one or more helpers (Blatner, 2002). Nevertheless, a lot of questions remain. Indeed, role-reversal (and role-taking)[2] seems crucial, but how and when exactly? If protagonists are supported by helpers, at what moment and how should they intervene? And finally, how can this whole procedure be supported theoretically?

   The present article endeavours to answer these questions by applying and describing a five-stage action method (SA-OS) used in psychodrama, guaranteeing optimum freedom of expression of both protagonists, in a safe setting. We will attempt to provide theoretical and process-based support for the procedure through the Phe-Di P-Model (Verhofstadt-Denève, 1988; 2000) and through recent neural insights into the functioning of the EA (Zaki *et al.*, 2009). Within the scope of this article, the SA-OS will be described in its most basic form, i.e. as contextual action-oriented work (without a group) with two motivated protagonists.

The Phenomenological-Dialectical Personality Model

The Phe-Di P-Model represents the PERSON, in which the word *'phenomenological'* refers to the unique subjective content and meanings that individuals construct about themselves and the world: *'dialectical'* refers to the underlying processes of tension or opposition, which causes these contents to be created and recreated.
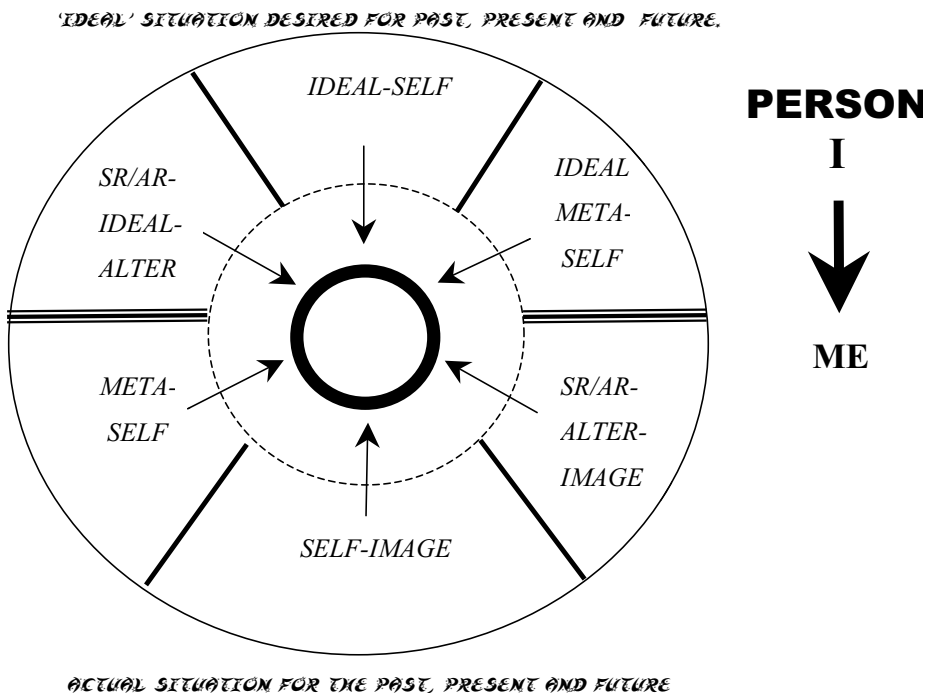

Figure 1. **The Phenomenological-Dialectical Personality Model**
(Simplified form. Original see Verhofstadt-Denève, 1988; 2000)

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2   In *role-taking*, only the protagonist becomes the other, while his own role is not taken. Many practical examples will be given later.

<u>Content:</u> Based on phenomenological (self)-reflection

Briefly, the "PERSON" can be seen as a process between two dependent poles in which the "I" is the reflective *subject* pole, or the person as knower, reflecting upon and creating the ME. The "ME" is the reflected *object* pole or the person as known (James, 1961). In our view, more specifically, the "ME" (the centre circle in Fig. 1) is constructed by the answers to some fundamental "I"-questions, resulting in six "ME"-dimensions or personal images of self and others (Verhofstadt-Denève, 1988, 2000):

- *Who am I?*   (Self-Image)
- *What are the others like?*   (SR- & AR-Alter-Image)[3]
- *How do the others perceive me?*   (Meta-Self)[4]

and the corresponding 'Ideal'-Images:
- *Who would I like to be and become?*   (Ideal-Self)
- *What should the others be like?*   (SR- & AR-Ideal-Alter)
- *How should the others perceive me?*   (Ideal-Meta-Self)

These six dimensions constitute the foundation stones of a therapeutically relevant and "living" personality model. The model proceeds from the assumption that all human beings construct their own and unique subjective interpretation of themselves and the surrounding reality at different levels of consciousness and acting.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the three phenomenological "real" or infra-structural constructions and the three "ideal/wished-for" or supra-structural constructions are represented in the lower and upper part of the Model respectively.

As illustrated in earlier publications, this Phe-Di P-Model constitutes a workable frame of reference for the psychotherapist (Verhofstadt-Denève, 1988, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2007, 2012). The fundamental starting point is that all the Self- and Other- constructions are subjective phenomenological contents, which can differ substantially from the subjective view of the Other, possibly causing the estrangement of the partners. Reality criteria for truth (right or wrong) do not apply here. However, the content of the constructions can be fundamentally adjusted in view of achieving greater empathy and mutual understanding. Below, we will see how the application of the SA-OS can play an important role in this process of rapprochement.

Process: Dialectical

Within the context of the Phe-Di P-Model, the assumption is that the personality dimensions should be confronted with each other in a dialectical constructive oppositional relationship through active "I"-"ME" reflections. In my own work, I rely on the classical psychodrama method elaborated by Moreno (Moreno, 1934; Moreno & Moreno, 1969) and slightly modified by Dean and Doreen Elefthery (Moreno & Elefthery, 1982), mainly aimed at a more secure application of the method.

Through a triadic dialectical process of Thesis, Antithesis and Synthesis, rigid constructions of one's Self and the Other(s) can be made more flexible and partially integrated. We will

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3   As far as the Alter-Images are concerned, two crucially different contents can be distinguished, namely the *Self-Reflective Alter-Image (**SR-Alter-Image**)*: "Who is the other according to me?" and the *Alter-Reflective Alter-Image (**AR-Alter-Image**)*: "What image does the other have of himself or herself?" As will become evident from the case examples below, both contents of the Alter-Image can express thoroughly different views and experiences in the protagonist. The same applies to the Ideal-Alter.

4   The Meta-Self (i.e. my construction of the image others have formed of myself and my world) essentially pertains to the Alter-Image. However, therapeutically the Meta-Self is so important that we differentiate it as a separate dimension in the personality model. The same applies to the Ideal-Meta-Self in its relation to the Ideal-Alter (see Verhofstadt-Denève, 1988, 2000).

illustrate the activation of these powerful dialectical oppositional experiences through an example from a psychodrama session with Paula, a student (23) in a psychodrama training session at the University, whose father had recently left the family for Laura, Paula's best friend. (cf. Verhofstadt-Denève, 2003).

> **Example:** In a first stage of the therapeutic process, the protagonist presents herself in the subjective I-form: *"I am Paula, I feel miserable…I lost a father and my best friend at the same time, and with them also myself…my world has collapsed… all my certainties are gone…I can no longer trust anyone..."* (her current Self-Image), while about her father, in a narrative mode, she says: *"He's a liar, a selfish person… he doesn't act responsibly towards his family…"* (her SR-Alter-Image). This stage is termed the ***Thesis*** phase.
>
> Then, in a second phase termed ***Antithesis***, she is asked to really "become" her father and thus think and feel like him, while moving effectively in space (through "role-taking"); she formulates in the I-form: *"I am Paula's father…I fell in love and could not fight against it…I fear Paula no longer wishes to make an attempt at conciliation…"* (her AR-Alter-Image and Meta-Self); while saying this words, Paula is very moved.
>
> This transition from the Thesis to the Antithesis implies what Hegel (1952/1807) calls the *first negation*, here the negation of her Self-Image (and SR-Alter-Image) in favour of her AR-Alter-Image (and Meta-Self). In other words, her Self-Image (and SR-Alter-Image) remains historically present, but are now relegated to the background as the focus shifts to her AR-Alter-Image (and Meta-Self).
>
> In this stage, the opposition between these images is felt most strongly. This vivid oppositional experience can be accompanied with a cognitive-emotional crisis or (in Moreno's terms) a "catharsis" (Kellermann, 1984). This was indeed the case with Paula; she was deeply affected emotionally when she felt her father's pain and confusion together with her own ambivalent feelings toward him.
>
> In the third or ***Synthesis*** phase of the process - the moment of the *second negation*, or the negation of the AR-Alter-Image/Meta-Self - the protagonist returns to the starting position and identifies herself again with her Self-Image/ SR-Alter-Image. "*Yes, he is right…while he acted totally irresponsibly, I still hate, and love him…*"

Importantly, the experience of conflict in the antithesis phase contains the condition for potential change and the integration of the opposite poles in the synthesis phase. According to Hegel (1952/1807), the opposite poles are now "aufgehoben" or partially destroyed, integrated, and enriched. This dialectical movement can stimulate qualitative new self- and other-interpretations and reconstructions.

This process is not a rigid or linear triadic movement. Typically, it is repeated in a to-and-fro movement (dialogue) between opposite poles, which can generate successive *partial syntheses*. The optimum synthesis can never be completed since the result would be no opposition, which would eliminate the dialectic system and growth. For a more extensive analysis, we refer to Verhofstadt-Denève (2000, 2007).

Simultaneous Action-Observer Strategy

Objective
The main aim of the SA-OS is to apply a simultaneous action- and observer-strategy, in order to stimulate an intense "I"-"ME" activity in both protagonists towards developing greater

"Empathic Accuracy", thus offering more room for empathy, mutual understanding, the integration of viewpoints and respect for each other's own identity.

Prerequisites

Absolute conditions for the application of the SA-OS are: a strong mutual motivation from both partners to improve their relationship through honest hard work; the absolute confidence in the neutrality of the director; and an experience-based feeling of security in view of proceeding towards honest self-disclosure.

Case Example

The two protagonists are the daughter (Paula = P1) and her father (John = P2): for more information, see above and Verhofstadt-Denève (2003). Both protagonists experienced their relationship as painfully problematic and they wished to be helped by a therapist, outside of a group setting.

Starting Position

The starting position consists of four chairs: two working-chairs (the P1- and the P2-chair) as symbols of the two protagonists in the Actor-Mode, and two chairs for both protagonists in the Observer-Mode (OM). These four chairs remain in place as points of reference throughout the whole intervention (see Figure 2).
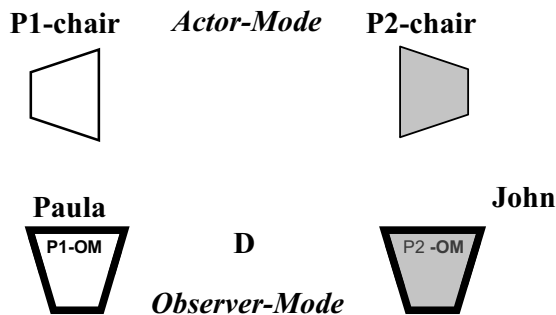

Figure 2. **Starting Position**

Both protagonists (P1 & P2) initially sit in front of their working-chair. The Director (D) sits in between them and explains the method concisely:

D: *We are not going to confront you in an open direct dialogue immediately. This dialogue will take place later, but we are going to prepare it by exploring together how everyone perceives their own and the other's positions through an indirect dialogue.*

Throughout the first four stages, either of you will work in turn, by means of the two working-chairs, the first one symbolising yourself and the second one the other. The person who's not working with the chairs watches and listens attentively and in silence.

In the intermediate stages, and especially in the final stage, you will then be able to enter into a mutual dialogue about what you have learned from each other. After the first two stages, we will together examine how and when to organise the subsequent sessions.

I will ask some questions to the person who is working with the symbolic chairs, and you should try to answer them as spontaneously and honestly as possible. You are, of course, completely free not to answer. Now, who would like to start?

The two protagonists should mutually agree on who will act first. If they fail to reach an agreement (which rarely happens), the decision is left to chance.

The Two Protagonists In Action

The underlying idea of the method is that *indirect* dialogues by each protagonist separately (through *role-takings*) during the first four stages will pave the way for a *direct* dialogue between the two protagonists (through *role-reversals*) in the fifth stage, but mutual reflections after the initial work of both partners is still encouraged. The timing and number of the sessions depends on the progress and needs of both protagonists.

In accordance with the infra-structure, or phenomenological "real" constructions, and the supra-structure, or "ideal/wished-for" constructions in the Phe-Di P-Model (Fig. 1), the two protagonists first explore their own "real" positions (differences and similarities) sequentially in stages 1 and 2, while in stages 3 and 4 their "ideal" positions (integration possibilities: how could the relationship be improved?) are worked on. For each protagonist, this involves two stages in the actor-mode, while the other protagonist observes the action in silence. However, as will appear below, internal oppositions are experienced during this active confrontation, not only by the protagonist in the actor-mode (through external/internal action), but also by the protagonist in the observer-mode (through intensive internal action), in whom major internal oppositions towards a differentiation and integration process are activated as well.

STAGE 1: Paula's experience of the current inter-relational features (cf. infra-structure of Phe-Di P-Model). Here, we work with Paula (P1) in the actor-mode, while John (P2) remains a silent observer
Spatial positioning
The director (D) takes a place from which both protagonists can be seen (mainly to encourage P2 in the Observer-Mode not to intervene while P1 is working with the chairs) (see Figure 3).
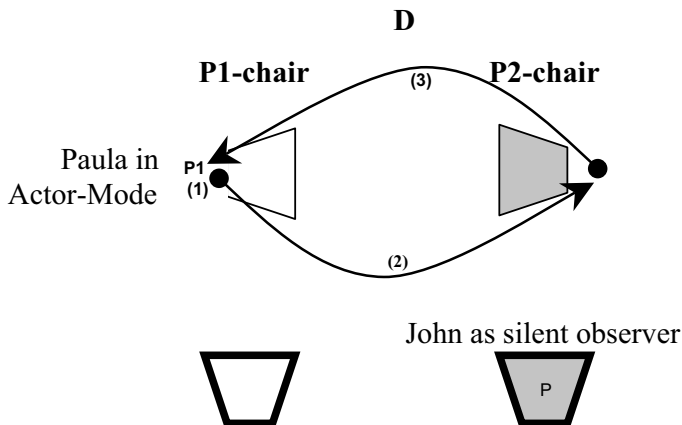
Paula starts **behind**[5] the P1-chair;

Figure 3. **Spatial positions in Stage 1**

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5   Of course, sitting in the chair would be possible as well here, but, working from behind the chair, a quick move to the other chair is easier. As a contrast, in the final stage (5), both protagonists are sitting in their chairs, facing each other, as a more intimate way of being together and being engaged in a real dialogue.

Successive action positions:

(1) P1 presents herself and the way she sees her father (standing behind the P1-chair)

(2) P1 becomes P2, through a first role-taking (by standing behind the P2-chair)

(3) P1 acts as herself again, after a second role-taking (by standing again behind the P1-chair)

Some illustrative statements and action techniques used in each position

(1) D. to Paula: *Paula, who are you? What do you stand for? What do you certainly want to avoid?*

   Paula: *I am Paula. I am honest, straightforward, I prefer outspoken communication, even if this hurts… I believe in stable relationships.*

Other possible questions from D. in this stage concerning Paula's **Self-Image**:

   D: *What are your favourite activities?*

   D: *What are your strengths?*

   D: *What points would you like to be worked on?*

Possible questions from D concerning Paula's **SR Alter-Image**:

   D: *What is your father like?*

   D: *What is important for him?*

   Paula: *He can be dishonest and he hides things for his family. I really hold this against him. He behaves totally irresponsibly....*

   D: *What do you appreciate in him?*

   D: *Does he also have weaknesses?*

   D: *What does he mean to you?*

....

(2)   D: *Paula, will you now become your father.* She moves behind the P2-chair and really becomes her father; she thinks and feels like him.

   D: (to Paula, in the role of her father): *Who are you? What do you stand for? What do you certainly want to avoid?*

   Paula   (as her father): *I'm hard-working and honest, but I'm afraid to hurt others. I don't want to hurt anybody... not even myself.*

The content of this **AR-Alter-Image** is generally quite different from the SR-Alter-Image in which she expressed her own view of her father. Generally, the emotional impact is much more intense in the AR-Alter-Image than in the more narrative SR-Alter-Image.

Other possible questions from D concerning Paula's **Meta-Self,** while Paula is still her father:

   D: *What do you think about your daughter, John?*

   D: *What do you appreciate in her?*

   D: *What points should she work on?*

   D: *What does she mean to you?*

....

3)   D: *Paula, please become yourself again and stand behind the P1-chair* (return to the Self-Image via second role-taking).

   Paula   (as herself): *It wasn't easy to get used to the other role!… And I was moved to hear that he does not want to hurt anybody...* (A statement she formulated herself, while in the father role!)

Following this triadic action, the Director can decide to launch a virtual (dialectical) dialogue between Paula and her father, also via the symbolic working-chairs, while John is

still watching in silence:

(1)   D: *Paula, if you wish you can also say something to your father now.*
      Paula: *You where the sweetest daddy in the whole world… and you killed me when you left the family!...*
(2)   D: *Become your father (P moves behind the other chair)*
      Paula   (as her father): *I understand how you are suffering, but you are still my sweetest daughter, Paula, believe me…*
(3)   D: *Become yourself again Paula. Did you hear what your father said?*
      P: *Yes, very painful, moving... but hopefully, not hopeless…*

....

In the meantime, the father-observer has been watching the scene with obvious emotion.

Actions of P1 and P2 from the Phe-Di P-Model

Since two protagonists are at work here, their actions should be represented by two personality models for Paula (P1) and John (P2) respectively (see Figure 4).

P1: External/internal action
(Paula: Actor-Mode)

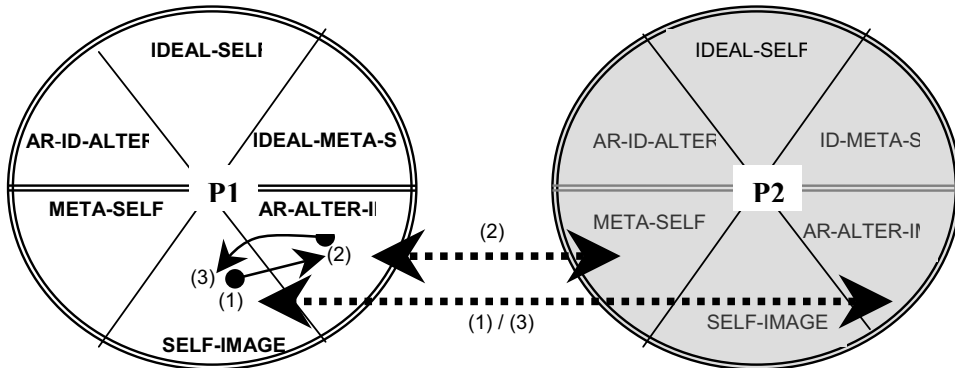### P2: Internal action
(John: Silent Observer-Mode)

Figure 4. **Actions of P1 and P2 within the Phe-Di PModel in Stage 1**
The thin solid arrows represent the (intra-personal) dialogue and oppositions of Paula, while the bold dotted lines refer to the (inter-personal) oppositions experienced by John while observing his daughter's action.

What is happening internally within Paula when she is in the actor-mode?

(1) In this first stage, she presents elements from her Self-Image and SR-Alter-Image contents (this is the *thesis* in the dialectical process);
(2) The transitional move to, and becoming of, her father symbolises the first negation, or the negation of her Self-Image and SR-Alter-Image to her emotionally deep AR-Alter-Image contents (with an excursion to her Meta-Self; this move is not represented in the Figure). This second stage represents the powerful *antithesis-stage* in the dialectical movement;
(3) The return to the initial situation symbolises the second negation, or the 'negation' of her AR-Alter-Image and her Meta-Self of her father (i.e., the *synthesis*).

This triple action represents a powerful dialectical process, which can stimulate new interpretations and reconstructions of the Self- and Alter-images.

What is happening within John in the silent observer mode during the action of his daughter Paula?

(1) When Paula presents herself, John experiences the opposition between his image of his daughter (i.e. his Alter-Image of his daughter or *thesis*) and her subjective phenomenological Self-Image (or *antithesis)*; the two contents may differ profoundly, and this can trigger an internal dialogue, which may (through successive partial syntheses) lead to provisional adjustments of his Alter-Image of his daughter.

(2) The experience is likely to become even more pregnant for John when Paula becomes her father, via role-taking. John now sees himself as reflected through the eyes of his daughter. This can create an opposition between the image that he thought Paula had of him (his Meta-Self or *thesis*) on the one hand, and the image that now appears of himself through the words of Paula (the AR-Alter-Image and Meta-Self of Paula or *antithesis)* on the other hand.

(3) When Paula performs the second negation and becomes herself again, the opposition described in (1) may repeat itself, and John may begin to perceive the first effects of the dialectical process within his daughter (i.e. statement by Paula: *And I was moved to hear that he does not want to hurt anybody...*), which may already point to an incipient form of integration.

Similar dialectical processes can occur in each of the protagonists during any subsequent 'virtual dialogues' between Paula and her father (as represented by the chair P2). After the warming-up, through the preceding role-takings, these dialogues can really hit a raw nerve and can be highly revealing, not only for the protagonist in the actor-mode but also for the protagonist in the observer-mode.

STAGE 2: John's experience of the current inter-relational features (cf. infra-structure of Phe-Di P-Model): this is work with John (P2) in the actor-mode, while Paula (P1) remains a silent observer

Spatial Positioning
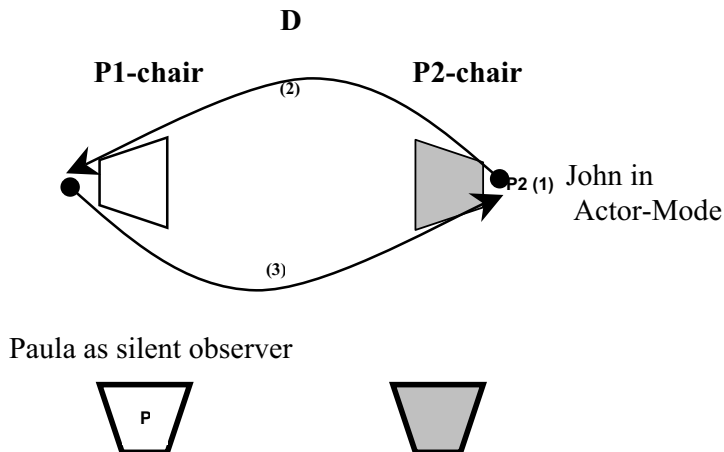
John starts behind P2-chair (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. **Spatial Positions in Stage 2**

This is followed by the **same successive actions as for Paula,** (as described in Stage 1).

Actions P1 and P2 from the Phe-Di P-Model

The figure is the exact mirror image of what has happened in both protagonists in Stage 1 (see Figure 6).
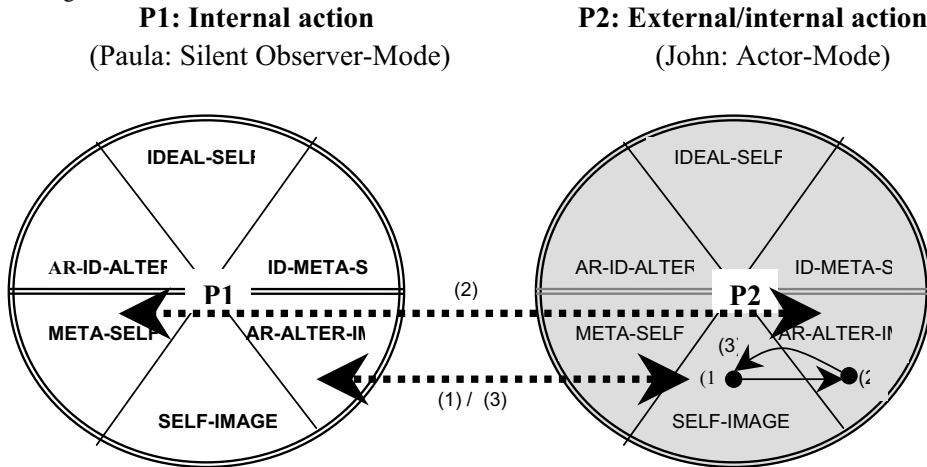
P1: Internal action   **P2: External/internal action**
(Paula: Silent Observer-Mode)   (John: Actor-Mode)

Figure 6. **Actions P1 and P2 within the Phe-Di P-Model in Stage 2**

After these first two stages, the current session and any further courses of action can be processed. The Director asks both protagonists how they have experienced the working session. How do they feel about working in the Actor- and Silent-Observer mode? Have they learned anything about each other? Is there material, either within themselves, or in their view of the other person, which they could or would like to adjust? Were they surprised, or shocked about anything? Do they want to say something to the other person?

D: *Last time, it was Paula who started with the symbolic chair-work. Who shall start now?* (They decide that now John will start).

STAGE 3: John's search for changes, which could improve the relationship (cf. suprastructure of Phe-Di P-Model): Working with John (P2) in the actor-mode, while Paula (P1) remains a silent observer. *Spatial Positioning* (the same as in Figure 5): Some illustrative statements and some of the action techniques used:

D: *John, in the two former stages you discovered a lot of information concerning yourself in relation to your daughter. You were also able to listen to and empathise with the position of your daughter. Do you already see any roads or changes, which could ameliorate your relationship with her?*

(1)   John: *Yes, definitely, I think that if we were both prepared to make compromises, this could fundamentally improve our relationship. We could do something together once in a while, such as a city trip to Paris… London... I think she would like that... I understand that this is very hard for her, but it would be nice if she could in her turn be a bit less critical of me and Laura... but I am aware that this must be very tough on her. The most important thing is that she should be convinced that I really do care for her very much* (Ideal Self / SR-Ideal-Alter & Ideal-Meta-Self).

....

(2)   D: *John, try to become Paula now* (John moves behind the P1-chair; i.e. a first role-taking).

D: (to John, as Paula): *Paula, how could you ameliorate your relationship with your father?*

John: (as Paula): *This whole situation keeps hurting… I feel the absence of a father about the house, like in the past... I can feel my mother's pain and this makes me angry and sad... but I also feel that - as a father - he keeps appreciating and loving me… perhaps I should be more comprehensive of him, and help my mother a bit more* (AR-Ideal-Alter).

....

(3)   D: *John, can you become yourself again and stand behind your chair?* (return to the Ideal-Self through a second role-taking).

John: (as himself again): *Phew, it was really hard when I became Paula and felt so strongly what she was feeling. My belly still aches and I'm still shaking all over, but I also felt warmth, compassion and love. I trust that our relationship will become even deeper and more honest* (Ideal-Self/AR-Ideal-Alter).

Actions P1 and P2 from the Phe-Di P-Model are completely comparable to Stage 2 (see Figure 6), but both protagonists are now active in the supra-structure of the model (the *Ideal-Images,* see Figure 7); more particularly, John (in the *actor-mode*) consecutively becomes his (1) Ideal-Self, (2) AR-Ideal-Alter, and (3) returns to his Ideal-Self, while Paula, working in the silent *observer-mode*, is confronted with the oppositions and similarities between her AR-Ideal-Alter and Ideal-Meta-self on the one hand, and John's Ideal-Self and AR-Ideal-Alter on the other (see Figure 7).

P1: Internal action
(Paula: Silent Observer-Mode)
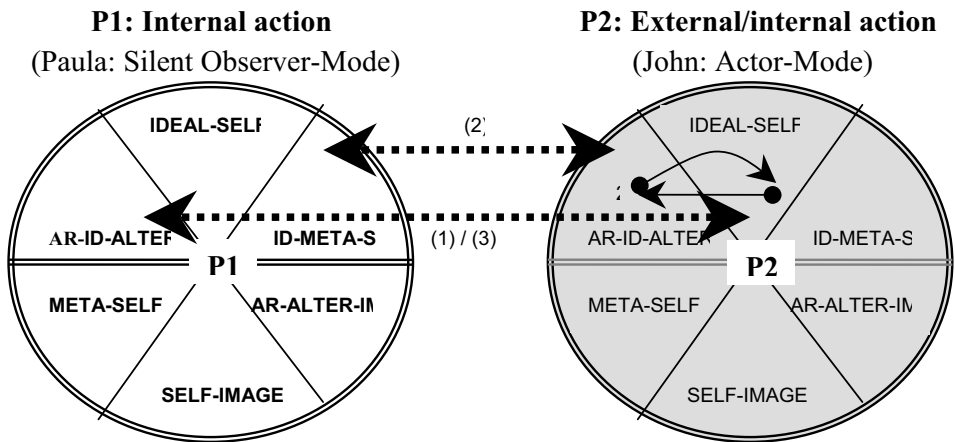
P2: External/internal action
(John: Actor-Mode)

Figure 7. **Actions P1 and P2 within the Phe-Di P-Model in Stage 3**

STAGE 4: Paula's search for changes that could improve the relationship (i.e. supra-structure of Phe-Di P-Model). *Spatial positioning* (as in Figure 3). There are similar dialogues, as in Stage 3, but now with Paula (P1) in the actor-mode and John (P2) as the silent observer.

Actions P1 and P2 from the Phe-Di P-Model
As in Stage 3, both protagonists are now active in their supra-structure (the *Ideal-Images*),

but now with Paula in the actor-mode. This means that the graphical representation of the movements of both protagonists is the exact mirror image of Figure 7.

More particularly, Paula consecutively becomes: (1) her Ideal-Self; (2) her AR-Ideal-Alter; and again (3) her Ideal-Self, while John, as silent observer, is confronted with the oppositions and similarities between his AR-Ideal-Alter and Ideal-Meta-self on the one hand, and Paula's Ideal-Self and AR-Ideal-Alter on the other.

STAGE 5: A direct dialogue between Paula (P1) and John (P2): The explicit dialogue between them was thoroughly prepared for by the four preceding mediated action stages.

>D: (to both protagonists): *Normally speaking, we should now reach the final stage of this sessions: a direct dialogue and action work between the two of you: (1) Perhaps you could start to explain your own views to each other, including the search for possible areas of cooperation. Take all the time that you need for this… (2) Next, you could try to do a real role-reversal in both becoming the other… and afterwards (3) becoming yourself again… Finally, we will together evaluate our work in extensive processing.*

Spatial Positioning and Theoretical Interpretation

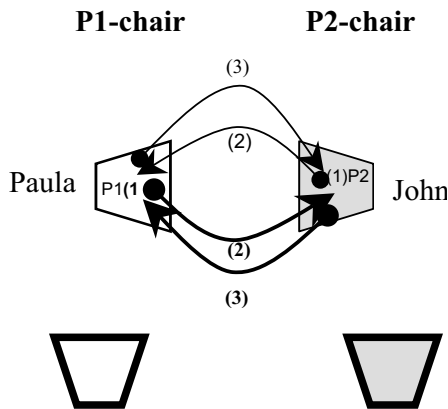Paula (P1) and John (P2) take place (actually sitting) in their chairs (see Figure 8)

Figure 8. **Spatial positions in Stage 5 in a direct dialogue (1) and role-reversals (2) (3), between P1 and P2**

The two protagonists frequently move their chair closer to each other spontaneously.

(1) Dialogue of the two protagonists as themselves (*Thesis*-phase):

>Paula: *We did have a few conversations in between already, but this feels different now, closing this intense sessions; I feel freer now, less tense.*
>John: *Yes, you're quite right, Paula… I feel much opener now…*
>Paula: *Not everything has been resolved between us, far from it, but I feel more connected to you now.*
>John: *We should try to maintain an open communication in the future...*
>Paula: *It's nice to hear this from you, dad!*

(2) Dialogue after role-reversal (***Antithesis***-phase): Paula and John change places and become each other's opposite. This is a relatively complicated action, and some protagonists find it hard to engage in a full role-reversal. Conversely, other protagonists – such as John and Paula – found such a dual action highly inspiring.

> D: (to John, as Paula): *Well, Paula how does it feel to sit here, after the tough work you did together with your father?*
>
> John: (as Paula): *It opens doors of hope and I am glad that I can say this to you now, dad… but a very sore point for me remains my relationship with my former friend, Laura... It still makes me sick to think of her!*
>
> Paula**:**   (as John): *Yes, I understand this, Paula, you were such an endearingly close friends... and suddenly, completely out of the blue, everything went wrong... I couldn't ever have predicted this crush myself.*

(3) Final phase: dialogue as oneself again (***Synthesis***-phase)

Paula and John take their place in their own chairs again.

> Paula: *You were completely right in what you just said when in my role, dad! Laura is my biggest problem now, and I still can't understand how she could have let everything get this far.*
>
> John: *She's still talking about you often, Paula. She's obviously still strongly attached to you... How about going through such a series of sessions with her, too?... I think this would do both of you a lot of good...*
>
> Paula: *Don't rush it, dad!.. I will have to think this over carefully...We'll see...*

What happens here could be the expression of a (dialectical) dialogue resulting in a partial synthesis, becoming the thesis of a new dialectical process. The development between Paula and John seems to follow this constructive pattern. But, according to the basic principles of dialectical processes, a perfect synthesis is impossible to reach, as a complete harmony would lead to stagnation, and hamper the richness of a warm interpersonal relationship.

After this closing stage, there was room for extensive processing with the two protagonists, including arrangements about continuing, closing or relaunching the sessions intermittently.

Discussion

The schematic representation of the concrete positioning and the illustrative statements are destined only for practitioners who intend to apply the (SA-OS) in practice. The theoretical interpretation may be somewhat difficult to follow, but is useful to practitioners who wish to have an understanding of what they are doing: what (dialectical) oppositions are thought to be triggered by interventions not only within the "externally" active protagonist, but also within the silent observer?   The Director is certainly not expected to constantly consider this theoretical basis during the action, since this would surely have an inhibiting effect. But he or she at least now knows that a lot of things are going on during the action. Subsequent reflective awareness and theoretical analysis, that may be useful in understanding better certain crucial actions, or some of the reactions by the protagonists. It is obviously not particularly useful to discuss all this theoretical information systematically with the protagonists.

Practical methodological variants are perfectly possible, for instance when organising SA-OS in a group setting. Although it may be tempting to urge the group members to "double"[6],

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6   Doubling is a typical psychodramatical technique, where group members can help the protagonist by formulating statements in the I-form, as if the protagonist herself was speaking. The protagonist can always deny or change the statements.

we should exercise caution here, because in doubling the sympathy / antipathy of the group for one of both protagonists may be revealed, and this can be very painful for the protagonist concerned.

However, a major advantage of working in a group setting is that the protagonists can be assisted by one or two helpers of their choosing: (e.g. a personal "double" for themselves and a personal "antagonist" to play the other protagonist). A fixed double and an antagonist can be very helpful for the protagonist, when in the actor mode, mainly in the case of dialogues in the first four stages. For a detailed explanation of how antagonists and doubles can be used throughout the same five stages, in particular in the treatment of sub-group conflicts symbolised by two protagonists and their two helpers, we refer to the discussion of the *Double Triad Method*, in Verhofstadt-Denève (2012).

When practising the SA-OS through experience-based learning in training groups, it is not always easy to find two participants, who are prepared to work on a conflictual relationship, because such conflictual relationships sometimes do not exist in training-groups. In this case, the task can be formulated positively: D. *Are there any group members who have a close tie with each other and who would like to get to know each other even better?* It will generally prove a lot easier now to find two volunteers for this project. It is my experience that the five stages of the SA-OS can be executed perfectly in this way and that the two participants generally feel the method to be valuable. But here again we are very cautious with doublings from within the group, while also in the final sharing we urge the participants to formulate the similarities with their own lives starting from accents of *both* protagonists as much as possible.

Numerous statements by participants suggest that the SA-OS can have a very powerful and durable effect. We suspect this can be explained by the following interrelated factors. First of all, in the course of the SA-OS lots of emotions are triggered in both protagonists in a very short time span, as this activates sensitive contextual themes relating to oneself in relation to the significant other. Many researchers have proposed that a focus on clients' emotions is essential for any therapy to produce long-term client change (Lyddon *et al.*, 2006). In this context, cognitive neuroscientists have begun to elucidate the psychological and neural mechanisms underlying emotional retention advantages in the human brain. "Emotion-memory interactions occur at various stages of information processing, from the initial encoding and consolidation of memory traces to their long-term retrieval". (Labar & Cabeza, 2006, p. 1)

A second explanation for the strong impact of the SA-OS is also provided by neurology. Through the protagonists' experiences in the actor- and the observer-mode, a huge amount of information about oneself and the partner is acquired in a very short time in both modes. It is an accelerated learning process, which may enhance "Empathic Accuracy" (EA) (Ickes, 2003). This assumption is completely in line with recent neurological research (Bombari *et al.*, 2013), which showed that EA involves the activation of two important socially related processes: *mirroring* and *mentalising*[7] (Zaki *et al.*, 2009).

In *mirroring*, the observation of another person's actions (and emotions) triggers the corresponding motor and mental representations in the observer, enabling him or her to empathise with the other (i.e. neural resonance). *Mentalising* goes deeper and refers to the differentiation and understanding of another person's aims, leading to conclusions about

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7   Mirroring and Mentalising are activated by two different brain systems: regions within the mirror neuron system (i.e., the middle frontal gyrus and the Inferior Parietal Lobe) and areas involved in mentalising (i.e. the superior temporal sulcus and medial prefrontal cortex) (Zaki *et al.*, 2009). The fact that these systems rely on separate neural regions is important because this means they can be activated at the same time.

their state of mind (i.e. theory of mind). Mirroring is related to the so-called mirror neuron system and is considered as a relatively automatic, unconscious response based on shared mental representations, whereas mentalisation is a more cognitive aspect of empathy, which requires an empathic representation of the observed partner's individuality. In other words, mentalising involves the capacity to distinguish between one's own mental perspectives and those of others (Spunt *et al.*, 2011). Analyses of the actions during the five steps of the SA-OS suggest that mirroring (as well as mentalising) are activated in both modes, but mirroring seems linked more strongly with the observer-mode and mentalising with the actor-mode. This combination of the two neurologically supported processes in the application of the SA-OS also suggests the efficiency of this strategy in enhancing EA in the short term and subsequently improving the social relationship.

Similarly, the power of the method could also be explained through the intense "I"-"ME" activation as described in the Phe-Di P-Model, as a result of which dialectical oppositions between fundamental intra- and interpersonal dimensions are stimulated in both the observer- and actor-mode (through mirroring and mentalising processes), which can enhance qualitative interpersonal understanding in both partners (Verhofstadt-Denève 2000, 2007).

Finally, the SA-OS is more than just a mechanical application of a five-step plan. Its power also depends largely on the director's empathic accuracy. We hope that the present article can motivate and help them in their subtly challenging task.

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