SOCIAL INTERACTION AS DRAMA

Applications from Conflict Resolution

A. PAUL HARE

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To June Sara Rabson Hare, who introduced me
to the dramaturgical perspective
through psychodrama
and her own special
dramatic talents

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Preface

The basic assumption for the analysis of social interaction as drama is that meaningful interaction takes place between individuals when they enact roles in support of some idea. In keeping with this assumption, this book may be considered as an opening monologue delivered to you, the reader, as audience. Depending upon your own familiarity with this dramaturgical perspective and the particular instances of conflict and conflict resolution that will be used to illustrate the application of the perspective, you may wish to adopt one or more of the following roles as a counter-player in support of this idea. If you are unfamiliar with the dramaturgical perspective in social psychology, then it is my hope that this book will serve as a fair introduction to it and that you will be encouraged to read further in this area. If you are already familiar with the dramaturgical perspective as it exists in the current literature, you will be aware that I have extended the perspective by adding insights from the study of interaction process and of functional analysis in groups as well as from the writings of persons associated with the theater. I hope you will be encouraged to expand the perspective still further. If your main interest is in conflict or conflict resolution involving labor disputes, protests, riots, or ethnic disputes involving parts of nations or whole nations, then I hope that you will find this perspective useful for analysis and intervention.

The dramaturgical perspective in social psychology was developed mainly by persons working in the symbolic interactionist tradition of the "Chicago School." The broader symbolic interactionist theory gave considerable attention to the process of socialization of children as they acquired roles, whereas the persons who analyzed social interaction as drama were concerned with adult role players.

The theory presented here views all social interaction as a form of drama, with creativity at the heart of the matter. For this theory, the

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literature on theater, including books written by actors and directors, provides a set of insights about the nature of human interaction. Over the years playwrights, directors, and actors have specialized in a process that is central to collective behavior: the communication of an idea to an audience. In everyday life there may be only two people present or there may be many, but the initial problem is the same. Before there can be any collective behavior, one actor must transmit an idea to another actor or to an audience. A major difference between everyday life and the theater is that an ordinary person continually modifies the presentation of the idea in response to the reactions of the listener, whereas the actor follows a fixed script until the play is finished.

In everyday life, as people react to an idea either positively, negatively, or indifferently, some are moved to take roles in support of the idea, others to take roles that are critical of the idea, and some to remain neutral. If the idea that is presented is not the espouser's own, there may be someone similar to a playwright behind the scenes who created the idea. There may also be someone who facilitates the presentation of the idea like a director. There is always a stage, or action area, where the activity takes place. Persons who are outside this action space form the audience. The time during which a presentation takes place is always limited. It may be only a few minutes or it may be a lifetime; an actor, however, cannot hold the stage forever.

In groups of different types, activity is organized differently. In the small informal group, activity is often organized around an "image," an object, an action, or a word picture that provides an emotionally loaded focus of attention. In larger informal groups, such as street crowds, the activity may follow a "theme" that provides a general direction and mood of action. For social movements, the organizing ideas are more complicated, as in a "plot," where phases of the activity over time are outlined with an indication of the major roles to be played and the nature of the group's objective for interaction in an organization, such as a factory or a university, the central idea takes the form of a "script" in which specific tasks are described and the details of roles are given.

In many groups, several images, themes, plots, or scripts are being enacted at the same time, some formally and others informally. Sometimes the presentation is enacted by the same actors and at other times by different actors who take over the action space in turn. Thus life can be seen as "ever changing, ever renewing drama" (Sarbin, in Allen and Scheibe, 1982: 33).

These are the basic ideas to be expanded in the text. However, before going on to outline the contents of this volume, I would like to provide the reader with a brief description of some parts of my own background that led to the choice of this perspective and field of application.

This book provides an opportunity for me to bring together two themes that have characterized my own activities from childhood. One has to do with the theater and various forms of entertainment and the other with conflict resolution. Although on many occasions I played a supporting role, I remember best the ones that I helped to organize. I always enjoyed doing things a little differently. One of my early heroes was Henry David Thoreau who said that he "marched to the beat of a different drummer" (Thoreau, 1949: 216). In my own case, because I started playing drums with a drum and bugle corps in junior high school, I was often the "different drummer."

Without going into all the details, I remember that my first 25 years—whether in school, Boy Scouts, college, or the U.S. Army—I usually acted as the social director, organizing skits, plays, or fun and games. Because I was a cartoonist and made posters to advertise the events, I had ample opportunity to capture the "image" of social events on a two-dimensional page. For several seasons when I was still in High School, I accompanied my mother to all Saturday matinees at the National Theater in Washington, D.C. As an English major at Swarthmore College, I read classic and modern plays and attended the local repertory theater, as well as theaters in Philadelphia and New York whenever possible.

Sociology was not taught at Swarthmore when I was there, so it was not until I moved on to Iowa State University (Ames) to study architectural engineering that I took a required course in sociology. Here I found people professionally concerned with groups, whereas I had only been an amateur. I decided to drop architecture and give up my position as a teaching assistant in physics (although not my interest in the experimental method) and concentrate on sociology. By taking a double load of courses, I was able to complete a second Bachelor's Degree in one year and move on to graduate work in sociology and social psychology, first at the University of Pennsylvania and then at the University of Chicago where I became immersed in the "social interactionist" tradition.

I had the good fortune to be around Harvard University in the heyday of small group research (from the mid-1950s to 1960), first in the School of Public Health and then in Social Relations as one of Freed

Bales's assistants. Thus I became thoroughly familiar with Bales's systems for observing groups, which culminated in the multilevel observation system that he uses now. It was only after I left Harvard for Haverford College in 1960 that I became acquainted with Parsonian functional analysis through the good offices of my colleague Andrew Effrat.

My interest in conflict resolution can also be traced back to my early childhood when I was more likely to be "holding the coats" of the antagonists rather than directly involved on one side of a conflict. However it was not until after World War II that I joined others, especially Quakers, who were concerned that the civil rights of all Americans were not yet in accord with statements in the Constitution. At Harvard I initiated and became co-chairman of the Fair Housing Committee of Weston, Massachusetts, one of many committees concerned with opening white Anglo-Saxon Christian suburbs to persons of other ethnic or religious backgrounds. Similarly, at Haverford College I initiated and became co-chairman of the Radnor Township Fair Housing Committee and later the Ardmore Coalition, both devoted to goals similar to those I had tried to address in Weston.

During 1961-1962 I had the opportunity to serve as the Deputy Representative of the Peace Corps in the Philippines. Although there was not much emphasis on peace in the Peace Corps, we did try responding to the needs of rural people by introducing new ideas in the schools and in the communities. The Peace Corps experience gave me the confidence to organize a group of academics and community workers committed to nonviolence to help the people of Curacao, Netherlands Antilles, come together to discuss common problems after a riot in 1969 that brought down the government. Our third-party intervention took the form of the 1970 summer Antillian Institute of Social Science, of which I was co-director.

In the mid-1960s I established the Center for Nonviolent Conflict Resolution at Haverford College. Our involvement with the peace movement led to a major grant from the National Institute of Mental Health to observe the various forms of nonviolent protest in Washington, D.C., and in other parts of America during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This in turn led to my taking part in a group of faculty and students acting as third parties at Kent State University during the academic year 1970-1971 following a protest the previous spring during which four students had been killed. We were engaged in a variety of nonviolent activities designed to prevent the reoccurrence of the previous violent confrontation. A second outcome of the

Haverford Center activity was that I was asked by members of the International Peace Academy staff to help organize a group of volunteers to serve as third-party mediators on Cyprus (1972-1974) to help bring the Greek and Turkish communities closer together. Some of the details of this project are found in Chapter 4 of this volume. To recruit volunteers for the Cyprus project and on several other occasions, I had the opportunity to observe, and in some cases participate in, the work of the Gandhian Shanti Sena (Peace Brigade) in India in relief, community development, and riot control. Case studies of some of the major nonviolent actions in America and other parts of the world were collected in the volumes that I edited together with Herbert Blumberg entitled *Nonviolent Direct Action: American Cases: Social-Psychological Analyses* (1968), *Liberation Without Violence: A Third Party Approach* (1977), and *A Search for Peace and Justice: Reflections of Michael Scott* (1980).

After moving to the University of Cape Town, South Africa in 1973, I became involved as a third party in confrontations between black people and the white government, especially in the so-called Coloured schools in the Cape Town area. In 1976 at the time of a major period of unrest, I helped form and I served as coordinator for a voluntary ambulance unit to help with medical transportation in the black squatters' areas and to provide emergency and third-party service at times of confrontations between police and community members. The ambulance service was again visible during the 1980 period of unrest (see the description of the incident at Elsies River in Chapter 3). The ambulance unit also provided a model of the type of service that might be performed by conscientious objectors, should the government decide to accept some national civilian service as an alternative to prison. Some indication of the parts played by those of us concerned with nonviolent action and conflict resolution during those years is reflected in the case material in *The Struggle for Democracy in South Africa: Conflict and Conflict Resolution* (Hare, 1983b).

In 1980 I moved to Ben-Gurion University in Israel, and then returned to Cape Town in 1981 to complete my teaching commitment and to bring together my experience with conflict and conflict resolution in the volume noted above. Until now I have been occupied mainly with the problems of settling in to a new country and living and working on a kibbutz as a resident for one year. In India, the followers of Gandhi are sometimes involved in protest, sometimes in conflict resolution, sometimes in social change, and sometimes in living

together in community. They believe that all of these activities are necessary parts of the search for truth. Rather than spending time deciding where to place the emphasis in their activities, they say "do what comes before you." So I shall see what opportunities are placed before me in the years to come and how they can be creatively experienced.

Now back to the formal part of the preface. You will find that the book is presented in two parts. Part I introduces the dramaturgical perspective from social-psychology and brings together some of the insights provided by persons working in the theater. Part II consists of applications of the dramaturgical perspective in the analysis of instances of conflict involving protest and instances of conflict resolution between ethnic and national groups. I was involved in only two of the instances described in Part II as a participant rather than as an observer. Even then the events took place before I had begun to use the dramaturgical perspective as it is presented here. As a result only one or two aspects of each case have been highlighted as illustrations of the type of analysis that can be made in the future when more formal methods of observation are used at the time the event occurs. The final section of the book consists of three appendices for readers who wish more details about dramatism in social psychology, phase movement in collective behavior, and types of dramatic situations.

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