

SA-OS, A psychodrama-based strategy to improve interpersonal relationships: an exploratory study on theory, practice and effectiveness

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Abstract This article focusses on a specific psychodrama-based strategy for the improvement of dyadic relationships, in which the direct interpersonal dialogue between two opposing protagonists is prepared step-by-step through indirect intrapersonal phenomenological dialogues, where both protagonists simultaneously operate together as actor and as silent observer. This method is referred to as the “*Simultaneous Action-Observer Strategy*” (SA-OS). The theoretical background is explored, with special emphasis on the *Phenomenological-Dialectical Personality Model* (Phe-Di PModel), followed by a description of the SA-OS procedure. The third part describes an *Exploratory Effectiveness Research* (Pretest-Posttest design/ repeated measures ANOVA) with 32 participants in the treatment group and 30 in a matched control group, who volunteered to participate to improve the quality of their (basically non-conflictual) relationship. Results provide preliminary evidence supporting the effectiveness of SA-OS, which is relevant in psychodrama practice for the quality improvement of dyadic interpersonal relations. Moreover, it is sug-

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gested that this study could serve as a useful basis for replication research in various representative samples of both “non-conflictual” and “conflictual” dyads.

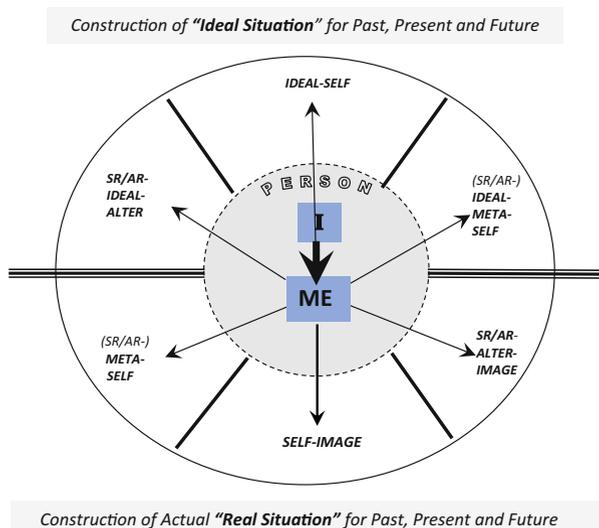
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1 Introduction

A psychodrama director usually works in groups with one protagonist who, through role-reversal, role-taking, doubling, etc. discovers new valuable personal interpretations about themselves in relation to the social and material contents of the surrounding world. It has been convincingly demonstrated that psychodrama can be effective in this regard (Orkibi and Feniger-Schaal 2019). Many psychodrama directors work simultaneously with two protagonists, with couples, family members, two group members or even entire families (Moreno 1934; Moreno and Moreno 1969; Moreno and Elefthery 1982; Deutch and Muney 1968; Kellermann 1996; Blatner 2002). Here also, role-reversal and role-taking with both protagonists are crucial. But how and when exactly? And how can this whole procedure be supported theoretically? In a previous publication, we attempted to formulate an initial response by providing a detailed description of the psychodrama-based “Simultaneous Action-Observer Strategy” (SA-OS) (Verhofstadt-Denève 2017).

On this basis, the project presented here includes an exploratory study addressing the question of whether SA-OS can enhance the quality of (non-)conflictual dyads, for example family members, partners, friends, colleagues, group members. Due to time and financial limitations, this research is exploratory, the sample size and selection of the participants in the treatment and control group do not meet strict

Fig. 1 The Phenomenological-Dialectical Personality Model. (For the complete original diagram see Verhofstadt-Denève 1988, 2000)



scientific criteria. The results should therefore be interpreted with caution, but they may be useful as hypotheses for further investigation (Rothman et al. 2013).

Firstly, we will describe the main elements of the central Phe-Di PModel (Verhofstadt-Denève 1988, 2000), since this model also functions as the basic framework for the research questions, the methodological elaboration of the study and the interpretation of the results. This will be followed by a synthetic concretization of the SA-OS Strategy and the presentation of an SA-OS effectiveness study with information about participants in the treatment and control group; the measurement of “relational quality”; the research design; intervention in the treatment and control group; research questions and results for the whole sample and subsamples; strengths and limitations of the project. We close this article with suggestions for further research.

2 The Phenomenological-Dialectical Personality Model

The Phe-Di PModel represents the PERSON, with *phenomenological* referring to the unique subjective content and meaning that individuals construct about themselves and the world, and *dialectical* referring to the underlying processes of tension or opposition causing these contents to be created and recreated (see Fig. 1 below).

2.1 Phenomenological content

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 reflective knower, and the “ME” as the reflected *object* pole, or the person as known (James 1961). In our view, the ME is more specifically constructed by the answers to some fundamental I-questions resulting in six ME-dimensions or personal images of self and other, each in his/her environment (Verhofstadt-Denève 1988, 2000):

- *Who am I, in my world?* **Self-Image**
- *Who are the others, in their world?* **SR- & AR-Alter-Image**
- *How do the others perceive me in my world?* (SR- & AR-) **Meta-Self**

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**¹
- *How should the others perceive me?* (SR- & AR-) **Ideal-Meta-Self**²

¹ 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 her/himself?” Both contents of the Alter-Image can express thoroughly different views and experiences in the protagonist. The same applies to the Ideal-Alter (see Verhofstadt-Denève 2017).

² 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). Here too, theoretically, a distinction can be made be-

These six ME dimensions constitute the content or the foundation stones of a therapeutically relevant, “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 social and material world at different levels of consciousness and acting. As can be seen in Fig. 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.

2.2 Dialectical process

As illustrated in earlier publications, this Phe-Di PModel constitutes a workable model of reference for the psychotherapist. Through combining the six main questions by applying the central psychodrama techniques, a thorough I-ME reflection is enhanced within the six personality dimensions (Verhofstadt-Denève 1988, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2012, 2017). Within this context, the assumption is that the central dimensions should be confronted with each other in a dialectical constructive oppositional relationship. This means that through a triadic dialectical process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, rigid constructions of oneself and the other are made more flexible and partially integrated. The whole process is certainly not a rigid or linear triadic movement. Typically, it is a repeated to and fro movement (dialogue) between opposite poles which can generate successive partial syntheses. The optimum synthesis can never be reached since the result would be *no* opposition, which would eliminate the dialectical system and growth.

We will illustrate the activation of these powerful dialectical oppositional experiences by means of a concrete example. For an extensive analysis, see Verhofstadt-Denève (1988, 2000, 2007 and 2017) Hegel (1952) and Riegel (1979).

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 the next section, we demonstrate how the application of the SA-OS can play an important role in this rapprochement process.

3 The Simultaneous Action-Observer Strategy (SA-OS)

The main aim of the SA-OS is to apply a simultaneous action and observer strategy to stimulate an intense “I”-“ME” activity in both protagonists. This offers more room for empathy, mutual understanding, integration of viewpoints and respect for each other’s own identity.

tween the SR- and AR-Meta-Self, and also between SR- and AR-Ideal-Meta-Self, but this is not frequently experienced in this way, certainly with regard to the Ideal-Meta-Self.

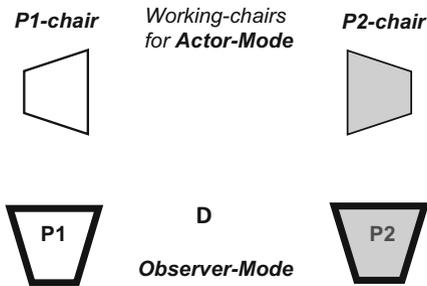


Fig. 2 SA-OS Starting Position. Both protagonists (P1: Paula, and P2: John) initially sit in front of their working-chair. The Director (D) explains the method concisely: “Throughout the first four stages, either of you will work in turn, separately by means of the two working-chairs, the first one (in front of you) symbolizing yourself and the second one the other. The person who’s not working with the chairs watches and listens attentively.”

For a detailed protocol and a theoretical interpretation regarding the application of SA-OS with two seriously conflicting protagonists (P1 and P2), we refer to Verhofstadt-Denève (2017). This case involves a complicated and ambivalent daughter/father relationship (Paula/John) in which John started an intimate relationship with Paula’s best friend (Laura) and had left the house. The situation turned out to be emotionally unbearable for both protagonists Paula (P1) and John (P2).

SA-OS can be applied only if the following conditions are met: 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 a strong feeling of security. Both protagonists turned out to be particularly motivated to participate, in an ultimate attempt to save their relationship. We will confine ourselves here to a synthetic representation of the five SA-OS stages.

The starting position consists of four chairs: two working-chairs (the P1-chair and the P2-chair) as symbols of the two protagonists in the Actor-Mode (AM), 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 (Fig. 2).

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 separately in **Stages 1 (P1) and 2 (P2)** in the AM, while in **Stages 3 (P1) and 4 (P2)** their “ideal” positions (integration possibilities, for example looking at the relationship and how it could be improved) are worked on. For each protagonist, this involves two stages in the AM, while the other protagonist observes the action in silence in the OM. However, as will be seen, internal oppositions are experienced during this confrontation, not only by the protagonist in the AM, but also by the protagonist in the OM (through intensive mental action), in whom major internal dialectical oppositions towards a differentiation and integration process are also activated. The underlying idea of the method is that *indirect intra-personal* dialogues by each protagonist separately (through *role-taking*, during the first four stages) will pave the way for a *direct inter-personal* dialogue between the two protagonists (through *role-reversal*) in **Stage 5**.

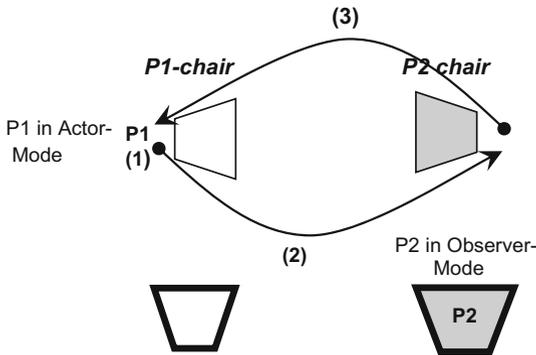


Fig. 3 SA-OS Spatial positions in Stage 1. What is happening with Paula in the AM? (1) She starts behind^a the P1-chair and presents herself: *I am Paula ...* (Self-Image) and the way she sees her father: *He is ...* (SR-Alter-Image). This is the thesis in the dialectical process. (2) She becomes her father, through a first role-taking (by standing behind the P2-chair): *I am Paula’s father ...* (AR-Alter-Image); the antithesis in the dialectical movement. (3) After a second role-taking (by returning behind her P1-chair), she acts as herself again. The return to the initial situation symbolizes the return to her Self-Image; the synthesis. ^aOf course, sitting in the chair would be possible as well here, but working from behind the chair makes a quick move to the other chair easier. In 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.

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

P2: Internal action
(John: Observer-Mode)

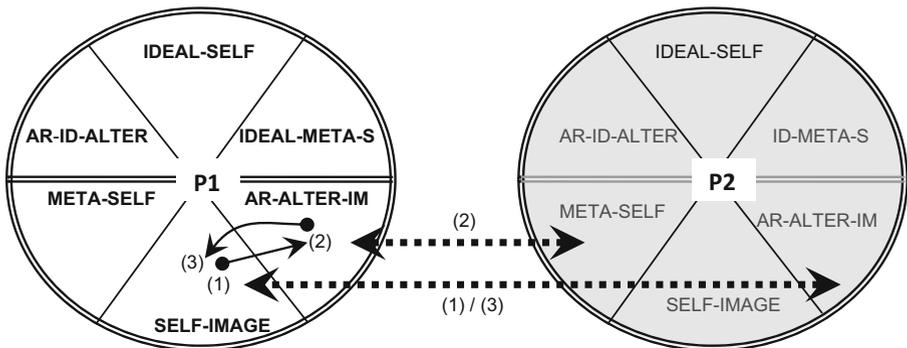


Fig. 4 Action interpretation of P1 and P2 within the Phe-Di PModel in Stage 1. *The thin solid arrows represent the (intra-personal) dialogue and oppositions of Paula in the AM, while the bold dotted lines refer to the (inter-personal) oppositions experienced by John while observing his daughter in the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

As an example, we will explain what dialectically happens for both protagonists in **Stage 1** with P1 (Paula), in the AM, exploring her current “real” relational situation with her father, while P2 (Father) remains silently in the OM (cf. Fig. 1: Infrastructure of Phe-Di PModel, and Fig. 3).

This triple action represents a powerful dialectical process, which may (through successive partial *syntheses*) lead to adjustments of her Self-Image and Alter-Images (Verhofstadt-Denève 2017).

What is happening in the father-observer during this process? We will find the answer by analyzing the simultaneous actions of both protagonists in the Phe-Di PModel. Since two protagonists are at work here, their actions should be represented by two personality models, one for Paula (P1) and one for John (P2) (Fig. 4).

What is happening within John in the OM mode during his daughter's action?

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 about his daughter.
2. The experience is likely to become even more profound 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 a strong opposition between the image that he thought Paula had of him (his Meta-Self or *thesis*) on the one hand and, on the other hand, the image that now appears of himself through the words of Paula (the AR-Alter-Image of Paula or *antithesis*).
3. When Paula becomes herself again, the opposition described in (1) may repeat itself, and this may already point to an incipient form of integration for John. Similar dialectical actions occur in the four subsequent stages of SA-OS (Verhofstadt-Denève 2017).

4 An Exploratory Effectiveness Study of SA-OS

When working with SA-OS, the reactions of most protagonists gave us the strong impression that it was an effective strategy for the improvement of the *relational quality* in several kinds of conflictual as well as non-conflictual dyadic relations. This motivated us to set up a project to look more systematically at the possible effectiveness of this specific strategy combining psychodrama-action and simultaneous observation.

4.1 Method

4.1.1 Participants

The participants were recruited via website information, which was complemented by a more targeted recruitment through professional and leisure associations. We can summarize the information we provided as follows:

Do you have a fairly good relationship with your partner, a friend, a colleague, a family member ... but do you perhaps wish to deepen one of these personal dyads? In that case, you are invited to participate in a short, free and enriching dialogical methodology (only two sessions: in total maximum 3 hours). The only condition is that you are **both** highly motivated to engage in honest joint

Table 1 Sample characteristics of treatment and control group

Variable	Treatment group (TG) (N= 32)	Control group (CG) (N= 30)
Gender		
Female	26	23
Male	6	7
Age (years)		
M	48.09	46.83
SD	16.30	15.55
17-50 (TG) 18-49 (CG) “Younger”	17	14
53-78 (TG) 52-69 (CG) “Older”	15	16
Educational level		
Bachelor/Master	16	17
Basic/Practical	16	13
Relational duration with dyadic partner		
Long: mostly family members; partners, etc.	16	15
Short: <1 year; mostly friends, colleagues, etc.	16	15
Psychodrama		
Experience	13	12
No experience	19	18

participation. It is a closed session for the two of you alone. This means that no other dyads will be present. Guidance will be provided by an expert who has been thoroughly trained in this matter. The sessions are part of an investigation. All data are processed completely anonymously, and privacy is strictly guaranteed. At no time will any information be recorded acoustically or visually, and you are at liberty to end the session at any time.

A relatively large number of people, with some previous psychodrama experience, appeared interested in participating. As a result, the treatment group consisted of 32 participants. As can be seen, a larger number of women were willing to participate than men. In the treatment group, in addition to gender, we were able to distinguish four other clearly defined subgroups: age, educational level, relationship duration and psychodrama experience (Table 1). Subsequently, a control group of 30 participants were matched with the treatment group on the same subgroup criteria (Table 1). The eventual treatment and control groups consisted of dyadic relations of friends, lovers, colleagues and relatives (sisters, brother/sister, mother/daughter, grandparent/grandchild, etc.).

4.1.2 Measurement of “relational quality” (RQ)

To conduct an effectiveness study, it was important to describe which factors influence “relational quality” (RQ) and how quality changes could be measured. To do so, we relied on an integration of the three personality dimensions (Self-Image, Al-

ter-Image and Meta-Self) on the one hand and, on the other hand, several significant relational parameters based on the findings of relationship experts.

Magnavita (2005) states: “*In dyadic restructuring, the therapeutic task is to enhance and encourage the members of the dyad to listen to and respect the other, and to learn to develop empathic responding, which will deepen intimacy while restructuring the individual defense systems of both people.*” (p. 200)

Relationship therapist Van Steenwegen (2019) also advocates that open, honest confrontation and communication leads to better mutual knowledge, understanding and appreciation. These attitudes stimulate dialogue and a willingness to listen, instead of the frequent scream-and-shout accusations directed at each other. In her “Emotionally Focused Therapy” based on the basic principles of the attachment theory, Johnson (2015) subsequently stresses: EFT helps address the core questions we often ask ourselves about our most important relationship: “*Do I matter deeply to my partner? Do I feel safe and secure enough in this relationship to be my full and authentic self?*” According to Ickes (2003), disagreements between two people (regardless of the nature of the relationship, e.g. partner, family or work relationship) will often arise due to a lack of mutual EA “Empathic Accuracy”. EA refers to the degree to which one is able to empathize accurately with the other.

All the above-mentioned authors start from a common underlying thought pattern: RQ can be improved by stimulating “knowledge”, “understanding” and “appreciation” in both partners, paving the way for real connecting dialogues and a deepening of the relationship. *Knowledge* here refers to knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the other, *understanding* means having insight into the internal dynamics of the other and knowing what moves him/her, and *appreciation* refers to the realization that someone is valuable to you as a person.

The way in which we evaluate ourselves is related to the EA (Erbas et al. 2016). Therefore, the inclusion of Self-Image in the determination of RQ is important in conjunction with the more direct social oriented personality dimensions (i.e., Alter-Image and Meta-Self).

In practice, for a precise operational definition of the degree of RQ, the three parameters (knowledge, understanding and appreciation) were related to the three personality dimensions of the Phe-Di PModel: Self-Image, Alter-Image and Meta-Self (Verhofstadt-Denève 1988, 2000). In this way, the RQ was measured by analyzing the participants’ responses to statements related to the following main questions:

To what extent ...

1. do I *know*, *understand* and *appreciate* myself? cf. **Self-Image** (SI)
2. do I *know*, *understand* and *appreciate* the other person? cf. **Alter-Image** (AI)
3. does the other person *know*, *understand* and *appreciate* me? cf. **Meta-Self** (MS)

We opted for a scoring of statements on a 10-point Likert scale. For example, for the “Knowledge” parameter this is:

- *I know my strengths and weaknesses* (SI):

Absolutely true = 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 = not true at all

- *I know the strengths and weaknesses of the other (AI):*
Absolutely true=10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 = not true at all
- *The other knows my strengths and weaknesses (MS):*
Absolutely true=10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 = not true at all

The higher the participants scored on the proposed statements, the stronger the indication of a better RQ. Moreover, we gave respondents the opportunity to complete their answers freely.

According to Cronbach's alpha³, the scale used amply meets the internal coherence conditions. The total scale for the three *personality dimensions* (SI, AI, MS) scores 0.92; the subscale values are: Self-Image 0.84; Alter-Image 0.82; and Meta-Self 0.75. The values for the "Knowledge" "Understanding" and "Appreciation" *parameters* are 0.82, 0.81, 0.78, and the total parameter scale scores 0.92 as well. A value greater than 0.80 is considered an extremely high degree of coherence. A value of 0.70 is also sufficiently high. The full questionnaire is available upon request.

4.1.3 Research design

A Pretest-Posttest design was used to measure the changes, after the application of the Simultaneous Action-Observer Strategy (SA-OS), compared with the results of a control group treated only verbally (Table 2 below). The data were processed statistically using the "Repeated Measure, Analysis of Variance" (ANOVA) (Dimitrov and Rumrill 2013).

4.1.4 Intervention

The SA-OS sessions were conducted within the learning circle of three Certified Practitioners Psychodrama students working in individual sessions with one dyad. They received intensive practical training based on a guiding protocol (Verhofstadt-Denève 2017). They were not associated with the measurement of the results.

In the treatment group, the partners were (after the introduction, pretest and participation motivation test) invited to engage in 5 stages, starting with **4 fundamental preparatory stages with indirect dialogue(s) and role-taking(s)** through simultaneous observation and action, leading to a **direct dialogue with role-reversal(s) in the crucial final stage**; followed by mutual sharing on the whole process; final posttest and closure (Table 2).

In the control group, the start was the same, but it was followed by only a short direct dialogue about their relationship, e.g., "*Duration? ... nice joint experience?*" ... **without the 4 fundamental preparatory stages and final role reversal(s)**, but also ending with a mutual sharing on the whole process; final posttest and closure (Table 2). Note that time slots are approximate and can be adapted slightly, if necessary.

³ Cronbach's alpha is a measure of internal consistency.

Table 2 Overview Treatment and Control group interventions

<i>Treatment group setting:</i>	<i>Control group setting:</i>
Two sessions (TOTAL: $\pm 03:00$ h)	One session: ($\pm 00:45$ h)
<hr/>	
<i>SESSION 1: ($\pm 01:30$h)</i>	
Intro	Intro
Pretest incl. participation motivation ($\pm 00:20$ h)	Pretest incl. participation motivation ($\pm 00:20$ h)
SA-OS training Stage 1 & 2: with indirect dialogue and role-taking about current situation of the relationship (cf. Infra-structure of the Phe-Di PModel) followed by short mutual sharing ($\pm 01:00$ h).	
Short posttest (1): on Participation Motivation ^a , and evaluations on any learning differences between Observer- and Actor-mode ($\pm 00:10$ h)	
<i>SESSION 2: ($\pm 01:30$) (can be the same day or after 1 or max. 2 weeks)</i>	
SA-OS training Stage 3 & 4: with indirect dialogue and role-taking about ideal situation and improvement possibilities of the relationship. (cf. Supra-structure of the Phe-Di PModel).	Short direct dialogue about relationship mutual sharing on the whole process ($\pm 00:15$ h)
Followed by short mutual sharing ($\pm 0:40$ h) Short posttest (2): on Participation Motivation, and evaluations on any learning differences between Observer- and Actor-mode ($\pm 00:10$ h)	
SA-OS training Stage 5: with direct dialogue and role-reversal, followed by mutual sharing on the entire process ($\pm 00:30$ h)	
Final Posttest	Final Posttest
Closure ($\pm 00:10$ h)	Closure ($\pm 00:10$ h)
<i>FOLLOW-UP (06–18 months after training)</i>	<i>NO FOLLOW-UP</i>

^aEvaluation procedure: PARTICIPATION MOTIVATION. 1.01 My motivation to participate in this study is great: Absolutely true= 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1=Not true at all. Brief explanation. 1.02 I feel safe/relaxed. Absolutely true= 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1=Not true at all. Brief explanation. 1.03 I have the impression that the director is now completely neutral (towards both of us). Absolutely true= 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1=Not true at all. Brief explanation (see also fig. 5)

4.2 Research questions

4.2.1 Total sample analysis

- Is there, within the dyads, sufficient motivation to participate at the start and during the entire intervention?
- Does SA-OS improve the relational quality in non-conflictual dyads, based on personal assessments of the basic dimensions in the Phe-Di PModel? In other words, does the treatment group in the final posttest score significantly more positively on the **total score** of the three relational parameters, Knowledge (**K**), Understanding (**U**) and Appreciation (**A**), in the Self-Image, Alter-Image and Meta-Self in comparison with the control group.
- Does a similar development apply within the treatment group after the **breakdown** of the relational parameters (Knowledge, Understanding and Appreciation), each separately in combination within the three personality dimensions Self-Image, Alter-Image and Meta-Self?
- Do the results hold up in a follow-up after 06–18 months?

4.2.2 Subgroup analysis

- Are there effect differences after a short (06–09 month) versus a long (12–18 month) follow-up interval?
- Are there effect differences within the five distinct subgroups (see Table 1)
- Are there effect differences after a staggered “multi-day” training versus a “same-day” training organization?
- Does the relationship quality in the pretest influence the training results?
- Addendum: are there indications of more specific learning effects in the Actor- and Observer-Mode for the Self-Image, Alter-Image or Meta-Self?

4.3 Results (total sample)

4.3.1 Participation motivation

Fig. 5

4.3.2 Overall effectiveness of SA-OS training

Firstly, we analyzed the development of the three personality dimensions (Self-Image, Alter-Image, Meta-Self) each in combination with the **total score** of the three parameters: Knowledge (**K**), Understanding (**U**) and Appreciation (**A**), in the Treatment and Control group (cf. Fig. 6).

After the training, a significant improvement in all three of the personality dimensions appears in the final posttest ($p < 0.001$ or 0.000). The gain seems higher for the socially oriented Alter-Image and Meta-Self than for the more personally linked

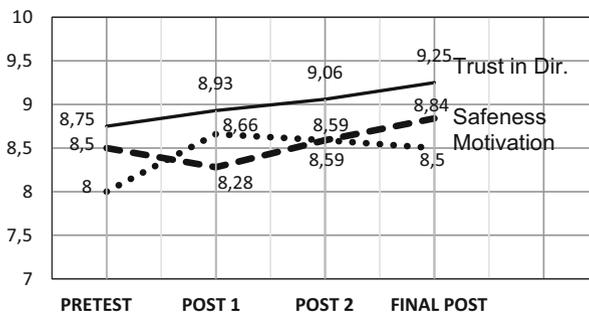


Fig. 5 Motivation, Safeness Experience and Trust in Director in pretest, and three posttests ($N = 32$). The figure shows from the start a fairly high motivation participation, trust in the neutrality of the director and feeling of safety (between 8 and 8.75) and these seem to rise throughout the training to (8.5 and 9.25). The slight “safety click” along with increasing motivation in posttest 1 may be due to a first sudden experience of a less safe comfort zone accompanied by a new unknown surprising action-observer experience. Evaluation procedure see Table 2 note ⁴. As illustration, some free quotes: (quote 1.01): “I found the first part strange ... but very motivated to continue.” (quote 2.16): “It’s amazing, what came up ...!” The starting values for the control group were of the same order

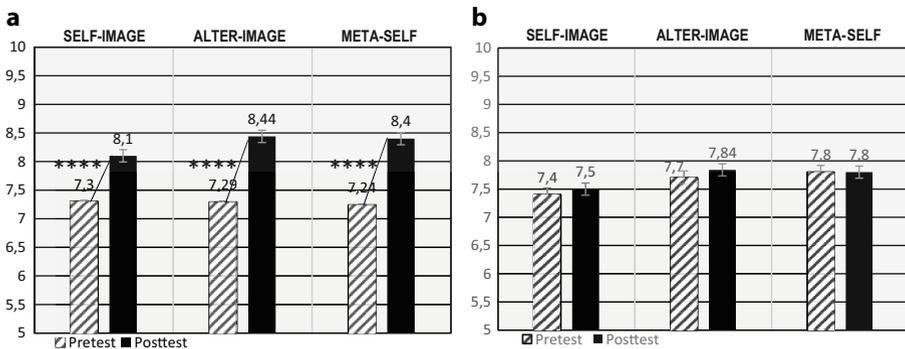


Fig. 6 **a** Treatment group. **b** Control group. Total dimension scores (SI, AI, & MS) with the *combined parameters* (*K, U & A*) in pretest and final posttest for the treatment and control group (**a, b** resp.); *I know, understand and appreciate myself* (SI); *I know, understand and appreciate the other* (AI); *The other knows, understands and appreciates me* (MS)

Self-Image (Fig. 6a). Additional Cohen's *d* effect size measures, for the comparison of the means between pretest and final posttest, were large (0.80).

In the control group, the starting values appear to be slightly higher than those of the treatment group for Alter-Image and Meta-Self, but the effect is nil (Fig. 6b). The following analyses show whether these results are confirmed, taking into account the more **specific effect** of each parameter.

4.3.3 Specific training effects within each of the relationship-promoting *K, U, A* parameters

There appears to be a significant positive training effect in the treatment group for the three parameters separately, but with clearly different emphases (Fig. 7, 8 and 9).

As can be seen in Fig. 7a, prior to training, the presumed "**Self-Knowledge**" is much higher than the knowledge about the other (AI) and the presumed knowledge of the other about myself (MS). It seems that after the training, the low Alter-Image and Meta-Self now reach as a high level as the familiar self-knowledge.

In the control group, the start appears to be higher again, but without any effect in the posttest results (Fig. 7b). In summary, it can be stated that in the treatment group SA-OS seems efficient for the increase of "**Knowledge**" in the three personality dimensions, but especially for the more socially oriented Alter-Image and Meta-Self dimensions.

Fig. 8 shows a similar development for the parameter "**Understanding**", with very high significant effects in the treatment group (Fig. 8a). In the control group, the start is once more slightly higher, but here also the gain in the posttest was far below the treatment group results (Fig. 8b).

The most striking point for the parameter "**Appreciation**" (Fig. 9) is the particularly low start of self-esteem (SI) and the much higher positive rating of the social dimensions "appreciation of the other" (AI) and "appreciation of the other about myself" (MS); this is not surprising in a sample with fairly harmonic dyads (Fig. 9a). The same applies fully to the control group (Fig. 9b).

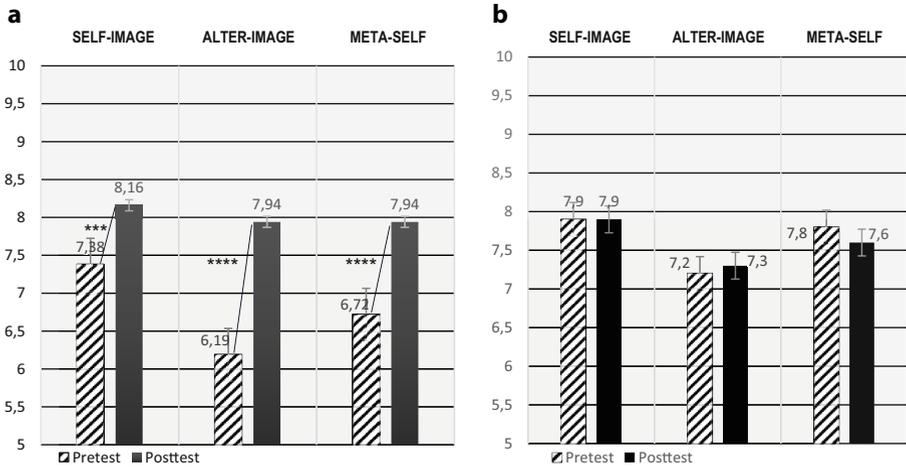


Fig. 7 a Treatment group. b Control group. Dimension scores in the pretest and final posttest on parameter “KNOWLEDGE” for the treatment and control group (a, b resp.); I know my strong and weak sides (SI); I know the strong and weak sides of the other (AI); The other knows my strong and weak sides (MS)

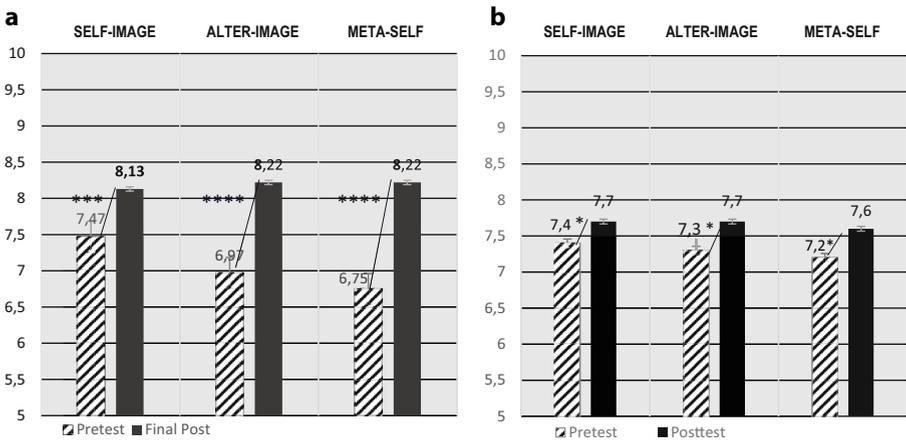


Fig. 8 a Treatment group. b Control group. Dimension scores in the pretest and final posttest on parameter “UNDERSTANDING”, for the treatment and control group (a, b resp.); I understand myself (SI); I understand the other (AI); The other understands me (MS)

In the final posttest after SA-OS, the three valuation levels appear to have risen significantly, but self-appreciation certainly does not reach the high evaluation levels of both socially oriented dimensions (Fig. 9a).

In the control group, the low self-appreciation level persists in the posttest (Fig. 9b). The question is whether this negative self-esteem score in treatment and control group could be related to the predominantly female composition of the groups. It is well known that many women judge themselves more critically than men. This common negative self-evaluation in women was also clearly demonstrated

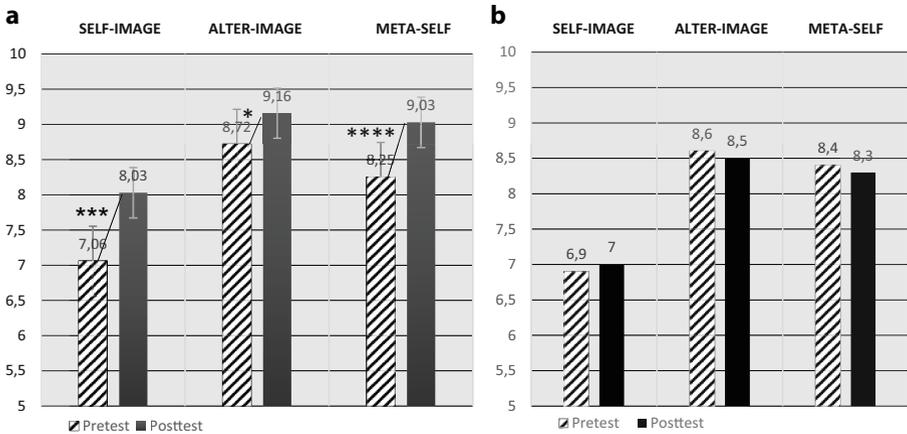


Fig. 9 a Treatment group. b Control group. Dimension scores in the pretest and final posttest on parameter “APPRECIATION”; for the treatment and control group (a, b resp.); *I appreciate myself (SI)*; *I appreciate the other (AI)*; *The other appreciates me (MS)*

in a former 15-year longitudinal study from adolescence to adulthood (Verhofstadt-Denève et al. 2003).

4.3.4 Stability of training effects: Follow-up results

31 participants, out of 32, took part in the follow-up. The charts below display only the *Knowledge* and *Appreciation* parameters since (as already appeared in Fig. 7) the *Understanding* parameter usually shows a fairly large similarity with the *Knowledge* parameter. However, the three parameters are included in the discussion (Fig. 10a, b). In light of the small effect, no follow-up was organized for the control group.

These graphs show the differences between the results in the final posttest (all highly significant), and what is left in the follow-up after 06-18 months. This rather long follow-up interval will be differentiated below in the subgroup results.

It is very encouraging that the *Knowledge* (and *Understanding*) about the other person (AI), and also regarding the presumed *Knowledge* (and *Understanding*) of the other person about the self (MS), hold up significantly in the follow-up (especially with regard to the AI). However, what was learned about SI seems completely lost (Fig. 10a).

The *Appreciation* of self and the other drops to the starting level recorded before the training. Too bad, especially for the self-esteem, as it could benefit from an increase (Fig. 10b).

We move on to compare possible specific training effects within some subgroups, for instance with different follow-up intervals, different training modalities and a different relational quality at the start.

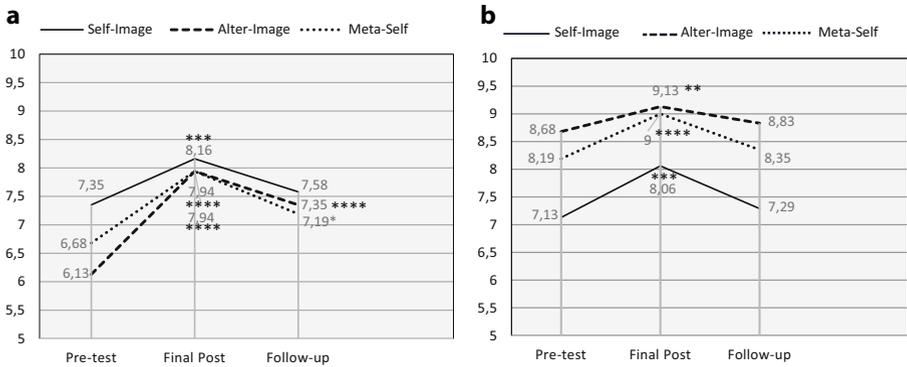


Fig. 10 Dimension Scores (for Self-Image, Alter-Image and Meta-Self) in the total sample, in pretest, posttest and follow-up. **a** Dimension scores for the Parameter "KNOWLEDGE": *I know my myself* (SI); *I know the other* (AI); *The other knows me* (MS). **b** Scores for the Parameter "APPRECIATION": *I appreciate myself* (SI); *I appreciate the other* (AI); *The other appreciates me* (MS)

4.4 Subgroup results

4.4.1 Results after a "short" (06–09 month) versus "long" (12–18 month) follow-up interval

The results were expected to be better within the subgroup with the short follow-up interval, but this was only partially true (Fig. 11). In the **short follow-up**, the feeling indeed remained that one *knows* (and *understands*) the other person better than before the training (Fig. 11a, AI: 6.5 and 7.5), and also that the other person *knows* (and *understands*) the self better (6.61 and 7.39). But again, the results suggested that self-knowledge and self-understanding (SI) were quickly forgotten (Fig. 11a), unlike the more socially linked contents of *Knowledge* (Alter-Image and Meta-Self). In the **long follow-up**, only the improvement of the *Knowledge* about the other (AI) lasts very clearly (Fig. 11a: 5.62 vs 7.15), and even more than in the short follow-up. For the *Appreciation* parameter, after the training there appears to be a significant increase in the final posttest for the three personality dimensions (Fig. 11b), of which almost nothing remains in the short follow-up, and which subsequently disappears completely in the long one.

In summary: the results emphasize and nuance the overall follow-up findings presented in Fig. 10a, b. The training gain for *Knowledge* (and *Understanding*) in the follow-up remains present only for the image of the other (AI), even very emphatically until the long follow-up phase (Fig. 11a). As is mostly the case for the *Appreciation* parameter the FU gains are very low but somewhat better for the Meta-Self in the short FU interval. Unfortunately in the long FU interval subgroup nothing remains.

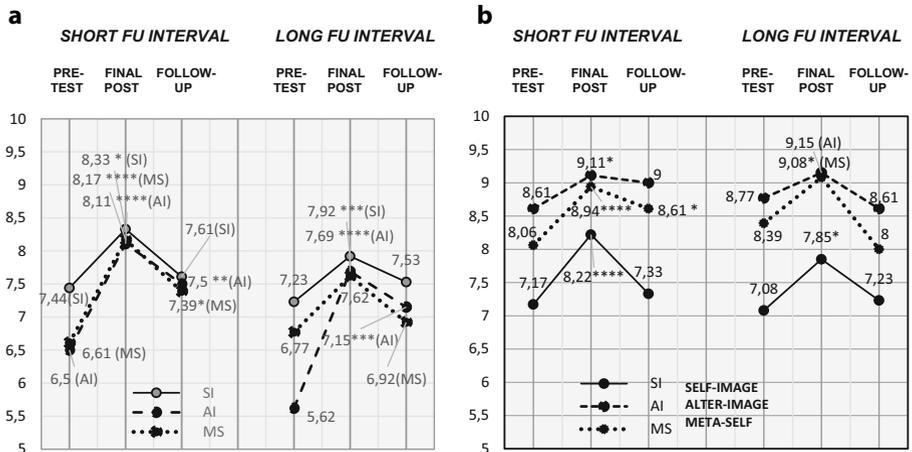


Fig. 11 Subgroup comparison: “short” ($n = 18$) vs “long” ($n = 13$) follow-up interval in pretest, final posttest & follow-up. **a** Parameter KNOWLEDGE: *I know myself (SI)*; *I know the other (AI)*; *The other knows me (MS)*. **b** Parameter APPRECIATION: *I appreciate myself (SI)*; *I appreciate the other (AI)*; *The other appreciates me (MS)*

4.4.2 Effect differences within the main “subgroup characteristics”

From the analyses of the distinct subgroups for Age, Educational Level, Relationship Duration and Psychodrama Experience (Table 1), no significant differences were found. As for Gender, the analysis could not be conducted because of the imbalance in the number of male ($n = 6$) and female ($n = 26$) participants.

4.4.3 Effect differences after a “staggered” vs a “same day” training

Two training sessions were organized for all dyads, each session lasting approximately one hour and a half (for complete training overview see Table 2). For about half of the participants, the two training sessions took place on two different days with an intermediate period spread over 1 to 2 weeks. For the other subgroup, the two sessions were organized in one day. Due to the greater processing possibilities and dialogues between the two meetings, the staggered training was expected to have more effect than the full training on the same day. However, this was not the case.

The data suggest that after the **concentrated same-day training**, there are more positive significant long-term effects than after the **multi-day training** for the *Knowledge (and Understanding)* parameter (Fig. 12a). Only the Alter-Image (*I know the other*) seems succesful after both training conditions. For the “Appreciation” parameter, as is regularly the case, all significant effects were lost in the follow-up, after both trainings (Fig. 12b).

An explanation for the unexpected success of the same-day training could be that in this condensed condition, a larger amount of new knowledge and higher emotional arousal may have made the learning process more efficient than after a staggered

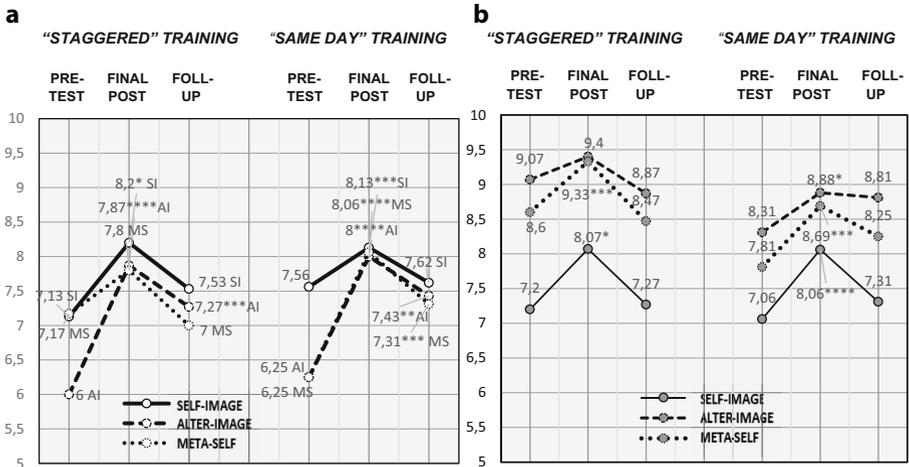


Fig. 12 Subgroup comparison on the effect of “STAGGERED” ($n=15$) vs “SAME DAY” Training ($n=16$) in pretest, final posttest & follow-up. **a** Parameter KNOWLEDGE: *I know myself (SI); I know the other (AI); The other knows me (MS)*. **b** Parameter APPRECIATION: *I appreciate myself (SI); I appreciate the other (AI); The other appreciates me (MS)*

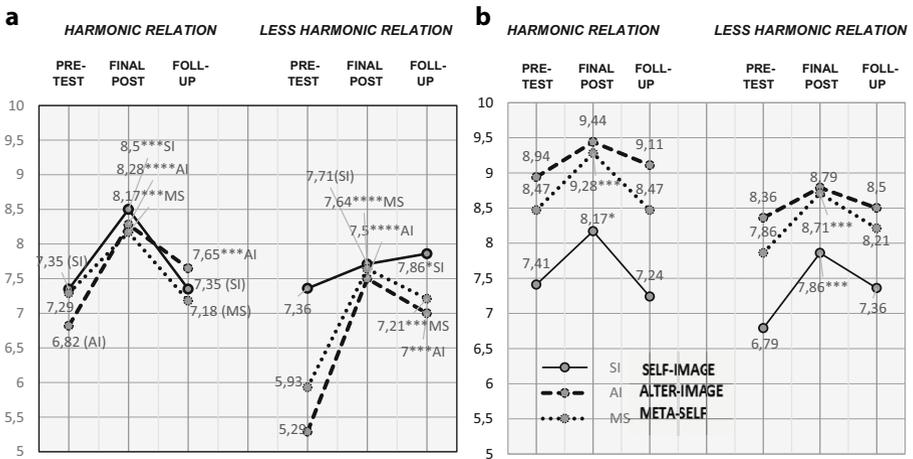


Fig. 13 Subgroup comparison: on *Relationship Quality* “Harmonic” relation ($n=17$) vs. “Less harmonic” relation ($n=14$) in pretest, posttest and follow-up. **a** Parameter KNOWLEDGE: *I know myself (SI); I know the other (AI); The other knows my (MS)*; **b** Parameter APPRECIATION: *I appreciate myself (SI); I appreciate the other (AI); The other appreciates me (MS)*

training. Another explanation could be that memory in the one-day training had a greater bias effect on the posttest answers. Anyhow, it is highly likely that, in clinical practice, many staggered sessions will be needed anyway.

4.4.4 Relationship quality in the pretest, and training results

Although no serious conflict relationships were present in the sample, it was still possible, based on a few separate answers in the pretest scale, to distinguish a greater or lesser degree of harmony within the dyads classified in a “Harmonic” H ($n = 17$) and “Less Harmonic” LH ($n = 14$) subgroup respectively. The question is: within which subgroup did SA-OS have the greatest effect?

One remarkable finding was that, in the **follow-up phase**, the LH-group performed significantly better for the three personality dimensions, even with a significant increase for the Self-Image (very exceptional) (Fig. 13a). For both subgroups, the *Appreciation* values for self and others were remarkably similar (Fig. 13b). The **starting** values were also somewhat higher in the H-group. In the **follow-up**, there was no longer any significant result for both subgroups, although the results suggest

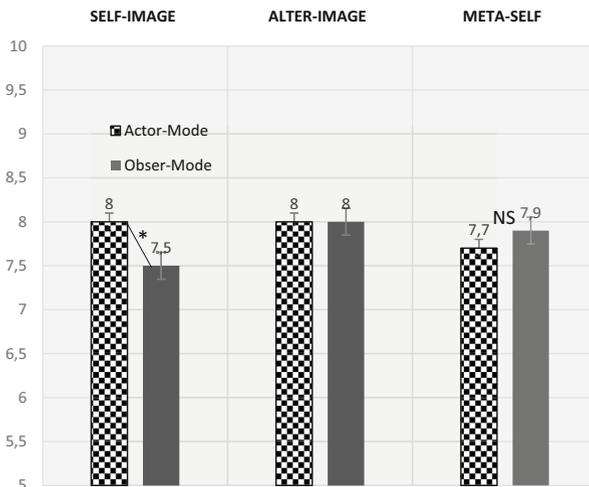


Fig. 14 Importance of actor- and observer-mode for information acquisition in Self-Image Alter-Image and Meta-Self. The results in Fig. 14^a show that according to the participants’ personal evaluations, both modes are considered essential for the knowledge acquisition of the three personality dimensions, with indeed a little more information about the Self-Image in the Actor-Mode; and in the Observer-Mode a (albeit not significant) tendency towards more information about the Meta-Self. In the discussion we will come back upon this important topic. (quote 2.15): “Unbelievable, how positively she speaks about me.” (quote 2.19): “It was so nice to observe him. I was proud to see and hear this.” (quote 2.29): “All in all I loved this challenge to be both myself and the other person. Despite it being a learning day, it has really sparked a lot for me as a person ...”.

^aEvaluation procedure: LEARNING FROM ACTOR- AND/OR OBSERVER-MODE

During my action work (with chairs) I got valuable insights on (1) on myself (2) my opponent (3) how my opponent sees me.

Absolutely true = 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 = Not true at all
[one statement for each dimension (1) (2) (3)]

Brief explanation

During observation (sitting in my chair) I got valuable insights on (1) on myself (2) my opponent (3) how my opponent sees me.

Absolutely true = 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 = Not true at all
[one statement for each dimension (1) (2) (3)]

Brief explanation

that here also the LH-group performed somewhat better than the H-group, especially for the Self-Image and the Meta-Self (Fig. 13b).

In summary, it appears that the LH-group experienced as many (if not more) positive relationship developments as the H-subgroup. This may be a favorable sign for the application possibilities of SA-OS in more conflictual relationships.

4.4.5 Addendum: Relative learning importance of the Actor- and Observer-Mode

One would expect that the more socially oriented personality constructions (Alter-Image and Meta-Self) could be enriched in the corrective Observer-Mode, while more in-depth self-constructions would be more likely to occur in the psychodrama-supported Actor-Mode (Fig. 14).

5 Discussion

5.1 Summary and strength of the study

5.1.1 Structured theoretical frame and suggestive exploratory effectivity results for a psychodrama-based strategy

After SA-OS, the final posttest shows a clearly significant gain for the three personality dimensions (Self-Image, Alter-Image and Meta-Self) in relation to the three relationship enhancing parameters (Knowledge, Understanding and Appreciation) (Figs. 6, 7, 8 and 9). These results in the treatment group gain even more value because of the weak effects within the control group. The gain remains visible in the follow-up, but the three personality-dimensions do follow a clearly different course (Fig. 10a, b).

The **Self-Image** displays a rather complex picture, with the highest value for *Self-Knowledge* and *Self-Understanding* at the start, together with the lowest value for *Self-Appreciation*!

(quote 4.05): “*I know my strengths very well, but I still look too much at my weaknesses, which keep slumbering.*”

The three parameters do increase significantly after training but drop to pretest levels in the follow-up. This is not a problem for *Self-Knowledge* and *Self-Understanding* (which were already comfortably high at the start) (10 a), but it is rather negative for *Self-Appreciation*, which falls back to the low starting point. SA-OS seems to have only a short-term effect on the Self-Image in this sample (10a, b).

These results are fundamentally different from the success story of the **Alter-Image** (my image about the other) (Fig. 10a, b). The start is low for *Knowledge* and *Understanding*, but remarkably high for *Appreciation*. Here also, the three parameters rise significantly after the training, and for *Knowledge* (in sharp contrast to the Self-Image) this continues to rise significantly even in the longest follow-up interval (Fig. 11a). This does not apply to *Appreciation* (Fig. 11b), which scored comfortably high right from the start.

(quote 1.29): *“I have the impression that I got to know her better. Better appreciation does not apply. I already appreciated her, that has remained the same.”*

In summary: SA-OS appears to be most efficient for a solid development of the image of the other (which, from the beginning, is less known and understood but most appreciated) and appears to be the least efficient for the Self-Image (which, from the start, is best known but least appreciated).

The results for the **Meta-Self** (my view about the image the other has about me) usually fall between these two extremes (Fig. 10a, b, 11, 12 and 13). The Meta-Self indeed involves both the other *and* the self, but the course of the Meta-self seems to correspond more strongly (for the three parameters) with the Alter-Image than with the Self-Image.

Additional subgroup analyses showed that the follow-up effect of a same-day training was certainly not inferior to a more staggered intervention (Fig. 12). Moreover, in a comparison of a harmonic and a less harmonic subgroup, the positive impact on the less harmonic group appeared to be more effective than for the slightly more harmonic one (Fig. 13). Both results can have serious implications for practice.

It is obvious that an increased mutual reinforcement of mutual knowledge and understanding, together with the already existing high appreciation for the other in this sample, will improve the relational quality. A few quotes from participants:

(quote 1.30): *I am even more aware of how important she is to me. How much she means to me. And that it is good how I am ... that I am valuable again.*

(quote 1.28): *I got to know her even better and she has heard more about my background, about my childhood years and the way I was brought up. The same goes for me towards her.*

(quote 4.29): *I really enjoyed taking part in this ... also how difficult it was sometimes to show myself. I no longer run away from it and want to get out of my comfort zone to become even stronger. I enjoyed doing this with my partner. It is so beautiful to discover that we complement each other ...*

(quote 2.28): *We need to talk more often like this ... that would be good for us ...*

5.1.2 Availability of data supporting the results

The power of SA-OS can be explained through the intense “I”-“ME” activation as described in the Phe-Di PModel, as a result of which dialectical oppositions between fundamental intra- and interpersonal dimensions are stimulated in both the Observer-Mode and the Actor-Mode, which can enhance knowledge and interpersonal understanding in both partners (Verhofstadt-Denève 2000, 2007).

During SA-OS intervention, lots of emotions are triggered in both protagonists, as sensitive contextual themes relating to oneself in relation to the other are worked through in a very short period of time, in both modes. 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; Johnson 2015).

Another explanation for the strong impact of SA-OS is provided by neurology. Throughout the protagonists' experiences in the Actor- and Observer-Mode, a huge amount of information about oneself and the partner is acquired in both modes. It is an accelerated learning process, which enhances "Empathic Accuracy" (EA) (Ickes 2003). This assumption is completely in line with neurological research (Bombari et al. 2013), which showed that EA involves the activation of two important socially related processes: *mirroring* and *mentalizing* (Zaki et al. 2009). 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 mentalizing is a more cognitive aspect of empathy, which requires an empathic representation of the observed partner's individuality. In other words, mentalizing 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 SA-OS suggest that mirroring and mentalizing are activated in both modes, but mirroring seems more linked to the Observer-Mode and mentalizing to the Actor-Mode (Verhofstadt-Denève 2017, 2018).

Finally, we assume that the power of SA-OS consists of the unique simultaneous combination of experiences in the Actor- **and** Observer-Mode for both protagonists; though it is through *role-taking* in the **Actor-Mode** that the protagonist is, by means of the symbolic chairs, invited to stand alternatively in the shoes of the Self and the Other with enhancing strong *indirect dialogues* (Fig. 3).

As a result, own forgotten/unconscious constructions can be (re)discovered and adapted. This fits completely with classical psychodrama: an intensive stimulation of the I-ME reflection and possibilities of deepening/reconstructing personal phenomenological dimensions in relation to the Self-Image, Alter-Image, Meta-Self and respective Ideal-Images (Fig. 1). But in SA-OS, the protagonist in the **Observer Mode** can enter directly into the partially unknown inner world of the other, with the discovery of new deep, often emotionally charged, basic information with fears, desires, dreams and expressions of affection and resentment ...

This intense lively experience of contradictions between Self/Other constructions can lead to deep emotions in the observer, and a thorough redefinition and more accurate empathic adaptation of the observer's images about the other and the other about the self (Fig. 4). Moreover, in the observer-mode, the fundamental "listen in silence" attitude is learned, instead of the automatic, classical sometimes harsh, remarks in the past. The mutual combination of both modes is an excellent preparation for a *real direct dialogue* in the last SA-OS phase with full *role reversal* between both partners as the base for a joint authentic listening and dialogical attitude, also outside the sessions (Table 2). The unique dialectically based Actor-Observer combination with two protagonists would appear to offer an efficient added value to psychodrama practice in the healing or improvement of relationships.

5.1.3 Relatively easy application of the strategy for participants and trainers

The protagonists do not require any prior psychodrama experience. A test group comparison between participants with ($n=13$) and without ($n=19$) psychodrama experience showed no significant difference in results. The same was found re-

garding different levels of education. The basic method itself is quite simple, but psychodrama training is nonetheless highly recommended for the trainer. Specific SA-OS training by an experienced psychodrama director is necessary. (For detailed basic information and protocol proposal see Verhofstadt-Denève 2017.)

5.1.4 Related application possibilities

SA-OS is useful as a short-term method in itself, but the Actor-Mode can be creatively extended by the simultaneous addition of spontaneous inter- and intrapersonal psychodrama vignettes and social atom forms (Verhofstadt-Denève 2003). Moreover, in addition to role-taking and role-reversal, the participants can be stimulated to double each other; specific themes can alternately be addressed by both partners in the Actor-Mode, such as: the mutual attitude towards children; holiday arrangements; intimacy; freedom; work; leisure; various role patterns, etc.

SA-OS can also be combined with other relational therapeutic treatments such as Emotional Focused Therapy, Systemic approaches, Relational Experiential Therapy, Relational Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Mindfulness, Schema Therapy. The strategy can be applied (in a slightly modified form) in groups (Verhofstadt-Denève 2017), and in a broader psychodrama approach for resolving subgroup conflicts via the so-called “Double Triad Method” (Verhofstadt-Denève 2012).

5.2 Research limitations and suggestions

This is certainly not a robust top-research, but rather an exploratory study showing a number of weaknesses:

- The sample is clearly not representative and too small. With a larger sample, the current subject analysis could be extended to a dyadic analysis. Cohen’s *d* corrections gave positive results, but this obviously does not solve the problem.
- It would be better if the follow-up were conducted in the total sample at two different times, instead of in two separate follow-up subgroups.
- The control group was matched with the treatment group, but the possible comparison with a randomly composed waiting list would have been much better.
- The pretest-posttest design certainly offers many advantages, but the posttest results can be influenced by pretest bias effects on the posttest answers, combined with the social desirability factor. Conversely, it is true that participants cannot control their answer in case of subgroup results (for instance better results after a short, than after a more staggered training). Anyhow, it is strongly recommended to supplement the personal “subjective” evaluations of the participants with a well validated scale for a more “objective” evaluation of the relationship quality in the pre- and post-tests.
- A more extended and systematic analysis of the open motivations could be expanded further.

5.3 Conclusions

Although this is a long list of weaknesses, we hope that this project will serve as an incentive for replication studies; if so, with better baseline conditions, in various samples: men and women in conflict relationships and clinical settings, in different countries and cultures. Or, simply in the elaboration and presentation of some dyadic case studies based on creative applications of the “*Simultaneous Action-Observer Strategy*”.

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