

The Alter Ego

Here is a key part of the technology of intrapersonal group work. It is equally efficacious in interpersonal work as well. Our tradition uses this method almost like a cornerstone. While putting these words to paper I was remembering an analogy - that of writing a book on cycling or swimming !!

True this note will not "teach" you how to be an alter ego. It will come in use as an adjunct to the workshop. It is intended as a memory aid should you need that.

When an alter ego you are operating from within the system.

The Alter Ego

What is the Alter Ego

The notion of the Alter-Ego has existed in various forms in the world of theatre. The “Sutradhar” in Sanskrit drama, the “Viveka” in the Bengali Jatra and the “Chorus” in Greek theatre are prominent examples.

The actors enact their roles, while the various Alter Egos named above speak out the inner worlds – of emotions, dilemmas – sorrows: articulating the inner worlds of the people and situation unfolding on the stage.

The term literally means an alternative personality and, importantly – centred on the ego. Alter-ego is defined in some dictionaries as a close friend – a relationship of deep goodwill-not a colluder (except under special circumstances).

In our practice the alter ego is an extension of the inner world of the person being alter-ego-ed. This person is called the Protagonist while the Anchor Person becomes the alter ego. The alter ego is the “inner voice” lying dormant, inhibiting expression- thus gathering negative power until voiced and brought into overt awareness. This technique is deployed to expand the expression that the Protagonist is engaging in, using speech and non-verbally. The first and most important aim is to directly and instantly establish a sense of being “understood” by the protagonist. It then encourages her to expand the expression. The experience of “being understood” reduces the power of inhibitors such as shame, low self worth or (often) inability in articulating conflicts, ambivalences or emotions.

Verbalizing the hitherto withheld expression leads to possible redefinition of the “problem” and enables the protagonist to progress the exploration. It relieves her of any, some or all of the following classes of inhibiting beliefs

- i) I am the only one with this “problem” (isolation/shame)
- ii) I am an enigma (I am untouchable – isolation)
- iii) I am blocked and resourceless (I am limited)

Thus releasing energy to explore further and deepen the foray into one’s own being. It assists her in being able to arrive at recognizing in what way she is responsible and indeed in what way she is not, for the “problem” at hand.

Levels of Alter Ego

Alter Ego-ing can happen at three levels

- individual
- group
- universal/macro

These are not exclusive, the alter-ego may switch or combine levels. At the individual level, the alter-ego listens to the protagonist, observes the body and space language and based on the understanding till then, articulates possible thoughts, emotions, assumptions of the protagonist. The alter-ego statements here must be in the first

person. The Alter Ego gets in touch with the protagonist in himself, and gives it a voice. A guiding principle is to articulate the unarticulated, make visible the invisible, own the disowned, and reflect on the withheld. The alter ego may also begin to voice in a contemplative/reflective note the protagonist's relationship with herself in the moment and ambivalencies about the possible action choices. Care must be taken neither to flood the protagonist nor to leave her feeling abandoned. Care must also be taken to not influence or in any way exert any kind of coercive pressure on the protagonist – this is very important since the alter-ego is only a reflector – not a choice maker, guide or “help”.

Group Level: At this level, the anchor person alter-egos in the first person, what he sees are the group level beliefs or emotions that may be “gripping” the group as a whole. He casts himself in a symbolic prototype of the inhibiting forces embodying the universe of the set of beliefs. He may go into fair detail voicing these forces and the range of reactions/responses to these forces. This route intensifies a confrontation with unpleasant social realities. It ups the ante.

Universal/Macro

At this level the Alter-Ego becomes the voice of the macro existential themes that form the ground of the current phenomena in the group. It is guided also by the design brief for the activity at hand. It is used frequently as a means for setting the stage for large group exercises and for rituals. It often takes the form of a historical perspective or a philosophical position or an articulation of the deeper struggles involved in being human.

Positions of the Alter Ego

The physical position the alter-ego takes relative to the protagonist or to the group is the first level of communication – it conveys a message. It is important therefore for the anchor person to choose his location consciously and deliberately. This does not imply becoming rooted, although that itself may be a choice.

While engaging in individual alter-ego-ing, most often the position taken is from behind the protagonist often with a hand placed gently and surely on the protagonist's shoulder. This relative position symbolically is the “inner voice” of the protagonist. He is then speaking on behalf of the protagonist, he speaks in the first person, careful to not contradict anything the protagonist has said or done, careful to not collude either, except under special circumstances where intensification of the inhibition in his sensing is likely to strengthen the protagonist's assertiveness. It is important to know that this choice maybe experienced as veiled or otherwise sarcasm, and as such chosen with care and sensitivity.

Choosing a side by side position conveys a joining-in as “shoulder to shoulder” from where the alter-ego voices emotions or thoughts that help elaborate the protagonist's expression. This position also conveys a “collegiate visioning” of the situation – in a sense this position conveys to the protagonist “I am with you in seeing what you are – and here is what I am seeing as well”.

A third position is face to face. This position symbolizes the invisible self opposition of the protagonist. This is a relatively rare position as it is a special case that embodies deep opposition in the form of self-rejection – usually held with despair, shame and anger.

In the net, the most frequently occurring, efficacious alter-ego-ing happens from behind the protagonist.

Forms of the communication

The Alter-Ego's communication is almost always to provide elaboration. This performs two functions: expands the world that the protagonist is opening up, and, very importantly reaffirms the invitation to the rest of the participants through processes of identification.

All expressions of the protagonist will have a universe of emotions, assumptions, a context, a subject and an object. As such the communication of the Alter-Ego has to be mainly some combination of

- a) description
- b) non evaluative of the protagonist
- c) reflective of the situation and its possible meanings in the protagonist's mind
- d) articulation of the universe and multiple connotations of the protagonist's statements such that resonances with others present become stronger.

The intent of alter-egoing is to expand the expression of the protagonist, not to influence his choices. As such great care must be taken to, in no way, influence the choice making of the protagonist - remember that as the Alter-Ego you are the Alter and she is the Ego, and for the present we go with the idea that it is the Ego that makes the final action choices.

Note prepared by Sushanta Banerjee for use in the workshop on Theory and Practice of Process Work, Jan 5 to 10, 2015, Bangalore