
Investigation article

SELF-CARE AND PSYCHODRAMA. PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF A GROUP
EXPERIENCE WITH PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH CHILDREN
AND ADOLESCENTS VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

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ABSTRACT

THIS RESEARCH IS A RESPONSE TO A REQUEST FOR HELP FROM A GROUP OF PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE, IN ORDER TO COPE WITH THE EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION EXPERIENCED AS A RESULT OF THEIR CONTACT WITH TRAUMATIC STORIES OF THE VICTIMS. PREVIOUS STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT THE NEGATIVE IMPACT THAT INVOLVES SUCH LABOR ACTIVITY CAN GENERATE SIGNIFICANT DAMAGE TO THE WELL-BEING OF THE SPECIALISTS WHO PERFORM THEM. THIS IS WHY WE HAVE PROPOSED AS A PRIMARY OBJECTIVE THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR BETTER COPING WITH THE SITUATION THEY ENCOUNTERED AT WORK. IN THIS STUDY, A GROUP WAS CREATED WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF 21 PROFESSIONALS WHO HAVE DIRECT CONTACT WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE. FIVE SESSIONS WERE

CONDUCTED USING THE METHODOLOGY OF PSYCHODRAMA DUE TO THEIR RELEVANCE TO STIMULATE HUMAN POTENTIAL AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR SKILLS AND ABILITIES IN TERMS OF EXTENDING THE CONTROL AND MASTERY OVER THEMSELVES AND THEIR INNER WORLD. THE PARTIAL RESULTS SHOW THAT THE EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION DECREASES WHEN THOSE EXPERIENCING IT HAVE A SPACE WHERE THEY CAN EXPRESS AND SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES AND REPRESSED FEELINGS, AND RELEASE STRONG EMOTIONAL BURDENS. FURTHERMORE, THE USE OF PSYCHODRAMA TECHNIQUES FAVORS THE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND FOSTERS THE EMERGENCE OF NEW SKILLS AND PERSONOLOGICAL RESOURCES. IT HELPS TO DISMANTLE MISCONCEPTIONS THEY HAVE ATTAINED THROUGH THEIR WORKING EXPERIENCE AND ALLOWS THE POSSIBILITY TO GAIN NEW TOOLS TO MANAGE THEIR OWN EMOTIONS.

KEY WORDS: SELF-CARE, PSYCHODRAMA, PROFESSIONALS, ATTENTION TO VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

INTRODUCTION

In Cuba, with the triumph of the Revolution in January 1959, deep transformations took place in the economic, political and social life of the country aimed at ensuring the multifaceted transformation of both childhood and youth, and setting priorities in care, education and health.

Currently, the Minors Specialty in the Ministry of the Interior is focusing its efforts to treat children and adolescents who are victims of violent manifestations, namely, sexual abuse, injuries and threats. Within this framework, the Centers for the Protection of Children and Youth (CPNNA) have devised a recording technique for the testimony of the victims during criminal proceedings conducted without their physical presence thus reducing, as much as possible, a secondary victimization.

EMOTIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS TREATING VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

The demands derived from treating violence and, specifically, victims of sexual violence presuppose a high emotional cost for those involved and have a negative impact in the mental health of professionals working in this field. Hence, their psychological wellbeing is extremely important since it highly increases their mental health when working in this field.

These health professionals must provide the adequate and quality individual care to all those coming to the institution. In order to comply with such demands, they have to listen to descriptive and cruel stories, to become witnesses of both victimization and re-victimization, experience impotence and run the risk of being assaulted by the victimizer. At the same time, the confidentiality demanded by each case usually leads to isolation, emotional silence and blockage of expressions. As a result, they begin to consider themselves vulnerable and fear that something similar might happen to them or to their loved ones. Therefore, treatment of victims of sexual abuse entails facing constant and deep stress (1). All the above-mentioned can trigger serious consequences for physical and mental health.

The Burnout Syndrome can be developed as a result of a persistent stressing emotional situation. This means that the body has very few possibilities to recover, thus reducing its capacity to continue functioning in an adequate manner. The most frequent symptoms include: sleeping disturbances, depression, headaches, myalgia, breathing problems, gastro-intestinal disorders, vertigo, dizziness, sexual disorders, menstruation disorders, and consumption of toxic substances and alcohol. It can also lead to the vicarious traumatization, the so-called effect of self-reproducing the symptoms and sufferings of victims treated, experiencing a condition similar to a post-traumatic stress. Therefore, mental exhaustion and constant alert are common. Likewise, professionals run the risk of

reviving or activating their own vulnerabilities, sufferings, fears, guilt, frustrations, sadness, impotence or anger associated with violence and abuse events so they activate their own violence experiences. That is why they frequently resort to de-personalization and de-humanization as a means and strategy to cope with the situation (2).

Management of these issues not only results in a great emotional impact, but also provides a response to a demand for help, to prevent new aggressions, to protect the victims, to achieve a change in the aggressor or to denounce him/her to the police, etc. (3). Therefore, the expected direct and timely response of these professionals is required.

These afflictions are hardly visualized or acknowledged thus making their timely treatment difficult and affecting health recovery and the quality and effectiveness of treatment to victims. Therefore, the need to promote self-care is vital.

GENERAL ASPECTS OF SELF-CARE

The authors of this study believe that self-care means the active involvement in caring for one's health and the capacity to develop behavioral strategies aimed at protecting the personal, familial and social integrity. At the same time, it requires the assistance of others to maintain commitment, creativity and competence with the protection of children and adolescents who are victims of sexual abuse.

Likewise, it is associated with protective, individual, team or institutional strategies devised by those who are in direct contact with victims of violence, who are acknowledged as professionals and teams at risk (4). To this effect, we must raise awareness about deficiencies, expectations, ailments, vulnerabilities, strengths and personal resources and take individual or collective actions and strategies for self-care and recovery of their general wellbeing. In this regard, there is a content detachment with a strong emotional impact, the need to have entertaining spaces and to prevent its contamination with labor issues, the

need to receive professional training and prevent any excessive responsibility and blaming others.

Group self-care can be dealt with from several perspectives: through the internal life of peer professionals, professional networks and external professional support; through therapeutic accompaniment, consulting, orientation, training and work. The external agent should be capable of facilitating and surfacing the individual and group capacities and use their creativity and resources to improve the performance of the group and provide answers to critical situations experienced and faced by professionals from a sound experience in this field and under supervision (5).

The care of teams and professionals at institutional level should be the responsibility of both decision-makers and institutions. The purpose is to create and ensure working conditions that could guarantee safety and integrity, spaces for the most contaminating content "detachment," and the adequate training to prevent inefficient and incompetent feelings. Barudy states that every institution incapable of protecting its professionals would be committing a double violence, namely, violence against these professionals and, therefore, against the victims they protect (6).

This particular study includes a new proposal based on psychodrama in which the coordinating team becomes an agent—outside from the institution—using the group to have access to the individual and group subjectivity and to promote individual and team self-care.

This group mechanism creates a liberating and cathartic space where workers can express their emotions and get to know themselves; and where the group is empowered to look for psychological resources to cope with the emotional situations they face. This space helps to assess the immediate reality and its members can develop different personal feelings that

will allow them to give a new meaning to their experiences at work and to promote a satisfactory emotional wellbeing and labor performance.

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

To promote the development of self-care strategies based on psychodrama in specialists working with children and adolescents who are victims of sexual abuse.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- To promote the expression of experiences, emotions and feelings associated with the work performed by these specialists.
- To consolidate abilities, capacities and resources favoring the development of self-care strategies at individual and collective level.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative methodology in accordance with the psychodrama assumptions as referential framework of this research. This allowed us to assess how they experience, construe, feel and represent the daily phenomena they live and feel.

The psychodrama is a method to coordinate groups through actions and encourage participants to dramatize significant events of their life, instead of simply recounting them. Dramatization is the main core characterized by a holistic concept of the human being from the cognitive, affective and corporal points of view. The interrelationship between the researcher-coordinator and the group under study ensures an involvement level which promotes a change—while raising awareness on subjectivity—since it contributes to create new constituent synthesis through an internal and complex process developed by the active participation of the subject beyond the limits of the psychodramatic process (7).

Hence, for the purposes of this research, its usefulness lies on the possibility to penetrate the inner world of professionals and get acquainted with their experiences, emotions and

feelings associated with their work, while promoting processes to change feelings and meanings favoring the development of professional self-care, both at individual and collective level.

The group was made up by 21 professionals working directly with children and adolescents who are victims of sexual abuse. The study was conducted at the Center for the Protection of Children and Adolescents. Out of the 21 participants, 16 were women and only 5 men. They all work at this institution: 8 psychologists, 2 defective workers, 2 police instructors, 2 recording technicians, 3 lawyers and 4 service staff members. The latter were not professionals but they were included upon request by the Center since they are in direct contact with users of services provided by this institution.

Fifteen sessions were conducted, though so far only five have been completed. They are held every fifteen days for approximately two hours. Therefore, outcomes included here are partial, since we are just conducting the first part of its application.

The study was carried out as established in the psychodrama methodology (8-9):

- Warming up. This is the required preamble before the psychodramatic action to prepare participants both physically and moodily. This can be done using different techniques and resources, namely, role games, internal psychodrama, body work, and music or oral contents in accordance with the group reaction.
 - Dramatization or action. This is when protagonists represent what is happening to them, the traumatic stories that have greatly affected them, the feelings and emotions they were incapable of expressing before. Afterwards, they represent either real or imaginary scenes of the past, the present or the future.
 - Sharing. This is the time in which they express in words the feelings and memories they experienced during the dramatized action. All participants express and reflect the impact it had on them.
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The following techniques were used in the collection of information:

- Participant and non-participant observation. The systematic and thorough observation of a social phenomenon, without manipulating or modifying it, to collect data on participants in the group dynamic through oral and extra-oral information, so as to detect evident or latent aspects. This demanded the involvement of the observer/researcher in the process itself by acting as observer and participant. Besides, the co-coordination work of the team allowed for alternating the director-coordinator and observer-narrator roles.
- Research daily report. Daily report on the psychodramatic process, that is, a record of what happened in every group session based on the participants' interventions and the dynamic achieved, as well as the transcription of what was recorded with a video camera for its further analysis.
- Content analysis. The information analysis and compilation also included the information of material productions made by the group itself, such as sociometric maps and collective drawings.

PARTIAL OUTCOMES OF THE RESEARCH

Detachment and decompression

Since the first sessions, with the creation of group standards, participants realized that they were in a different space where they would not be judged for what they expressed and instead would find the required emotional support in case of any emotional outburst.

The need for having spaces like this was evidenced by the prompt acceptance of the proposal, thus promoting the active participation of the group members who managed to join this task since the very beginning. Therefore, they expressed the emotional content

which is frequently repressed. This allows the detachment and decompression so much needed to attain a psychological wellbeing.

The first scenes were mainly associated with emotions caused by the direct contact with children and adolescents who are victims. In this regard, they expressed the anger they felt for not being able to do anything, the fear of thinking that their families could be involved in similar situations and their deep despair when realizing that these aggressions will always exist—which is one of the reasons why maternity is frequently postpone due to fear of being involved in these situations.

Most women expressed their distrust of men, even of their partners, since they generalize this behavior due to the large number of aggressions committed by men they see. Sometimes, they feel guilt for not being able to do anything to cope with their victims' reality.

Likewise, they expressed feelings of insecurity, inefficiency and incompetence associated with the lack of professional training to deal with some cases. In this regard, the use of psychodramatic techniques enables members of the group to realize that professional upgrading depends, to a great extent, on them. This results in a personal commitment to encourage individual study and constant post-graduate training.

Throughout the sessions, professionals expressed the distress they feel due to disagreements among members of the group and the negative effects of mistakes committed by others.

Tiredness, mental exhaustion and stress, as well as physical conditions such as headaches and stomachaches were among the symptoms detected through their corporal expressions, thus revealing the disturbances caused by the lack of self-care in these professionals.

However, during the sessions, we tried to compensate these dissatisfactions with labor motivations. This was very useful, since we managed to set their responsibility limits and

reduce self-guilt while highlighting the humane, useful and sensitive aspects of their complex work.

In general terms, they symbolically charged against everything affecting them: the institution, authorities, fears, and insecurities. Thus, they experienced a catharsis and achieved a relief which surfaced in comments like "this is what I needed to feel better" and "I said things that I might never have said in other places and this has made me feel good."

They realized that sharing their problems made them feel that they were not alone; that the freshness and flexibility of psychodramatic techniques allowed them to laugh of things that so much affected them before; and that they were able to assess the same problems through different perspectives.

In general, this catharsis helped them not only to externalize their repressed emotions, but also to integrate and surface their discomfort, change its sense and, therefore, find new meanings.

New support networks

Likewise, finding themselves among their peers favored the understanding of the group about the dramatized conflicts without too many explanations. Therefore, the group managed to restrain narrations thus preventing uncontrolled outbursts.

During the sharing session, on several occasions they expressed their gratitude for having this space where they were able to leave behind all their concerns before going back home without contaminating relations with their couples and families that had previously caused family conflicts.

The group managed not only to establish a support network for dealing with work issues but also to channel family problems associated mainly with family communication problems, the

emotional cost of the absence of significant persons and the deterioration of relations with some members.

In this regard, the psychodramatic work was based on the desired family concept leading to a reflection on the roles played by each one within the family. Despite the fact that some contents were not closely associated with the labor field, they are equally important for professional self-care due to the decisive influence that inadequate management of personal conflicts can have on work performance.

Therefore, the merits of team work were very useful since through the represented roles played in the dramatized scenes, the group expressed their experiences, built new analysis references which contributed to provide new solutions to old situations and promoted the creativity and spontaneity of participants.

On average, they stated that they found the support they needed since the beginning and what was previously a personal problem, now could be solved and shared with the group. They have even realized that now they do not have to wait for the group meeting since they can do it any time with their own work team. Hence, they have incorporated to their daily life everything they learned within the group, so this is of crucial importance because, after the sessions, professionals can implement the individual and collective self-care without external agents helping them.

Learning to take an inner look and understand ourselves

Bearing in mind that self-knowledge is one of the indispensable premises to promote psychological changes to new life styles in all sessions we spent some time to empower the members' development. Though this can be a very complex task, the outcomes achieved constitute an example to evidence how psychodrama helps us to take an inner look and understand ourselves.

This was evidenced in one of the group members who stated that she has always been very shy and never imagined that through her active participation in this space she could establish a link with the rest of the group in such an uninhibited fashion. She also said that she should have more self-confidence.

Likewise, another member of the group stated that she had always felt out of place among workers. However, working with the group made her "realized" that she needed to open up to personal relations since she recognized that sometimes she was too uncommunicative in her relations with others.

As can be seen, both cases showed a willingness to change everything that hindered their own development. This willingness to begin modifying what affected them and become more resilient is fundamental for self-care.

New abilities and capacities

Despite the fact that, since the beginning, the group was participating, we detected a certain tension and embarrassment to relax which are common at the beginning of an unknown warming-up activity.

Throughout the development of the sessions, most of the participants became more relaxed and flexible without feeling ridicule. The wellbeing expressed by most of the members resulted in acceptance and relaxation during the sessions and even some of them confessed having applied the techniques learned at home or during their leisure time.

As a significant outcome, their discourse revealed that this had become a strategy that made them more tolerant to frustration, since they felt much more flexible.

Likewise, they declared that resorting to self-relaxation they were in a better position to cope with physical distress whenever they were treating a victim and less predisposed when facing the next one.

Though most of them used this resource as a positive tool, we should say that not all of them were able to achieve this condition, since they were reluctant to abandon their concerns, fears and distress. These are persons with a highly controlling personality and difficulties to expose themselves in front of others.

Getting acquainted with our group

In the first two sessions the absence of group integration became evident: it was very hard for them to touch each other, they rejected any eye contact, and were indifferent to others' stories. Consequently, certain well-differentiated subgroups became evident. "I have realized that we should establish closer relations. Despite working together, we do not know each other."

Assisted by sociometrics, they became aware of this problem and adopted a positive attitude to change this situation. More or less during the fifth session the group was more united, the selection of tasks was more spontaneous and detached from the subgroups previously perceived. They expressed that the sessions had helped them to know each other, even to share aspects of their private life which were previously unknown to them.

We believe that this has a positive influence on professional performance since, as frequently seen in this kind of work, violent manifestations can be frequently observed among specialists due to their inadequately channeled distress and anguish. Therefore, achieving harmony and a better knowledge of our co-workers is very useful to better cope with difficult situations.

CONCLUSIONS

The results achieved throughout these sessions allowed us to reach partial conclusions concerning the significance of using the psychodramatic methodology to promote an internal dynamic in professionals working with victims of sexual abuse because it unveils emotions, experiences and feelings faced in this kind of work. Group experience shows the usefulness

of promoting self-care for it facilitates the expression of evident and latent contents affecting their labor life and allows professionals to integrate themselves to the group and develop the adequate personal relations, self-knowledge and empathy—among other abilities and capacities—so much needed to promote active care and health.

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