

The use of psychodrama with sexual offenders

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Abstract

This article explores the psychotherapeutic work with sexual offenders, convicted by the Brazilian justice system for rape (sexual abuse), committed against children and adolescents. These interventions were developed at the 'Reversing the Path Project', run by the Centre for Study, Research and Expansions of the Juvenile Village, at the Pontifical Catholic University of Goiás.

Keywords: Sexual offenders of children and adolescents, sexual abuse, psychodrama, treatment methods.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence involves several actors: family members who cannot protect their children, the sexual offenders (SO) and the own children and adolescents who are victims of the situation. Since this topic has been addressed by the Brazilian society, especially

after the publication of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA)¹, in 1990, the psychological care was concentrated on the victim and the non-aggressor relatives, but today it is stated the importance of the SO care to the disruption of the violence cycle (SCHMICKLER, 2006).

It is worth pointing out the little national literature on the subject. In a research conducted in the years of 2006/2007, Esber (2007; 2009) found the incipient Brazilian scientific production on SO in contrast to international production. It is, therefore, essential to publish this and other experiences in order to contribute to new studies and new practices, especially in the psychodramatic approach.

The attendances were conducted at the Odenir Guimarães Penitentiary (POG), in the municipality of Aparecida de Goiânia, in Goiás. It proposed the promotion of a greater understanding of the phenomenon and the theoretical studies, focusing on the subjectivity of the PSV, in order to assist in the prevention, contributing for the discontinuity of the circle of transgenerational sexual abuse (SCHMICKLER, 2006; FURNISS, 1993), preventing future recurrences and protecting children and adolescents. Based on this, this work is guided by the qualitative research methodology and aims at constructing a methodology of psychotherapeutic care for SO against children and adolescents under the psychodramatic approach.

Initially it was necessary to obtain authorization from public officials to carry out the attendance at the prison agency, which was done through the psychology sector. As it was a continuity project of the action of service for SO, the staff of the prison agency already knew about it² and allowed the accomplishment of the work.

The selection of subjects was conducted based on the survey carried out in 2006 by the university team, updated in this step and sought to encompass the largest possible variety of subjects: SO who had been sentenced due to violence against boys and girls, due to only one case and several cases; who had and had not provoked the death of the victim; SO with and without family relation to the victim; who had recently been sent to prison and others who had been there for a longer time; SO that had already been attended in other stages of the project and others that had not met before.

Based on these criteria, six subjects were selected according to the project's goal, between 21 and 59 years of age, with varying degrees of relationship with the victims: father, grandfather and unknown. Then the invitation to participate and the signing of the free and clarified consent term was made. The attendances were carried out in specialized rooms of the psychology team in the penitentiary. The sessions happened once a week and lasted 50 minutes, from May to December 2008.

¹ This is Law No. 8,069, of July 13, 1990, created to replace the code of minors and to ensure the rights of children and adolescents in Brazil (Brazil, 1990). The major breakthrough caused by ECA's institution was the new conception of children and adolescents as subjects of rights.

² This service was initiated in the year 2004, with the "Programa Repropondo" (Re-proposing Program): psychotherapeutic attendance to perpetrators of sexual violence, developed by the "Projeto Invertendo a Rota" (Inverting the Route Project): actions to confront sexual violence against children in Goiás, done by the Catholic University of Goiás, and had its continuity in the year 2006, sponsored by the Special Secretary of Human Rights, from the Presidency of the Republic.

PSYCHODRAMA – THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEW POSSIBILITIES

The psychotherapeutic method used in this work was the psychodrama, individual attendance, performed by a duo of psychotherapists formed by a director and an auxiliary ego, called functional unit (ROJAS-BERMUDEZ, 1997).

The psychodrama is defined by Jacob Levy Moreno (1889-1974) as the "method that penetrates the truth of the soul through action" (1974, p. 106). The action is the main tool of the psychodramatic theory and is anchored in the concepts of spontaneity-creativity, theory of roles, tele, philosophy of the moment (the "here and now"), and by the man's vision of Moreno who conceives him "in his double dimension individual and relational" (MARTIN, 1996, p. 11). For Moreno, "the man is a cosmic being [...], responsible for all the universe, forms of being and values" (1974, p. 21), and should not be limited by the psychological, social or biological concepts of life.

In this perspective of a conception of a spontaneous-creative man, responsible, who plays roles, that is inserted into a world of interpersonal relationships and interacts in the "here and now", was elaborated the strategy of this work, whose main task was to favor the meeting (MORENO, 1992).

The eight actors, psychotherapists and subjects, with all the strengths and all weaknesses, were in a space (prison), which is degrading to any being, where other actors (prison guards, police officers, staff, other inmates etc.) were also found with their forces and weaknesses. In this place, the climate is tense, the living conditions are precarious, social interaction and the norms of conduct obey a code of hybrid ethics: the prison system and the crime one.

How to deal with all this? How to deal with the stereotypes of "monster", "Pervert", "maniac", that surround the SO? How to face the distrust in relation to the psychotherapists³ of these so stigmatized people by the crimes they have committed? How to cope with the emotions raised by the "truth" printed in the criminal proceedings and the "truth" of the subjects' speech (ESBER, 2009) which, in the vast majority of the performed attendances, denied the practiced act?

In face of many questions and challenges, there is only one way out: the human being. Without the focus on human beings, the psychotherapeutic work with SO cannot be performed to satisfaction.

BETTER UNDERSTANDING SO

You can't conceive any SO in the same way. They are different factors that lead a

³ In POG, the main role of psychologists in the institution is the elaboration of the psychological report which will allow, or not, a penalty progression, or even the conquest of liberty for those in treatment. As the role of psychotherapists in this project was different, it was necessary to clarify this issue in order to encourage the formation of a therapeutic bond.

subject to practice sexual violence against children and adolescents. It may be related to pedophilia, which according to the DSM-IV and CID-10⁴, is one of the sexual disorders, the paraphilia. The pedophile has sexual preference for children and pre pubertal, that may be female, male, or both sexes. Still in the field of psychiatric classifications, individuals with antisocial personality disorder (psychopaths) who do not obey social rules, do not experience guilt for the acts practiced. Usually, subjects with this diagnosis do not accept attending attendees because of the difficulty they have to form bonds, a fundamental condition for any psychotherapy treatment.

However, there are also other factors that can lead an adult to commit sexual violence against children and adolescents. It may be a matter of power, in which sexual pleasure is closely linked to the domination of the other person. It may also be related to the sexual immaturity of the individual, which contributes to their preference for children and adolescents.

So the possible way is to understand each individual in his own particular story. Accepting him as a human being in distress that needs help. In this sense, it is essential to put aside the labels placed by society and to transpose the barrier of common sense and social stigmas.

FIRST SESSIONS

One of the first psychotherapist concerns when initiating a psychotherapeutic process is to establish an interpersonal relationship in which there is trust and respect. This is the principle of the link to be co-constructed throughout the process.

The work proposal, in the first three sessions, was to use psychodramatic techniques and games that assist in co-construction of the link, in obtaining data from the subjects's world, of its social atom (MORENO, 1992), biographical data, as well as assessing its dramatic quality and ability to be spontaneous-creative. For this, self presentation techniques, social atom and life history interview were used.

PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC PROCESS

The psychodrama gives to the SO a psychotherapy treatment in which dramatic action is the main tool of work and offers the patient the opportunity to live, in the "as if", the social, psychodramatic (MORENO, 2002), imaginary (NAFFAH NETO, 1997) and fantasy (PERAZZO, 1994) roles, which inhabit their psychosocial universe.

In practice, what does this experience in the life of a "diagnosed SO" as a pedophile mean, for example? The experience reported in this work allows us to say that the patient becomes conscious of his way of existing and acting in the world. Taking

⁴ Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In English, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) and International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Health-related Problems (CID-10).

responsibilities in face of the acts practiced and being able to dream, imagine and make plans to live a healthier life. Will he cease to feel sexual desire? Probably not, but he can recognize that desire and decide which direction he follow other than the sexual violence.

One of the subjects, Pedro⁵ reports: "It [the desire] has a weakness. [...] The weak point is to sit next to a boy, it is one of the weak points." Albeit he claims that his weakness is being close to children and adolescents, Pedro insisted on the argument that he could control his sexual desire. Only after experiencing the two situations (getting near × staying away) in the psychodramatic context, he became aware that the best strategy was to keep distance. In the "as if", Peter was able to experience his conflict through the role play game⁶ and transcend his rational discourse, integrating him into a experiencing experience. It was not the rationality of Peter that showed him the need to stay away from teenagers to not succumb to the desire, but a concrete experience, a purifying experience called the integration catharsis. Referring to the performance of roles and the integration catharsis, Moreno (1974) says:

When, finally, [the protagonist] embodies the people of his hallucinations, they lose not only their strength and energy, but still embodies that strength in himself. Your own self has the opportunity to relocate and reorder; to restructure the elements scattered by evil forces, forming a set and, with this, gaining a sense of strength and relief, a catharsis of integration, purification by "complementation". (p. 113).

In a theoretical-didactic description of the transcribed session, it can be said that Pedro conducted a mental catharsis (his rational speech), went through a catharsis of action (when he plays the roles) to finally accomplish a catharsis of integration (taking consciousness, integrating reason and emotion) and understanding that a new way to be/act is possible.

THE CONSCIOUS DENIAL

Some SO deny the authorship of the crime. And, in this survey, denial was present in most subjects. This is a difficult situation in the psychotherapy process. The resource used in this matter was, through the creation of characters and situations imagined by the subjects, to provide those who would allow themselves to experience new roles, a new state of being, in a universe without trials, made of respect, understanding and welcoming.

According to Calvente (2002), the origin of the character is subjectivity and is

⁵ All the names here used are fictitious in order to preserve the identities of the subjects.

⁶ Role-play game is the dramatization itself, in which the protagonist (the subject) plays the roles of the various characters of his plot. In the scene to which the transcription above reports, Pedro played the roles of the desire, the temptation, the beautiful teenager, of Pedro near the teenager, of Pedro away from the teenager, etc.

linked to fantasy, imagination and the environment.

Through the performance of roles, protected by a character, some subjects were able to reveal their secrets, even though, moments later, they went back to being defensive. This would guarantee their survival in the system.

Another subject, Cláudio, denied having committed sexual assault and defended himself by means of a character: "Everyone likes me". This character settled in Cláudio by suppressing his private person, compromising his spontaneity, especially when he felt threatened. As a psychotherapeutic strategy, to completely distance himself from this defensive cultural preservation, therapists suggested the creation of a new character, an "unknown SO", a random father who had abused his own daughter.

In a scene in which the "unknown SO" character is embodied, Cláudio plays the role of father and, in front of the daughter (abused by him), reveals his secret: "I want to forget what happened". However, shortly thereafter, even acting in a fantasy role, he goes back to denying the abuse: "Because you know your father has never done that to you".

It is important to emphasize that even in this process of denial, the subject is able to give new responses to ancient cultural conserves. As well as Pedro, who thought he could control his desire when close to teenagers, Cláudio also believed that he could live alone again with his daughter with no problems whatsoever. In the final sessions of the treatment, his understanding was different: "To live with me now, I do not want"; and he justifies: "That's why it happened, I was arrested for that thing that happened to her."

This leads to believe that the process of denial of the subject does not impede the psychotherapeutic work, it does not restrict its spontaneity and its ability to give new and appropriate responses. As can be seen, the experience of the use of characters in the conduct of this work has led the subject, even denying the sexual abuse, to change his behaviour.

THE REQUEST FOR FORGIVENESS

It is crucial that the SO assume full responsibility for their sexual actions in the abuse (FURNISS, 1993). The request for forgiveness is one of the ways of assuming such responsibility.

Cláudio, in the dramatization of the aforementioned scene, as the "Unknown SO" character, assumes the role of his daughter and lives in his own flesh the conflict of this role. Not only he forgives the father for the abuse: "I just want to forgive you", he also forgives himself: "And forgive myself too," for being blamed for the arrest of the father: "Because of me you have been arrested."

It is a very significant this request for forgiveness. It can be seen in it the possibility of a new perspective of life, since it was possible to bring to consciousness internalized feelings that are not from the fantasy world but from the real world of the subject. Calvente says (2002, p. 26) that the character "contains unconscious and conscious aspects [that] integrate relational aspects". Therefore, the request for

forgiveness to the victim signals to the assumption of responsibility for the act practiced; it signals to a new way of understanding the child/adolescent, respecting it as a subject of rights.

SO ASSUMES THE ROLE OF THE VICTIM

An important moment of psychotherapy is when the SO assumes both the role of the victim and the childhood's victim (if it is the case). He realises that the child is helpless and how vulnerable she is and how much the adult has power over her.

In the case of Pedro, the subject who assumed the sexual abuses, living the role of victim was not so difficult, mainly because he was already in a psychotherapeutic process for four years⁷. However, it was important to realize that the responsibility of the sexual abuse is entirely of the adult. In the early sessions, Pedro believed that the victim liked him and shared with the victim the responsibility of the occurrence of sexual abuse. It is what you can observe in the third session, in a dramatization, Pedro speaks to the abused teenager:

But I recognize the mistake I committed, do you recognize it too, right? And you've practiced that thing, too, since you were 11, you've practiced that thing with your cousin, you told me, didn't you? So I didn't beat you, you would hug me, would tell me that you loved me.

In the seventh session, Pedro dramatizes a scene in which he, aged thirteen (the same age as his victims), he is sexually abused by an older homosexual, 43 years old, owner of a pleasure house where he was mowing the lawn. He dramatizes the whole scene, from the adult's invitation, the money offer, the will to say no, the feeling of disgust along with an excitement and the pleasure when the adult touches on his sexual organ:

I'm feeling trapped, I've been feeling trapped in the claws of the predator... It's a huge claw over me, do you understand? Then I thought, Gee, if I say no, then I'm going to let him down, will I? What about the money? You're going to take my money? I'm keeping this money here, you know what I

⁷ Pedro has been attended since the first stage of the Re-proposing Program, from the beginning of the Inverting the Route Project.

mean? If I say no, you will send me away. What do I do? [...] Then, when he started doing, having oral sex on me, then I got more excited, then when I let it happen, accomplish what he wanted.

Feelings are contradictory: you do not want to practice the sexual act with the adult, but at the same time you feel pleasure and cannot deny it.

The twelfth session brings back the scene when he was abused. With the support of the psychotherapist/director, it says, in the dramatization, to the owner of the pleasure house:

I didn't want this to happen, right? I didn't want this to happen, I didn't want you to do this to me because I was feeling scared and disgusted, do you understand? I didn't want this to happen, right? I said yes, but I didn't want to.

In this session Pedro was able to understand that the teenager, even when he does not want, may not be able to refuse. Thus, he assumes responsibility for the committed act. In the dramatization, he says to the teenager who had abused:

I have to tell you that I was wrong, I was wrong to have practiced sexual harassment with you. It wasn't wrong to like you, It wasn't wrong to be your friend, but It was wrong to have sexual harassment with you, you could have prevented it. It was wrong to have taken you away from your family [...].

For this conclusion of Pedro, it was crucial to dramatize, because in the "as if" it allowed him to contact all the excitement of the sexual abuse experienced, both in the role of the victim and in the sexual offender. While speaking, he was able to control the lines and rationalize the explanations for the committed acts. In the dramatizing, the whole emotional burden arose and it is no longer possible to remain peaceful with the given explanation. The facts can be interpreted in different ways, but not feelings. These are not programmable. As Moreno States (1974), the experienced catharsis of integration allows the subject to reorder and give new responses to old situations.

In another SO example, when assuming the role of the victim, he changed his understanding of it. Cláudio, in the role of the victim, his daughter, stated: "I ask you father to not do this again, I felt bad that day, I want to ask you father to not do this to me ever again". The subject himself, Cláudio, replies, now in the role of the father, the perpetrator of the sexual violence: "That will never happen again, now I promise it won't. I'm going to take you back to your mother's, stay there with her, it's better for you and *for* me, you agree with me?"

In order to create the SO character, Cláudio uses his imagination and also unaware aspects of his life experience (CALVENTE, 2002). In this sense, it can be stated that the dramatization mobilizes the subject's profound emotions and allows the change of behavior. Besides, the feelings present in the dramatization are not invented, the subject himself brought to the scene the SO role (even consciously saying that he had not sexually abused his daughter).

Dramatization is an opportunity to better understand the victim's side. Most of the time, the SO does not actually perceive the child as a person, as a bearer of sentiment. To assume in the "as if" the role of the child victim of sexual abuse, the subject will construct a character using his imagination closely related to his life, as stated Calvente (2002). By inverting the roles, the adult assumes the role of the child and speaks from his/her perspective.

PREPARING FOR THE EXIT OF THE PRISON AGENCY

In this work, one of the goals was also to work on the end of the psychotherapeutic process. In the last session, the subjects were asked for a self-presentation and also an evaluation of the work performed and each of them received a feedback. This dimension has been present at various times of the psychotherapeutic process, alerting the need for a preparation of subjects for this moment. One of the subjects reveals that he committed the sexual abuse again when he left prison, because he was not prepared to confront the world.

These were the last steps given by the subjects and psychotherapists, during this SO attendee. I cannot be guessed what are the next steps to be given by these actors. It is widely known, that the psychodramatic encounter happened, and that it was fruitful in changes. Solidly conquered changes in a complex process of knowing and letting itself to be known, anchored in technical, methodological and ethical resources of the Moreniano method.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It can be stated that the goals were achieved. Through psychodrama, it was possible to construct a methodology of psychotherapeutic care to sentenced SOs, having as the central axis the principles of the meeting, tele (indispensable in the formation of links), of dramatic action, the performance of roles, the creation of characters and the spontaneity-creativity. Through these principles, it was possible for subjects to face their greatest fears, myths and prejudices.

The richness of the psychodramatic method in psychotherapeutic attendance of SO was demonstrated by the results achieved, proven in the voices of the subjects who evaluated the work performed. They claimed to have been: "strong", "faster", "important"; "reeducation is this", "I learned a lot", "you've reached the problem" etc.

This work was accomplished with subjects who were suffering due to the practice of sexual violence against children and adolescents. Despite the fact that in the beginning of the process, they were unaware of the child's suffering, they felt guilty for what they did. In this sense, it was possible to accomplish the work. With subjects who do not feel guilt and who are not willing to think about the act practiced, psychotherapeutic work may be fairly limited. This is one of the limits of the psychotherapy. The subject must want to do the psychotherapeutic process, it is not possible to force him to participate. In some cases, the subject can be sensitized to participate in the process, but we can never force him.

On the psychodramatic stage, through the performance of roles (social, psychodramatic, imaginary and fantasy) it was possible for the subjects to laugh and weep at the same time; to object and to be challenged, to forgive and also to be forgiven. It was possible to unite in the same context the voices of the process and the voices of the subject, giving them the human dimension that the harsh reality of the prison system does not recognise.

Despite the results achieved, it is important to emphasize that this is a small contribution for new studies and new research to be developed broadening discussions and questions on the subject.

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