

Reality, Space and Time: The Challenges in Online Psychodrama

Realidad, espacio y tiempo: los desafíos del psicodrama en línea



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Abstract

In considering online psychodrama, two essential questions arise: how to achieve adequate involvement of the protagonist in the experiences in surplus reality on the virtual psychodrama stage and how to overcome the risks of insufficient or excessive involvement.

On one hand, when sitting in front of the screen, there is a risk for incomplete reproduction of the traumatic event in the surplus reality and insufficient emotional involvement. On other hand, there is a risk of too strong emotional involvement and immersion in the reproduced trauma in surplus reality, leading to detachment from the here and now reality. No less is the risk of overlapping the constructed surplus reality with the reproduced traumatic event, with the here and now reality of the protagonist, connected also with a risk for too deep sinking in emotions. We are exploring the answers to these questions in four presented cases from practicing training, when it was temporary moved in an online platform.

Keywords

Online psychodrama, Virtual room, Surplus reality, Psychodrama stage

Resumen

Al plantearse realizar psicodrama en línea, surgen dos preguntas esenciales: cómo lograr una adecuada participación del protagonista en las experiencias de realidad suplementaria derivadas de un escenario psicodramático virtual y, cómo superar los riesgos de una implicación insuficiente o excesiva. Por un lado, al sentarse frente a la pantalla, existe el riesgo de una reproducción incompleta del acontecimiento traumático mediante realidad suplementaria y una insuficiente implicación emocional. Por otro lado, existe el riesgo de una implicación emocional demasiado intensa, con la consecuente inmersión excesiva en el trauma recreado con realidad suplementaria, lo que puede ocasionar un distanciamiento del Aquí y Ahora. Un riesgo nada desdeñable, por tanto, es la superposición entre la realidad suplementaria construida con ayuda del acontecimiento traumático que está reproduciéndose y la realidad surgida del Aquí y Ahora del protagonista, algo que enlaza además con otro riesgo, el de un profundo naufragio emocional. Exploramos las respuestas a estas preguntas a través de cuatro casos presentados durante prácticas de formación, en el período en que se trasladó dicha formación a una plataforma en línea.

Palabras clave

Palabras Clave: Psicodrama En Línea, Sala Virtual, Realidad Suplementaria, Etapa De Psicodrama

INTRODUCTION

For almost two years until now, during the peak periods of Covid-19 pandemic waves, the psychodrama training in our center moved to an online format for several months. One of the dimensions from which the effectiveness of psychodrama work depends is the degree of involvement of the protagonist in the experiences in the surplus reality. In the surplus reality created by the protagonist on the psychodrama stage, the protagonist recreates, explores and processes their significant event. Typically, the director follows the protagonist through the process. A therapeutic change in the protagonist's emotional and cognitive experiential world could be achieved if the change process takes place on sensorimotor, kinesthetic, bodily level. This can only happen if the protagonist is sufficiently involved in the emerging experiences.

In online psychodrama the risks are in both directions: On one hand, when sitting in front of the screen, there is a risk for incomplete reproduction of the traumatic event in the surplus reality and insufficient emotional involvement. On the other hand, there is a risk of too strong emotional involvement and immersion in the reproduced trauma

in surplus reality, leading to detachment from the *here and now* reality. No less is the risk of overlapping and impossibility to separate the constructed surplus reality with the reproduced traumatic event, from the here and now reality of the protagonist, also connected with sinking into emotions too deeply.

GOAL

The goal of this article is to answer the following research questions: In online psychodrama, how can the director adequately involve the protagonist in the experiences in surplus reality on the virtual psychodrama stage? How can the director overcome the risks of insufficient or excessive involvement? We are exploring the answers to these questions in four cases presented from practice training in Psychodrama Center Orpheus, when it was temporarily moved to an online platform. Some cases were successful, some not enough; the goal is to learn from our own positive and negative experiences.

In accordance with the requirement to maintain the confidentiality of the participants in the described sessions, their names were changed and their consent was obtained.

METHODOLOGY

This paper refers to the data collected from the written notes of the two trainers of each of the three groups, with additions or corrections from the trainees' notes. Data were analyzed in the staff meetings with the co-trainer as well as in the process analysis session with the whole group. This allowed the information in all written notes to be compared, corrected and the missed moments to be fulfilled. Some months after online training weekends, all group members were invited to give written feedback for their experience in this way of work. Some reflections from the protagonists of these sessions are included here.

These are the first four cases that, in the first months, challenged us with the difficulties of working with psychodrama online. They were discussed, analyzed, and from them we learned lessons for our next protagonist-centered works. They do not exhaust all the difficulties and risks in this form of practicing psychodrama, nor all the possibilities for overcoming them. Their research needs to continue.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to David Kipper (2001), a prerequisite for effective psychodrama therapy is the ability, in the therapy room, to produce experiences that are of the

same emotional and cognitive quality as those that occur naturally in life, activating the sensorimotor, kinesthetic, emotional and intellectual functions of the brain (p137–152). In psychodrama this is achieved in a surplus reality, built on the psychodramatic stage, in which the boundaries of time and space fall away and the events are reproduced and experienced as *here and now*. For Kipper (2007), the goal of psychodrama therapy is to facilitate the correction, reformulation and reorganization of the “pool” of significant client experiences (p. 41).

We have many possibilities when practicing psychodrama in a real, three-dimensional therapy room, such as to organize its space in a way similar to the space in the protagonist's memory of the event and to produce experiences that are of the same emotional and cognitive quality as those that occur naturally in life. By sitting in front of the two-dimensional screen of a personal computer, the possibilities to wake up their sensorimotor and kinesthetic perceptions are significantly reduced. Because of the trauma's effect on the entire human system, the memories remain on the *sensorimotor level*. This is why Psychodrama is particularly appropriate for traumatized clients (Kipper, 1998). With their research, van der Kolk et al. (1996) demonstrated that such (emotionally) overwhelming experiences have never been properly coded and, therefore, could have not been removed from intellectually coded memory. Rather than being repressed, they are stuck on the sensorimotor level. Interpersonal neurobiologists agree that the most important finding of the century has been that experience has the power to change the brain throughout the entire lifespan (Cozolino, 2014; Siegel, 2012). This means new corrective experiences have the power to renegotiate the impacts of past trauma (Giacomucci & Stone, 2019).

The surplus reality (Kipper, 2001) arises from the temporary and protected removal of external and internal psychological boundaries. As Kipper (2001) emphasizes, it is extremely important to remember that this removal of boundaries and inhabitation in surplus reality can only happen in the action space of the psychodrama stage, in the therapeutic room, during the psychodrama session (pp. 137–152). Returning to the group space during sharing restores the boundaries of real time and space and is a smooth transition, a preparation for a return to the external reality of everyday life.

As Kellermann (2000) emphasizes, *involvement and distance* seem to be the two main forces that evolve around the central axis of balance within each session of psychodrama (p. 36). During the traumatic re-enactment, the director had to control and keep the balance between tension and relaxation, involvement and distancing.

In this way, in the midst of emotional upheaval, traumatized clients are helped again to find a sense of safety, to reconnect with themselves and others and to cognitively process their overwhelming experiences.

DESCRIPTION OF CASE 1

The Risk of Insufficient Emotional Involvement

The group member Sonya, living far away from her parents, upon hearing that two other participants would not participate that weekend, shared that her parents would celebrate 50 years together in the same weekend. She wanted to go to celebrate with them and to honour them, but after long hesitation, because of her responsibility to the group, she decided to stay home and to be with the group. Sonya said disappointedly, “I am very upset and confused. When an engagement is made, it must be fulfilled! I fulfilled it, I am here, and what about the others? My parents taught me that I must always put others first.”

The work started with the first scene of the inner dialog of the protagonist between the self-blaming part and the self-justifying part. After a *key*, discovered through successful doubling, came a memory from five-year-old Sonya in the kindergarten. Generally, Sonya had an agreement with her parents for two different behaviour options if neither of them would be on time to take her home. They negotiated in the morning which one to follow that day. The first option was to wait until they came to pick her up; the second one was to go home with the parents of the neighbour's child. One day they did not come on time, and she could not remember which one she was told to follow that day.

On the stage, in the second scene, through the monologue technique, we heard the hesitation of the five-year-old child, “If I go with the parents of a neighbour's child, and they come, and they see that I am not there, they will be very angry with me. If I don't go home with the child next door, they'll worry I'm gone.” In such hesitation the child waited a long time alone with the last teacher, and in the end she went home alone. The parents were very angry with her, and here came the third scene presented on the online screen—the punishment—Sonya was put in the corner with her face to the wall, standing silent, during her parents' dinner, speaking between themselves, but not with her.

The director (the author) asked the protagonist to describe the room from her childhood—in the way that we all imagine it. On the screen stage with camera on were only the protagonist, and the two auxiliary egos, in the roles of her mother and father. They eat dinner and

converse as if nothing happened that day and they are alone in the room, not looking at their child.

The director asked Sonya to turn her camera towards one of the corners in her current room. Then she invited her to enter in the role of five-year-old child just after coming back from kindergarten alone, to receive the order for punishment from her father and to go to the wall corner, to stay there in the same way as she did in her childhood. The protagonist stands with her face to the wall, silent and listen the regular conversation of her parents (everyone of auxiliary egos speaking from his/her own small screen). After that came silence in the virtual room for several long minutes. The director asked Sonya in her role of five-year-old, looking at corner wall, what happened in her. She was in tears and answered, “They don't see me. As if I don't exist.”

The director told Sonya that now her parents are listening to her and she could tell them everything that she didn't tell them there, but she needed to tell.

Sonya, through tears, cried out to her parents, “Look at me! I am here, I am your child! You don't care about me! You didn't ask me what I experienced waiting for you alone with the teacher for such a long time, wondering how to prevent your anger! And what to do so you don't worry about me. I was thinking about you, what to do, to be the best for you!” Sonya expressed all her pain and anger to her parents as a child, looking to the two auxiliary egos in the roles of her parents.

The director encouraged the protagonist to tell them how all these will reflect on her growing up and doing everything in the best way for the others, but not for herself.

In the present role of protagonist, Sonya explained to them how the whole of her life she was doing exactly the same, as they taught her—everything to be the best for others, not caring for herself, including this weekend when she is with the group, instead of doing what she would like—being with them, celebrating their anniversary.

After these catharses the director invited the protagonist to go back to the scene just before the punishment, and to take one by one the roles of her parents, knowing the risk for their child growing up with such education and punishments. Both of them (Sonya in their roles), realized how much suffering this attitude would create in their child. Crying, they apologized to her, told her how much they love her, and how much they wanted her to grow up to be a good and responsible person, but also to be happy, healthy, caring for herself. Instead of punishing

her, they apologized to her for the long wait alone with the teacher. They thanked her for the courage to come back alone, and how proud they are of her. Again, in her role of five-year-old, she heard these words from her parents.

The director verbally accompanied Sonya in walking into her room, as if travelling through the years until the present, calling out the number of years from five to her current age, growing with this new experience. With this new experience she entered into the last scene—redoing the first scene of her inner dialogue between her two parts. In this dialogue, this time the protagonist made a new decision on the topic of responsibility to others and to her self-care.

Later Sonya wrote, “At our first online meeting, I had to do personal work. To my surprise, I didn’t feel any difference from working live, in person. The work was done in the best way.”

DISCUSSION

In the described case, in the surplus reality as a five-year-old child, presented on the online psychodrama stage, standing in the corner of her real room, the sensorimotor and kinesthetic perceptions of the protagonist awakened. Her experience was so close to her real experience *then and there*, that this evoked all of her strong emotions, suppressed feelings and words from that time. After their expression in the catharsis scenes as a child, now, as an adult, Sonya entered into a corrective emotional experience by redoing her early life situation in a new, healthy way. Reintegration of this new experience was conducted through travelling through the years with it, which contributed to correcting and reorganizing her pool of significant experiences (Kipper, 2001). In the final scene, in redoing the first scene of inner dialog Sonya achieved a new response to the old problem, which was called “spontaneity” by Moreno (1964). The therapeutic change in online psychodrama was achieved under the influence of a set of therapeutic factors: action catharsis, action insight, action learning, (Moreno, 1982) corrective emotional experience and reintegration of the new experience (Kipper, 2007), the same as in psychodrama in a real room.

In the virtual therapy room, the prerequisite for effective psychodrama therapy producing experiences of the same emotional and cognitive quality as those that occur naturally in life, could be fulfilled through using all resources of the physical space of the real room, from where the protagonist participates. In a two-dimensional virtual room, we have to use the three-dimensional space of the real room of the protagonist, including all

physical sources of sensations, in order to activate the sensorimotor, kinesthetic, emotional and intellectual functions of the brain to make the experience vivid and real enough.

DESCRIPTION OF CASES 2 AND 3 Too Deep Emotionally Involvement in The Surplus Reality

Case 2

In the morning group session, the member Katya shared that she felt emotionally shaken because her son from her first marriage, with whom she had a difficult relationship and many guilty feelings, was coming back the next day after a long time living abroad. During the warming up exercise, named “Time Machine”, directed by the trainee director, Katya was silent, deeply moved, with tears running down her face.

The Time Machine transferred participants ten years ahead, on the same day in 2031, and everyone was invited to tell where they would arrive, with whom they would be there, what they would be doing and, from that position, to give advice to themselves in 2021.

Katya waited for all other participants to do their vignettes, and when the trainee director asked her where she saw herself in 2031, after some silence came her answer, “I am gone. I was looking for myself and I didn’t find myself.” The trainee director tensed but asked what she saw around herself. Katya was with closed eyes and slowly answered, speaking with pauses of silence, “cosmic darkness ... and no one around me ... I have no matter.” Katya was speaking softly, muffled, she sounded somehow detached, absent. Her answers came after an extended period of time, it was difficult to attract her attention and to hold on the question.

This situation was too difficult for the beginner trainee director so one of the trainers (the author) took over directing the protagonist, Katya.

The trainer asked Katya, “Look at yourself in 2021. You see Katya in 2021, what do you see?”

Katya’s answer was, “She is alone. Nobody is around her.” Katya started crying, holding her hand clenched into a tight fist in front of her mouth, her body trembled with intense tension. The trainer encouraged Katya to let everything come out, removing her hand out of her mouth.

Katya started speaking through tears, “I’m alone. There is no one with me. There is nothing to be happy about. I’m all alone.” Katya was already crying out loud, followed by a deep sob and moan in the way that began to disturb her breathing. Her face expressed a rapidly growing intense fear, approaching panic, which progressively made it even harder for her to breathe.

The trainer instructed Katya, “Breathe, now you can breathe, you are already breathing evenly. Open your eyes and see me. You see me. Look at the group! We are all with you here. Look at every one of us—we are with you! You are not alone!”

The trainer asked the group, “Let us all breathe together with Katya! Let’s hear everyone’s breathing with Katya! We all inhale and exhale together with Katya.”

Everyone in the group inhaled and exhaled loudly in a harmonious rhythm with Katya. The trainer checked that Katya was again **in the here and now** and asked her whether there was something she could be happy about? The protagonist started speaking about her love for her children, about her fear of death and the moment she would die and not be able to enjoy being together with her children.

Later Katya wrote, “In the online format I did extremely strong personal work, in the Time Machine exercise, I experienced catharsis, sharing one of my great fears that one day will come when I will not be there and my children will live without me. Despite the skepticism about this format of work, during the session the director encouraged me to express aloud my great fear of death, to feel strong love for my children, through doubling I heard my own thoughts. I will never forget when the whole group was breathing with me!”

Case 3

Another case of deep immersion in heavy emotions was with the trainee Asya, from another training group. This time the emotion was shame from humiliation, experienced in her childhood, awakened during a group session, leading to catharsis, and disturbing her breathing. Later Asya described this session: “Online, when the whole group was breathing with me, was one of my strongest experiences. I jumped into the trauma of humiliation, when I shared that I felt numb during one of my turns directing the group. When the trainer asked me, “What is numbing you?” I recalled somewhere between the ages of 12 and 13. I started sinking; I couldn’t stop crying and it became difficult to breathe. I wanted to hide myself, I hid my face and the trainer said to me, “Asya, you don’t have to hide your face.” The trainer continued

talking to me. She brought me back to the present. I remember the group breathing with me while I calmed down! I think I will never forget it! And it didn’t matter to me that we were online. I felt such strong support from everyone!”

Discussion

The catharsis, the tears and the topic of death could be scary for beginning directors.

After removing time boundaries, moving away from *here and now* reality and sinking into surplus reality ahead in the future, or back in the past, sometimes the protagonist turns out to be too deeply involved in emotions in this reality, more than useful. In the virtual therapy room, there is a bigger risk of less well protected removal of internal psychological boundaries and losing control of the degree of emotional involvement of the protagonist. There the protagonist is alone in the space of her own real room. In the virtual space, holding the *here and now* live presence of the other participants could not be experienced as vividly as in the real therapy room. This could be more frightening, for both the protagonist and for the director, due to the physical distance and inability to provide physical support and possibly help if necessary. In the case of Katya this happened during the warm up exercise with elements of guiding imagination and future projection, with a person who came into the group in an unstable emotional state, due to acute family problems. In the case of Asya, sinking into the reality of child trauma of humiliation happened during her sharing of feelings as the trainee-director of the group. Both (Asya and Katya) worked later on as protagonists on what emerged from this experience.

The needs of the protagonist, the online approach and techniques do not differ from the ones used when working in the real therapy room. In the real room, when there is a risk of too deep emotional involvement of the protagonist and immersion in surplus reality, the energy, power, strength and support, pass to the protagonist from the hand of the director through the shoulder of the protagonist. In the virtual room, in such cases, they have to be transmitted only with words, tone of the voice, eye contact, in order to reach the protagonist. The director has to find creative and adequate way to allow the group members to express their support to the protagonist, according to his/her needs.

DESCRIPTION OF CASE 4

When the Protagonist Participates from The Same Place Where the Traumatic Experience Took Place

At the first moment it could look easier, because there is no need of setting the scene—the protagonist is in it.

At the same time, this could be one of the most difficult situations in online psychodrama, which is illustrated by the description of the session with Zoya as the protagonist.

Zoya said, “I feel misunderstood by my husband. Once again, I want to leave him. I am leaving the marriage with a bag of clothes and nothing else and after that, I don’t know how to go on with my life.”

The protagonist was sitting with her laptop in her room together with her dog Eva, in the house where she has been living with her husband of 19 years. This was a big house, Zoya ensured us that her husband is in the kitchen, on the opposite side of their big house, and there was no risk that he would hear her speaking during the session.

The trainee director started the interview with Zoya and asked her when and where she was with these thoughts. The answer was that a week ago, after a conflict with her husband in the kitchen, Zoya was in the same room where she is now, hugging her dog Eva and crying,

The trainee director started setting the first scene she would like to explore, and Zoya described the room she was sitting in at the moment, together with her loving, small, young dog Eva. The kitchen has been the usual place of their conflicts, “It’s very scary there, like two planets colliding and moving away.”

Through the interview with Zoya in the role of the dog, followed by a psychodramatic dialog between her and the dog, the protagonist shared very heavy emotions of loneliness, confusion, fears, longing for love, helplessness, sadness, shame and despair. It was a long and emotional scene, in which the protagonist was immersed in these emotions, unable to distance from them. The trainee director asked the protagonist to look at this scene from a mirror position in order to expand her view of the situation. There were attempts for different emotional responses through doubling from the trainer, but the protagonist asked to stop the work, saying that she saw herself clear enough, having transformed her pain into wisdom. She told she would find a solution by herself.

Zoya couldn’t stand the whole sharing even though it was very supportive. She thanked us for the work, saying that it was helpful for her, but I think it was not very successful. The trainer asked the group to accept her wish to stop sharing, because it was clear that in the lunch break after her work she had to go to the kitchen, where her husband was and ...she need to went out of all these heavy feelings and to gather herself.

Discussion

According to Kellermann (2000), the basic rules when working with psychodrama with traumatized people are very similar to those of psychodrama in general. In the first place, he defined the rule that the repressed experiences of the traumatic event have to be restored in a safe environment. Sitting in her room, the same one in which Zoya was suffering and crying a week ago, after the conflict with her husband, it *was still* a safe place for her, generally. *But now*, being too close to the “scary kitchen”, it was full of heavy emotions and *not a safe enough* environment for deep opening.

The fourth rule according to Kellermann (2000) is that an imaginary element of surplus reality is introduced to expand the protagonist’s worldview (ibid., p. 31). Surplus reality scenes can be applied in psychodrama with traumatized people to undo what was done and to do what needs to be done. This allows the protagonist to look for different emotional responses, not to encourage reality distortion. In the case of Zoya, an attempt to build a scene of surplus reality took place, but it was totally overlapping with her *here and now* reality. The place was the same (her room); the participants were the same (Zoya and the dog Eva). The only difference was the time—one week difference. It was not imaginary; it was the same space. For the protagonist, it was probably too difficult to differentiate the two experiences and this did not allow her to expand her worldview and to have a different emotional response.

The mirror technique can be used for some detachment from oneself and some distance from the frightening event when things get too painful (Kellermann, 2000). In this case, it was not possible for the protagonist to exit from the scene (her room) to see herself from outside and to achieve some detachment and distance from the frightening event.

Unfortunately, a sense of safety was achieved enough for a deep catharsis of actual emotions, but not enough for deeper work with the trauma and the conflict in Zoya’s session. The main reason for this was the overlapping the space of her *here and now* reality and the space of surplus reality with the traumatic scene.

This case could be a lesson about the risk of retraumatizing the protagonist in online psychodrama, when the place of traumatic experience, presented in a scene on the psychodrama stage, totally coincides with the real place of the protagonist during her session. It is better to avoid such work online if it is at all possible. This is true especially if there is a short time - one week between the actual event and the psychodrama session.

Even if the protagonist hadn't been retraumatized, she would not have been able to utilize the possibility of redoing and having the healing corrective emotional experience, offered by psychodrama.

Working with psychodrama in an online group made more visible the value of the experiences in the breaks between the sessions—where and with whom the group members are. There is a big difference if the protagonist has lunch with supporting group members, or with the real antagonist in the “scary kitchen”.

I hope that sharing this experience, is useful for colleagues. For me, it would be very helpful to read other psychodramatists' accounts of similar cases and possibilities for overcoming such challenges.

CONCLUSION

In the two-dimensional virtual therapy room, in order to fulfill the prerequisite for effective psychodrama therapy to produce experiences of the same emotional and cognitive quality as those that occur naturally in the protagonist's life, we have to use the three-dimensional space of the real room of the protagonist, including all physical sources of sensations, to activate the sensorimotor, kinesthetic, emotional and intellectual functions of the brain.

In the virtual room, when there is a risk of too deep emotional involvement of the protagonist in surplus reality, the energy, power, strength and support have to be transmitted only with words, tone of the voice, eye contact, in order to reach the protagonist. The director has to find creative and adequate ways to allow the group

members to express their support to the protagonist, according to his/her needs.

In online psychodrama there is a risk of retraumatizing the protagonist, or not utilizing the effect of psychodrama, when the place of traumatic experience, presented in the scene on psychodrama stage, totally coincides with the real place of the protagonist during her work. It is better to avoid such work online, especially if there is such a short time between the actual experience and the psychodramatic enactment.

LIMITATIONS

The sample is small. We need more research on this topic. Created by Moreno a hundred years ago, Psychodrama, on its stage, **gives** freedom of boundaries in time, space and reality. Psychodramatists are used to crossing boundaries in the surplus reality on the stage; maybe because of that we feel comfortable with jumping into the virtual reality of an online room. In addition, we are trained in spontaneity and this allows us to quickly find an adequate answer to the new problem—working in a situation of pandemic restrictions. Probably because of that we quickly transformed our online skepticism into online inspiration. The therapeutic process in online psychodrama is the same as in psychodrama in a therapy room (Tarashoeva, 2022). In online psychodrama, we have to pay even more attention to providing protection for the protagonist and the group while temporarily crossing the boundaries of time, space and reality and strictly following the rules. To achieve adequate involvement of the protagonist in surplus reality online, the director has to control and keep the balance between tension and relaxation, involvement and distancing more than in the real therapy room.

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