

Thematic Sociodrama: a research procedure

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Revista Brasileira de Psicodrama. 2015. 23(1), 14-22.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present Thematic Sociodrama as a research procedure. While investigating how adolescents understand and cope with marital conflicts in the context of marriage and separation, Thematic Sociodrama has proved to be an appropriate instrument in the examination of themes emerging during social-clinical research/intervention. It proved to be helpful in protecting the vulnerability of participants as well as in the challenge of creating a procedure in which all the participants are involved in the co-construction of scientific knowledge. Through the use of creative action during dramatization, participants could express how their different views of the family have been constructed and how family roles can be understood through these.

Keywords: Thematic sociodrama. Research. Conjugal conflicts. Adolescents.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims specifically to those interested in developing research using Thematic Sociodrama. Thematic Sociodrama used as a research procedure is a rich instrument for researchers of diverse scientific backgrounds and approaches to the social sciences. Our intent is to show a procedure capable of sustaining research with relational themes. Thus, we will now present considerations on Jacob Levy Moreno's Sociodrama.

Jacob Levy Moreno (1992), the father of psychodrama, sociometry, and group psychotherapy said, "Sociodrama has been defined as a deep action method wich deals with group relations and collective ideologies" (p. 188). Menegazzo, Zuretti, Tomasini et al. (1995) define Sociodrama as a "specific dramatic procedure based on the concepts of role theory and bond-anthropology" (p. 197). The authors add that Sociodrama "specifically shows social roles that interact in the development of common tasks in the

studied group”, and also “allow us to see their conflicts and to facilitate their comprehension in order to be resolved” (p. 198).

While discussing the emergence of the scientific method, Moreno (1992) considered that observation and analysis are “incomplete tools to study the more sophisticated aspects of intercultural relations” (p. 189), while Sociodrama allows for exploration and an attempt to modify emerging conflicts through action. Thus, he considered the potential for dramatic and role-focused research through the use of Sociodrama could “provide a direction for methods through which the opinions and attitudes of the public can be influenced and even modified” (p. 189).

Hence, we can consider that Sociodrama is characterized as an instrument that enhances the expression of personal/relational/group issues in the same manner in which it amplifies the aspects found in the group context. Furthermore, allows action in an investigative and therapeutic process of aspects regarding the social dimension and context, in which the focus is the common identity of collective drama, since it starts from the social conflict to facilitate emerging the individual demands (ZAMPIERI, 2002). As an investigative and intervention procedure, Sociodrama approaches the intersection between the social and the individual phenomena, since the true object of study of Sociodrama is the group itself, considered in its determined social condition (MORENO, 1978).

Sociodrama, as a group process, allows for indications on how social roles interact in the development of common group activities. It is based on the assumption that an organized group in any contexts possesses social roles, since individuals of the same culture share those roles in many degrees (MORENO, 1978).

Thematic Sociodrama, to be presented as a research procedure, (TOLOI, 2006), demonstrated to be particularly useful in the investigative field of the social clinic (SÉVIGNY, 2001; GIUST-DESPRAIRIES, 2001). This strategy provided, along with the development of research, a therapeutic intervention to the participants of the study.

CHOOSING THE PROCEDURE

While elaborating the research about conjugal conflicts through the perspective of the sons and daughters (TOLOI, 2006), the first concern was to construct the research considering the vulnerable aspects of the studied population. How can one approach, investigate in a deep and reliable manner the personal and intimate issues lived by teenagers, if they are still in a process of development and personality formation? The major concern of the investigation was to protect them from physical, moral and psychological damage.

The concern of protecting the target audience, acknowledging the legal incapacity and vulnerability was the main guide for all decisions regarding the study. Another concern in the procedure was how we can approach the problem and aid constructively to promote awareness of the family issue in the population. The commitment with the maximum benefits and minimum risk of damage was involved in every step taken in the choice of participants and the construction of the procedure. Besides, the established criteria used to choose the age group is there to guarantee that the participants have, differently from small children, a developed cognitive process which makes it possible for them to express more clearly inner contents.

Another relevant aspect was how to detect values, beliefs and family themes, lowering the impact of emotional pain contained in such expressions in order to guarantee the psychological preservation and little exposition of personal experience in the

participants. The alternative found to the issue as to elaborate the research using Thematic Sociodrama. In fact, the work with Sociodrama minimizes not only expression-related tension but also personal contact-related tension if compared to individualized interviews, group interviews or questionnaires and it also promotes internal content expression respecting the personal group adherence of each subject.

The choice of dramatizations in the Thematic Sociodrama, looked for the construction of a protected context in which the spontaneous expressions of the target audience could be promoted. This way, the dramatization allowed for greater closeness of the conjugal conflicts from the point of view of the teenagers in a manner which there was no direct focus on the more intimate psychological wounds of the participants. Mediated by the dramatizations, youngsters could express spontaneously their experiences, ideas, opinions and life experiences without feeling compromised by family life reality.

RESEARCH WORK

The study was comprised of 45 teenagers, ages 13 to 16. The teens were divided into four groups (two groups of first marriage offspring and two of divorced/separated/second marriage offspring) of students of a private teaching institution in the city of São Paulo, Brazil.

The dramatized scenes were recorded and had the participation of audio specialists. The dramatic work happened in five stages: non-specific warm-up, specific warm-up, dramatization, sharing and inquiry.

The “Non-Specific Warm-Up” was used in preparing the group for the work. The proposal was discussed with the group, all doubts were cleared and the work period established.

In the “Specific Warm-Up”, the group was prepared for dealing with the research theme and so the work should begin. Each participant wrote individually in a sheet of paper the themes related to conjugal conflicts. That done, each group was divided in two subgroups (“a” and “b”, with 5 to 6 participants each) and then participants of group (“a”) told the other subgroup participants (“b”) the themes raised.

In this stage, information was traded about the indicated participants and each subgroup should create a fictitious story about conjugal conflicts. Following that, they should take the role of one character in the story to be dramatize and then all participants played one chosen psychodramatic role.

The “Dramatization” was played on three stages and then the stories were dramatized through scenes. In the first stage, after the definition and choosing of the characters, five participants dressed the clothes/costumes that characterized their own personal chosen. These costumes were composed by clothing and adornment made available by the researcher (boxes containing adult masculine and feminine clothing, child masculine and feminine clothing, teenage masculine and feminine clothing, and objects that allude to babies, the elderly and domestic workers).

As the roles were defined in subgroups “a” the participants went to the moment of “choosing attire” and the dramatization began while members of subgroups “b” watched as an audience. After the dramatization of subgroups “a” the situation reversed. By this way, many stories about conjugal conflicts were constructed, dramatized and gathered by the researcher from the four distinct groups of teenagers divided according to their daily family context (first marriage parents or separated parents).

The moment of “choose the attire” was also used as a warm-up for the role taken

by each subject. This way, each participant left his or her role as a private individual (student/participant) and assumed his or her psychodramatic role (father, mother, son, grandmother, etc.) of the chosen character. This moment was also considered as the one in which the participants took social roles in the dimension of social interaction of fathers, mothers, sons, etc. The social roles were constructed from internalized roles brought from daily experience and/or perceived daily experience.

In the second stage, the scene took place. In the original concept, the scene comes from the theatre and from that concept, Moreno began using it as a “basic unit of action” having as its main components: “determination of space, time, characters and argument” (BUSTOS, 2001, p. 109). Thus, participants marked their space, place where each scene would happen, place the time then the alleged hour in which the scene took place. They defined their physical position and the definition of the characters in the dramatic space scenario.

After the definition of time, space, characters and plot “here and now”, the students/participants self-presented their characters. In the “Self-Presentation” technique, the participant/character presents him/herself in the psychodramatic role of son, mother, father, etc. They performed, experienced and presented the psychodramatic role in daily life from a completely subjective standpoint (MORENO, 2006). In this moment, each student/participant/character presented him/herself with a fictitious name, age, profession (occupation), family structure, etc.

The “Self-Presentation” technique made it possible for each participant to build and express their character based on their own social and psychodramatic internalized roles. From that on, the scene would occur freely for 15 to 20 minutes. The characters acted and reacted with the other members of the scene developing, thus, the spontaneous plot of the story.

In the third stage, the researcher in the role of scene director interrupted the dramatization. In this interruption the scene was “frozen”. That means the participants stopped interacting with each other and stood immobile in the scene. In the physical and verbal immobilization, each character was asked to perform a “soliloquy” and then, each one of them was interviewed still in the psychodramatic role. The “Soliloquy” technique is characterized by the verbalization of internal dialogue/content openly expressed by each participant/character relative to the actions dramatized, thought, feelings and sensations contained during the dramatizations. (MORENO, 2006, p.381).

Each “soliloquy” implied the elucidation of hidden character content which was not openly shared during the dramatization. The exposition of internal content offered an opening where the director could enter into the latent conflicts from the characters as well as the wider perception of family patterns from the interactions of the main themes.

After the “soliloquy” each character was interviewed. The goal of the interview was to make the social dynamics of the dramatized relationships clearer as well as to clarify the main indicators of the themes shown by thoughts/feelings and their perception of family patterns. According to Menegazzo et al. (1995) the interview or report is a fundamental technique in psychodramatic procedure. It is normally performed through dialogue between the director and the protagonist for diagnostic purposes, therapeutic comprehension and the dramatic action contextualization.

The director’s questions directed to each of the characters also made it possible in order to raise awareness and personal questioning of unclear internal content. By this means, it facilitates the greater comprehension about how teenagers/characters understand, cope, or would cope with the conjugal conflicts suggested in the dramatizations.

During dramatization, according to Zampieri (2002), the world of lived realities

and their specific meanings is dedicated into direct knowledge in a more specific objectivity. Then the truth as result of the various perspectives of the different participants demonstrated that existing differences could be validate. At this moment, there is a transformation in which the inter subjectivist knowledge meaning appears and it is constructed by the group. Therefore, the participants execute their constructions in a co-creative and complex process located in a safe and trusting setting.

In the dramatizations, four basic techniques were used: self-presentation, freezing the scene, soliloquy and character interviews. Other techniques were not used because the scenes were directed for investigative purposes. Other psychodramatic techniques (role reversal, double, mirror, etc.) were not used because these techniques could surpass the limits of the proposed themes and lead the participants to levels of exposition beyond those initially set in deviating from the objectives of the study.

During “Sharing”, the characters and director left their psychodramatic roles established during the “Dramatization” and returned to act in their roles of private individuals (students/participants of the research and researcher). During the intimacy moment the group participants constructed their affective reports. They expressed personal thoughts and reflections about each participation in the dramatic experience while they left their characters and spoke about what happened in the present or in the lived experience (MONTEIRO & BRITO, 2000). The students/participants shared their feelings, ideas, thoughts and emotions that occurred during the dramatizations.

A fifth stage was introduced to the Thematic Sociodrama entitled “Inquiry”. In this stage, researcher and academic advisor actively took part by formulating questions that could provide further clearance and data to answer the investigation. According to Zampieri (2002), in “Sharing” the participants also express the most important identifications and the knowledge is co-constructed, elaborated and systematized.

ANALYSIS PROCESS

Analysis was considered the most complex moment in the systematization and understanding of the research results when using Sociodrama. This complexity is due to the fact that the groups presented countless possibilities of meaning considering the established relations in the dramatic context.

In the work here presented, every stage of research was recorded. These audio recordings were fully transcribed so it would be possible to gather the full and complete data from each meeting. Based on this material, many readings and narrative synthesis took place in order to obtain a condensed report of the most significant impressions related to the form and sequence presented by the participants. These reports went along with the notes relative to form and content of the presentations and researcher impressions taken after every meeting.

In each group was considered the following analysis material: scene structure, relationship patterns, answers given during “Inquiry”, constructed stories, story sequence and final report from the participants during the “Sharing” and “Inquiry” stages. In this dimension, the analysis becomes social-dynamic where the object of focus is the structure, evolution and the group manner of functioning (MARRA & COSTA, 2004).

After this stage, the comparisons between themes written on paper during the “Specific Warm-up” and the content of the Sociodramatic performances demonstrated the relationship dynamics included in the scenes of the “Dramatization” stage. These contents were compared to the personal identifications as well as the spoken reports of the participations during the “Sharing” and “Inquiry” stages.

The stories constructed during the “Dramatization” stages were compared to the reports given during “Sharing” and “Inquiry” so as to gather the meaningful content as to the differentiation presented by the teenagers in the constructed scenes.

Considering category construction, Nery and Wechsler (2010) pointed out:

“A set of Sociodramatic indicators – resultant from speech, dialogue, context-specific interaction (between participants; within participants and research team; between characters), scenes, actions, images – causes a category to emerge, which allows for hypothesis formation. Categories are theoretical constructions of a phenomenon, produced in a complex manner and emerging during field work. Through categories we access areas of meaning from the studied subject/group which will lead to new categories which integrate to the prior ones, widening or denying them” (p.93).

In this study, categories were constructed and compared to the scene dialogues during the “Dramatization” stage and the reports given during “Sharing” and “Inquiry”, so as to obtain meaningful content as to the differentiation presented by offspring of first marriage couples and divorced/separated parents. Simultaneously, following a posterior guideline from Nery and Wechsler (2010), comparisons between stages took place considering content and meaning regarding the investigative problem.

Finally, abstractions were created which could reflect comprehension about the groups in a broader context, considering meanings offered by the participants as to how they understand, face, and cope with parental conflicts and how they express their personal concepts of family and family roles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results gathered allow us to consider countless analysis and understanding possibilities due to the wealth and dynamics of the procedure. Thus, we can understand different aspects based on the situation experienced by the participants, leading to confirmations about how family roles and conceptions were presented by first marriage and separated couples offspring in dramatic context.

The results that referred only to the investigated theme were analyzed and discussed within the aspects of how the research problem was formulated (TOLOI, SOUZA; 2009). However, family relationship dynamics and the subtleties of the aspects considered meaningful for a broad analysis were gathered from the Thematic Sociodrama which would be harder to know from other procedures such as interviews, questionnaires or surveys.

An example can be noticed when we analyze the dramatic scenes in which the participants/characters demonstrate how they express the father figure. In this study, the providing father appears as a main figure of greater dominance and more central concerning the themes regarding married families. He also appears through high expectations and the lack of alternatives resolution when there is difficulty of resolving family economic issues. When the providing father figure does not respond to the needs of what is expected from him in an idealized manner he is pushed to take a huge responsibility, preventing him to perceive the experience, to express his feelings and to be harbored by intimacy and care in the family daily life. Much alike in the ideals of the nuclear family there is room for only one providing father figure in a divorced family where the biological father is excluded at the same time that the step-father fills his place

in the role of idealized father.

Another example, the married caring family mother is shown through idealized conceptions about her family role as to offspring care and the preservation of the house and conjugality. In the divorced family with the father leaving the nuclear family daily life, the mother (without a step-father) becomes the central figure, specially directed to resolving economic difficulties. These are the more evident and stressful themes covered by the teenagers. In both family configuration the woman “choose” economically well-positioned providers so as to obtain favorable conditions to the raising and the caring of the offspring as well as to feel safer. These aspects would not be spontaneously expressed in a procedure such as an interview or a survey.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Thematic Sociodrama, as a research procedure, made it possible to go beyond the initial proposition of the study. The complexity and involvement of the participants with the co-construction of knowledge made possible a deeper investigation of existing relationship, conflict and dynamic patterns. From that, awareness of such content became part of a transformation process.

Considering the fluid way with which the participants expressed themselves this procedure made it possible to detect how family conceptions and family roles act. Spontaneity of the participants showed social and moral patterns which are the foundation of contemporary family life. During the research the Thematic Sociodrama allowed for the construction of a dynamic and therapeutic procedure by making it possible to get closer to psychic intimacy, expression of personal content and bring forward family “secrets” which are usually expressed in clinical practice. Simultaneously, in the research context, the answers for the investigative problem were given spontaneously and the participants suffered less risk of psychological and moral harm.

This work has shown an alternative to a few aspects of the challenges facing researchers. The meanings of expressed content, through spontaneous participants taking part in the sociodramatic procedure amplify the creative quality in the co-construction of scientific knowledge.

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