

## *Contributions for a Psychodramatic Psychopathology*

**Carlos Fidel Calvente**

Instituto J L Moreno de Buenos Aires

e-mail: fidelcaster@gmail.com

*Revista Brasileira de Psicodrama*. 2014. 22(2), 46-54.

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to investigate psychopathology from the perspective of psychodrama psychotherapy. As seen in his protocols, Moreno did not fully consider diagnosis. However, in our current work with clinical psychodrama, understood as a process, we need other conceptualizations. Radical imagination is considered as the foundation of the psyche and character, as one of the expressions based on which we can understand psychopathology.

**Keywords:** Psychopathology. Psychodramatic Psychotherapy. Radical Imagination. Character.

### **INTRODUCTION**

I must admit that I was quite puzzled before I decided to make public these thoughts, starting by asking myself whether there was a good reason to write about psychopathology in psychodrama. Something about which I will return to later.

The desire to share my need to put a clearer frame to my clinic work, which I presume can be shared by other therapists, has finally pushed me to write this paper. It is important to clarify that I will refer to an only aspect of the psychodramatic practice. Psychodrama or to be more precise the sociodynamics is so broad, it covers so many areas, that perhaps for many of them it is unnecessary to inquire about psychopathology, as their focus of attention is connected to the development of spontaneity, creativity, training, recreational skills and various other aspects in which the question of psychological pathologies are not a priority.

Most of my professional activity has been focused on clinical care. For years I have been working from the psychodramatic psychotherapy approach. My intention in this paper arises, at least up to a certain extent, from my desire to share a sort of uneasiness or lack of clarity regarding how to call what I do.

Not long ago, after an exhibition with clinical material in a study group that I coordinated, one of the attendees approached me and told me: - "very interesting work, but where is psychodrama?".

To clarify: three of the members of the study group took the role of patients and from then on they engaged in a role-playing activity in which they told their pathologies and forms of resolution.

It is likely that the question had been latent deep inside me, because the comment

touched me. I would say that that experience had triggered my need to wonder whether there had been psychodrama or not in the presentation. I firmly believed that there was.

But beyond the anecdote, which could have made me wonder many things such as whatever this man understood by psychodrama, or what psychodrama is \_if there is such a definition\_, etc, etc, this experience has opened up the possibility to question myself how I conceive or see psychodrama today.

Ever since I have discovered psychodrama and taken it up, or rather it has taken me up, it has always been from the clinical aspect. I started using it at work with children and it was quite spectacular. This technique gave way to something similar to what I used to do, but with a bit of remorse, because it was placed away from the Kleinian technique I had been formed myself with and that passioned me at the time, because the children did not always conform to the box of games and wanted to "dramatize." In this way, through psychodrama, I was able to legalize my work without that contrition.

In due term, I then extended it to the rest of my work with adults and groups and it has been set as a great resource in clinical supervision.

In practice with individual patients I used to work with psychotherapy and psychodrama, to then happily integrated both as psychodramatic psychotherapy. So, what I understood by pathologies was approached with this technique.

This was also the case in conferences, workshops and seminars; psychodrama applied to the individual, groups and relationship clinic. In the words of Moisés Aguiar, it was more psycho and less drama.

Returning to the issue of psychodrama today, there is a different picture nowadays. So, you can see that in the conferences and meetings, clinical psychodrama, which had always been the main feature, has been shifted. In past congresses, the proposals regarding clinical psychodrama took up no more than 30% of the programmes. For this reason, I referred to the word uneasiness earlier on. Now I wonder: "Am I watching another channel?" Is it anachronic what I am doing?" "Will it no longer be used psychodrama or psicodramatic psychotherapy for consults of psychopathology psychotherapy?" Once again that phrase keeps coming back to my head: -"good work, but where is psychodrama?".

I will share some of the answers I give to myself.

## **SO WHAT WITH PSYCHOPATHOLOGY**

Of course, it goes without saying that we are living important changes in almost all aspects. When I say almost, what I really mean is that particular human suffering, the relational problems and internal conflicts have not changed so much even if its presentation may prove differently. Proof of this is that we still find pretty moving the classics of literature as well as plays written hundreds of years ago.

Yet what it has changed is what is meant by pathology, because the standard or norm depends on culture, history and society. This makes it rather difficult if not impossible to write an accurate definition of the word pathology.

I turned back to my books and read articles on the topic. I noticed that perhaps the absence or weakness of psychopathology in psicodramatic psychotherapy is due to the fact that it does not have a model from which to base psychological understanding that outlines our work at the clinic.

A psychopathology is based, in addition to the concept of health, on a theoretical proposal on psychological functioning. Thus, the psychopathologies that we use are based on psychiatry, following the medical model or psychoanalysis, from the perspective of

psychoanalytic theory with its conception of the drive theory. Consequently, it is not on that path that we can settle a psychodramatic psychopathology that takes into account the proposals of spontaneity, creativity, theory of roles or moment.

When I work, I take advantage of these psychopathologies. I do psychodramatic psychotherapy with everything I incorporated into my training which was not only psychodrama. Parodying Moreno when he talks about *sub specie momenti*: every time is in the moment. It is not that the moment is part of time, but rather the whole time is in that moment. When I manage to do it, all my history is right there in that precise moment in which I interact.

I will now come back to my deep thoughts on psychopathology. It is no coincidence that it is hardly spoken of in psychodrama and I would dare say that it is even rejected. So I said to myself: if whenever I work in the consult I do it on a pathological psychology basis, is it not that what we call psychopathology?

Maybe after that statement, someone would claim: “we do not work on a pathological psychology basis, we work with a person, with an existential being which is unique. Don’t you think that we would depersonalize that person if we put them in the psychopathological grid? My answer would be: “Right then, if we do it the Kraepelin way it might be the case, but that would be more psychiatric semiology rather than psychopathology”. At the same time I would also say: “By fear to depersonalize we cannot throw water in the tub with a child inside, as this existential being has got certain characteristics similar to others which makes him liable to be diagnosed on a scientific basis otherwise it would have been just a mere existential beings encounter.”

How can I go on or surpass this controversy? From where does one make both proposals?

What we or I understand by “traditional” psychopathology, so as to give it a name, comes from a medical scientific conception taken from a biological epistemology for both psychistrist and psychoanalysis that works with empirical thought- inductive etiology type or metapsychology, symptomatic manifestations and psychopathological diagnose.

From the psychodrama point of view, it is based on an existential concept or phenomenologic existential of philosophical-social basis, that is to say we are talking about Social Sciences not Biological Sciences. When I started looking at it this way, I became less disoriented, and I could use and take advantage of “traditional” psychopathology with its charts and concepts as a guide, but without trying to mix proposals from different origin.

As I said, my sense of disorientation was diminished but it did not disappear completely.

I quit trying to reformulate psychodramatic psychopathology which resulted in a mix, but then a question turned up: Then, what?

In this search is that I come across useful and lightning quotes from Fonseca (2000, p.261) “...psychiatry nowadays is far from classical medicine criteria and it is included in the so called Human Sciences. This does not mean that it ceases being Medicine<sup>1</sup>.” Following these ideas is that I add my proposal.

## **WORKING WITH CHARACTERS**

In the search for framing pathologies in the clinical practice and respecting the concept of phenomenologic-existential Psychodrama, it has come as a great help what I

---

<sup>1</sup> Our translation.

call “characters”

As I stated in another context (Calvente:2000) carácter is a metaphorical concept useful to shape and nurture life experiences, behaviours and ways of connecting all of which can be used in the clinical work. However, some inconveniences can be aroused due to its polysemic characteristic, meaning that it can be used in many different scopes. On the other hand, it is a familiar word in psychodrama as with the awakening of the Spontaneous Theatre, it is called “characters” rather than protagonists.

Up to a certain point I am trying to rescue the carácter through the protagonist. My proposal is then to work on the concept of “carácter”, not on the term of it. “What do I mean by this” Taking the carácter as an expression of the imagination which is the true reality (Pirandello, p. 1921)

I take it is a complex subject to accompany, but I state my path to get to that proposal. I want to point out that the imagination that I propose it is not that opposed to reality, as seen in phrases such as “it is imagination” or “it is an illusion”. I am talking about a psychological ability, used to point out this difference, Castoriadis (2002, p. 178) and called radical imagination.

I return to what I meant by my path: when Freud (1916) postulates the drive, he defines it as a limit concept between the soma and the psyche, that is to say a work proposal for the psyche, the translation of a physical need to another field – the psychological- where it needs a representation that takes the role of the desire. There it lies the radical imagination.

In addition, Klein (1946) gives another meaning to that imagination and calls it unconscious fantasy. He postulates that as the psyche functional unit. It is understood as a schematic proposal for didactic purposes.

Moreno postulates spontaneity or factor as a quality resulting from various factors, as well as a limit concept that translates into a role or leading part of the psychic functional unit.

I am well aware of the fact that he talks about behavioural units that make up an I, which eventually leads to psychism. I firmly believe that in that building up of the I lies the radical imagination.

These statements may sound a bit outrageous if we take into account what we have learnt about role theories and so on. But if you are patient enough you will see what I really mean.

For instance, when Moreno speaks about supplementary reality he really means imagination. This supplementary reality, though old data as it sounds we have recovered it with Zerka and has enriched our psychodramatic proposal indeed.

How does the carácter fit and relates with psychopathology then? Well, a new problem arises about which I might not be able to provide all its aspects.

I do not pretend neither will I think it possible to think about the evolutionary development of the characters. What I propose is to set them as functional units in relation to others and to themselves.

Characters appear and they are nurtured by imagination. A radical imagination. Pirandello addresses it as the true reality. Then why does the play writer talk about the true reality? I reckon he states this from the creator point of view, from whatever he manages to create as his own.

I will go even further and claim that this is the true reality, that expresses itself as a representation, an unconscious fantasy, like the one that exists in the script linking spontaneity and creativity. I thus state that spontaneity is imagination.

I do respect Moreno's statements. All his efforts done trying to explain the e factor. After all, spontaneity is a quality, an imagination quality, the archcatalizer. That

is the reason why I associate them to other statements – representations, unconscious fantasies- that are different ways to deal with imagination. That is what I see in my private practice as characters.

In psychodrama we talk about scenes, the thinking of scenes and nobody ever questions this, quite the contrary. But scenes are not empty, scenes are filled with characters not only in the psychodramatic scenes the ones on stage, but all of them. We are inhabited by characters.

I wish to make clear that the carácter does not compete nor replaces the role.

In another context I have defined carácter as a cultural unit (Calvente, 2002, p.52) but seen it this way it becomes too general and vague. In order to be more specific, I quote Moreno (1972) who defines the role as being private and public. The carácter lives in that private side of the role That is why the carácter appears and can appear in different roles.

For example, the dependant carácter who inhabits the carácter will appear in various roles.

Bustos (1999) refers to the generating role of identity. In my opinión, charaters are more versatile, though I accept that certain people are inhabited by characters who they identify with, as for example in characteropaties.

In Bustos work there is an analogy of the inner world inhabited by characters, playing different roles: moral conscious, protection, stimulus, etc.

It is posible, and I can truly say so, that it inot easy to get used to a carácter as a or as a metaphor concept. I reckon that has to do with what i have said about polysemy. In other words, we are used to relate them to literatura, theatre or socially when we say: “it is a character” or he is playing a character”

If we accept that they come from imagination, which will be the case, this will help us use them in a specific context. I mean the character as a concept within the psychotherapy psychodramatic.

## **A COUPLE OF VIGNETTES TO SUPPORT MY REFLECTIONS**

Orlando, a person who is angry all the time. He makes it clear that he is angry at himself. This is a regular topic in his therapy. He always thinks that he should have reacted differently or that he should have answered in a different way. It could be said that there is a disqualifying behaviour.

Currently, his main concern is regarding physical pain, due to two lumbar disc herniation. Previously he had suffered psoriatic arthritis, which made it very difficult for him to walk.

Amazingly enough he questions himself that in spite of the fact that he is aware of his need to take care of his body, when he is not in a crisis, he cannot seem to manage to do it. This makes me suspect there is an emotional factor at present time or previously, so I point this out to him. He seems skeptical.

I comment that by hearing him regretting himself, I could interpret something like this: “I cant believe this is happening to me”. He remains thinking and then he says ironically: “Do you mean to say that I have a bubble speech over my head like the ones in a cartoon”?

“Yes” I nod and I add: “If you thought: I have these pains and I dont take care of them properly, I dont accept my performance, that is to say, if you accepted what was happening to you, what would that mean to you?”

Orlando answers: “It would mean that I am resigned, broken, decadent. It would be a character with those features.” And he goes on to add: “Have you seen the film “A

few days from the life of I.I. Oblomov?" Its a film that really touched me. It is about an indolent noble man that has run out of money and everything around him deteriorates because of his slothful attitude towards life.

Now that he spotted the character (in this case it is not a personal production) from which he defends himself, we move on to work in a situation where he accepts to take the role of Oblomov, which takes us to work with the difficulties in the father-son relationship, father being mediocre according to his son description and the fear to take after that sole feature from him.

## **ANOTHER EXAMPLE**

Rafael remembers that he used to like drawing as a teenager. One of his favourite drawings, which he often and distractedly repeats, was a half-covered face mask. A pretty mask, like the ones seen in the Venetian Carnival. He just remembered this when his wife reproached him for having two faces; one in public, sociable and charming and another one, a private one inside his home, callous and unbearable.

From now on he has found out that the mask appears with women of his intimate life: his wife, his sisters, his mother and he feels sorrow when he notices that this mask is starting to appear in front of his teenage daughter too, with whom he used to be so spontaneously affectionate. I understand that as son as sexuality appears, tenderness vanishes.

As far as we are concerned, his mother has been rather possessive with his only male child and that developed in a very dependable relationship in his childhood. The mask represented the price he had to pay for his freedom.

Let us remember that character derives from the Greek word for mask.

It is frequently seen such characters appearing as spokesmen that question or compulsively encourage certain behaviours as a reaction to particular situations; they can also produce anguish feelings or inhibitions.

One night, while I was writing this paper, I went out to the cinema to see Oscar winning film Birdman, which is a good example of a protagonist inhabited by a character. If you pay close attention you will notice that this character only appears in special moments, for instance when the protagonist feels insecure, tormented or puzzled.

Each of them fulfils a role perfectly. Some could be, like in the case of the film, conscious and straightforward. They could also appear to confront a situation.

I can also find old characters that puzzle people or that they are unconscious.

I am working on this trying to classify such characters, but I will leave this for another occasion.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Quoting Fonseca (2000, p. 261) "Psychiatry nowadays has stepped away from classical medicine only to be included in the so called human sciences; yet this does not mean that psychiatry itself has ceased being called medicine but it clearly requires a thorough revision.

Following this latter approach is that I suggest the concept of character with its metaphorical richness, aiming to improve the clinical practice from a phenomenological-existential perspective. I find in the radical imagination the basis for a better understanding of the human psychopathology and in its character, one of the expressions

of this problematic which will help us think that there is a psychopathology possible in the practice of psychodramatic psychotherapy, based on the idea that spontaneity can be seen as one of the attributes of the imagination.

## **REFERENCES**

BUSTOS, D. M. **Novas cenas para o psicodrama.** São Paulo: Ágora, 1999.

CALVENTE, C. **El personaje en psicoterapia.** Buenos Aires: Letra Viva - Instituto de la Mascara editores, 2002.

CASTORIADIS, C. **La institución imaginaria de la sociedad.** v 2. Buenos Aires: Tusquets editora, 2003.

FONSECA, J. **Psicoterapia da relação.** São Paulo: Ágora, 2000.

FREUD, S. **Obras Completas,** v. 14. Buenos Aires: Amorrortu editores, 1999.

KLEIN, M. **Desarrollos en Psicoanálisis.** Buenos Aires: Ediciones Horme, 1965.

MORENO, J. L. **El Psicodrama.**Buenos Aires: Horme editorial, 1972.

PIRANDELLO, L. **Seis personajes en busca autor.** Ediciones Nuevo Siglo S.A., 1994.

**Carlos Fidel Calvente.** MD at Universidad Nacional de La Plata (Argentina). Specialist degree in Psychiatry at Colegio de Médicos (Buenos Aires). Supervising Teacher of Psychodrama at Instituto J L Moreno de Buenos Aires. Guest Professor at Sociedade de Psicodrama de São Paulo (SOPSP). Author of A personagem na psicoterapia. Editora Ágora, 2002.