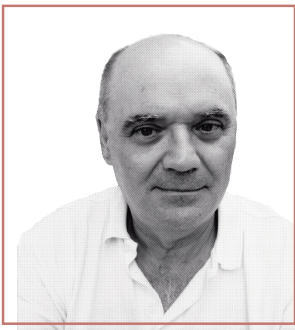


Psychodrama in the time of Coronavirus

Psicodrama en tiempos de coronavirus



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Abstract

Our country, Italy, was the first country outside Asia to be hit by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

As the virus increased in intensity and spread with increasing rapidity, the Italian government was forced to adopting a massive series of health measures, which strongly conditioned social interactions. For three months, normal group psychodrama sessions (other things) were banned.

In order to keep existing groups alive and, therefore, make the most of the beneficial effects of interaction between members, modern digital communication technologies were widely used. These means of communication allowed us to maintain relationships, albeit without direct contact or a physical presence.

By looking at a series of activities planned for one session (the fourth online session), this article endeavours to highlight how this particular kind of interaction can also promote interpersonal and intrapsychic dynamics according to the Morenian model.

Key words

supervision, group, videoconference, methodology, psychodrama.

Resumen

Nuestro país, Italia, fue el primero fuera de Asia en verse afectado por la pandemia de SRAS-CoV-2. A medida que el virus aumentaba en intensidad y se propagaba con creciente rapidez, el gobierno italiano se vio obligado a adoptar una serie masiva de medidas sanitarias, que condicionaron fuertemente las interacciones sociales. Durante tres meses, se prohibieron las sesiones normales de psicodrama en grupo (entre otras cosas). Para mantener vivos los grupos existentes y, por tanto, aprovechar al máximo los efectos beneficiosos de la interacción entre los miembros, se recurrió ampliamente a las modernas tecnologías digitales de comunicación. Estos medios de comunicación permitieron mantener las relaciones, aunque sin contacto directo ni presencia física. A través del análisis de una serie de actividades previstas para una sesión (la cuarta sesión en línea), este artículo pretende poner de relieve cómo este tipo particular de interacción también puede favorecer las dinámicas interpersonales e intrapsíquicas según el modelo moreniano.”

Palabras clave

supervisión, grupo, videoconferencia, metodología, psicodrama

A QUESTION TO START WITH

There is a question we intend to answer with this study: “Can we really work using online psychodrama?”.

To find an adequate and satisfactory answer, we will develop observations and reflections on two parallel and connected paths.

On the one hand, we will refer to Moreno’s theorizations that see the human personality as originating from action, that is, from the concrete manifestation of each human subject in bodily and mental interaction with others; in this way, we can better understand the possibilities and limits of an interpersonal action that does not see the direct and immediate participation of the bodily dimension.

At the same time, we will describe and analyse a real experience of psychodramatic activity carried out via telematics; through the evaluation of the effects on the participants, we will verify and appreciate some practical methods of implementation and their effectiveness.

Furthermore, we will take this study as an opportunity to systematise and describe a model for reading the constituent events of a psychodramatic session: an interpretative paradigm consisting of several dimensions: phenomenological, existential, methodological, and theoretical.

ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITIES

Criteria for the observation and interpretation of events.

The role, the cornerstone of the Morenian epistemological paradigm.

It is undoubtedly well known that, in psychodrama, the role is considered to be the epistemological foundation of the entire corresponding theoretical system.

Epistemology is the research and study of the processes and principles that enable and govern the production of knowledge. This knowledge may be related to science in general or, narrowing the field, it may be the kind of knowledge that is a specific trait of human personality, namely self-awareness.

The epistemological paradigm on which this study focuses is therefore that concerning the processes of formation of the self, or, in other words, of human subjectivity.

To paraphrase Moreno (1964), it is from the role that the self originates and forms; it is the foundation stone on which being human is built, in terms of both individual personality and social identity.

The three fundamental properties of a role

A role is therefore defined by three fundamental aspects: *structure*, *operation*, and *meaning*.

As regards *structure*, a role corresponds to a form that, while contributing to the constitution and definition of reality, is clearly manifest and perceivable.

Operation is a defining characteristic of a role in that a role is dynamic rather than static. This is the aspect that distinguishes reality as *action* (Reggianini, Papi 2017) and interaction between multiple subjects and is, at the same time, a constitutional foundation of reality.

As a symbolic element or form of representation, a role is something else; a role has *meaning* incorporated into its form, in other words, its clearly

defined and characteristic structural dimension.

Two of these three characteristic elements of a role, namely the *structural* aspect and the *symbolic* aspect, therefore serve as essential points of reference when organising activities to investigate and interpret roles.

Our research will therefore be approached from two perspectives, which - while separate - are linked and interact harmoniously, namely from a phenomenological viewpoint and from an existential one.

The phenomenological interpretation of events

The phenomenological perspective directly concerns the structures of a role; it is based on the properties involved in the performance of our perceptual functions and on the beneficial consequences thereof. Thus, the phenomenological approach involves the observation of phenomena as they objectively appear and occur. The primary way for an observer to analyse a given occurrence from a phenomenological approach is through direct, attentive observation of that which is simply perceptible. This must be carried out impartially, without the conditioning of pre-established theoretical definitions.

The existential interpretation of events

This primary phenomenological focus is immediately accompanied by an *existential sensitivity*. When observing the personal dimension of an individual, this sensitivity is required in order to search for and bring out the meanings of that which is observed, taking into account the subjective aspects thereof fully and integrally.

Empathy and tele.

In Carl Rogers' view (1951), it is empathy that allows one party to reach an existential interpretation of the emotional world of another and of the underlying and embodied meanings. *Empathy* therefore, as an interpersonal connection, is a form of authentic and non-judgmental communication that allows one to connect with the inner world of another and capture and interpret it emotionally rather than through rationalisation and categorization.

In Morenian theory, the equivalent of empathy is *tele*, which is also defined as *two-way empathy*. *Tele* is an innate factor (but it can be fostered and developed through appropriate activities) which allows reciprocal interpersonal communication that is uninfluenced by conditioning.

Psychodrama is the quintessential tool with which to create relational fields, known as 'telic fields', structured according to the requirements described above. (Reggianini, 2020). By activating and using one's telic capacities, the observer (or the researcher) can comprehend the emotional world

of others. What is more, by putting oneself in their shoes and seeing things from their point of view, the observer can understand their thoughts and reveal their personal meaning system.

Generic existential interpretation and specific existential interpretation

All situations in life contain both general, collectively shared meanings and meanings that concern and are held by only a specific individual. These meanings are characteristic of that person, conditioned as they are by their individual traits and by their set of life experiences.

A *generic* or collective *existential interpretation* takes place when the world of meanings revealed, with respect to a specific event, concerns humans in general, in a universal way. In this case, the possible meaning of an event is interpreted in relation to its common, shared human dimension. For example, we might examine and define the common meanings shared by humans in general about experiences such as birth or - at the opposite end of the scale - mourning and loss.

An *existential interpretation*, on the other hand, is *specific* when it focuses on the precise and complex world of meanings relating to a single, specific subject at the time that person lives through certain experiences and events.

When analysing the series of activities comprising a psychodrama session, through which a session develops, we can adopt two other criteria with which to orient and organise our interpretations. If, when working through the various steps in the psychodrama session, our attention is focused on making observations and developing thoughts on the method and the application of specific techniques, then we are engaged in a *methodological interpretation*. If, however, the aim of our observations and subsequent reflective processing is to investigate and draw conclusions about theory, for example, the theory of personality, mental functioning, diagnosis, etc., we are involved in a *theoretical interpretation*. To remain within the structural limits of this research, the following pages focus exclusively on phenomenological and existential interpretations. These are discussed in general first and then, subsequently, taking into consideration one specific sense, by exploring the world of meanings of the particular members of the group under examination.

Analysis of the session: premise on instrumental aspects and theoretical-methodological consequences A very special set.

In order to comply with the precise government directives issued in the field of health prophylaxis, the sessions are held through the use of modern online

communication tools: computers and cable connections.

The participants are each in their own living environment, and the interaction therefore takes place electronically; the first significant consequence of this necessary choice is to have two different realisations of one of the fundamental elements of the psychodramatic set: the scene or stage. By doing psychodrama through videoconferencing, we have the simultaneous setting up of two stages: a real and concrete one in the place where each of the participants is located; the other stage, virtual and imaginary, is created through the possibilities of interaction and communication allowed by the specific telematic tools used.

One part of the action concerns what each participant acts and experiences in the environmental situation in which he finds himself; another part is intrinsically connected to the possibilities of communication and interaction with peers via telematics.

The intermediary objects.

An "intermediary object" (Rojas-Bermudez 1997) is an interaction and communication tool capable of acting therapeutically on a subject within a relationship, whether this is directly available or not.

In our case, therefore, we consider intermediary objects to be both the tools that allow remote communication between the participants in the videoconference session and the props with which each subject interacts inside the stage with its own specific living space.

Telematic connection and Telè

Alongside the 'distant communication' made possible by telic processes, there is also remote communication based on the concrete instrumental aids mentioned.

It is significant to underline that in the first scenic space, the one related to the place where each person is, all the perceptive channels of this person are stimulated and activated; in the virtual space created by the videoconference communication, only the auditory and visual channels can be used. We will see a little further on how to work through the methods described, considering the verified specific possibilities of exploitation.

General existential interpretation, activity by activity

Activity 1: Coming back together and group warm-up

Instructions from the director: "Good evening everyone, welcome. To begin our meeting, I'd like you to take a good look at your screens.

Listen to what is stirring within you and also reconnect with what is still there from the last session. Everyone, in turn, express yourself freely in your own words. You start Stefania. You were the first to log on; when you are finished, hand over to whomever you want “.

Phenomenological interpretation. Upon instruction, people begin to speak, one after the other, in a circular sequence. At first, the attention is focused on the screen, i.e., directly on the technological medium that allows connection, communication, and interaction with one another. Next, a moment of introspection is encouraged, the aim of which is to find and define all the emotional and cognitive content left over from the previous meeting. Finally, the participants verbally express whatever they have drawn from their inner selves, speaking freely.

General existential interpretation. *The participants at the meeting experience what it is to re-establish and feel a shared (re)connection (visually and through communication) both with one another and with the emotional and cognitive residues still within them after the previous meeting.*

Technical and instrumental observations

Each participant, through his own monitor, concretely connects with the other people involved in the session; at the same time the visual stimulus produced by the screen and its contents evokes memories, experiences and thoughts relating to previous encounters.

Purposes, effects, and activated processes.

Welcoming group members, relating them to each other while activating their introspective attention.

Activity 2: Finding and presenting a significant object

“When I say so, everyone stand up. Spend a few minutes moving around the room you are in at the moment, looking at the objects around you. Some of these will have been with you in your life for a long time; some are more recent. Be aware. You will be especially drawn to one of these objects, by a sort of indefinable magnetism that attracts you. Go to that object, pick it up, and then come back in front of your screen.”

People start acting according to a general bodily sensitivity as soon as they get up and move around, making contact with their physical surroundings. They observe and differentiate between the objects present. They then focus on one of these objects in particular because of the specific mental stimulation it has generated and they have perceived. They establish a definite, stable contact with the object, then immediately reconnect with the screen.

The attention shifts away from the screen and from the inner self of each of the participants towards the physical world, their real life. Within this new sphere, particular consideration is given to a single object among those present, as thoughts and affection flow towards it, establishing a meaningful connection, both bodily and mentally.

Technical and instrumental observations

The psychodramatic scene created here is that consisting of one’s own living environment; the concrete objects present in the place where everyone is at the moment are constituted as props, tools for action of the particular subjective stage.

They have the ability to activate particular mental functions in connection with the delivery given by the director.

Through the monitor, an “intermediary object”, each person can take on the image of their own face as a counterpart with whom to interact.

Purposes, effects, and activated processes.

Establish connections of identity—perceptive and introspective, spatial and temporal—before activating a projection on a particular object that takes on a significant and rich symbolic value.

Activity 3: Role reversal with the object and its presentation

“In turn, one at a time, each one of you will stand in front of the camera, holding the object so that it is clearly visible. You start again Stefania. Make sure your object can be seen by the others in the group. Imagine you are that object and, using your voice, tell its own story and the story of the life it has had here with you up to now and about the emotional and affective bonds between the two of you.

Standing sideways in front of the screen and holding their object in their hands, the participants reverse their roles with the object. They imagine they are that object and—talking in the first person, out loud—briefly tell its story and recount the experiences shared with the owner, making an effort to clearly describe the kind of bond that exists between them.

An object that has shared a significant part of the owner’s life becomes a privileged witness to his or her existential events; thus, it becomes a catalyst for and a condenser of memories, experiences, and mental images. By taking the point of view of the object, through role reversal, the participants experience a strong urge to draw out

significant elements from the contents of their mind. What is more, they have the opportunity to go back and look at meaningful moments in their lives from a new perspective, from outside themselves. These activities generate an intense and fruitful mnemonic process concerning both affective and cognitive aspects.

Technical and instrumental observations

A chosen object, a prop, constitutes itself as a counter-role, thus allowing each subject to assume its point of observation; then, through the perceptual decentralisation experienced, the mental function of role inversion is activated.

Purposes, effects, and activated processes.

By putting oneself from the point of view of the chosen object, the connections previously established are defined, organised, and made explicit; an autobiographical reenactment is then stimulated. At the same time, group sharing is nurtured.

Activity 4: Perceptual decentralisation through the observation of one's own image on screen

"Put away your objects. This time you start Paolo. Everyone else turn off their cameras. Paolo, look at what is in front of you, at that face, and express, in words, everything that goes through you when you see that face—your face ... your feelings and emotions, the thoughts that come freely to you. Then recount some episodes from the story of the life associated with that face. Tell us what you know about that face, or whatever you feel like sharing with us now". All the participants put their objects away and move back in front of the screen. All the participants, except the protagonist at that specific time in the action, turn off their cameras so that each one is now talking to his or her own face. The protagonist at this time is invited to decentralise themselves, taking on a purely and exclusively observational role. From this special viewpoint everyone expresses their thoughts freely and out loud, sharing the thoughts aroused by the act of concentrating on the reflection of their own face on the screen and thinking, once again, about their personal history.

In the same way as the significant object, one's face is also a witness and, at the same time, a concentration of memories and meanings about the collection of one's life events.

People engaged in this activity are able to decentralise perception by setting in motion, by themselves, a set of their own mental functions.

The participants are placed in a mainly observational role as they look at their own faces, which is a concentration

of elements of identity. Decentralisation allows you to distance yourself from these elements in order to obtain a sharper focus on yourself and to delineate and extrapolate meanings.

Technical and instrumental observations

Each participant in the session is the protagonist in turn; the companions turn off their video cameras so that the protagonist in turn has only his face in front of him on the monitor. Through the monitor, an "intermediary object", each person can assume the image of their own face as a counterpart with which to interact.

In this way, it is the latter that constitutes itself, in turn, as an intermediary object; each protagonist can assume himself as his own counter-role with which to interact in a process of self-definition.

Purposes, effects, and activated processes.

Taking a point of view outside oneself to stimulate perceptions and awareness of one's own historical and personal identity

Activity 5: Role-reversal and conveying a message from the object to its owner

"Now, taking turns, all of you will go back into the role of your objects for one last time while you see the reflection of your face on your screens. Let's start with you, Elisa, as you take on the role of your pastels. Look at the face of Elisa that you see on your screen and, talking directly to her, say whatever springs to mind to bring this meeting to a close."

Once again, the attention is diverted away from the screen, and the speaker becomes the significant object again in this two-way interaction. Each of the participants takes on the role of the object for the second time, swapping positions with it spatially too. From this particular spot, the participant whose turn it is to be the protagonist sends a message to himself or herself, saying whatever they feel moved to say at the time. The focus now, though, is on what has been experienced so far, and the words are spoken with the awareness that the session is drawing to an end.

A greater, more detached, decentralization experience is achieved when the participants take on the role of their object a second time. It allows them to change their point of view in order to reappraise what they felt during the various activities leading up to that time. This way, the contents of the psyche that have emerged through their experiences during the session are redefined and connected through a pro-active approach intended to add something more.

Technical and instrumental observations

One's own person is projected and concretized in the intermediary screen object where one's face appears. The "internal participant" of the protagonist on duty, called an observer too, emerges concretely by placing himself in the role of the significant object chosen.

Thanks to this new role reversal, a highly identifying movement is activated for the protagonist on duty.

Theoretical/methodological observations.

The role reversal technique consists of two fundamental and co-essential steps: taking on a role "other than oneself" and, at the same time, stepping out of one's own perspective to place oneself in a different point of observation (perceptual decentralisation). In this way it is possible to assume, to experiment with, an identity "other than oneself" according to different progressive steps, such as role taking, role playing, and role creating; this constitutes an important, the most advanced factor of growth and development of the personality.

The "role reversal" technique is the essential prerequisite for the development of the mental function called "role reversal."

Purposes, effects, and activated processes.

Stimulate processes of intentional self-definition by assuming again an external point of view, centred on the significant characters condensed in one's own history.

Activity 6: Group comes back together for the last time and leave-taking.

"Let's have a round of verbal expression in which each participant addresses the whole group, sharing with the others their state of mind after receiving the message from their object."

Purposes, effects, and activated processes.

Stimulate introspection and contact with one's own emotions, leading to a further and final integrative synthesis of acquired awareness.

A final round in which each participant in turn will use words to send a personalised goodbye message to another member of the group ".

Purposes, effects, and activated processes.

Making intra-group identification processes explicit and enhancing them.

The participants focus their attention on the screen again, and now, for one last time and in a circular manner again, talk to the group and its members.

Each person describes their state of mind after receiving the messages and ends by saying goodbye to a co-member of their choice.

At the end of the session, the participants shift their focus away from the contents of their internal world and an imaginary dimension, towards the group and its members, thereby returning to a dimension consisting of a shared reality. From this existential location, they experience a further transition by establishing their final state of mind and connecting relationally with the specifically chosen co-member.

Technical and instrumental observations

The attention of each participant shifts, through the telematic connection, towards the common, virtual scene, made up of all the connected and active monitors; in this way, each member of the group becomes the direct interlocutor of the other participants; the group as a whole interacts and works to complete the session.

Specific existential interpretation

Meaning and techniques.

The aim of this section is to understand and focus on the subjective meanings that a specific person may have found within whatever they experienced during the session.

This exploration concerns two participants for each activity, to which we will refer using just the number and title.

The techniques which allow this kind of analysis involve the leader establishing a telic relationship with the members of the group.

This way, the leader can experience what the other is experiencing and give voice to the emotions at play using a technique known as 'doubling'. Alternatively, the leader may be able to 'see' the other person and represent him or her through reflective action ('mirroring'). These different methods show the significance that an experience (undergone through the proposed activity) may have for a specific person.

Activity 1: Coming back together and group warm-up

Elisa: "I couldn't wait until it was 6.30 and time for our psychodrama session. Now I can see you I feel better.... This week has been more stressful than the last few weeks."

Director, doubling: "I feel increasingly part of this group, and this makes me feel calmer, more peaceful. Sometimes I feel lonely and disoriented, and when commitments start to build up, I am afraid I won't be able to do everything, that I am not up to the situation. I feel a deep sense of inadequacy, along with anxiety and

stress. Here with the group, though, I feel accepted and can relax.

Activity 2: Finding and presenting a significant object.

Eva lingers in front of the monitor for a few moments with a thoughtful look about her; then, she gets up and heads in a specific direction; she thinks about it, goes into another room, then returns - almost excitedly - with the object she goes on to present.

Director, mirroring: "Eva appears to be someone who struggles to let herself go because of obstructive thoughts, which prevent her from connecting with her emotions on a deeper level. This leads her to be torn between what she thinks and what she feels. She shows she has great vitality, that she is someone who can recognise the conflict within her and motivate herself to seek her own authenticity without blocking himself."

Activity 3: Role reversal with the object and its presentation

Stefania: "I don't know if this is okay because I didn't want to choose such a cold object. Okay, I'll try... I'm Stefania's phone, and I was a present from her father for her 24th birthday. So I've been with her since the day before she joined the rehab centre, which was a turning point in her life. I am a great support for her when she feels lonely. even though sometimes the way she uses me is unhealthy, she becomes addicted, and then, when she realises we are spending too much time together, she turns me off and puts me in a drawer... I know she'd like to change our relationship, but she can't do it.

Director, mirroring: "Stefania seems lonely; she seems to be someone who needs a great deal of contact and presence, and she has a low frustration tolerance; this leads to her being dependent on the people and objects with whom or which she feels a connection."

Giovanna: "I am a book of poems about love and friendship and I was given to her by a friend. I stir all kinds of emotions in her: laughter, sadness, contemplation... she has kept me on her bedside table all the time over the last two years... every now and again, she reads me (perhaps when she is irritable) and I calm her down... she loves me because I am vast and complex, and Giovanna likes to ponder things... the effect I have on her brings us closer.... Never having enough time usually keeps us apart, but that is not a problem at the moment".

Director, doubling: "Receiving attention from others makes me feel important. When I receive external stimuli, I feel like I am part of things and am more in touch with my inner self. When I experience intense emotions, I feel disoriented and am scared I'll lose control. During these moments, I need reassurance; I need something from the

outside that makes me stop and take the time I need.

Activity 4: Perceptual decentralisation through the observation of one's own image on screen

Elisa: "I see a scared face, with a tense forehead and a frightened look. It's weird for me. Seeing that face makes me feel bad... I feel bad because I'd like to see myself as braver; I wish I took risks more often, but what I see is a fear that's always there in the background. I also see a knowingness in my look—a more attentive, lucid, more alert kind of look... I have just realised that until last month my gaze was more absent."

Director, mirroring: "Elisa seems to struggle to accept herself; she'd like to be different from how she feels she is. Despite her self-critical attitude, she manages to decentralise and reach a perception of herself that also recognises the evolutionary aspects."

Activity 5: Role-reversal and conveying a message from the object to its owner

Elisa: "We are your pastels; use us well because, thanks to us, you can bring out what you have inside..."

Director, mirroring: "Elisa gives the impression that she is someone who needs to express herself, to show herself to the outside world; she is learning to be more in touch with herself, with her own resources."

Activity 6: Group comes back together for the last time and leave-taking.

Giovanna: "I feel happy, and I will try to read my book more in the future. (Saying goodbye to Elisa) I was so pleased to find out about how passionate you are about your pastels; I found it moving. Also, the fact that you haven't thrown them away and that you have been looking after them for such a long time... I found it very touching."

Director, doubling: "I feel satisfied with myself, and this gives me great confidence in the future. My co-members' words fascinate me, especially when they concern the past. I find being able to keep a link with the past very moving."

Utility and purpose of observation and interpretation data.

Through the specific existential interpretation, the director can gather different kinds of information depending on the role he or she has played in the interpretation. When doubling, the leader has access to the world of existential content and the participants' emotional movements. When mirroring, meanwhile, the leader can gather knowledge about the structure of the participants' personalities and their functioning.

All this information contributes significantly to the construction of the specific diagnostic process applied to individuals in psychodrama. At the same time, the data collected can help better orient the leader's interventions concerning the group as a whole throughout the evolutionary and therapeutic processes.

Concluding remarks.

The main objective of the research work we presented was to answer the questions concerning the possibility and consequent modalities of conducting therapeutic group work via telematic connection.

At the end of our research work, we think we have come to a clear and motivated positive reopening: yes, it is possible to develop productive therapeutic work through the channels under investigation.

Let us briefly recall that in Moreno's conceptualisation of the origins, development and modifications of the human mind and of personalities, at the basis of everything is **reality** in its concreteness; the space-time dimension where different existential forms interact reciprocally, stimulating and influencing each other's structures.

Psychodramatic theatre and the stage, which are both a scenic space and a context for interaction, constitute basic

mediums for the realisation of personal development and therapy processes.

The group companions and all the concrete objects that make up the therapeutic set constitute the auxiliary world, which is fundamental for the development and modification of the subjective identity.

We have positively hypothesised and verified how the same conditions of therapeutic work in the presence are present and can be activated in online work; in addition, we can benefit from the useful availability of a few more elements: the common virtual space activated and supported by the telematic connection, which allows reciprocal connection and interaction at a distance; the additional intermediary objects constituted by the audiovisual tools; space and tools are the fundamental context and support for the development of communication and interaction between the participants.

Through interpersonal interactions and appropriate stimulation and accompaniment, relationships come to life and develop; from interpersonal relationships, the processes and structures of the mind derive life and stimulation for their own growth; in each of the online group activities described and analysed in detail, we have examples, evidence, and motivation for this.

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