Engaging Children in Psychodrama: Appropriateness of Technique to Child Development

Abordando Niños en Psicodrama: Adecuación de la Técnica al desarrollo Infantil

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Abstract
Psychodrama techniques used with children are usually different from the techniques used with adults. Using child techniques can result in a different level of engagement compared to using adult techniques. In this work three sessions of a weekly play therapy group with children aged 7-13 are presented. In the three sessions, various psychodrama techniques were used, and the children's engagement was noted with the different techniques and correlated to the children's development as defined by Piaget and Moreno and to the cultural context.

Key words
Psychodrama, Egypt, Children, Development, Engagement, techniques, process

Resumen
Las técnicas de psicodrama utilizadas con niños suelen ser diferentes de las técnicas utilizadas con adultos. El uso de técnicas para niños puede implicar un nivel diferente de compromiso en comparación con el uso de técnicas para adultos. En este trabajo se presentan tres sesiones de un grupo de terapia de juego semanal con niños de 7 a 13 años. En las tres sesiones, se utilizaron varias técnicas de psicodrama, se notó el compromiso de los niños con las diferentes técnicas y se correlacionó con el desarrollo y el contexto cultural de los niños.

Palabras clave
Psicodrama, Egipto, Niños, Compromiso, técnicas, proceso

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PSYCHODRAMA IN EGYPT

Psychodrama as a term was first used by Moreno in 1919. (Haworth, 1998) However, it may have been practiced in ancient Egyptian temples, where the sorcerer dramatized desired events.(Nasser, 1987) The practice still lives in the form of the "Zar" dance where at a point the leader or "Kodia" encourages the devil inside the victim to leave her. The Zar encourages emotional expression using the whole body and following the music of the drums in a group therapy format.(Nasser, 1987)

In modern Egypt, Alexandria may have been the first place where modern psychodrama as described by Moreno was practiced, as evidenced by the paper by Samuel M. Tawadros published in 1956 "Spontaneity training at the Dorra Institute, Alexandria, Egypt" (1956b)

Psychodrama with children

Bannister (2002) describes the interplay of child development and psychodrama, where psychodrama techniques as doubling and mirroring often occur naturally between the care giver and the child. The understanding of the child in view of different developmental theories and how trauma may influence the development, sheds light on how psychodrama can rectify the development.

According to Aichinger (2014a), Psychodrama with children is a symbol game that may not be suitable for teenagers who may find playing with symbols childish. It is composed of three phases; the warm up, the game and the conclusion.

Child development

Piaget introduced the concept that children's minds were not simply a smaller version of adults' minds. He described four stages of development; sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete operational and formal operations. (Huitt & Hummel, 2003) Important concepts introduced by Piaget include; Schema*, Assimilation, Accommodation* and *Equilibration*. (Cherry, 2020)

Preschools that adopt Piaget's thinking encourage discovery learning and supporting the interests of the child without presenting material that is too advanced for the child's level.(Huitt & Hummel, 2003)

Piaget pointed that "We take as the fundamental problem of adolescence the fact that the individual begins to take up adult roles. From such a standpoint, puberty cannot be considered the distinctive feature of adolescence. The essential fact [underlying the growth of formal thought] is this fundamental social transition (and not physiological growth alone)" (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958)

Moreno introduced the spontaneity theory of child development. (Moreno & Moreno, 1944) He describes the infant at birth knowing nothing and living in the here and now to the extent of retaining no memories from his/her first 3 years of life. For the infant to survive according to Moreno there is a need for dealing with new situations. The first basic manifestation of spontaneity is the warming up of the infant to the new setting. Moreno differentiated between two types of starters of the warming up process; physical starters and mental starters.(Moreno & Moreno, 1944) Moreno described 4 characteristic expressions of the spontaneity factor which arise when a child faces new situations; a) Dramatic quality (newness, freshness, and vivacity) b) Originality c) Appropriateness, competence, skill and d) Creativity.

The Egyptian educational system

The Egyptian educational system mirrors the versatility of cultures and the difficulties facing the society. There are different types of education (Krafft, Elbadawy & Sieverding, 2019).

The main aim of the national educational system is memorizing information. (Loveluck, 2012)

Children's engagement with psychodrama

Engagement with psychodrama in this work refers to the observable behavior of children that indicate that they are immersed in the psychodrama experience and that it is grasping their attention. Behaviors that usually indicate that children are not engaged include having side talks, playing side games, asking to play another game or interrupting the flow of the drama. Behaviors that indicate engagement include participating in the drama, listening and asking for clarifications and doubling.

Orkibi et al (2017) described dramatic engagement as "the degree to which a client actively engages with and is immersed in the dramatic activities in a session". In a review of psychodrama research published 2019 Orkibi and Feniger-Schaal found only two studies measuring in-session process variables (2019); one on adolescents' dramatic engagement (Orkibi et al.) and one which measured the clients' spontaneity but not in-session.(Tarashoeva, Marinova-Djambazova & Kojuharov, 2017) Making this work the first, to our knowledge, to discuss psychodrama with children in-session process variables and engagement.

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FORUM
Journal of the International Association
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Hypothesis and aim of the work

It is hypothesized that the engagement of children with psychodrama techniques is developmentally sensitive.

The aim of this work is to explore appropriateness of child and adult psychodrama techniques with children as measured by their engagement.

GROUP CONTEXT AND METHOD

The setting of the group is at a private practice office, the room is small measuring about 3.5m * 4m. Children and families come referred by pediatricians, psychiatrists, psychologists, their schools and teachers or they are referred by other families. The families pay out of pocket except in rare occurences when they have a medical insurance that covers the therapy.

The group is run in the evening from 6 PM so as not to conflict with school times. It is run weekly for an hour, with an open format. At first there was one therapist, but as children with more challenges were accepted, a co-therapist was needed. The presence of a co-therapist proved very useful to contain the children and at the same time continue the therapeutic process.

The group usually starts with welcoming the children and a ritual of introduction is performed when we have a new child or two children that have not met previously. The group rules are then mentioned which are simple; no hitting and no bad language. We then proceed to playing games. Deciding on the game is done in several ways, often we play several games during the hour and we warn the children before the hour ends. Often the children are aware of the time but want to stay more. At the end of the group we shake hands with the children and they often play with the electric bell that we use to signal the end of the group.

In this group full psychodrama as practiced with adults was attempted twice, with varying degrees of acceptance and engagement. Oral consent was obtained from the parents to publish these scenarios and other games that occur in the group and the names of the children were changed to protect their privacy.

Group Description

The group is a weekly group, it usually has between 4-8 children, the age range is 6-13 years old with both male and female children.

The main difficulty facing the organization of this group is the time. A number of children are often absent because either they have exams (different school systems have different schedules) or they have sports events and training.

GROUP FORMULATION AND TREATMENT PLAN

Group formulation and approach

Social difficulties are the primary concern of many children attending the practice and their parents'.. Even when the parents' reason for referral is related to problems like scholastic achievement, the children are often more distressed about having no friends, with many children complaining that they are lonely. These social difficulties are commonly seen in children with depression, anxiety, OCD, ASD and family problems. The group offers a corrective emotional experience as described by Yalom. (McVea, Gow, & Lowe, 2011) This group was started with a play therapy group (Ginott, 1958) which is a technique that has proved effective with children (Bratton, Ray, Rhine & Jones, 2005) but it also used behavioral therapy techniques.

Treatment Plan and Goals

The goals of the group were to; 1) Allow the children to experience the feeling of belonging to a group and being accepted in it, having friends and playing with them as a source of joy. 2) Acquire the skills of negotiation, taking turns, patience, observing one's limits and others' limits, reading body language and behaving in different social circumstances and in different roles. 3) Encourage children to try different ways of social interaction and asking directly for feedback. 4) Transfer adaptive skills between children.

The contract with the children is simple: they orally agree to come play with other children, to learn how to make friends and enjoy themselves. Usually the children are eager to come, especially since they see the toys in the room and hear the word "friends", however, anxious children are sometimes reluctant to come to the group and no pressure is allowed from the parents, most of them think about it and come when they are ready. The duration of the treatment is set with the parents to end when the child has friends outside the group that he plays with and when the therapist and the parents agree that the goals were met. In the case of children on the autistic spectrum, the parents are told to expect the child to be in the group between 18 months and two years.

Methods

In this study three sessions of an ongoing group where selected, because child and adult methods of psychodrama were used.

Session notes were routinely recorded immediately after each session and the highlights of the process discussed among the therapists.

Content analysis of the ongoing process of the three sessions was applied retrospectively in relation to the children's engagement and developmental level. The difference between the level of the children's engagement was noted and linked to using adult and child psychodrama techniques.

Adult psychodrama techniques used included full psychodrama as practiced with adults including one protagonist, auxiliary egos, doubling, mirroring and role reversal.

Child psychodrama techniques used included using short vignettes that relate to the children symbolically (not telling the children's stories from their life) using masks and props and using doubling and role reversal.

Engagement is assessed in behaviors that usually indicate that children are not engaged including having side talks, playing side games, asking to play another game or interrupting the flow of the drama. Behaviors that indicate engagement include participating in the drama, listening and asking for clarifications and doubling.

COURSE OF TREATMENT

The facial injuries

This was carried out on November 2016, 5 children showed up: Yaser, Mahmoud, Aser, Amr and Zeyad.

Yaser came into the group with his face full of scratches and some contusions especially around the eyes. When asked what happened he said that he has had an incident at school and instead of telling the story regularly, the leader asked Yaser to choose one of the children attending to play the child who hit him. Yaser chose Mahmoud for the role of the child who hit him. Yaser said that this child used to be his best friend and they used to do a lot of mischief and hit the other children together. They were both behind in their studies as well. But after he started medication, Yaser found that his scholastic level improved a lot and he decided to change his ways and stop hitting other children and he stopped being friends with his old friend. To explain the initial situation, role reversal (Karp, Holmes & Tauvon, 1998) was used. When the drama played out and before the hitting scene, it became apparent that the other child wanted to become friends again with Yaser. Yaser was

expressing the great difficulty he was having in finding a way other than hitting to answer his previous friend's provocations. At this point and when the leader explained doubling (Blatner, 2000) to the other children, two of them who had already appeared enthusiastic doubled Yaser and suggested ways to deal with the other child that Yaser accepted. Yaser was then encouraged to choose a double for himself and he chose Aser. The new suggestions were played using the mirroring (Wilkins, 1999) technique with Yaser looking at the scene and they undermined the position of the other child, but Yaser did not appear to be done or satisfied with matters, so role reversal with his friend was attempted and as his friend the director asked Yaser why do you hit Yaser and he said that he wants to be friends with him again the way things were. When Yaser returned to his own role he was asked why he did not want to become friends with his old friend again and he said "I do not want to go to old Yaser again or to my old ways. I want to maintain good grades and a good character". So this scene was closed and another scene was opened with another child portraying old Yaser and Yaser playing himself now. Yaser now talked about the benefits of good grades, his parents and teachers' approval and not getting in trouble. Old Yaser's role was first played by Yaser to show how old Yaser had lots of problems but had a close friend. No further role reversal was attempted when Yaser expressed that although he misses old Yaser sometimes, he was determined not to go back to his old ways or his old friend. Deroling (Blatner, 2000) was done and sharing was started, with the other children sharing about being hit by other children and when they had change in their lives.

n the next session, Yaser shared with the group that he hit a child at school that day and Amr remarked in a warning tone that Yaser will go back to his old ways like this. For the next few sessions Yaser talked repeatedly about the past and the present and himself as a new person. It was noted also that Yaser's two siblings were trying to attend the group.

All through the psychodrama the children were highly engaged and they did not attempt to have side games or talks.

The shop with magic

This was carried out on February 2017, 5 children showed up: Manar, Jana, Omar, Amira and Fares.

The group started by the suggestion of the therapist to play a new game; The shop with magic. The children did not express, as they sometimes do, that they wanted a different game. The suggestion was

not intended, but may have resulted from the director's warming up (Karp, Holmes & Tauvon, 1998) which happened by reading an article about the "Magic Shop" technique. (Verhofstadt-Deneve, 2017) The technique was explained to the children: you came to the shop to buy qualities and you paid by good qualities that you have maybe in excess. Two chairs were propped with their backs facing each other and a small distance between them, and Amira volunteered to become the protagonist. Manar volunteered to hold the bell that she would ring as the protagonist entered the shop and when she left.

In the beginning Amira entered the shop and Manar rang the bell. At first Amira said that she wanted brightness to be better at school, when asked by the director about her current grades, she revealed that she got almost the full marks but wanted to get full marks in all subjects. The other children protested that she was already bright and did not need more brightness. Jana prompted Amira to hurry up, saying that other people wanted to buy at the shop. Amira agreed and said that she wanted courage and explained that other girls at school tease her and talk badly about her saying that she is a loser, a bad student and a cheater. Other girls take her things and then complain that she causes problems. At first the director asked Amira to choose some of the audience to be the girls who tease her at school, and she chose the two boys first naming them as girls, and the boys flatly refused to hold girl names at first, but then accepted when told that it will not be real. Amira then chose Jana to play the role of a third girl. The 3 children were brought into the shop without ringing the bell. The first scene was enacted after role reversal (Karp, Holmes & Tauvon, 1998). The scene was enacted after giving Amira some blocks in her hands to represent her things, however taking them did not arouse her, nor even taking her own head band which moved her a bit, but she kept repeating that they were bad actors, so Manar from the outside with the bell said that they were taking her things the way boys do, so her suggestion was taken and Amira chose Manar to be one of the girls who verbally abuse her and another scene was opened with the children repeating to her what they heard from her at the beginning of the scene after role reversal, but the two boys started playing side games and Jana was reluctant to repeat to Amira the abusive words. The therapist tried to double Amira (Blatner, 2000), she refused the doubling and kept repeating that they were bad actors. At that point, the scene was closed. Amira went out the door and the bell was rung.

Jana was then invited to the shop since she had wanted to try it, the bell rang as she entered and she said that she wanted to buy courage, but when she was asked to choose someone to be the friend she had the most trouble with, she chose Amira. Role reversal was done and she showed Amira what to say as her friend who did not know what she wanted and could not decide whether to remain friends with Jana or become friends with the other girls. Jana however was not satisfied with Amira's performance as her friend and she was told she could change her, so she chose the co-therapist who performed the role and she liked her performance a lot and said that that was exactly it. Jana was then encouraged to choose a double for herself and she chose Manar. Meanwhile Omar and Fares were losing interest and playing with each other, the therapist kept asking them to stay with the scene, but they started asking whether we could play another game which is something that happens a lot during games. The group ritual was to finish the game at hand and take votes afterwards or pick a game out of the game raffle, and this was what was said. Continuing with Jana, the scene played in front of her in Mirroring and she appeared puzzled, the director asked her whether she actually wanted to be friends with her friend and she said that she was not sure. So this scene was closed and the director asked the protagonist whether what she really needed was courage and she said that what she really needed was to not be alone. So the director opened another scene where Jana was encouraged to choose group members to be her friends. Jana role reversed with them saying that the main thing was to have fun, say no if you did not want to play in a nice way and deciding on what to play without big problems. She played with a ball with them and said that she enjoyed herself. The director doubled her saying that she deserved to have good friends and could wait till she found them. Jana accepted the doubling and repeated it. She then walked around with a block representing not being alone, coupled with deserving good friends and was told to try it on everyday and remind herself. To pay for it, the group was asked what did she have as a good quality that she could pay with. Everybody agreed that she was very kind and could pay with some of her kindness.

During the sharing, Manar, Fares and Omar shared that they wanted courage as well. When asked, all except Jana said they did not like the game and did not want to play it again. Jana however, said that she liked it a lot. At that point the energy level in the room was low so the director suggested playing a traditional Egyptian game called fishermen, which involves moving around and "fishing" each other with a ball. In the next session of the same group, Jana told the therapist after the group that she joined a new group of friends and that her old friend wanted her back.

The masks game

This session was carried out in March 2017, 6 children showed up: Amr, Fares, Amira, Maher, Mai and Mahmoud. Mai and Mahmoud were very late coming in almost in the middle of the session.

The session started by greeting the children and introducing Amira to Maher since they had not met before. The therapist told the group that there was a surprise and showed them about 24 new masks of different sizes and types; Disney characters male and female, clowns, Spiderman, Santa and scary masks. The children were immediately attracted to the scary masks and started trying them on trying to scare each other, they also tried on two furry pieces of cloth as cloaks with the masks. After about 10 minutes of this, the therapist brought out a crown and a magic wand and suggested playing a game where after tossing for a king/queen, we would have crowned a king or queen that would choose who wore which mask and what will they do. The children agreed, and the first queen was Amira who played a bit with giving female Disney masks to the boys, she then started asking the bird characters to sing and the scary characters to scare the others. When she asked Fares to be Tweety and sing and wave his arms as if they were wings, she did spontaneous role reversal with him without wearing the mask and the other children started to double the Tweety role as well. Fares looked confused and did not perform to the queen's desire until the therapist doubled him. This was not the first time that children did role reversal and doubling spontaneously in this group, and they used to do it even before the first psychodrama was done in the group. The playing continued until it was time for a new King/Queen and the toss produced Amr. Amr loved the role and had clear instructions for everybody. Amr also told Mai who had come in to do push ups. Mai did not know what push ups were so he showed her. She was still unable to do it, so he asked her to become a bird instead, but she kept going out of role. All the remaining kings asked Mai to do push ups, she kept trying at them and then talking about other things and whether we would play another game. The other child who started asking for another game was Maher. When both Maher and Mai were told that we could play another game on their time as king and queen, they both refused. Maher from the start wanted to put on Spiderman but only Amr let him be Spiderman for a while. He was complaining, taking off his mask and resorted to hiding one of the masks to get the Spiderman mask. The therapist and co-therapist kept encouraging him to do as the king or queen told him, so that they would obey him when he became king. Maher was the same with all the kings and queens, but they all dealt with him, some of them jokingly, others were underlining their authority. The only one who complained

about him to the therapist was Fares. However, when Fares was king he proudly assigned the roles telling the scary ones to be scary and the birds to sing. Mai did well as queen as well, asking Amr to play a role using a difficult traditional Arabic word that the therapist had to explain. The game ended at the end of the session with the last king and queen being Mai and Maher. Towards the end the energy level had decreased but Amira went on telling everyone that she had made them laugh the most, hadn't she?

DISCUSSION

Cognitive development is a major factor in psychodrama with children. Although it is possible to group children according to their developmental level, variety adds to the life of the group and a child like Fares would refuse to sit with children that look younger than him, he needs to be with children his age to further his development. At the same time narrowing the age range as recommended by Flegelskamp and Dudler (2017) will still not guarantee equal level of cognitive development. The wider age range makes it easier to pass those children who like Fares are delayed in their cognitive levels by finding other children who share either due to younger chronological age or developmental stage. The wider age range also makes running the group with its open nature and challenges in attendance easier.

Psychodrama as practiced with the adults can engage the children provided their cognitive level is nearer the formal operations stage according to Piaget. Another factor that can help is the topic of the psychodrama. In the facial injuries psychodrama, the topic of being hit in the face is developmentally appropriate for children in the concrete operational phase. Or, according to Moreno it may be a physical starter. In contrast the "Shop with magic" which consist of essentially abstract qualities is more suitable for children in the formal operations stage of development. To be noted is that Jana, the only child who truly engaged with the game and liked it is at the formal operations stage of development.

Aichinger (2014b) describes the warming up phase with children as short, in the facial injuries the children were engaged during the action with no side talks perhaps because they were sufficiently warmed up by Yaser's appearance and wanted to know about how he got injured. Another possibility is that the topic of hitting was in itself very dramatic and engaging for the children. On the other hand, no clear warming up was attempted with the "Shop with magic" and the children's engagement was low. Mental starters according to Moreno were not enough for most of the children. In the masks

game, warm up was in the form of playing freely with the masks at first, but full engagement was not achieved, though it was better than when "The shop with magic" was played.

Because of the variety of developmental levels present in this group, previous attempts at drama work and indeed most games are not met with equal enthusiasm from all children. This is not only due to the children's developmental level where egocentricity makes it difficult to share in a game where roles are not equal or indeed where all the lights are on the protagonist like in the "Shop with magic". But also, factors like the children's mood, previous learned patterns of play and rigidity affect their engagement in the group's work, whether this is taking turns playing Connect 4 or doing a psychodrama.

In this group, the children are encouraged to agree on a game and see it through, however, if a child does not like a game he/she can stop playing it, but they are asked not to disturb or distract the other members which is why the co-therapist presence helps the process of the group to continue while containing the children who do not like it and not punishing them. Children nearer the formal operations stage are often told that they cannot expect to like every game and to try to enjoy themselves anyway even if the game is simple.

Both Piaget and Moreno encourage the exposure of children to new experiences, but Piaget warns from going significantly above the child's abilities. Engagement in psychodrama together with the explicit opinions of children can guide this process with children refusing what is above their level while getting the chance to move to a new level of cognition through experiences that are more suitable to children, rather than expecting them to behave like adults.

When attempting to play with this group theme drama games, they were usually more attracted and engaged in games that included concrete themes like "money". The Egyptian national educational system at which most of the children in this group study does not employ or engage the children's imagination. Indeed, it mostly depends on memorization and rigid teaching styles.(34) Therefore, it may be understandable that it is difficult to engage children in games that are more abstract and to find them more attracted to themes that they are used to. However, this underlines the importance of continuing to try to engage children in active play that involves their imagination as in the masks game.

At the same time, Egyptians usually do not separate adults from children. Usually, children are aware of the life events of adults, not only their parents, but also other adult members of their extended families. Lots of children, especially the girls start watching TV drama series and soaps from the early age of 5 years old. It is a frequent complain of parents at mental health clinics that their children still watch cartoons at the age of 10 years old. This is no surprise given that at rural settings children as young as 5 are expected to work and children especially girls have short childhoods as they prepare for early marriage.(Matze, 2011)

After reading the description of psychodrama with children by Aichinger (2014a, 2014b) and Flegelskamp and Dudler (2017) and writing about how the school age children in the group did not engage in imaginative play, the therapist started rethinking the aims of the group. One of the aims of the group is for children to enjoy themselves while playing. And although the toys and the games in the room allow the children to play together and fulfill the group's aims, there remains a question; isn't restoring imaginative play to the children an important restorative goal? Wouldn't it increase the joy? So the therapist started out to get some psychodrama props like masks and colored fabrics, intending to continue to develop this kind of play with the children mixing it with other games and allowing children to choose it or suggesting it sometimes.

Conclusion

Children's engagement in psychodrama is more affected by their cognitive development than their chronological age. It is also affected by their mood and known play practices. The educational and cultural surroundings further affect their engagement. Psychodrama with children can play a crucial role, not only in dealing with the children's social issues but also in restoring their childhoods and their right to play.

Limitations and directions for future research
1 - Developing psychometric tools for measuring engagement of children in psychodrama, creativity and overall spontaneity.
2 - Using psychometric tools to measure children's development accurately.
3 - Studying the effect of enrolling in Psychodrama groups on children's creativity and coping with adversity.
4 - Comparing the outcomes of psychodrama groups with children with a narrow and wide age range.

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