#6 PAPER 09 -
CREATIVE IMPROVISATION THROUGH LITERATURE AND ITS EFFECTS ON ANXIETY IN A UNIFYING PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTION

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Abstract

Nowadays, the levels of anxiety in people are increasing, due to a dynamic society and its challenges. In this paper, we intend to reveal the working process for decreasing anxiety trait through a unifying intervention as part of a personal development group that used creative improvisation trough literature as the main technique. At the beginning and at the end of the study we applied the State -Trait Anxiety Inventory to the experimental sample and a control sample. We observed significant differences between the samples: the experimental one experienced a decrease in trait anxiety level, compared with those who didn’t participate to such an intervention.

Keywords: creative improvisation, psychotherapy, personal development, unifying, experiential, anxiety, literature;

1. INTRODUCTION

Literary metaphor, or therapeutic storytelling is a special category of metaphors used in the therapeutic process, which is distinguished by its highly creative nature, but also by its popularity among therapists, researchers, and patients, whether adults, adolescents or children. Therapeutic stories were used assuming that they will facilitate the access to the unconscious and will reveal the most painful issues, in this way the client not being placed directly in front of them, which will be, for him, more secure. It was also observed that the storytelling revealed a high level of creativity not only because of the details they are highlighting, but also because of the fact that the stories can contribute to the acquisition of a certain value system.

Sana Loue (2008) states that literary metaphor makes the client’s experiences more tolerating, especially if sometimes there are painful ones, creating a secure space in which the client can express freely and in accordance with his identity, even though under the protective umbrella of the story (Loue, 2008), while Stone (1998) stated that the reported stories, especially those about ourselves, are a good way to handle certain situations, to better understand certain aspects of our life and our behaviour (Stone, 1998).

Considered one of the originators and developers of literary metaphors, George Burns, pupil and successor of Milton Erickson, says that "metaphors in therapy are meant to be a form of indirect communication with clients about their experiences, processes and results, thing that can help solve their problem more precisely" (Burns, 1990). In the author's view, a therapeutic metaphor can be a story, a proverb, a fable or analogy, but regardless of its structure, it needs to contain a specific symbol where the therapeutic direction goes for the client (Burns, 2012). He has developed a series of stories for children, adolescents and adults for therapeutic purposes noting that this type of approach is first meant to discipline the client and a secondary role of storytelling is their power to arouse emotions (Burns, 2012). An experimental design to treat anxiety and phobias for children based on storytelling was conducted in 1994 (Constantino et. al., 1994). Their study group consisted of Hispanic children, who were asked during eight weekly meetings, to create stories based on some suggestive images for the measured variables. In this way, the authors observed a decrease of anxiety for the children included in the study group. A similar model was developed by Sasaki Tamotsu along with his colleagues (Sasaki et. al., 2007) who wanted to create a technique to use literary metaphor, combined with images taken on paper using colour spots similar with the Rorscharch test. Thus, when a person creates a particular image using colour drops, the therapist asks him to create a story based on that image / design, thereby creating a projection of certain
unconscious feelings of the person’s concerns (Sasaki et. al., 2007). The authors concluded, based on their clinical experience that this way of working is effective for those who have difficulties in expressing themselves, as they become less defensive (Sasaki et. al., 2007).

Paola Santagostino began working with “fables” of her clients, noting that they project within their stories some aspects of the disease they are suffering from (especially psychosomatic diseases). Santagostino (2008) highlighted the projective character of literary metaphors, stressing also that, asking her clients to retell the end, or create a new one, has positive values by integrating this into their reality and the symptoms get to know some improvements (Santagostino, 2008).

Taking as a starting point the utility of literary metaphors and storytelling, we have developed a new technique, within the paradigm of the Unifying Experiential Psychotherapy (Iolanda Mitrofan), which we named creative improvisation through literature. Creative improvisation through literature is an innovative experiential technique, which has as its starting point the spontaneous story-writing within the personal development group; this type of approach has a projective psycho-diagnosis and reorganizing valences. Thus, when developing and implementing creative improvisation through literature, an essential aspect that distinguishes this technique from others who have used literary metaphor is precisely the holistic approach, becoming not just a simple story, but also a complex process with powerful implications in activating creativity and the emotional unblocking.

Basically, in creative improvisation through literature, the participants have the opportunity, within every meeting, to turn into writers who draw their own stories (based on a given theme), translating their own thoughts and emotions on paper, giving life to new characters (but certainly a projection of significant people in their lives or even sub-components of their own self). They have the opportunity to make sense of certain events, to provide a meaningful title for their stories, to "play" with the characters, create their own thread of action to find solutions and provide a genuine end. Previous studies that we have done in this direction (Mitrofan & Constantin, 2015; Constantin, Cardaș & Petreanu, 2014) had shown the efficiency of using the technique within an experiential group in order to increase self-esteem or even changing some other variables in the participants’ life, such as social reintegration, increase of communication and balanced relationships.

Due to the positive effects that we have observed in past studies, we proposed to continue and develop the studies regarding spontaneous story-writing. This paper aims to highlight the effects of creative improvisation through literature in decreasing trait anxiety, as will be revealed below.

2. EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

2.1. Objectives:

The main goal of this research program is to harness the creative improvisation through literature technique within the unifying personal development group on the behaviour of trait anxiety.

Thus, we proposed the following objectives:

- Developing creative improvisation through literature technique, with its application way and harness within the personal development group;
- Psychological intervention using creative improvisation through literature on experimental group consisting of 40 subjects over a period of 12 sessions;
- Comparative analysis of the results obtained by the experimental group and the control group after the psychological intervention.

2.2. Participants

This study involved a total of 80 subjects, randomly selected and divided in two groups as follows:

- An experimental sample consisting of 40 subjects (N1 = 40);
- A control sample, consisting of 40 subjects (N2 = 40);

Selected participants were aged between 20 and 30 years, with higher education, coming from various fields: geography, social work, psychology, computer science, journalism, nursing, public relations and education. The main psychological problems of the participants were the increased level of anxiety and a low self-esteem, as revealed in the diagnosis phase, before the onset of the research program. Thus, involving participants from several areas in the research program, we wanted to observe the effects of this technique, applied to different types of people which simultaneously participate in a personal development process. In practical terms, we believe this approach of the intervention within creative improvisation through literature can
have positive values, depending on how the participants from different backgrounds, with different personalities, positively resonate with this technique.

The experimental sample was included in a 12 week program of personal development that used creative improvisation through literature as the main technique, while the control sample was tested on the same variable as the experimental group but the subjects didn’t participate within a personal development program. All the participants involved in the experimental sample were informed about the research goal and objectives.

2.3. Method

As a tool for therapeutic intervention in a personal development group, we used creative improvisation through literature, as I mentioned above. Thus, at the beginning of each of the 12 meetings, participants received the task to write a story spontaneously, based on a specific theme in order to highlight in a projective and experiential manner, the themes of the participants’ lives, blockages or any other issues. After 10 or 15 minutes, this phase was followed by an analysis one, which lasted 2 hours, in which the participants integrated their themes, after they gave new meaning to some blocking events released by the stories they previously wrote. The group analysis was conducted by a facilitator, in a non-directive, experiential way, based on the Unifying Experiential Therapy paradigm.

To measure trait anxiety, we used STAI – state trait anxiety inventory produced by Spielberg and his collaborators (Spielberg et. al., 1983). This inventory is widely used in the field of psychology clinical, being one of the scales with which to distinguish between anxiety and depressive syndrome.

Before beginning the study, we applied the STAI questionnaire, both to the control sample and the experimental sample. Later, the participants included in the experimental sample took part within a personal development program through literary improvisation. In the end both groups were retested in order to see the extent to which participation within the personal development group through creative improvisation through literature has beneficial effects on anxiety.

In this context, the independent variable is the development program based on creative improvisation through literature and the dependent variable is trait anxiety.

2.4. Hypothesis

Research hypothesis (H1): There are significant differences between the scores of the experimental sample and the control sample for anxiety – trait variable within a personal development program based on creative improvisation through literature.

The null hypothesis (H0): There are no significant differences between the scores of the experimental sample and the control sample for anxiety-trait variable within a personal development program based on creative improvisation through literature.

3. RESULTS

After applying STAI questionnaire and after data processing, we made a comparison between the experimental and control group.

The mean obtained by the experimental sample in pre-test phase was 47.78, while the control sample obtained 44.06. To see whether there are statistically significant differences between the two samples at the T1 (pre-test) moment, we applied the t test for paired samples: thus at a level df = 39, p = .15. How p >.005, this means that there are no statistically significant differences between the two samples which are, thus, homogeneous.

Data of the statistical processing are shown in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scored variables</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental group pre-test mean</td>
<td>47.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental group post-test mean</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df value</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p (sig. 2-tailed) value</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next, in the post-test phase, we compared the means obtained by the experimental group and the control group both tested on the same variable. At a mean of 34.53 for the experimental group and a control group average of 44.05, df = 78 and p level is .000.
Following the set, we see that $p < .05$, which allows us to reject the null hypothesis and accept the research hypothesis: there are significant differences between the means calculated for trait anxiety variable on the experimental sample and the control sample. We note in this case a decrease in anxiety level for the 40 subjects who took part in a personal development program which used creative improvisation through literature technique; this demonstrates the effectiveness of this type of intervention applied on the variable mentioned above.

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<table>
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<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental group test mean</td>
<td>34.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control group test mean</td>
<td>44.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df value</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p$ (sig. 2-tailed) value</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As we’ve shown in this study, creative improvisation through literature is a highly creative and experiential technique, with benefits within the personal development of youth and adults. The use of this type of unifying experiential group intervention leads to a decreased level of trait anxiety for the subjects involved which we think is an extremely important fact, in the context of the need for fast and healthy adaptations to the environment, consisted in a society with multiple pressures caused by our needs for performance, affirmation and even survival.

In a previous paper, we have shown that creative improvisation through literature has beneficial effects and increases self-esteem, which is why we intend to continue the validation and use it on other variables, others than those measured in this paper. We also consider that this research has limits; however, the limits can be overcome when identified, our goal being to re-evaluate when necessary. Thus, an aspect that we would like to take into account in future studies is to reveal the effect size of the technique in order to observe the extent to which such intervention is kept in subjects’ personalities. If we are to reveal long-term effects on a larger sample of participants, a total of 40 subjects may be insufficient. Also, we believe that, in order to demonstrate the the efficacy of the technique, it is important to measure the effects of its intervention through other psychological variables such as emotional intelligence, sociability, self-acceptance, empathy, etc. We intend to do that in future studies.

In conclusion, we plan to continue the research of creative improvisation through literature, not only to harness this technique but also to eliminate potential bottlenecks and limits that we faced in the present study; these bottlenecks can be removed with the acquisition of experience.

5. REFERENCES