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Reflections on Online Freudian Analytic Psychodrama

Reflexiones en Psicodrama Analítico Freudiano

Stefania Picinotti (Italy)

Stefania Picinotti, Psy. D. Is a Psychoanalyst, Individual and Group Psychotherapist, Psychodramatist, President of SIPsA (Italian Society of Analytics Psychodrama), Member of Scientific Board at COIRAG (Confederation of Italian Organization for Analytics Groups Research) and Lecturer at University of Rome Sapienza - Faculty of Medicine and Psychology. Representative SIPsA Affiliate in IAGP's CAOA. Author of clinical scientific contributions in the field of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy and Freudian Analytic Psychodrama.

picinotti.stefania@gmail.com

Abstract

The article explores the main challenges that occur in Freudian analytic psychodrama groups, in the transition to online therapy. I introduce the literature on Freudian analytic psychodrama groups and then -based on clinical examples from my experience with online groups- I address changes and challenges in 4 areas of the therapeutic processes. The experimented setting shows that the body drives are conditioned by the online mode in order for us to experience an intense and new emotional condition. This practice reveals that challenges fully invest our identity, our reflective and symbolic capacity. We easily adapt to take on and maintain the unconscious dimension.

Key words

uncanny, unconscious, online setting, representation, body drive.

Resumen

El artículo explora los principales desafíos que se presentan en los grupos de psicodrama analítico freudiano, en la transición a la terapia en línea. Introduzco la literatura sobre grupos de psicodrama analítico freudiano y luego -basándome en ejemplos clínicos de mi experiencia con grupos online- abordo los cambios y desafíos en 4 áreas de los procesos terapéuticos. La puesta en escena experimentada muestra que las pulsiones corporales son condicionadas por el modo online para que experimentemos una intensa y nueva condición emocional. Esta práctica revela que los desafíos invisten plenamente nuestra identidad, nuestra capacidad reflexiva y simbólica. Nos adaptamos fácilmente para asumir y mantener la dimensión inconsciente.

Palabras clave

lo siniestro, inconsciente, entorno en línea, representación, pulsión corporal

FROM THE UNCANNY TO THE PERTURBATION: STARTING THE ONLINE SESSIONS

The 2020 world crisis of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the lives of all of us. Strategies for supporting patients with online therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic can be found in several psychotherapeutic disciplines (S. Geller 2020; A. Lemma 2020; V. Lingiardi 2008; J.S. Scharff 2020; D.A.Nesci 2021), including group psychotherapy (S. Baron 2018; R. Biolcati 2022; H. Weinberg 2020, 2021).

With the arrival of the pandemic, with many colleagues, we wondered how to proceed in the conduct of our Freudian analytic psychodrama groups that are of various levels: therapeutic, training of psychodramatists, continuing education.
The dilemma was: how to recreate in a 'virtual setting', in the physical absence of bodies, the possibility of representation as we have always understood it?
We tested a 'setting' in which the sensory nature of the body was altered (hearing and voice) and in some cases distorted (body movement, gestures, perception of smells).
The emotional relationship, the therapeutic alliance and the social bond made it possible to hold on to the unexpected and the uncanny event, both in the therapeutic and in the training setting.
The paradigm used in the practice of Freudian analytic psychodrama opens up to something that we could call 'the words to the rescue'. We do not mean here the word not only as an analytical act, but rather the word as a substitute form of what of the body drive has been deprived of in the virtual setting.

The irruption of the real (J. Lacan, 1969-1970), shows itself, both at the social level and at the level of the practice, as a 'perturbing' and 'disturbing' element, a concept that we could frame, with its implications, in Freudian theory.

In the essay, "The Uncanny"(1), Freud highlights some fundamental aspects characterizing psychoanalytic epistemology: the return of the repressed, the castration complex and the figure of the double.

The disturbing is the return of something that was buried, in the form of the stranger (unheimlich) of what is familiar (heimlich): it is not so much the content of the repressed as the return of the same, but the 'coming alive again' that produces estrangement (unheimlich) because we witness the return of the same as different.

The theft of the eyes operated by the magician "Sandman", according to the story by Hoffmann, to which Freud refers, has to do not only with the symbolic equivalent of castration and with the anguish about the alienating character of automata that presents themselves as human; but, more broadly, considering the entire psychic economy, it recalls the subject's relationship with freudian *Das Ding*, a question that constantly recurs in the subject's encounter with the external world.

This disorienting encounter, during the pandemic, becomes even more topical since we have been living for some time in a world increasingly immersed in the virtual. This relationship leads to the impossible mission of finding the first pleasure through the discovery of an identity of perception in the relationship with an object (Winnicott, 1969). The disturbing question of the double refers, like any other disturbing phenomenon, to an overall repositioning of the subject, not only in relation to the world, but each time also in relation to its narcissistic balances and internal structures.

This value of repositioning of the subject is interesting because it shows us how the reverse of the disturbing is to be found in a function of reconstruction, processing and renewal if we can preserve the entire psychic system from disintegration.

The idea of uncanny proposed by Freud remains current, in the moment in which it is considered a real sensor of detection of cognitive dissonance and 'non-sense' that is in us, especially in an era in which we are less and less defined subjects, polymorphous and multidimensional, absorbed in technological contact with other subjects.

INTRODUCING FREUDIAN ANALYTIC PSYCHODRAMA

The Freudian analytic psychodrama is a device that is practiced in group and is characterized by representing, through a scene, what the subject brings to the session as a subjective issue that is a problem. The theoretical reference by which it is inspired is the 'fort-da' game described by Freud (2). In fact, repetition, in the fort-da game, is connected to the symbolic function that the game performs for the child, in order to re-propose a sort of inner scheme or model, regarding the absence and the presence of the object, on the background of the loss of the object. Thus, the movement of absence and presence is represented in the game as a metaphor for the possibility of 'handling' loss.

The process of symbolization does not work, however, in the case of a split between the 'fort' and the 'da'.

A psychodrama session is conducted by an animator and an observer who both have a therapeutic or didactic function and alternate in the two positions, with two different styles: this interchange reduces the vertical transference. The two conductors of the group avoid becoming objects of identification and therefore occupy the position of the ideal ego.

The scene is constructed according to the indication given by the animator who identifies and 'punctuates' a significant aspect of the subject's discourse carried as a narrative that questions the Other.

When the play is proposed, the participant gets up and comes in, occupying occupies the empty space inside the circle that refers to the absence of the object.

From that moment, the level of the narrative changes and it is translated into representation.

The player person in question chooses characters who are assigned a script which they must follow, a choice that is often unconsciously dictated by identifications.

The character called to play performs the function of 'auxiliary self'.

During the play, the animator intervenes, by introducing a punctuation, an interpretation, a silence, in any case an analytical act that shifts the register from the imaginary to the symbolic level with tertiary elements.

The animator can also propose to the player a change of role, thus let them experience the encounter with an Other inside and outside themselves that is different and, at the same time, to see themselves from a different position.

Another possibility, is to double the person in question or the players themselves: the participants in the group can get up from their seats, position themselves behind the person they want to double and say something. This movement amplifies the resonances, affecting, with unexpected elements, the dubbed character, giving depth to their position, opening new questions. It is interesting to note that, at the same time, the dubber brings into play his or her own subjective question, because while dubbing one always says something about oneself under the illusion of saying it to the other.

At the end of the performance, the participants go back to their seats and the speech starts to circulate again.

The session always ends with the reading of the observation that returns the significant topics circulated in the group, leaving unanswered questions that can activate the work of elaboration between one session and another. In the psychodrama groups, the scopic drive assumes primary relevance because vision in a physically present group, in addition to being circular, benefits from a space in which there is depth. This gives the participants an actual and imaginary 'all-round' perception, which is equivalent to both a unitary perception of the group and an internal representation of one's own body placed in a three-dimensional space. In addition, there is the possibility of catching the other's gaze, which corresponds to the perception of being able to see and be seen in a direct way, with a drive that moves in a circuit of back and forth in which the response is immediate, both in the meeting and in the diverting of gazes.

In reference to space we recall the famous aphorism of Freud, who said: "The psyche is extended and knows nothing about it. [...] Spatiality is a projection of the psychic apparatus"(3). With this extension of the psyche and with spatiality we have to deal continuously in the practice of Freudian analytic psychodrama.

ONLINE DIFFERENCES: WORDS TO THE RESCUE

Online group therapy implicates several changes and challenges in the following elements.

1. Change of Setting

The transition to in the online mode, has brought us face to face with the intense emotional experiences of conductors, as well as patients and training participants, because "the distinction between real and virtual content tends to disappear: the simulation is not limited to amplifying one of our senses but totally invests our identity, our reflective and symbolic capacity"(4).

On the other hand, thanks to the therapists' experience of non-loss with the shift to the online setting, experiences of despair have been reduced and new avenues for finding lost beloved pulsional objects and/or processing grief have opened up.

The space of virtual presence cannot be considered a classical third space, since the online session takes place, simultaneously, in several real places and in several 'topoi' or metaphorical mental spaces.

Therefore, the first issue is the overcoming of space/time limits that induced, at an unconscious level, an antidepressant effect and created an opening to hope on the one hand and the omnipotent idea that everything is possible on the other.

Only the face of each person appears, while the body is off-screen, this partial image, being what remains most visible, gives us an unprecedented access to the close-

ness of the face and its expressiveness that is less possible to perceive in a 'live' group.

2. Vision: the double, dubbing and the space of the other

The simultaneous double vision on the screen, besides being disorienting, offers a return of the image of the subjects, allowing them to see their own image as in a mirror and to 'reflect', readjusting their face, in the recovery of an 'authentication' which we all need. It is as if we were immersed in contininus exposure to the Lacanian 'mirror phase'(5).

Freud had explored the theme of the double following the reading of Rank's work (1914): "The relations between the double and the image reproduced by the mirror are investigated, between the double and the shadow, the tutelary genius, the belief in the soul and the fear of death [...] The double originally represented a bulwark against the disappearance of the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death', and probably the first double of the body was the 'immortal' soul."(6).

This reconstruction of the figure of the double can be linked not only to one's own image, but also to dubbing in analytic psychodrama, which acquires even more importance in the online mode: in addition to giving depth to the dubbed character, it assumes a more effective cutting function since the intervention is mediated by the word that preliminarily accompanies it. This is because, since there is no physical proximity, you are forced to designate your double by saying: "I would like to double, such and such". This statement, produces a significant emotional resonance both with those who do it and with to those who receive it, as there is an activation from the 'call' by name.

Another aspect found, is the reciprocal vision of the 'space of the Other' which fulfills an unconscious desire, often revealed in patients' dreams, to be in one's own house with the psychotherapist. This novel aspect stimulates 'exploration of the Other's outer/inner world', fostering the possibility of new insights or breakthrough moments.

3. The gaze and the gesture

"Psychodrama is the place of identifications, [...] it dynamizes and organizes the group since everyone is exposed to the gaze of the other"(7). In online sessions, one experiences an 'overexposure' of the gaze that tends to reflect on one's own image and on the set of images rather than intersecting with the gaze of others.

The therapist who animates the group must verbally solicit the participants and this affects the directionality of the gaze. In the construction of the representation, 'a trick' was found to turn off the cameras of the non-participants in the scene just to recreate a situation of exchange of glances limited to the characters directly involved.

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In the online setting, making a transition to the symbolic requires careful articulation of the scene that must be accompanied by many more words from the psychotherapist, which perhaps takes away some of the improvisation and surprise from the shifts and the gestures that participants would make in presence.

Moreover, the gesture is accompanied by the word, revealing the implications of emptiness, pause, rhythm, contradiction. The animator, by grasping these aspects in detail, can reveal to the subject the unconscious discourse that lies behind the conscious speech.

By familiarizing with the new device, we have progressively rediscovered that the subject is not only a body, but that it is the speech that gives the subject one.

In the change of role, has for the subject the value of experiencing themselves in the place of the Other. In the virtual condition, we are not able to physically move, we have to introduce the variant of asking, to declare who is dubbed and to provide the actual movement of the body with a small change of position within the room, and then speak from that place. The result, in this case, did not always prove effective, especially in cases where the subject has difficulty mobilizing the imaginary, there is a risk of tracing the 'fiction' style, rather than enacting the 'as if'.

4. The body, the silence and the words

To return to Freud and the material extension of the psyche, we can say that the ego is an ego-body. for there to be psyche there needs to be a body, but also that the psyche by its existence produces something of the body, even when it is distant. Moreover, if we think of the group as a social body, the on- line dimension has put us in front of a completely different representation that has opened us to the thought of 'multiplicity'.

In this regard, I will consider two significant excerpts of observations made in a therapeutic group of online analytic psychodrama, in March 2020, just when what has been called "social distancing" began.

O.: "Sharing exists in the inside, but the outside moves to remind us that in every home the movement continues... to remember our origins...".

S.: "Bodies change too, and unlike the limited movements of the normal group setting, here the bodies are constantly moving."

Listening was also modified by a change in auditory perception, since normally the sound is modulated by the architecture of the room, by the orientation of the voice depending on how the heads of the speaker and the listener move. The sub-liminal return is immediate and fast in physical presence. Online we experience that the sound is artificial because it is completely dependent on electronics and microphone quality. The orientation of the voice is unidirectional and the sub-liminal return is not present. In this arrangement, silence has become

more difficult to interpret. Often, in the face of a long silence, one has experienced the perturbing anguish of loss, in fact one says: "the connection has dropped, the connection is not working!".

These incidents, which also include image distortion, as we continued to use this online media tool were experienced as more familiar and their effects became the object of analysis. As for the sense of smell, we were faced with an even more radical situation, since smell is a more primitive sense, in the carnal sense like touch and taste, with powerful effects of attraction and repulsion at the affective level, so much so that olfactory memory is the one that remains most imprinted and lasts longest in life.

CONCLUSIONS: EXPERIENCES AND DREAMS

In summary, I believe that the outcome of this experimentation with the online system was positive, since the impact on analytic psychodrama, with regard to the creation of new environments (new but ancient setting, heimlich/unheimlich), could improve its effectiveness both in psychotherapy and in training. It will be interesting to continue the research on the use of words in the Freudian analytic psychodrama and which future frontiers will be crossed.

To conclude, I would like to draw attention to two fragments of dreams brought by patients from different clinical groups during the transition phase to the online setting. These excerpts are meant to describe how the process of change resonated in individuals, in their perception of the group and in the position they assumed.

D. recounts a dream she presented saying it was a nightmare. It was a long dream of which she remembered only 'a final flash'. It was set "in the ward" of a hospital, there were two men, one stronger, one weaker. The thinner man was inside a glass room, he had some drips attached, but these drips had no supports. There were no patients or staff in the ward.

There is an obvious allusion to the absence of structure in a condensation that refers to a 'feeble' chance of survival for both patients and caregivers. The absence becomes pervasive, the presence of the two men alludes to a dual juxtaposition, the room with the glass window refers to the video, and a strong anxiety of death is perceived.

T. recounts the dream in which he was out and about with a group of people moving from land to water. She says they were on a raft and she positioned herself on the edge. There was a group of people on another part of the raft. In the distance she saw dolphins approaching towards land, these animals turned into goats.

In this case, it seems that the group's water journey has to do with a transit situation, two groups on the same raft, the reference is to a 'beading' of the subject. The vision is a scene of evolutionary transformation, from aquatic

animal to terrestrial. It is as if they represented the experiences of the participants in the group, so much so that the associations on the two animals in the dream highlight the nature that characterizes them: from playful animal to climbing animal.

The two fragments, taking us back to the beginning of the pandemic, give us both the dimension of the historical time that has passed since then, and the 'timeless' dimension, typical of the formations of the unconscious. We can see in these examples how "[...] The uncanny can be observed as a psychic phenomenon that describes the mind's attempt to construct a narratively coherent 'theory' capable of containing the anguish it experiences in the course of its development. [...] The anguish moved and activated by the perturbing object is, however, intertwined with an aesthetic form, or rather, the aesthetic form of the perturbing work [the dream] provides the anguish with a narrative track on which to move in order to find [...] transformative pathways and 'exchanges'"(8). We have been able to feed on these new forms of exchange for a long time as leaders of Freudian analytic psychodrama groups, by working on a sort of narrative de-construction of communicative processes coming from external reality, by bringing subjects back to the assumption of a statute of unconscious reality. The disturbances experienced in the virtual world have left a remnant, a trace on which to continue to develop thought.

NOTES

All the quotes are translated by the author of the paper. The numbers of the pages mentioned in the quotes are referred to the italian text.
1. Freud S. (1919), pp. 81-118.
2. Freud S. (1920), pp. 192-246.
3. Freud S. (1938), p. 566.
4. Caronia A. (1996), p. 6.
5. Lacan J. (1937), pp. 87-94.
6. Freud S. (1919), pp. 96-97.
7. Lemoine G. and P. (1972), pp. 55-58.
8. Moroni A. (2019), p. 103.

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