New Ideas and Clinical Practices to Improve Corporeal Self-Esteem

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Abstract

It's common to face, concerning patients with eating disorders, the lack of trust towards others and the fear of judgment. In the clinic, this aspect is very interesting but also difficult to engage. The aim of this research is to evaluate theatrical techniques as tools to develop confidence toward the others' point of view, through an improvement of collaborating and interaction abilities. We interviewed about building a character on the scene fifteen not professional actors and fifteen recovered eating disorder patients, attending to theater classes using Stanislavski Method. To compare the clinical and the amateur actors group and to analyze the link between the self-descriptions as a common person and self-descriptions as actors on the scene, we used modified repertory grids and semi-structured interviews. The outcomes of the work show us that every participant appreciate the stage activity as a potential training for the multiplicity of "the self". Anyway, the Eating Disorder Group is more likely to reduce the interaction impact's size and to disconnect actors and observers (director and audience), in comparison to the Amateurs Group. The Clinical Group also doesn't recognize the importance of being a relational feedback during the construction of characters and it's easy that they give importance just to the aspects of the character which they already see in themselves. Thus, the fear of judgment could be overcome thanks to the theatrical laboratory, in fact the screen of the theatrical performance offers protection to actors. Possible outcomes in the clinical practice will be discussed.

Keywords: role, role playing, identity, theatre, eating disorders

Introduction

According to many authors, the daily life may be described as a theatrical scene, and the personal identity as the set of roles that the person wears in the various contexts of the stage

(Berger & Luckman, 1966; Goffman, 1959; Watzlawick, 1976, 1981). Face-to-face interaction might be understood and analysed in terms of a theatrical representation where individual, when comes in contact with others, attempts to control or guide the impression that others might make of him/her by changing or fixing his or her setting, appearance and manner.

The parallels between performance and life is, following Goffman (1959), is disarming: an actor performs on a setting which is constructed of a stage and a backstage; the props in both settings direct his action; he is being watched by an audience, but at the same time he is an audience for his viewers' play. The social actor has the ability to choose his stage and props, as well as the costume he would wear in front of a specific audience. The actor's main goal is to keep coherent, and adjust to the different settings offered him. This is done mainly through interaction with other actors. To a certain extent, this imagery bridges structure and agency, enabling each, while saying that structure and agency can limit each other.

Communication and interactions create also what we call simply "reality". Constructive processes of "scenic" real, redeemed from the accusation of "draft," can then become a reference for understanding the birthing process of what we consider "reality."

In interactions, or performances, the involved parties may be audience members and performers simultaneously; the actors usually foster impressions that reflect well upon themselves, and encourage the others, by various means, to accept their preferred definition. Accepted definition of the situation and dominant roles become, after being shared within persons, the "reality".

The "self" is also the image that the person tries to pass to others, it does not originate from the person, from the so called "subjectivity", but from the scene and its actions between actors. The self, often wrongly attributed to a character, is the product of a represented scene, not its cause. It is not something with a specific location, but a dramatic effect that emerges from the situation, then, is the social institution that must be considered as the means to produce and maintain the self.

This is the premise from which it moves the "established role therapy" proposed by Kelly (1955) and the "psycho-drama" born from Moreno (1985): strong experiences of self-transformation based on the role-playing game.

Therefore, the use of theatrical techniques, especially those that promote the entry into the character and the work of the actor, may represent an important resource for psychotherapy, when practiced consistently and accompanied by a reflection about the meaning of the laboratory. For these reasons we chose a theater course conducted according to the Stanislavski (1936, 1949) method. This method of acting is a set of techniques meant to create realistic portrayals of characters. It is based on the concept of emotional memory for which an actor focuses internally to portray a character's emotions onstage. The major goal of the Stanislavski method is to have a perfect understanding of the motivations, obstacles, and objectives of a character in each moment. Actors often use this technique for realistic plays, where they try to present an accurate portrayal of normal life.

Problem Statement

Starting from these examples of identity change obtained through the scenic fiction, the research is aimed to investigate the change in self-description of actors engaged in a theatrical activity. Reports provided by participants of a clinical group were collected and compared to reports of amateur actors engaged in a theatrical workshop. Both were interviewed about the perceived effects of the assumption of new roles during the construction of character and role play. The parallelism between groups perceived as "building process of identity" has made it possible to explore the possibilities that the theatrical activity can offer in the clinic context of eating disorders. (Castelnuovo et al., 2008; Cipolletta & Faccio, 2013; Faccio, Bordin, & Cipolletta, 2013; Faccio & Costa, 2013; Faccio, Mininni, & Rocelli, in press).

Research Questions

Specifically, the two groups were compared with respect to the following themes:

1. The subjective perception of the processes involved in the building of character.

2. The subjective perception of the effects of "extension" of the character's features to the "self."

3. The impact of identity exploration held by the Theatre laboratory in the most general sense of identity.

4. The investigation of the way people involved in research tend to describe themselves in relation to the selected roles as well as lessen or increase the distances perceived among colleagues.

Method

Participants

In the study, 30 people between 18 and 35 years of age (median age 25.7) participated. Group 1 consists of 15 amateur actors (8 females and 7 males) established in a partnership aimed at the representation of a show. Group 2 (12 females and 3 males) consists of young people recovering in a residential center for eating disorders. In the Center (of cognitive-behavioral approach), the theater workshop was proposed together with the dance therapy as a part of the therapeutic treatment aimed at the improvement of body awareness.

Tool

The survey instrument was built ad hoc and aimed at the investigation of personal significance in the construction of the experience. It was a semi-structured interview consisting of 11 questions investigating 4 thematic areas, inspired by the Stanislavski's and Grotowski's methods (Grotowski, 1968; Stanislavski, 1936, 1949):

1. Area of constructing reality
2. Area of the construction of identity
3. Role-building process
4. Area of perceived change

Qualitative Analyses

For the qualitative analysis of responses to semi-structured interviews, the Atlas.TI software was used for the analysis of textual data content. It follows an hermeneutic approach for categorization and segmentation of the text. This procedure refers to the Grounded Theory (Faccio, Castiglioni, & Bell, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this specific case, the software has been applied to confront the two groups according to a thematic principle; each question corresponds, in fact, to a thematic area related to the model proposed by Stanislavsky.

Results

Area of the Construction of Reality

With regard to the construction of the scene, the two groups evoked two apparently similar themes: action–improvisation and interaction, however, participants of the first group share the idea that the scene is built according to the function and role of the characters, while participants of Group 2 emphasize the importance of imaginative factor, that is, the ability to recreate in the mind everything that helps the representation. The "reality" effect would result from improvisation and from the ability to spontaneously live in the situation where the character is: the circumstances given for that situation and the relationships established between participants.

A different element between the two groups is related to the role that is assigned to the external perspective: In Group 1, the eye of the filmmaker who observes actors is considered important, as the scene built by the actors needs the look of one who is outside; in Group 2, this observation point is not considered—the scene is built exclusively by actors. This aspect represents a peculiar attitude for "clinical" group, living an external point of view as a source of judgment from which an actor needs to defend herself.

The Group of amateur actors (Group 1) seems to live as reality the scenic situations depending on the audience. The recitation of a role is not intended as a "party" already written that should be replicated, but as a story born

at that time that comes alive in respect to someone. The actor must pay attention to the viewer; he should not try to scare him, nor try to impress him or please him. At the same, the relationship between actor and audience is the condition that ensures they commune and share the same reality. This allows them to eliminate the fiction effect and to transmit live emotions. The viewers are not perceived as judges; the dialogue between actors and observers generates theatrical reality, making it "real."

On the opposite side, participants in Group 2 tend to separate the actor from the observer and to reduce the effect of the judgment. The actor must therefore be absorbed by what he is doing without paying attention to who is on the other side. The observer doesn't have other roles if not critical ones.

While in Group 1, the skill of the actor is intended as the ability to move from one reality to another, playing the role of himself as a person, as an actor, and as a character (as provided by the Stanislavski method); in Group 2, the actor's focus is only on the character in that situation. He assumes that the entry into the character can take place regardless of the relationship with the audience.

The most important strategy referred by Group 1 for deleting fictional effect is the "method of the actions": attention to the gesture spontaneity is what allows the actor to render true the effects of what he's reading. It is thanks to acting on stage that the scene becomes true. Then the postures, movements, and the expressivity of the body awaken in the actor the feeling of connection with himself and authenticity.

The actor's action is intentional and goal-oriented; the single action, detached from the context and from the relationship with the other actors and the audience, does not communicate anything, either to the actor or the audience.

Group 2 does not cite the action as a tool to eliminate the fiction effect or make the emotions real, as it is underlines the ability of an actor to really try emotions "as if" he was the character.

Participants do not show awareness of a real method; they emphasize the importance of "take the role of" another person with respect to a specific situation.

Toward the audience, the actor should not think of being himself, but as being the character. Regarding the scene, it is important to offer an escape from what he usually is, but at the same time the ability to live, feel, and convey emotions as an actor to make "real" what he represents. So, if on one hand the emotions can be recovered by the actor in the repertoire of his memory, then on the other hand, as a character, he has the opportunity to experience new emotions and learn how to communicate them.

Area of the Construction of Identity

Both groups think of the actor as one who "does" rather than as a person who "is"; in fact, answers to questions about the construction of the actor's identity do not contain lists of adjectives descriptions, but they refer to the actions that he might do to be an actor.

Intentionality and awareness are chosen by all of the participants; they think that the actor's skills are acquired through a method and through a "practice" of theory.

The actor cannot be described without the context—the relationships with other actors and the role. Through the role, he has the possibility to be and act differently from how he would in everyday life.

The role is perceived as very active in both groups as that instrument through which the actor can describe himself with different words, be thought of as if he were another person, and act under "other" intentions—all of which he helps to facilitate.

An actor is not one who wears characteristics of another personality, but rather, one who, living in a different life, has the opportunity to observe thinking, feeling, and reacting from another particular perspective, which might become another himself.

According to Stanislavski (1936, 1949), the identification of the characteristic signs of the character allows an actor to find himself in them. The actor is not the one who exposes himself in front of whoever looks, but is the one who shows ways of being and belonging through his character.

The actor must avoid clichés, those roles that immobilize the character, stereotyping it into something generic.

It is unlikely that by "types" may emerge true emotions. Customizing and finding within themselves certain thoughts and ways to act allow the actor not only to experience unexpected sensations, but also to become aware of sides of his way of being, which could not otherwise emerge. According to what emerges from the analysis of the answers provided by Group 1, amateur actors tend to structure the building of character in two phases: at first, they create an overview of what they must recite, identifying the "type" of character who can be staged; later, emerged features are animated by examples and thoughts among actors.

They are not simply given by text and reproduced in the character, but they are ad hoc created in a long collective research work. They are also researched in relation of the actor to himself and his ways of doing. The actor is initially understood as the effect of building a personal interpretation of the role, but it is in the construction stage during interaction with other actors that the character comes to life, changes, and acts in a continuous adaptation of the role.

Also, responses provided by Group 2 show a similar division between the two phases of creation: a more theoretical and a more practical one. The role is not given from the outside; it is, rather, created by the actor himself, who has the task of deciding how to use and impersonate it.

Area of the Role and Self-Representations

Amateur actors (Group 1) tend to describe the relationship between themselves and the character in three ways: (1) as similar to themselves, representative of some parts of themselves, (the character is "the other myself," "more true than me," "my rant"); (2) as different, with different values and ways of being; or (3) as a constructive process: it is "my challenge," "my Escalade," my "get in the game." In the clinical group (Group 2), only the first case seems to be present: the person tends to highlight certain aspects of the character that belong to himself. Respondents claim to explore "in the shoes of another person" (e.g., a parent) some characteristics and reactions generated. Respondents of Group 2 say they have noticed this "participation" of the character only in retrospect. Some respondents report that it is amazing to be able to bring to action aspects which perhaps they would not have been able to describe otherwise. Finding new-old parts of yourself in situations becomes thus a sort of "protection" that helps overcome the fear of appearing to others, but also to themselves.

Perceived Change Area

Both groups represent the theater as a place where they have fun, try different things, experiment with new versions of themselves, play with their own rigidity, use the role to implement new ways of conduct, and observe the reactions of others.

Group 2 refers in particular to eating disorder as a limit that can create obstacles in the exploration of certain activities of the laboratory. The ability to get in the game without worrying about other people's judgment represents a challenge for many; at the theater, people experience the possibility to being and doing without necessarily having to achieve some goal. So, therapeutic laboratory space may represent a moment to be different or be themselves without worry.

Group 1 reports the idea that the character does not change the actor. Laboratory experience offers the opportunity to be different from how an actor proposes to others on a daily basis, to return to being more her/himself upon exiting the role (i.e., more self-aware). Experimenting with new ways of acting and thinking is experienced as an incentive for an individual to modify certain aspects of oneself. There is a part of each character in each, meaning that potentially a person might be any character: each can play with characteristics which represent him, as well as with different parts very far from himself.

Group 2 believes that the character does not change the person, but it represents a reflecting opportunity. It can give the possibility to a person attempting to handle a role other than his own and trying to put himself in the shoes of another in order to better understand the reactions of other people and think to himself through the filter of that role.

Discussion and Conclusion

People who took part in the research describe themselves as prone to change, to finding out new identities, and to getting involved in new situations. This may suggest that the theater might be functional for the therapeutic path, as it promotes the realization of what the person is experiencing, but at the same time does not focus too much on the problem (Faccio, 2011, 2013). In this sense, "eating disorder" might be thought of as a set of behaviors, skills, and attitudes that are not explained by personality traits, but reflect a self-perception that is generated around a role ("pathological"). In theater practice, an actor can "play" the representation of "disease" as if it were a role played; for example, it is possible to stage the disease according to the idea of an intentional actor who controls what he lives. This allows the person to look at the disorder as something which he may govern and direct: it is not so much an illness "suffered" as something that can be recreated and modified through the theatrical representation.

Summarizing, the theater laboratory in the clinical context may represent a resource to produce new meaning and personal experience centered not only on the individual, but also and above all, on the interaction (Faccio, Centomo, & Mininni, 2011; Faccio, Costa, et al., 2013; Faccio, Romaioli, Dagani, & Cipolletta, 2013). In fact, in the theater workshop, the relationship between persons is more complex than the patient–therapist relationship and it permits working in different situations and not necessarily focusing on the "eating problem" (Castiglioni, Faccio, Veronese, & Bell, 2013; Faccio, Belloni, & Castelnuovo, 2012). In the theatrical workshop, the body experiences the chance to break free from the definitions that often constrain it, goes beyond those bounds and feels, moves, and relates to a new sense of freedom (Costa, Faccio, Belloni, & Iudici, in press; Romaioli & Faccio, 2012;

Romaioli, Faccio, & Salvini, 2008; Salvini et al., 2012). The research shows that the path of emancipation, which from the outside looks like a judgmental presence (for amateur actors), can be favored by theatrical experience when systematically and continuously practiced.

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