



## Expressive workshops in mental health

### Oficinas expressivas em saúde mental

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#### ABSTRACT

Studies development by the World Health Organization on schizophrenia and other psychoses have demonstrated, since the 1970s, that different social contexts represent important variables in the course and prognosis of the disorder. If the evolution of each psychopathological disorder is strongly impacted by socio-environmental variables, in addition to specific medical care interventions for psychosis must include management strategies that impact the complex constellation of variables related to micro social contexts. In order to develop strategies that help the psychosocial reintegration of these individuals and their perception about themselves, we developed expressive workshops in Psychosocial Care Centres in a large city in the interior of the state of São Paulo, as part of internship and university extension projects. Based on psychosocial and psychoanalytic references, and on the works of Augusto Boal and Nise da Silveira, expressive workshops on scenic improvisation and artistic expression aimed to provide to the users, especially those who express themselves verbally in a restricted way, materials and space to express psychic contents in a way to organize them according to their own personal elaboration rhythm. Offered to anyone who wanted to participate, 12 workshops were held per semester, with a weekly participation of 8 to 12 users in the improvisation workshops and 4 to 8 users in the artistic expression workshops. The constant frequency and active participation of users in the workshops indicate they are able to represent a valid instrument as an aid to other treatments offered to this population, as it promotes the expressiveness of psychic contents that remain outside the field of language, in addition to encouraging communication, the autonomy and social reintegration of the users.

**Keywords:** Expressive workshops, Mental health, Psychoanalysis.

#### 1 INTRODUCTION

Since the 1950s, mental health has been the great utopia of psychological and social wellbeing, and the great challenge for the health sector, especially at the beginning of the 21st century. Recent statistics from the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) show that, in 2019, one in every eight people – or approximately 970 million people in the world – lived with some type of mental disorder, a situation that has worsened since 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic, whose initial estimate pointed to a 26% to 28% increase in depressive and anxious mental disorders in just one year (WHO, 2022).



Studies by the World Health Organization, initiated in the 1970s [International Pilot Study of Schizophrenia and the Collaborative Study on the Determinants of Outcomes of Severe Mental Illness (WHO, 1973; JABLENSKY et al., 1992; LEFF et al., 1992)], demonstrate that different social contexts are important variables in the course and prognosis of a mental disorder, showing a variation in the evolution of schizophrenia in relation to environmental conditions - that is, the weight of the “context effect”. In this sense, results point to the family context, the density and homogeneity of the individual's social network (the number of people who share the same social values as the individual) as relevant predictors of a favourable prognosis.

As Saraceno (1999) observes, an intervention on psychosis requires environmental management strategies that impact upon the complex constellation of variables related to micro social contexts (family and community), which constitute both risk and protective factors.

In order to collaborate with the development of strategies that could help the psychosocial reintegration of people suffering from mental disorders, mainly users who express themselves verbally in a restricted way (mostly psychotic), expressive workshops were developed in Psychosocial Care Centres in a city in the State of São Paulo, Brazil, as an internship and university extension activity over more than a decade. The summary report is presented below.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 EXPRESSIVE WORKSHOPS**

Based on a psychosocial and psychoanalytic framework, expressive workshops have therapeutic potential as far as they allow the projection of internal and external conflicts through expressive activities that value the creative and imaginative potential of the user.

The simple act of expressing oneself in a concrete way, through tangible, sensitive materials, such as paints, canvas, paper or one's own body, brings about some ordering in the mental chaotic contents that fall short of words, promoting a path to their elaboration.

Therefore, the expressive workshops aimed to provide users, especially those who manifest themselves in a restricted verbal way, with materials and space for them to express psychic contents in order to organize them according to their own rhythm of personal elaboration (including eliciting content subsequently worked on in other therapeutic services offered within the Psychosocial Care Centres).

Among the expressive workshops implemented in our internship and extension projects in Psychosocial Care Centres located in a large city in the interior of the state of São Paulo, Brazil, our exhibition will focus on two workshops: Scenic Improvisation Workshop and Artistic



Expression. The first is based on the work developed by Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal (1931-2009), with his “Theatre of the Oppressed”, and the second, the innovative work of psychiatrist and psychotherapist Nise da Silveira (1905-1999).

The workshops were offered for 12 weeks each semester, with 8 to 12 people participating in the improvisation workshops and 4 to 8 in the artistic expression workshops.

All activities developed were transcribed into a field diary and discussed in weekly meetings, both with the supervisor and with the mini-teams and health teams from each Psychosocial Care Centre, in the sense of:

- a) to present the report of each workshop and plan the next actions;
- b) to monitor the procedures and discuss the results;
- c) to evaluate the impact and repercussions of implementing the workshop in relation to the user and other services of the Psychosocial Care Centre;
- d) to lead the intern or extension student to critically reflect on the procedures, technical, ethical and legal criteria involved in the intervention process to resize the proposal according to the new data that emerged during the process.

The particularities of each of the workshops offered to users of Psychosocial Care Centres, with their working method, results obtained and discussion will be briefly presented below.

### **3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

#### **3.1 SCENIC IMPROVISATION WORKSHOP**

Based on the working method proposed by Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal (1931-2009) in his “Theatre of the Oppressed”, and on psychoanalytic listening, 12 scenic improvisation workshops were held per semester with users of Psychosocial Care Centres, mostly psychotic and some are severely neurotic. Weekly participation varied between 8 and 12 participants per workshop. The workshops were organized in stages that included activities such as:

1. relaxation and body expression: through free and differentiated body movements, the perception of one's own body movements was encouraged;
2. improvisation: proposed activities that stimulated the creativity of each participant (including materials they brought), who were free to propose themes to be worked on as scenes;
3. development of a story through the concatenation of scenes - a moment in which the work became more structured but remained open to the expression of emotions and feelings;



4. reflection and understanding of the experience lived in the previous stages of improvisation, in addition to proposing new activities for future work.

The workshops accepted the changes suggested by the participants and included activities proposed by them. For this reason, although the work was originally structured in four stages, the participants' interest in delving deeper into one or another stage was respected; for example, introducing improvisations through mime – prioritized over other, more structured improvisations – when they so desired.

The workshop remained open to the participation of all interested users - except those who were advised against the activity in their Singular Therapeutic Project, and also included the spontaneous participation of some employees. Users were free to enter and leave the workshop as they wished, which guaranteed an environment rich in opportunities for expressing subjectivity.

However, it should be noted that activities involving direct expression of feelings and impressions did not arouse great interest among the majority of psychotic participants, which made us consider that there are some peculiarities of these users that must be taken into consideration when seeking to develop this activity. One of them, perhaps the most important in the initial stages of the work, is to consider that the psychotic individual has a different relationship with their body, in addition to the side effects arising from some of the antipsychotic medications.

We therefore consider that for the psychotic user the greatest gain from this activity was not expressing feelings and impressions arising from it, but rather recognizing the body as their own and developing a creative relationship with it.

In this sense, the improvisation workshop proved to be a valid contribution in a mental health care context, as it offers users a tool to express their subjectivity and/or promote the recognition and appropriation of their own body, in addition to offering an alternative and an auxiliary tool for other services available at the Unit.

After the end of the planned activities, the workshop continued to be offered by some professionals from the institution, which we consider to be an indication of its contribution to the well being of users.

### 3.2 ARTISTIC EXPRESSION WORKSHOP

For Freud (1856-1939), the images created by art would indicate a privileged route of access to unconscious materials, which would more easily overcome repression and censorship. At the same time, Jung (1875-1961) also became interested in the relationship between artistic



expression and the unconscious, adding therapeutic potential to the diagnostic possibility (McGUIRE, 1988).

This therapeutic aspect was recognized and widely developed in Brazil by the psychiatrist and psychotherapist Nise da Silveira (1905-1999), from 1946 onwards. According to her work, images obtained in painting workshops for psychotic people provide the expression of unavailable psychic contents in verbal language. Such contents can only be understood according to their context, and from a series of drawings and paintings that reveal the repetition of motifs.

Based on these proposals, we developed artistic expression workshops in order to promote the externalization of psychic contents that remain outside the field of language in order to help users with restricted verbal communication, the majority of whom are psychotic.

The material used basically consisted of paper, coloured pencils, crayons, canvas, paint, clay and other materials that offered to the users the possibility of expressing psychic contents unavailable to strictly verbal communication, promoting the expression of feelings and ideas through artistic representations, such as drawing and painting.

After receiving the materials, the themes of the drawings and paintings were freely chosen by each participant. Afterwards, or even during the production of the images, the following were carried out:

1. comparison between the production of drawings and paintings with reports from the participants themselves about their life history, and with some additional information obtained from their medical records (with their consent);
2. identification of repeated motifs in each series of paintings and drawings. In this sense, we observed that repeated motifs could be identified even before completing a series of twelve drawings [Jung's initial proposal (SILVEIRA, 1992)].

We highlight that the comparison between artistic production with present or past aspects of the participant's life history allowed, far beyond the elucidation of one image or another, the construction of meaning for the production in question, as the participant concatenated it to their own experiences.

As Freud (1908) reminds us, the same fantasies that arise when the opposition between playing and reality dissolves, and that can be precursors of serious neurotic or even psychotic symptoms, are those that, if elaborated, generate artistic creations.

At the end of each workshop, a moment of conversation about the productions was offered, where each user could present and share their own production with the group, if they so desired.



The workshop remained open to the participation of all interested users, with the exception of those who were not advised to participate in the activity in their Singular Therapeutic Project. Weekly participation varied between 4 and 8 participants per workshop, for 12 weeks each semester.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Although mental illnesses can be understood based on brain mechanisms, they afflict individuals who live in personal, social, political, economic and cultural contexts, and treatment must be provided in these contexts. Since the 1970s, studies by the World Health Organization have shown that both, the chronification and the impoverishment of psychotics' lives, are due not only to the psychopathological condition, but to variables that can be modified and guided in the intervention process. Therefore, therapeutic interventions that aim at psychosocial rehabilitation must presuppose an interaction between the user, the therapeutic measures adopted and the environment in which they are carried out, resulting in an increasing scope of services offered by each mental health device.

Combined with all other therapeutic devices offered by Psychosocial Care Centres - psychiatric monitoring, psychotherapeutic care, reception groups, home visits, Therapeutic Companion, etc. -, expressive workshops have proven to be a valid tool for promoting expressiveness and externalization of psychic contents that remain outside the field of language. The act of being able to express oneself in a concrete way, through materials such as paints, paper, canvas, clay, or with one's own body, seems to bring about in users, especially among psychotics, some order in the chaotic psychic contents that are beyond the words.

This ordering is perceived as the workshops promote communication and exposure of the subjectivity of each user – a subjectivity that is still ignored or disregarded by society today due to the stigma that still surrounds mental disorders.

The constant and spontaneous attendance of users at each workshop, their increasingly active participation in the elaboration of the activities developed and the consequent expression of psychic contents that remained outside the field of language indicate that, in addition to encouraging communication, autonomy and social reintegration of users, the workshops can represent an auxiliary instrument for the other treatments offered to this population by mental health care devices.



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