

*Towards empowerment of women victims of gender violence: a psycho-social intervention model in Romania**

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***Summary.** This paper aims to disseminate the country-specific results and experience of professionals working within a multinational research study on women victims of gender violence. A description of the two partner organizations – Romanian Association of Classical Psychodrama and Home of Hope – which worked with the abused women and the domestic violence context in Romania are briefly provided. The main objective presented in this paper is the evaluation of the effectiveness of the ecological approach combined with psychodrama intervention in a group of 36 women victims of intimate partner violence: there were 16 women in the psychodrama group(PG) and 20 women in the Ecological Model group (EM). The results of psychodrama and the ecological intervention are discussed. To conclude, some lessons were learned for future application in the field of gender-based and family violence.*

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Romania only officially recognised and addressed specifically the phenomenon of domestic violence beginning in 2003, when the first legislative framework for preventing and combating family violence was created (Law 217/2003). Even though, the legislation in the field is aligned with international treaties and conventions and is theoretically generous, it has proven to be inappropriate for the Romanian economical and social context, as some amendments are hardly implemented. A very new legislation was enacted in May 2012, finally introducing a restraining order for aggressors (Law 25/2012).

The Home of Hope Reformed Christian Church Centre from Brasov was established in 1992, as a typical urban mission institution that carries out pioneering work in the field of domestic violence in Brasov. In 2003 the current intervention program was established called “Program for Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence” and was further developed in 2008 with “Esther Crisis Shelter”.

The Romanian Association of Classical Psychodrama was established in 1996 as a professional organization aiming to promote theoretical and applied psychodrama techniques through training psychodramatists, conferences and psychotherapeutic groups.

For a more detailed description of the Romanian social and legislative context and interventions in the field of domestic violence see (Bucuta, Dima, Zoltani, & Antal, 2012).

Theoretical background of the study vbc

The theoretical perspectives acknowledge the role played by culture and patriarchal traditions in relation to women's dehumanization, the trans-generational transmission of women's victim role from mother to daughter, and the feminine co-responsibility relevant to violence in gender relationships (Testoni, 2008). The direct work with women victims of abuse is based on the following theoretical models: ecological approach

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979), crises intervention model (Roberts, 1991; Roberts, & Ottens, 2005) and Morenian psychodrama, chosen for its potential to enable an awareness of interiorized roles and change them (Boria, 2005).

Methodology

The main study objectives are:

- 1) the evaluation of the effectiveness of the ecological approach combined with psychodrama intervention in a group of women victims of intimate partner violence;
- 2) the analysis of the maternal role in gender violence through psychodrama technique.

The research design is experimental, using mixed-methods. The sample consisted of 36 abused women, 16 in the PG (age 21 – 57 years) and 20 in the EM group (age 21 – 42 years). All women had the first contact with the Home of Hope, through referral by the police, child protection authorities, church, social services, friends and via the internet. The social workers selected and prepared the women for two psychodrama groups: Group 1 included eight women living at the home, who had passed the crises phase and were outside the cycle of domestic violence; Group 2 included seven women living in a crisis intervention shelter for abused women; and one participant that agreed for individual psychodrama sessions. Women in the PG participated in a module of 25 psychodrama sessions.

Research data was collected by social workers via forms, questionnaires (ante/post tests), written reports of psychodrama sessions (first and last sessions and every fourth session) and by observation. An informed consent form was completed by each participant.

The intervention phase

Social workers made first contact with the women and prepared them for the psychodrama group. Those who were already their clients before the project started were more balanced (emotionally, socially, psychically and financially) when selected for the psychodrama group, and therefore had minimal ecological intervention (Group 1).

The social workers intervention was based on the ecological model, (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), addressing women's needs at all levels - social, medical, juridical, and psychological – within the environment that domestic violence occurred. For crises intervention, Roberts phases of intervention were followed (Roberts 1991; Roberts, & Ottens, 2005): plan and conduct a crisis bio psychosocial assessment, establish a collaborative relationship, identify the major problems of the victims and the crisis precipitance, explore emotions and feelings, explore and elaborate a personalized alternative plan, implementation of the action plan, follow up and agreement. The main intervention spheres were: rehabilitation of physical health and mental balance, motivation for life and an adequate existence, ending the cross generational repetitive patterns.

Psychodrama intervention was adapted to the two different groups of women: Group 1, consisting of women living at home, mostly out of the domestic violence cycle, participated at 25 weekly sessions (an average of 14/15 sessions for each) run by one psychodramatist over a period of eight months; Group 2, consisting of women living at a shelter, mostly still in the crisis phase, received a more intensive treatment of twice a week psychodrama sessions at their premises, over a period of four months. Because at the beginning stage there were little resources within the group for recovery, reliance and support, a professional Ego-auxiliary was introduced during the eighth session to help activate members resources.

Psychodrama intervention focused on the following aims and themes:

- knowing each other, building relationships and developing group cohesiveness;
- expectations and needs from the group and resources they contribute with;
- exploration of the social atom;
- exploration of the family atom: identifying relations and feelings between family members, knowledge of family life stories; exploration of unclear, ambivalent relationships from the family atom;
- exploration of mother – daughter relationship;

- exploration of power distribution in the family;
- exploring the life line and significant life events;
- mapping aggression and the aggressor in women lives;
- exploring the partner from different perspectives;
- stress relieve;
- exploring self and envisaged changes: 'I now' and 'desired I';
- exploration of the soul and making desired changes;
- learning forgiveness;
- feeling secure and activate inner resources; identify and get in contact with outer and inner resources responsible for happiness;
- activation of good memories from their past;
- activation of their social role from childhood;
- healing the traumatised inner child and the adult;
- exploring the understanding, meaning-making of male violence against women; understanding the violence cycle and combating violence of men against women;
- evaluation of the group experience and separation.

Results and discussion

Data about the aggressor (Figure 1) show that the father and partner have the same aggressive features, an example of how women abused as children tend to project their feelings and attract an abusive partner as adults.

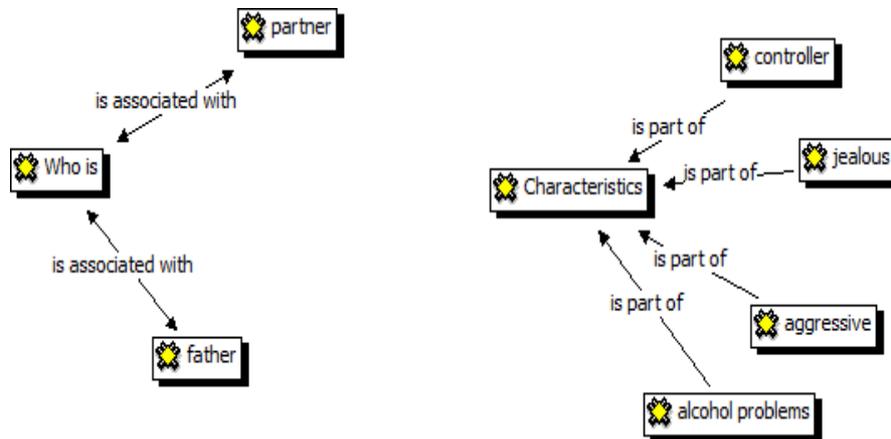


Figure 1. Data about the aggressor (Group 1)

Following are presented and analysed three sessions – the first one, the middle one (core to the subject) and the last session – to exemplify the psychodrama technique and its benefits.

The first session (Figure 2, Group 1) focused on personal knowledge and the development of group cohesion and used many psychodramatic techniques (role reversal, interview in pairs). Group members were reluctant about revealing themselves, anxious and were observing others. It began with a tour of knowledge among participants in which they described their life (age, work, children, family situation). Further they talked about their diverse motivations to join the group: to find themselves, know themselves, to understand and to increase their self esteem. The psychodramatic work went deeper to explore participants emotions experienced in their lives. Reported emotions had two opposite polarities: insecurity, worthlessness, frustration, agitation, loss; but there was also a sense of freedom, optimism, hope to bring clarity into their lives. These emotions were the starting level on which the group path developed. A symbol was introduced by the end of the first session aimed at creating a sense of belonging to the group, security, love, cohesion – the heart of the group (a red pillow heart-shaped). Participants were asked what they were willing to offer to the group. They answered that they could offer love, support, understanding, and friendship. An atmosphere of warmth, relaxation and hope was dominant at the end of session. The ‘heart’ became a permanent symbol for the group, continuously nurtured.

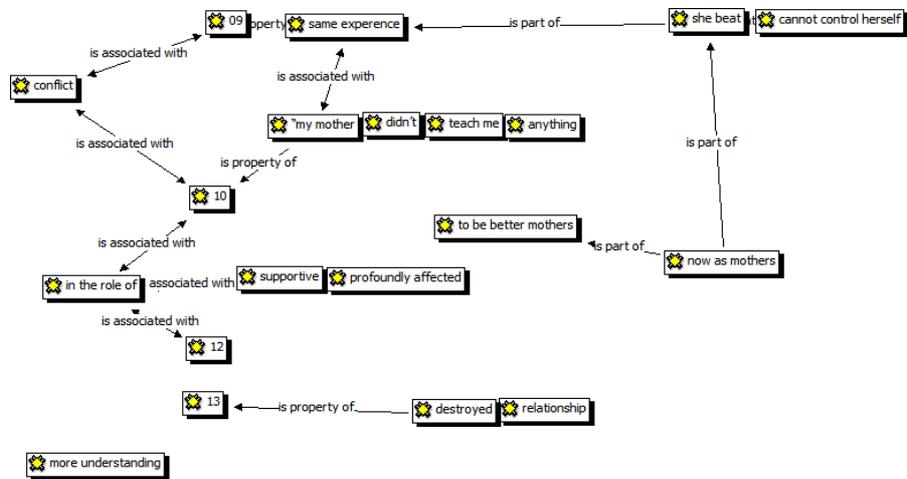


Figure 3. Theme of motherhood (Session 12, Group 1)

The last session asked participants a brief review of their experience (see Figure 4).

Past shared moments developed their inner resources and self-esteem and a greater acceptance of the self, which were the goals expressed during the first meeting. Women said they were gifted by the group of not being criticized, with mutual understanding, and the power to take important decisions. The moment of separation was particularly strong and it was felt as a moment which needed an ‘integration’ made by the psychodramatist.

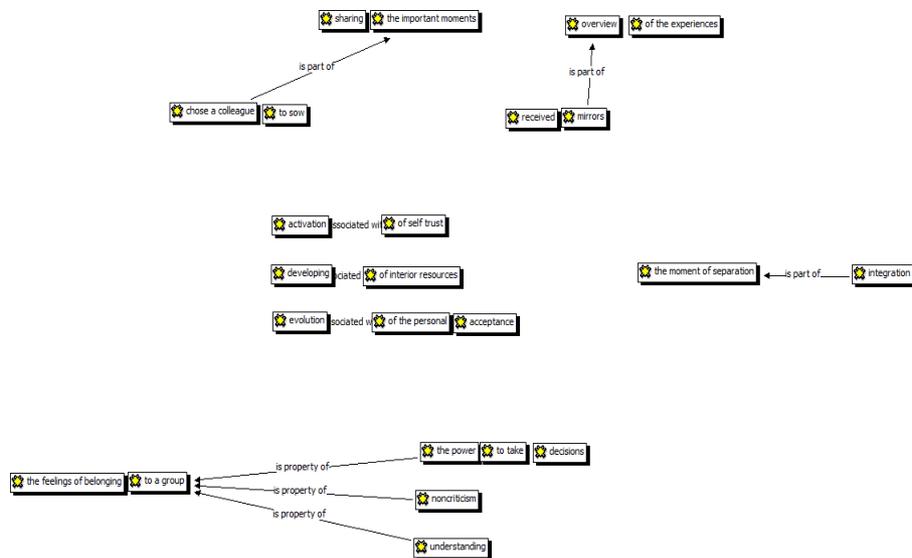


Figure 4. Last session (Session 25, Group 2)

For the women in the psychodrama groups, the most visible changes were related to increased self-esteem. The high impact was the fact that the psychodrama offered them mirrors from the group and similar life experiences (sharing phase) (Moreno, 2009) which removed them from the area of confusion where they were because of the abuse. They became calmer, more balanced emotionally and came in contact with their inner power and resources: going from obeying and being passive to acting and taking decisions based on their needs, such as: changing jobs and ending an abusive situation. Most women regained hope and optimism for a better life. For those more vulnerable these results were less stable, but noticeable. Their children provided them with the most motivation to recover and build a good life, but they struggled with feelings of guilt because of the trauma produced through the divorce or avoidance to leave the abusive situation for long time (in some cases). The technique of role reversal (Moreno, 2009) brought changes in the perception of their role as women in relation to men, as women/daughter in relation to their mothers and as mothers in relation to their own children.

From the 20 women involved in the ecological model, they all moved forward compared to the time they began: nine of the women are balanced and capable of managing their planned life, without social services support; three of them are still working to regain their inner balance; eight of them need to follow counselling or therapy sessions. Practice showed that women who are a good fit for psychodrama groups are women who need to become more stable, but have their basic needs covered, have no special psychological and psychiatric problems, and do not feel too insecure. Compared to women from the EM group, those receiving psychodramatic intervention had an advantage as they were involved much deeper emotionally. The psychodrama group offered women a strong feeling of affiliation and holding, emotional security and more positive feelings compared to women from the ecological intervention which involved contact with the police, forensic department, medical assistance (blood tests, treatment), court, juridical counselling, child protection authority, material support (food, clothes), interventions with negative connotations towards women. Women who were more balanced (emotionally, socially, psychologically and financially) when they were selected in the psychodrama group, had minimal ecological intervention.

Conclusion

To conclude, psychodrama proved its efficiency especially through the techniques of positive mirror (empowerment of women) and role reversal (decentring and change of perception related to social and family roles). Psychomotor games activated “the inner child”, increased relaxation and stress relief, bringing genuine affective states and spontaneity.

Experienced social workers in the field of domestic violence working in the project considered that the focus on the mother-daughter relationship of the project through psychodrama brought the missing link to adequately address and prevent re-victimization of the women.

Limits of the project include the number of psychodrama sessions, as some women need long-term intervention, and individual therapy sessions. Additionally group activities for their children and mother-child sessions would be recommended.

One important lesson learned relates to the key role of empowerment for the rehabilitation of women who suffered huge humiliation and disempowerment in their lives.

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