

Mythodrama Group Psychotherapy Method, its Basic Principles and Practical Use with Children and Adolescents

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Abstract

The article describes a Group Psychotherapy method – Mythodrama, its theoretical background, basics principles and practical use with children and adolescent.

Keywords: Mythodrama, Psychodrama, Analytical Psychology, Personal Unconscious, Collective Unconscious, Archetypes, Group Psychotherapy, Transference, Counter Transference

Introduction

Mythodrama is a short-term group psychotherapy method. Mythodrama was created in 1993 by Swiss psychologist and psychotherapist Allan Guggenbühl, who works in the sphere of juvenile psychology in Zürich, Bern, Kyoto and Stockholm. Mythodrama is a conflict resolution methodology which is based upon Jacob L. Moreno's Psychodrama and C.G. Jung's Analytical Psychology. Mythodrama is an approach in which stories and drama are used in order to assist children and adolescents to deal with conflicts. Mythodrama intervention and prevention program has been successfully performed in Swiss schools during the last 23 years and a couple of years ago in Sweden and Japan. 7-step Mythodramatic Intervention Program has been evaluated in 11 problematic schools in Switzerland and in 10 schools in Sweden.

Theoretical background

In order to better understand the method of Mythodrama, the authors make a short overview of J. L. Moreno's Psychodrama and C. G. Jung's Analytical Psychology.

Psychodrama – J. L. Moreno

Jacob Levy Moreno was an Austrian-American psychiatrist and psychologist, the founder of Psychodrama and one of the pioneers of group psychotherapy.

Psychodrama was founded in the early 1920s as a theatrical experiment; observing professional actors Moreno noticed therapeutic potentials and social implications of a spontaneous theatre – when there is no written script and no separation between actors and audience. Moreno's ideas were brought from the Greek theatre where, according to Greek philosophers, namely Aristotle, theatrical performance has cathartic, healing influence on spectators. Therefore Moreno came to a conclusion to use the potential of theatrical process with patients. Thus, Psychodrama turned from the experimental theatre to a group psychotherapy method. During Psychodrama, patients are encouraged to act, play roles and present themselves through drama. Scenes, memories, dreams, fantasies, unfinished and future risk-taking situations and other events are enacted *here and now*. Different roles of the real persons from patient's life are taken by other group members or inanimate objects (Kellermann, 1992).

Carl Gustav Jung and his theory of archetypes

Carl Gustav Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist and a founder of Analytical Psychology.

According to Jung, the unconscious mind consists not only of the *Personal Unconscious* which is a reservoir of repressed material, painful memories and ideas that have the capacity to become conscious, but also of the *Collective Unconscious*. As Jung states, the Collective Unconscious: “[...] is detached from anything personal and is common to all men, since its contents can be found everywhere, which is naturally not the case with the personal contents.” At the same time, the Collective Unconscious is a container of “primordial” images, patterns, forces, which are produced not from the personal memory, but from the secret chambers of the mankind's mental history. In every individual, beside his/her personal contents, there are the above-mentioned inherited primordial images present, which have repetitive character and are revealed through dreams, myths, legends, old texts etc. The collective layer of the psyche holds pre-infantile memories, experiences, rests, images transferred to a person from ancestors. These images are only forms – not filled-out, as they are collective, not yet personally experienced. But when psychic energy regresses, these mythological, ancestral images are awakened. Jung called these images/motifs *Archetypes*.

During an analytical work, the archetypal, collective images should be individually shaped and expressed. These images, which originate from

the life, from the pleasant and painful experiences of ancestors, strive to return to life on experiential level as well as in deed. But as they oppose the conscious mind, it is impossible to transmit them directly into the conscious world; so, there should be found a way, a bridge between these two worlds – between conscious and unconscious realities. During a Mythodrama session, the role of this bridge may be taken by stories, drawings and drama created by children.

Power of stories

According to Gottschall J. & Wilson D.S. (2005), man is a literally animal who develops a story for self-understanding. People create narratives for understanding the world around them and in them. According to Allan Guggenbühl, “the capability to create, quote and invent stories is a basic trait of us humans. Through story telling we distance ourselves from life, transfer ourselves into other realities. Animals don’t tell stories. Through stories we connect.” Stories in the group must be understood as myths that reflect the archetypal structure of the community. Mythodrama is based on the power of stories and uses drama and art in order to help children and adolescents to identify their stories, in order to overcome anxieties, traumatic events and regain confidence in their personal life.

According to Mythodrama, our attitudes and motivations are influenced by Myths. Myths are defined as distinct stories, which emerge in societies in order to explain mysteries, problems fears and threats. Myths often emerge in conflict situations. We lean on myths, when we are existentially challenged and in need for answers to problems and fears or conflicts. Stories are: motivators of our actions, mirrors of the relations we experienced, mobilizers of unconscious, helpers for making decisions and developing visions and coping with personal and professional problems; they are more than rational explanation, but symbolize parts of soul.

During a Mythodrama session, a story is chosen which depicts the myth of the group. The story is especially selected by psychologists after interviews, observations and talks with teachers, children and parents. The psychologists, who are in charge of Mythodrama session, have to pick or create a story, which reflects the challenges and complexes of the group members. The story should reflect the issues of the group. The story needs to have distinct quality. It should not have: moral, didactical or educational message; it should not be: neat, pacifying, politically correct; in opposite it should: stir group members up and cause in them fear, anger, irritation and bewilderment; help members to leave their common tracks of thinking and react psychologically on a deeper level.

Children are open to fairy tales, hence psychologist might tell them stories about Cinderella, dwarfs, trolls, princes and princesses; attention of

older children and adolescents can be caught by relating mythological themes (Greek, Celtic, Indian, Georgian).

Structure of the tale

Problem, obstacle or difficulty reveals in the second part of a story. In the third part of a story appears an attempt to solve the problem, overcome difficulties and bring to the end the fight with a victory. For example, unusual figures may occur in this phase or the main actor may be captured by the complicated circumstances. At the end, in the fourth part a story reaches its peak. In these difficult circumstances the node is bounding and situation becomes dangerous. Mythodrama storytelling is stopped at this moment and the listeners are given arena (stage) to complete it.

Mythodrama session

As mentioned above, group members never hear the stories to the end. Before a possible climax the psychologists stop storytelling and invite the students to imagine how the story might develop. Lying on their backs the members imagine how the story might continue. Afterwards they work with their endings – they might draw their conclusion on the paper or do a short drama in subgroups. Their drawings are then discussed interpreted and linked with their personal challenges and situations. When group members chose to dramatize their endings, their performances are analysed and connected to their specific problems and challenges. The drama and drawings are read on a symbolic level; Psychologists act as interpreters who try to make members aware of the unconscious messages and mythic patterns, which are revealed in their dramas and drawings. For example, what myth are they rehearsing, when they imagine of blowing up the school. By imagining a blow up they are relating an archetypal story. The restricted, highly coded environment of their school breeds a liberation myth. They imagine themselves as heroes, scarifying themselves for freedom or fighters against evil oppressors. The blow up scene shows that they are full of aggression.

Group work should be less structured and semi-chaotic in a form of game. Group work is radically different from a lesson at school. The main goal of group work is to enable children to increase their openness and boldly express their problems and needs in the unconstrained environment. Group process is a focal point in Mythodrama. Which roles should be selected by the children, what processes are significant are very important. Communication between the child and groups leader is on the second place. Group leaders have to assist children to involve in a group work and hinder themselves to determine children's actions.

Storytelling

Storytelling is central in a Mythodrama meeting. The following issues have to be considered in storytelling: Free style storytelling (only key points of narration can be written on the paper); Concentration on inner images in storytelling; Imagining the scene of the story, for example: *"Imagine the room where the main character is moving or a landscape where this story is played"*; Creation of tension through the details: events should be presented in details. The best way to create tension is not to challenge events but the expectations. For example: *"When someone enters the room, hears a strange noise and sees the drops of blood"*, and not like this: *"When he entered the room he was afraid that something would be happened"*. Stories should contain typical figures. The figures should be easily identified with their particular traits and forms of behaviour. The figures may be presented as clichés or archetypes as well: a swindler, mentor, hero, mother, charming woman, fighter, scholar, etc.

There are several techniques of storytelling: 1. Repetition of events and sentences: small children enjoy when a phrase or event in the story is repeated. Someone continually itches the head or says the same things (e.g., *"Who hasn't a head, has the legs"*). This could be a simple phrase. However, it should correspond to the character or a story. 2. All modalities of perceptions have to be included: five factors such as sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell should be considered during narration. It is necessary to use one of them by a storyteller (e.g.: the character enters the room where is a strange smell of sulphur, heart pounding shouting, noise of crunching shoes or running water, etc.). 3. Imagination Phase: the group members never hear the stories to the end, it is recommended to stop in the middle of storytelling and then ask children to end this story, request to decide continuation of a story, e.g.: *"the king's daughter lives in a wonderful palace, how does this house look?.."* and children will imagine what type of house is it. Utilization of such agents to induce fantasy is significant. 4. Mental movers: Stories may also include Mental Movers. This notion implies small pointless scenes, details, events and things that somehow oppose to the main tale and seem to be absurd. The main actor wears red shoes, dog in a small puppies dress will appear in the street or there is an inscription on a house: *Freddie has hidden a cow*. Mental Movers should provoke cognitive dissonance. It is impossible to understand the context through the ordinary way. 5. The main actor and other prominent figures should be characterized with specific traits, particular appearance, may have their own style or obsession.

Seven Steps of Mythodrama Intervention

1. The first step of Mythodrama intervention is a *Teachers Talk*. Therapists visit the chosen school/institution and meet the

teachers/caregivers. The talk follows a standard routine – therapists ask teachers to inform them about problematic incidents, students personalities etc. Then they inform the teachers of their specific approach and of the Mythodrama method. With help of the teachers there are children chosen, who will be involved in the sessions and the time-frame for sessions is set. 2. *Meeting with parents*: With the help of teachers therapists get consent of parents at a special meeting. Parents declare that they endorse the intervention and are ready to engage themselves actively. Parents sign a consent that their children will be involved in the Mythodrama Intervention and promise to encourage their sons or daughters to participate. Finally, therapists promise to organize a second meeting at the end of the intervention. The cooperation with teachers and parents is essential to tackle the problem of violence among children and adolescents. In this case interventions are more likely to succeed (Guggenbühl, 2003). 3. *Visit to the school* and observing learning process/learning methods: The visit gives possibility to get an impression of the school culture and atmosphere in the class. Therapists gain some insights on teaching styles, the setup of the class, the general mood among students etc. 4. *Conducting Mythodrama with children*: once candidates are chosen, conducting of Mythodrama sessions start – one session per week. One group involves 10-12 children/adolescents. One session lasts 2-2,5 h. Each group of specialists consists of three Mythodrama Psychotherapists (one main and two co-therapists); therapists divide function between each other, e.g., one is a storyteller, other two observe the process – this increases possibility to catch as much information as possible; each cycle of Mythodrama intervention includes 12-15 sessions. 5. *Meetings with teachers* (periodically). 6. *Follow up* during three months period; 7. At the end of the process therapists *meet teachers, parents* again. At the meeting the changed situation in school is discussed and contrasted with original problems.

Transference and Counter transference

Transference and Counter transference and their interpretations are considered as very important therapeutic tools during the Mythodrama session; Leaders of a group fulfil the role of a projection vessel of children's past experiences and relationships. Groups have their own history and myths. Group itself becomes projection target of emotions, imagination and fantasies about the future. Group Transference must be fixed, discussed and worked out. Some children associate group with a circle of friends; the others see anarchic group; somebody feels superior to others and considers them as lowborn. Reactions, feelings and behaviour of children always have to be considered in relation to the group. Childish perception and discoveries should not be considered at the level of facts. They have to be examined

from their psychological contribution to the group. Disclosure of psychological world, complex and history of children and adolescents depends on how the children perceive the group.

Benefits of Mythodrama Method

Mythodrama method is economical and practical, as in group psychotherapy there can be more people involved, than in individual therapy. Group enables children to feel at home. It creates holding environment by allowing members to fantasize; one gets a clearer picture of the complexes, myths and group dynamics in their families and schools. Mythodrama creates a vessel for imagination. On the basis of group members' fantasies and endings new solutions can be sought and concrete changes implemented. Mythodrama helps to develop imagination.

Georgian Project

Since 2009, 18 psychologists and psychotherapists (among them – professors and students from the Ilia State University) have been working with a team from Switzerland – Prof. Allan Guggenbühl, Lela Schmid-Ksovrelashvili, David Schmid and their colleagues in the frames of the project “Nergi”. In 2015 16 new professionals were involved in Mythodrama project in Georgia. 7-Step Mythodramatic Intervention Program was implemented in schools, orphan's houses, with IDPs etc. in Tbilisi, Georgia.

A case¹²³

The presented case is about “George”, 11 years old boy. When entering Mythodrama group, *George* was shy, passive, had problem with expressing emotions (namely, anger), which was caused by family situation – a powerful, over-protective, controlling mother and an absent father. These problems remained unconscious and hindered expressing his active potentials. Sessions of Mythodrama proved the existence of this dynamics and helped to reveal and enact these complexes.

The case demonstrates transformation achieved through stages of group dynamic. Stages of group dynamic during Mythodrama Intervention coincide with the well-known stages of group dynamic proposed by Bruce Tuckman (1965): Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, Adjourning.

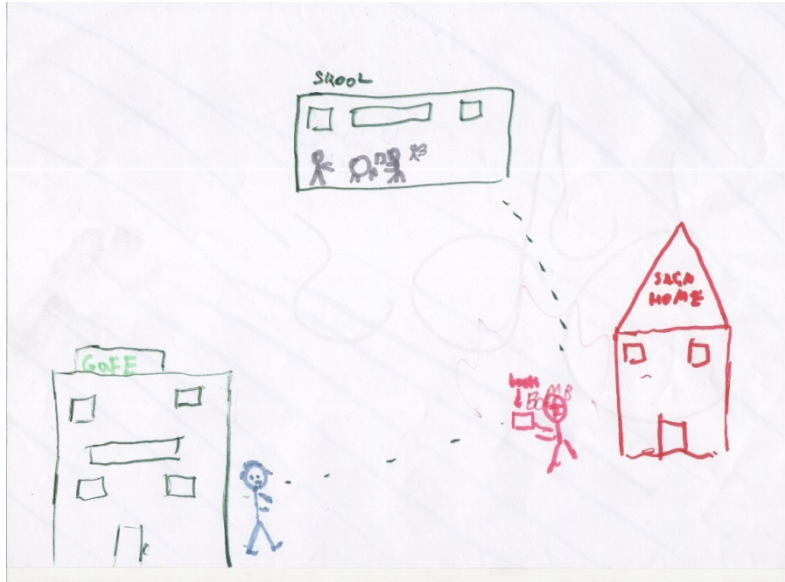
During the whole cycle of Mythodrama intervention a cat figure appeared in George's endings and paintings of the stories as a main self-expression tool. It is worth mentioning, that a cat was never mentioned in the stories told to the group by the therapists. It was brought up by George

¹²³ The cycle of Mythodrama, from which the case is taken, was conducted together with Manana Malaghuradze, MA.

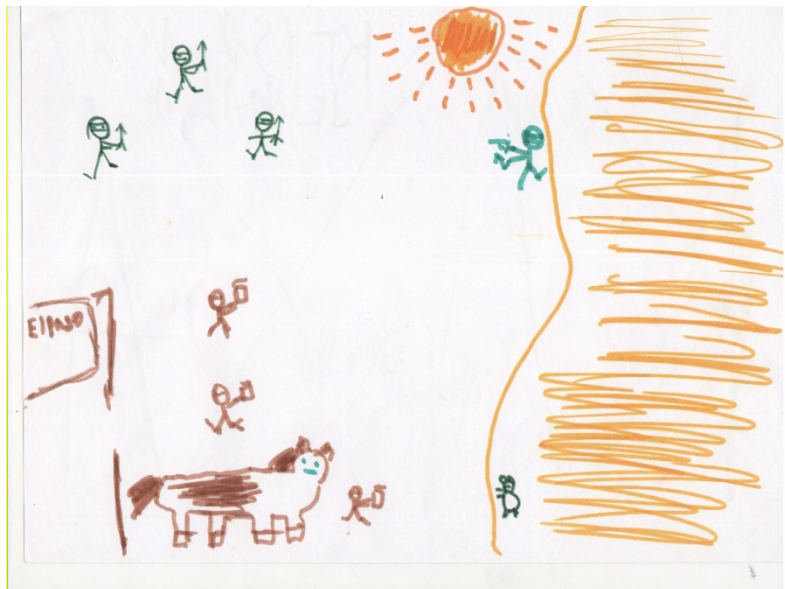
himself. These kinds of figures usually appear in Mythodrama sessions and are considered as supportive figures, which help to strengthen the Ego of the person. As said above, for George a cat was a tool of self-expression, adaptation in the group and tool of communication. On the Forming stage, on first session (Topic of the story: rejecting mother, abandonment) a cat figure appeared for the first time; it was still not defined – lacking colours and function. During first session figure of cat did not play any role.



At the storming stage – session IV (Topic: dumbness, lack of voice and communication), when there was a story told about a dumb man, George drew a cat, which swallowed a bomb and saved the world (as mentioned above, George’s core problem was shyness and lack of expressing emotions, namely anger). As if through the cat figure it was expressed, that George was “swallowing” emotions and situation at “Home”, lacking expression of emotions and speaking out.



On the Norming stage (Topic: friendship, collaboration), on session 7, when there was a story told about friendship, George drew a cat, which blew up the universe with bombs. George's "swallowed" aggression was revealed and expressed in his ending. On the Performing stage, session 10, a story was told about Zorro, a hero archetype, which is a symbol of strengthening the Ego. Here the cat figure was presented as a supporting figure in the process of fighting with enemies. It was already well-formed, huge like a giant, different from the forming stage, where it was still colourless and had no role or function.



This stage can be considered as strengthening of the Ego. At the end of the Mythodrama cycle, main achievements with George were: expressing emotions, showing initiative, activation of creativity and spontaneity.

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