The Effects of Creative Improvisation through Literature Technique on Self-Esteem, in a Unifying Personal Development Group

Iolanda Mitrofan\textsuperscript{a,b}, Vasile Constantin\textsuperscript{a,b}\textsuperscript{*}

\textsuperscript{a}University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, 90 Panduri Avenue, 50663, Bucharest, Romania
\textsuperscript{b}Romanian Society of Experiential Psychotherapy (SPER Institute), Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

Creative improvisation through literature is an innovative experiential technique, having as a central element the spontaneous story writing by participants. Subsequently, these stories will be the analysis instrument which will help participants to solve some of their problems. In this research, we measured the way this technique has positive effects on participants’ self-esteem, compared with a control group, that didn’t participate to a personal development program. The statistical processing showed that the 12 participants from the experimental group obtained an increasing of their self-esteem after the research, while the 12 participants from the control group didn’t.

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1. Introduction

Creative improvisation through literature is a new and original technique, that we intend to develop, based on the therapeutic valences of story writing, looking, in that way, for a creative way of analysis and restructuring in the therapeutic process. In the creative improvisation, participants are asked to create themselves a story on a particular topic, story that is actually, the provoking and analysis factor, the same like other experiential challenging factor, like dance, drama, painting or clay modelling (Mitrofan, 2004).
The development and implementation of this technique has its roots in two main concepts used over time in psychotherapy: the first is the one of literary metaphor (Berlin et. al, 1991), and the second is the concept of Unifying Experiential Therapy - a holistic approach of the human being, which participates “here and now” in the experiences, for the re-unification of the polarities of the Ego and the reconnection with the Self (Iolanda Mitrofan).

Literary metaphor assumes that a story can be an extremely effective way to access certain parts of a person’s unconscious, several therapists dedicating parts of their practice research studying various stories and the way they facilitate the therapeutic process, even if they are applied on adults, teenagers or children (Burns, 2011). Literary metaphor allows the client to more easily tolerate some painful experiences, creating a secure space where he can express freely, according to his identity, even if it is under the protective umbrella of a story (Loue, 2008).

One of the promoters of therapeutic stories was Nossrat Peseschkian, who used, in his work, oriental fairy-tales, with the purpose of inducing to his patients a system of values or to facilitate awareness, based on some pre-written stories (Peseschkian, 2005). Some of the researchers used the storytelling only as a psychotherapeutic tool (Bergner, 2007), while others extended the use of stories, applying them for patients with psychosomatic disorders, such as anorexia or bulimia (Davidson & Birmingham, 2001).

Unifying Experiential Psychotherapy (of Unification Therapy) is an original method proposed and developed by Iolanda Mitrofan, such as a holistic, dynamic one, which uses as a therapeutic vehicle the metaphor, and as a methodological instrument the witness state, aimed to make conscious – unconscious – trans-conscious connections and also body – psychological – social – spiritual connections (Mitrofan, 2005). The premise of U.T. is that, over our existence, during our life experiences, some of those may be traumatic or difficult, which leads to a division of the human being. This division it is, in fact, the disconnection between Ego and Self, which will lead to destructive “software”, jams, imbalances and weakness in assuming our own identity and emotions (Mitrofan, 2004). Unification therapy uses as a way to provoke and analyse, metaphor that takes different forms, depending on the type of technique used to activate the witness state (Mitrofan, 2004). When this state is activated, the person involved in a therapeutic process, can see itself as if from outside, but while living the experience, being also its character. Thus, reintegration of their polarities takes place, leading to increase awareness and capacity to gain mechanisms that will unlock their creativity and emotional growth. The metaphor in Unification Therapy includes: drama-therapy, art-therapy with various creative directions (painting, collage, clay-modelling), dance-therapy, or natural symbols metaphors for reintegration of trans-generational experiences – art-genogram (Mitrofan & Petre, 2013).

2. Experimental design

2.1. Research method

This research involved a total of 24 subjects, in which 12 participants were the experimental groups, who participated at a unifying personal development program, and 12 of them constituted the control group. Participant selection was made randomly and they were adults, aged between 20 and 30 years, who came from different fields of activity: journalism, IT, social care, arts, psychology or geography.

The study spread over a period of 4 months, during which the 12 participants form the experimental group took part, for 12 weeks (one meeting of 3 hours/week), in a personal development group, where we used the creative improvisation through literature as the main provoking, analysing and restructuring technique. Thus, in each meeting, every participant wrote a short story on some topics, stories that were not only the provoking and analysis tools, but also one of projective and experiential diagnosis, based on participant experiences, their own projections and the symbolic elements that appeared in their stories.

Before the research program began, and the end of it (one month after the last meeting of the group), we applied the Rosenberg self-esteem questionnaire to the participants, in order to observe the effects of creative improvisation trough literature on this variable. The scores obtained by the experimental group were compared to those of a control group, that didn’t participate in a personal development program.
2.2. Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of this study was to harness a model of personal development, therapy and psychological counseling, based on creative improvisation through literature and extracting some results after using this technique in an experiential-unifying manner.

Practically, the objectives of the study were:

To develop a personal development and therapeutic program based in the technique of creative improvisation through literature, to help boost participants’ self-esteem;

To apply the technique during an unifying personal development group of 12 subjects over a period of 12 weeks, in order to observe the effects of this technique;

To make a comparative analysis between the experimental group and a control group that did not take part in a personal development program, to see if there are differences between the scores obtained by the two groups;

2.3. Hypothesis

We assumed that a personal development program based on creative improvisation through literature will lead to a self-esteem level increase of the participants. In this research, the independent variable is the technique of creative improvisation through literature, and the dependent variable of the research program is the self-esteem.

2.4. Procedure

During the research program, we used psychometric measuring instruments, and also qualitative tools, in order to produce larger results which follow, not just a statistical analysis but also one that shows how the approach of the creative improvisation through literature technique has influenced the participants, observing behavioural and experiential changes, and also the way in which they find and implement solutions in their own lives.

The quantitative method was the Rosenberg questionnaire, measuring self-esteem.

The most important technique was the creative improvisation through literature. Thus, at the beginning of every meeting, they were given the task to write, in no more than 15 minutes, a short story based on a topic chosen in accordance with the participants’ individual life stories, but also based on common themes of the group.

After having finished writing their stories, participants were invited to read what they wrote in front of the group and after that, based on this short spontaneous writing, we started the analysis and restructuring process, facilitated by the trainer in an experiential-unifying way.

In addition to apply this technique in an experiential manner, the research procedure also involved a number of qualitative methods, which made us drawing the conclusions about the positive effects the creative improvisation has had.

For example, the interview taken at the beginning and at the end of the research program, showed a concordance between the expectations of participants, and what they gained at the end of the research. Also, throughout the research program we applied the method of observation, in order to extract useful information about the success of the program, based on some changes we’ve seen on the participants, such as: the body posture, gestures, mimicry or the type of speech they had.

2.5. Results

In the analysis performed at the end of the 4 months study, we notice the following:

The mean obtained initially by the control group, that did not participate in a personal development program, was 29.2, while in the retest phase, the mean obtained at the self-esteem questionnaire was 28.2;

Regarding the experimental group, in which subjects attended personal development groups based on creative improvisation through literature, the mean obtained before the beginning of the program was 29.3, while after the program (one month after the last meeting of the group), the mean score obtained for self-esteem was 34;
To see if there are statistically significant differences between the scores obtained by the experimental and the control groups, at the end of the research program, we used SPSS, where we applied the t test, to compare the means of two independent samples, as we can see in the following table:

Table 1 The means obtained by both research groups and the results of t test for independent samples:

| Scored variables                  | Results |
|----------------------------------|---------|
| Experimental group test mean     | 29.3    |
| Control group test mean          | 29.2    |
| Experimental group re-test mean  | 34      |
| Control group re-test mean       | 28.2    |
| df value                         | 22      |
| p (sig. 2-tailed) value          | .008    |

Thus, considering that the mean of the experimental group was 34, and of the control group was 28.2, we obtained: df = 22 and p = .008. Since p < .05, this means that there are statistically significant differences between the means of the two samples, and the research hypothesis is confirmed.

Although there are positive results on the measured variables, we must admit that these results are relatively limited. There is the possibility that participants also gained changes in other variables, which we didn’t measured. We can mention the increased sociability reported by some of the participants in their lives or the levels of creativity or emotional growth, which we noticed so far when we facilitated the personal development group.

We can also mention some concrete effects that creative improvisation through literature has had on the participants, such as:

One participant was able to forgive her parents, especially the aggressive behaviour the father had when she was little;

One participant was able to find a job after few months of being in a state of lethargy, as she herself said;

Another participant was concerned with profoundly self-sabotage fantasies, which led her to believe that she is ugly, incompetent and nobody likes her. During the participation in the personal development group, she started to feel accepted by others, her self-esteem improved considerably, and currently she has low anxiety levels and also began to focus more on highlighting her artistic talent, has an exhibit and also achieved an online portfolio.

One participant decided to move in with her boyfriend, who she had had a relationship with for some years. Although she wanted to move in with him, she was afraid to take this decision with maturity, having the fear that her personal space will be invaded. In reality, the participant had an unresolved conflict with her mother, with whom she had not spoken in three years and who hadn’t offered parental affection during her childhood. For her, moving in with her boyfriend would have been really a genuine affective relationship, to which would not have known how to react. Taking this decision was the first step for her, towards emotional maturity. She also decided to resolve the conflict with her mother through an individual therapy analysis.

3. Discussions

Following the data we have just presented, as well as the practical experience within the personal development group, we notice an increase in self-esteem in the unifying personal development groups, and also other changes experienced by participants.

The experience gained through such a technique in the field of Unifying Experiential Psychotherapy, and the novelty brought by the spontaneous story writing as a therapeutic and personal development approach, leads us to affirm and emphasize the originality proven by this technique.

Although there are studies which tried to use therapeutic storytelling, we think that they skipped the holistic approach, which focuses on the individual and unravelling the experiential skein, through the Self, and the solutions that can be discovered by themselves, encouraged by the presence of the therapist. The fact that the participants
produced some changes in terms of self-esteem, after a four month program, determines us to highlight the effectiveness of this technique.

Of course, there are some limits of this study, but limits that can be improved: thus, to validate this type of intervention, the presence of a larger number of participants is necessary. Given the long term unifying-experiential intervention, we found it relatively difficult to include a larger number of participants in the research. However, in future studies, we intend to allocate a longer period of time, which will allow us to work with a larger number of participants and also making a deeper analysis of the results, thing that can increase the validity of the technique.

4. Conclusions

As a final conclusion, we can observe the positive effects of the creative improvisation through literature in the case of a personal development group intervention, in order to increase self-esteem of participants.

Moreover, applying creative improvisation technique can have positive effects on other type of variables, such as: sociability, empathy, anxiety, emotional intelligence or creativity. Therefore, we propose further research in this direction, to harness the technique and show its effectiveness in several psychological directions.

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