

Improving the quality of training drama therapy students through the metaphors of experiencing fear

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Abstract. The present study is aimed at introducing effective psychological instruments the authors have been using in a therapeutic interaction with people (children, adolescents, and youth) with different problems for a long time in the educational process. The main focus of the study is the metaphors and motivation of fear and anxiety the use of which in the process of providing psychological assistance to students can improve the quality of the educational process and educational influences on them since these tools allow students and teachers to safely (due to the metaphorical distance) address sensitive topics that often present the source of anxiety and fear in students while neglecting these topics often hinders the creation of a safe learning environment. Metaphors are actively used in a variety of psychotherapeutic approaches although very little attention is paid to their implementation in the educational environment. The goal of the present study is to disclose the opportunities of using metaphors of experiencing fear in working with university students. The proposed hypothesis states that the implementation of metaphors of experiencing fear in work with university students will contribute to the improvement of their self-assessment of subjective well-being. The study presents the analysis of the results of focus group studies conducted during experiments with the students of the “Drama Therapy” specialty at the Palacký University of Olomouc in the Czech Republic. With the use of the grounded theory method, it is demonstrated that work with metaphors of experiencing fear leads to becoming aware of self-support mechanisms, processing suppressed emotions, relaxation, inner liberation, and the activation of personal resources. These results open up prospects for the active use of metaphorization of various (including negative) experiences in providing psychological assistance to students.

Keywords: metaphor of experiencing fear, education quality, qualitative study, gestalt therapy.

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1 Introduction

Fear and anxiety are common phenomena not only among children and adolescents but also among young people and teachers who also often encounter them in various forms. Insecurity, fears, and anxiety can cause rigidity both in the educational process and in the sphere of social relations where they can become the source of intolerance of otherness, xenophobia, etc. [1].

Considering the possibility of using metaphors of experiencing fear in psychological work with students, it is necessary to note the phenomenon of certain ambivalence in the perception of fear. Another vital aspect of the problem is the analysis of the corresponding methods and principles of working with fear in psychotherapy that can to a certain degree be implemented in the educational process [2]. One of the main objectives of the study is to rehabilitate horror, fear, and fright as effective instruments in psychotherapy and more [3].

Horror, anxious tension, and nightmares repel us but, at the same time, are often quite attractive in stories, literature, and films. Is it possible to combine feelings of pleasure with feelings of fear and tension? Since mythology, rituals, and shamanism are considered by us to be one of the most important roots of expressive therapy, let us refer to Greek mythology. J. Vymětal notes that fear is a child of gods – Ares and Aphrodite [4]. This metaphor contains the answer to the question of the ambivalence of fear: being the god of war, Ares is terrific, fierce, and bloodthirsty. However, Aphrodite, using her magic belt, for a little while turns him into a gentle and passionate lover; thus, in a certain divine sense, Aphrodite experiences pleasure related to fear [4]. Aphrodite's magic belt which allows enjoying fear can be viewed as a symbol of a safe therapeutic environment, as a purposeful and professionally guided intervention.

The ambivalence of the coexistence of fear and pleasure reflects many internal conflicts which J. Zinker considers to be a collision of the polarities of personality and advises to distinctly separate them [5].

Modern expressive and formative approaches are often based on rituals, shamanism, and magical ceremonies of ancient communities such as the rituals of exorcism, appeasement of evil spirits, home cleansing rituals, etc. These phenomena can be interpreted as externalized metaphors. Some recommendations for working with children suggest personalizing children's fears with the help of imagination, for example, in the image of a devil, a brownie, or an evil elf, as, for example, does a gestalt therapist V. Oaclander attempting to lead a child to safe contact with their feelings [6]. Experiencing fear and anxiety often creates a sense of their own incompetence and guilt in clients [7]. Such feelings often inhibit healthy mental development and interfere with the satisfaction of the highest meta need for self-realization and healthy social contacts [8]. However, using a regular story or a metaphor, these feelings can be safely confronted without the aforementioned feelings of self-blame.

The Gestalt Therapeutic Approach presents the so-called paradoxical theory of change based on the paradoxical assumption that people completely become themselves as soon as they stop trying to be someone they are not [9].

The aforementioned theory can be implemented in working with fear in the following way: a person will be able to get rid of their feelings of fear and anxiety not through resisting and avoiding them but by allowing themselves to experience them, live through them, and immerse themselves in them. However, such therapeutic work is associated with certain risks. For example, it is expedient to return to traumatic experiences in the context of working with PTSD but only in a way that would not allow for re-traumatization [10]. Recommendations for handling trauma safely can be expressed through another metaphor: working with trauma is a struggle with Medusa the Gorgon, that is, we have to look at it indirectly since a direct look will turn us to stone. In working with fear and trauma, such a safe gaze can be presented by a horror story [3]. Fairytale therapy as a specialty using fairy tales as a therapeutic

instrument addresses fears in a similar way [11]. The metaphorical reflection of fear makes it easier for adults to understand their life path [12].

The present study aims to disclose the opportunities presented by the metaphors of fear experiences in work with university students. The proposed hypothesis suggests that using metaphors of experiencing fear in work with students will contribute to the increase in their subjective well-being.

2 Methods

The subjects selected for the study were students of the Faculty of Special Pedagogics studying in the “Drama Therapy” specialty (60 people). The study consisted of three stages. At the first stage, the students were given a lecture on the use of horror motives as a means of self-knowledge and determining the current psychosocial and spiritual needs, and a list of such motives was offered [13]. The students were asked to choose one of the proposed motives and write a horror story based on it.

The second stage of the study involved the method of focus groups as a means of respondents’ self-reflection on their experience acquired as a result of writing horror stories.

At the third stage, the video recordings of the work of focus groups were processed using the grounded theory method and the study results were summarized.

3 Results

Based on the obtained data, the following therapeutic and formation phenomena supporting the suitability of using horror stories in positive support of the psychological experiences of certain individuals were identified:

- **Becoming aware of self-support mechanisms through unpleasant experiences.** In most cases, the main result of the acquired experience was that the “boundaries of one’s integrity” were investigated and the ways of protecting said boundaries were explored.

- *“I know that it is only on paper and is not true but something in me is afraid of it and wants to get farther away from it.”*

- **Activation, liberation, relaxation.** The general atmosphere during the focus groups was relaxed, the respondents were active, and the topic aroused their interest:

- *“It was as if I transferred something negative that was in me to the paper and now I feel better. Although I do not like this topic, horror films and the like, I leave full of energy.”*

- *“I do not like watching horror films but I liked this work, I sometimes like toying with such crazy thoughts, it brings me joy and liberation.”*

- *“Because of the terror that I bring to the extreme, something is freed in me that then brings me peace.”*

- **Contact with suppressed emotions.** Situations arose in which the creation of a frightening story allowed interacting with suppressed emotions and caused activation and joy:

- *“It reminds me of a situation when I laughed at a funeral. It was the biggest stress for me and I felt guilty at the time but now I know I simply had to get rid of these emotions in some way. I wrote the unpleasant feelings on paper and now I feel good and relaxed.”*

- **Projection, increased awareness.** Projections of real life and increased awareness also appeared in respondents in the course of the study:

- *“When I later re-read the story in reverse order, I saw all the problems of my present life.”*

- *“It seems to me that there is the entire story of my life, although I wrote about something different.”*
 - *“This negativism exists within us and I wrote about it although I was writing about a different topic.”*
 - *“There I can find the answers about my life. It increases my self-knowledge.”*
 - **Exposition.** A deliberate choice of the topic which was the source of the participants’ anxiety was detected:
 - *“I fear the topic of death, I never go to cemeteries, so I chose this topic deliberately. I am about to go on an internship at a nursing home and I need to familiarize myself with this topic in advance to know how it affects me.”*
 - **Creative ambivalence.** Ambivalent experiences and needs which were perceived positively were also identified:
 - *“I hate the feelings of fear and anxiety, I do not like it, but a cemetery to me is a place of serenity, a place where I feel good.”*
 - *“Today, it was deep and archetypal, it inspires me and opens up a lot of space for thought and experience. I feel like I am getting a great overview of it all.”*
 - *“This technique is highly effective but I would be too afraid to use it myself as a therapist.”*
 - **Balance of the expressive and receptive forms.** If some preference was present, it was balanced by both forms:
 - *“I was almost unable to write anything but I was very struck by other people’s stories.”*
 - *“I generally could not concentrate on other people’s stories, I kept thinking about my own story which was stronger for me.”*
 - **Correspondence with the inner “study process” of the researcher.** The duality of the topic can be demonstrated not only through the development of the researcher’s opinion about it but also by the answer of one participant:
 - *“When I was told about the intention to treat with horror I thought that this guy was crazy but I have discovered a lot for myself and I apologize.”*
- The focus group participants were asked questions focused on clarifying their view of the possibilities of using work with the experience of fear.
- **Who do you think this method is suitable for?** Overall, the respondents believe that the conditions for using the proposed method are the client’s desire and the corresponding degree of their inner integrity:
 - *“For clients with traumatic experiences.”*
 - *“For adolescents passionate about these topics – this would certainly motivate them, activate and develop their imagination.”*
 - *“To a greater extent – for stable people for their self-development.”*
 - **Do you see any therapeutic potential in using horror stories?** The vast majority of clients recognize the powerful therapeutic potential of the proposed method:
 - *“This is very effective but, at the same time, it is challenging to not exceed the permissible limit.”*
 - *“I am surprised that no one has invented it before. It is a fascinating method.”*
 - *“A lot of things are mixed there, everyone found something for themselves in this, it is a very powerful topic.”*
 - *“I think that facing unpleasant emotions is indispensable in the therapeutic process, it gave me a lot. I believe this is a way that will interest everyone and everyone can find different things in it.”*

4 Discussion

Among the study participants were people who did not want to discuss the stories they wrote or did not write them at all. It appears that their inner resistance turned out to be too strong and they were not ready for such work. However, the overwhelming majority of the respondents succeeded in this task, and many experienced playfulness and lightness. Several subjects found their choice of a frightening motive useful in terms of its impact on them. The respondents were aware of the importance of the rituals of starting and finishing the experiment to safely demarcate it in the course of the lesson. On the other hand, they also appreciated the specifically adapted environment – the so-called “atmosphere of terror” which, in their opinion, turned out to be necessary for experiencing deep feelings and better self-awareness.

Opinions about the inappropriateness of the method for a certain group of clients appeared occasionally. Nevertheless, in general, the participants view the attractiveness of frightening stories positively and experience some fear of using this method at the same time. The use of horror stories as a therapeutic method has significant potential, especially in terms of lowering the level of fear and anxiety. If all attributes and rules of using creative experiments in practice are preserved, the risks are relatively low and the only limitation can be determined by the level of inner integrity of the subject.

5 Conclusion

The present article demonstrates the specific use of metaphors of experiencing fear which can become an instrument of communication not only for clients in therapy but also for students in discussing disturbing topics with others.

Working with metaphors in providing psychological help to students shows itself as an authentic process based on a gestalt experiment, that is, on a creative study of the “here and now” situation in the framework of dialogical relations with the client.

Our study demonstrates that metaphors are especially effective when it is impossible to face the situation directly, in working with specific topics that can present certain danger. Metaphors of experiencing fear provide endless possibilities and can become “a way out of the impasse.” [14, 15]

The study limitations include a relatively small sample size and the lack of a long-term study of the effect of the conducted work which could have affected the students’ academic performance. Studying the influence of metaphorical work with fear experiences on the emotional component of the educational environment at different levels of education and solving the issue of the most effective and safe tools for metaphorizing the negative experiences of school and university students can be proposed as directions for further research.

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