Dare sociodrama online?

Scenic conflict management on the topic of "corona deniers" and corona "mindful".

The division of our society into poor and rich, into healthy and sick, into old and young, into bio-Germans and immigrants and/or darker pigmented in the last hundred years, into vaccination opponents* and vaccination supporters*, into cis* people and LGBTI etc. ... the list is long, not really new, conceptual attempts to do so are constantly in motion and help to sensitize to all these differences, inequalities and power relations. And yet the thinking of "us" and "them," fueled by the handling of the pandemic, has become no less threatening to democracy and human dignity.
We have the privilege of being able to practice a generalized view of living conditions, to strengthen empathy for and knowledge about the living conditions of others. A wide variety of paths are open to us for this purpose. Here I would like to outline an example of a sociodramatic online work, which was about one of the conflicts between "corona deniers" and corona "mindful" (there is no suitable term here). My question is, what are the advantages, risks and side effects for scenic work resulting from the online format that has become necessary because of the pandemic?

The learning potential of scenic methods

The goal of psychodrama work on such complex conflict situations is that we get access to what happens on the barely or not conscious level of a conflict situation[1]. Through the precise perception of body language, we can grasp feelings that are not expressed. We learn to perceive emotions from facial expressions, gestures, speech melody, body distances and body orientations (facing - facing away), which essentially determine our actions. By making them nameable, the thoughts that evoke these feelings in us also become accessible. This happens in theatrical pedagogical processing in scenes. The situation takes place in a concrete context (e.g. crisis, a certain region with its habits and structures, incidents shortly before and/or historical backgrounds ...). These contexts form the framework conditions, the limitations and spaces of possibility for the conflict partners. And these contexts are also connected to discourses that influence our thinking and can be reconstructed from their effects on the interactions. And as in 'real life', the players cannot simply control the behavior of their counterparts, the fellow act_ors, with their own will, but an interplay, a dynamic, a "world of the in-between" (Buber 1999:101) develops, which influences all participants. We, as act_ors or non-act_ors, always do this, whether we want to or not. And we are always influenced. In this process, the relationships of those involved are characterized by power, by status, and often involve confrontation or cooperation. The opportunity to do this on the stage of a seminar is that in the slowing down, in the alienation of play, in the supportive environment of a professionally led group, we can explore some of this complexity.

The body is the stage of emotions

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[1] More detailed: Heppekausen 2015/2016

"The body doesn't lie," it is rightly said. It is the stage of emotions and relatively uncontrollable by the cognition. This can also be a bit scary when working in groups, as we show something of ourselves that is effective but not always conscious to ourselves. In reflecting together on these feelings and their contexts, we can find out from which thoughts, stereotypes, images they were triggered and what effects they have on others. This gives us the opportunity to decide whether we want to consciously maintain these resulting attitudes and what consequences they have for others and the social fabric. It is an opportunity for self-understanding about the underlying values. Awareness and clarification should serve a collective self-understanding of who benefits from these values. This process is complex and circular, so it needs to be practiced and takes time.

The repertoire of theatrical or psychodrama methods for this is large. What they have in common is their potential of exploring the soul (Greek: psyche) through action (Greek: drama). Here I present excerpts from the sociodramatic approach. "Sociodrama is an instrument for determining social truth, truth about social structure and conflict, and for bringing about social change through dramatic methods." (Moreno 1947a/1981:220 after Buckel 2021:18)

Today we no longer speak of truth, but of an exploration of that world between the different planets of social actors* and social groups. They draw their trajectories in power relations that they create together (or against each other) and shape (or deface) the common space. In this respect, strategies for change are linked to the question of solidarity and successful dialogues in a space that is never free of domination. This space and one's own room for maneuver in it have to be found out. In this sense Ron Wiener (British senior of sociodrama work) names three essential goals of sociodramas:
- to better understand social scenarios
- to provide all participants with new insights into the roles associated with the scenario - both their own and those of others
- to provide participants with the opportunity for emotional opening or even carthasis by expressing and exploring the feelings associated with the scenario." (Wiener 2001:11 after Buckel 2021:19)

What is different about scenic work online?

The pandemic has challenged all of us in our creativity, including seminar methodology. Aversion to the medium of the computer had to be overcome in order to be able to continue working with groups, and new formats emerged that brought with them advantages and disadvantages. In general, we were able to experience that seminar offerings became more low-threshold, the composition of participants more diverse, and the costs lower. At the same time, we had to deal with inequality and exclusion: different technical, spatial and social conditions, IT knowledge and learning ability, and much more. Insights into personal living conditions became unavoidable (advantage or disadvantage?).

After the experiences with scenic work online this year, some observations seem to me worth considering for further seminar planning:

Self-perception: One's own body perception is reduced by the reduction to sitting and one's own gaze is directed at the faces of the fellow actors*, the sitting posture is often habitual and not infrequently also tense. Since our own body posture also triggers feelings in ourselves (embodiment), our perception threatens to remain trapped in the familiar.

Group feeling: The body language perception of the others is concentrated on facial expressions and intonation, gestures, body tensions, distances/alignment and movement in space can hardly be perceived. During warm-up exercises and performances with a full body image, it is difficult to recognize the others on the farther away. Physical touch does not occur; vocal vibrations alone trigger physical reactions. Thus, the perception of words alone, which are closer to the consciousness than the body signals that go beyond it, gains weight.

Exchange of glances with each other and with the line are distorted, since the gaze is directed at the tile, but the impression of being looked at only arises when the gaze of the looking is directed at the camera. The audio transmission does not allow parallel sounds, which means that each utterance (speech or music) interrupts all others. On the one hand, this leads to a more "orderly" sequence of speech contributions; it is always clear who is speaking and playing at any given moment, and thus where the focus is in the sometimes on-stage confusion of the play. However, this focus also inhibits side conversations and spontaneous interjections. The leadership has to intervene more than usual to direct the focus if it gets stuck in any of the sometimes parallel scenes. As a result, the group's potential is less noticeable, and the role of the leadership can seem more dominant.

After the end of the seminar, everyone is alone again with the after-vibrations or in contact with roommates or colleagues, there is no cool-down through common breaks or goodbyes.

Online tools open up new creative possibilities here: changing small groups, written interim reflections and feedbacks, voting, role marking by renaming and dressing up, spontaneous painting - these give us so many ways of expression that we are just learning to exploit. They require a fairly high level of technical competence and up-to-date software from everyone, can stop the flow of what is happening in the seminar, and can unsettle or pressure individuals.

Presence: overall, presence is harder to maintain for all participants over a longer period of time than in a real room. Obviously, we need a different kind of concentration on the screen (light effects, technical problems) and are more easily distracted by possible disturbances in the home or work space. On the other hand, having a familiar environment of one's own can also support personal security and thus the willingness to get involved in the game. Withdrawal and self-protection in possibly too stressful moments is more easily possible.

In summary, I think it is more difficult in this format to surprise oneself, that is, to open up playful access to the unconscious knowledge hidden in our bodies that largely determines our actions. And yet: again and again after online sessions we are amazed at how much the game has touched us and what new impulses we have given and received, how much connectedness has become palpable in the group. What has facilitated this in view of the limitations described?

Experiences from the workshop

> "Corona deniers" versus "Corona mindfuls"* and the space of the in-between - a research trip with theater pedagogical methods
> Right-wing populist conspiracy narratives walk hand in hand and without mask in public space, combine with frustration, anger and rebellion, with fear for basic rights and hunger for "freedom". They arouse fear for human rights, for health and loss of protection of weaker people and much more. Dialogues are attempted at kitchen tables and in the media. Dialogues? Polarizations? Attributions? Self-righteousness? Necessary demarcations? ..."[2]

Relieving technical preparation:

All participants received in advance a kind of short instruction manual for online work with different devices: Turning the camera on and off, covering the camera with sticky notes, gallery view, renaming, studio effects (disguise), hiding participant* without video function.

Preparation of a room that is as free of disturbances as possible with freedom of movement and the assurance not to leave the digital room without prior notice.

At the beginning of the seminar: short (!) technical check.

Division of labor between content management and technical support, e.g. setting up break out rooms and helping people to enter during the session, answering technical questions in the chat.

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[2] Announcement text for the 1st workshop "Emancipatory educational work" in the educational center of the IG Metall in Sprockhövel, 16.3.2021

Applied online-fair methods:

<u>Warm-up:</u>
- Sociometrics: 'How many groups are in this group?` with topic-related and also break-out questions. The participants (TN) each aired the slip of paper they had hung in front of the camera for yes answers. This is quick and looks appealing (mosaic of paper colors).
- Chain with role change with an object close at hand held in front of the camera. TNs tell how they are doing from the object's perspective and then pass the word to the next TN:
"I am X's calendar and all the time she is frantically flipping through it, writing, erasing, rewriting and not leaving me alone ..."

<u>Action: sociodrama</u>

From the variety of sociodramatic methods, the work with a collective role reversal will be presented here.

- Sketching a fictional scene:
Random meeting of people with and without masks after the storm of "Querdenkern" on the Reichstag in the S-Bahn. An argument ensues.
If there is more time, suggestions for topics and appropriate scenes are developed in the group (e.g. with the help of still images) and (sociometrically) agreed upon. Here, both were set by the leadership and were known to the participants who had chosen this workshop.
- Scene preparation in two break-out rooms, random assignment of the participants who prepare for their roles together: "Collect good arguments for the success of this action from the perspective of corona deniers or good arguments for the criticism of this action from the perspective of corona mindful people!
Prepare for the also technically roles: put on digital or real masks, rename with role names."
- Scene improvisation: all group members argue (language, intonation, facial expressions, gestures) from the respective role perspective and, setting aside all reservations, empathize more and more with these attitudes. Through the interactions in the whole group and, if necessary, supported by role interviews by the leadership, the role differentiates itself, which usually begins stereotypically. The leadership can also interfere itself - either in an appropriate role (e.g., constitutional protection) or as an off-person - if the dynamic "hangs" or one person becomes too dominant (neither was the case here). After a short pause:
- Collective role reversal: The groups exchange roles (names, masks) and continue the discussion "from the other side".
- Intermediate reflection: Everyone calls themselves by their personal names again, takes off all disguises and names what they experienced in the role (feelings, thoughts, observations) that could be interesting for the deeper exploration of the topic.

If there is more time, it would be possible to invent new roles from the group to add to the improvised game, expanding the system (health minister*, sick person*, esotericist*, scientist*, ...).

The playful and also topic-related warming up acts as an icebreaker, establishes an initial group feeling and facilitates the still unfamiliar changeover to a different mode of communication in the online encounter. Assuming roles - even technically - releases the imagination and encourages the initial exploration of foreign thoughts and feelings. The role reversal with the other side expands the perspectives experienced in (speech) action, confuses in a constructive way and opens one's own attitude on different levels to new ways of seeing and behaving and to open questions.

<u>Deepening the topic in a fictitious dialogue</u>

In order to test the first impulses from the role reversal experience in new ways of behaving, we worked with an exercise from the repertoire of the "Theater of the Oppressed - Theater of Liberation": Screen image (Boal 1999:127).
Scene finding in new, smaller groups in the Break Out Room:
- Finds a crisp conflict situation (experienced or invented), briefly sketches it, and establishes roles (corona denier* and corona mindful*). Find an expressive title for the scene.
- Back in plenary, the group votes on which scene they would like to try new behaviors for, here:

Conflict grandson-grandmother over wearing masks while shopping: Grandmother refuses.

- Reconstruction of the conflict: the conflict is improvised by the case giver and an "insider", only the two are "on stage", i.e. all other cameras are off.
- Focusing on the essence of the conflict: The case giver and the antagonist bring two audience members "on stage" (cameras on), and "build images" of the respective antagonists by turning off their own cameras and instructing the players verbally (body and text).
- Reflection and deepening of the essence of the conflict: The "pictures" improvise the dispute with the given attitude (body and text).
- Change: The pictures become "autonomous" and change body posture and text, then a rotation begins in which ultimately all (but at least 5) group members lead the dispute themselves in all two positions and try out alternative behaviors.
- At the end, the "originals" come back on stage and can try out with each other what convinced them and what they would like to change:
- The case giver* thanks all players by name ("de-role").

Reflection/Integration
- Evaluation in the group:
o What did I experience in the roles?
o What experiences can I share?
o What ideas did I come up with through the game?
o What was useful in clarifying the conflict?
This one was about getting out of an unequal power struggle and unintentional age discrimination. It was actually possible, through the collective "wisdom of the group", to surprise oneself (to activate knowledge in the group that was not or not explicitly conscious): to express clearly the grandson's fear (fear of contagion) and the good intention (protection) , while also respecting nonverbally the grandmother's desire for autonomy (tone of voice, facial expressions). Thus, a mutually agreeable solution could be found. With more time Setting can be connected here with distance to the stage events a Processing, with which the group dynamics and the contentwise development thread in small groups and plenum are analyzed, social connections worked out like the topic "age discrimination" and its structural connections are reflected or even scenically explored with a new sociodrama to this topic, which lay here under the "mask topic". Generalized possible solutions can be discussed and tested scenically in concrete contexts.

Conclusions

In this exercise, rapid changes of stage action kept the attention despite the screen effort. Due to the preliminary information about the technique, there was no "stumbling" of the flow of the play in this group. With the break out rooms and work instructions in the chat, studio effects and further digital "gimmicks" (voting by whiteboard with stamps, paper covers of the camera, "stage" set up by hidden videos and closed cameras, offline voices with open mics with closed cameras) online fatigue risks were creatively countered. The players were invited to move themselves in the room and to change their body positions according to their roles, even if their counterparts could mainly only perceive their voices and mimosas, a little gesticulation. Playful warm-up exercises and the repeated invitation

to actively intervene in the game were able to strengthen the group presence. Speeches were called out within the group by the participants themselves, naming them. Self-perception, perception of others and group feeling could be experienced with such small elements - even if in a limited way compared to the live experience. After the completion of the two games and the detailed feedback round, there was a gathering of the participants* from all workshops, which was conducive to a sociable and slowed-down cool-down.

The pre- and night-time horny ones probably keep the balance, even if the scenic work in the online format with its nine qualities is certainly still capable of further development in its technical possibilities as well as in its creative use. It remains a different medium than the encounter in the three-dimensionality of the real space, in which we can touch ourselves and our surroundings and share the breath - hopefully soon virus-free!

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