

PSYCHODRAMA ONLINE GROUPS IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: PROMOTING LEARNING AND WELLBEING

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Abstract: *The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic at all levels of society impacted on established practices and routines in higher education, requiring creative and innovative responses. This paper presents a psychodrama online program offered to social work students to partially replace fieldwork limited during the pandemic, and the evaluation of its efficiency and impact. A key result is an increased awareness of the reciprocal influence between personal and professional issues, acknowledging the role of self-development in training social workers. Implications for social work higher education are discussed.*

Key words: *social work education, psychodrama in education, self-development, wellbeing, COVID-19*

1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted the entire population of the globe and all sectors of society - including health care, education, the economy, and social life - in complex ways. It has also transformed the landscape of education in almost every country by disrupting education provision at an unprecedented scale with education systems around the world being impacted by extended school closures and abrupt changes to normal school operations (UNESCO, 2022). Education was confronted with challenges on continuing to provide learning through digital communication, by creating, maintaining, and improving distance learning. The costs of COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures on children's health, well-being and learning has been devastating (UNICEF, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). One of the largest studies on the situation at university level was conducted by UNESCO's Section for Higher Education by the end of 2020, through its member states, for an evidence-based overview at national and global levels (UNESCO, 2021). While most countries experienced an impact on university extension work – mainly the suspension or delay of activities – more high-income countries

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managed to continue their activities through digital communication than other income-level countries. The most important concerns for students were “first, disruption of study/research/campus activities, followed by financial concerns and then health (physical and mental well-being)” (UNESCO, 2021, p.3). Teachers were often confused and unsure on how to support learning (Kourgiantakis et al., 2021), being challenged with devising innovative pedagogical strategies and redesigning their curriculum as a way of enhancing teaching and student e-learning experience (Fudge & Shepherd Ferebee, 2021). In response to this pandemic crisis, opportunities emerged for new activities, seminars, online programs; an increase in short-term courses and in lifelong learning opportunities was observed (UNESCO, 2021).

As a teacher and practice placement coordinator for social work students the main challenge faced was how to help students both fulfill their fieldwork and develop social work practice competencies, without a delay which would have prolonged their studies for an undetermined point in time. Preparing students for social work practice is an important responsibility shared by field education and schools of social work (Kourgiantakis et al., 2021), however the statutory and voluntary organizations where students were usually placed for practice suspended the collaboration with the university for an unknown period. The way forward was to think outside the box and be creative. As a psychodrama trainer, the idea arises to offer students a new educational opportunity consisting in a psychodrama online program focused on the development of social workers' role, to partially replace fieldwork limited during the pandemic (20 hours out of 90 hours required). The proposal was discussed and agreed within the department.

2. Theoretical background: Psychodrama in education

Psychodrama is a group psychotherapy method originating in the work of Jacob Levy Moreno, which is based on theories of action, spontaneity, and creativity. Through dramatic action in the „here and now” people explore their internal world, reaching insights about self and others (Moreno, 1946). A psychodramatic session comprises of three contexts: social, group and dramatic; five instruments: protagonist, stage, auxiliary-ego, director, audience; and three distinct phases: warm-up, action, and sharing (Moreno and Moreno, 1975/2012). Moreno identified the educational context as suitable for the application of psychodrama which can be used as a theoretical-practical model to improve teaching-learning processes. “Education must develop creativity and spontaneity as essential features of personal development and one of the bases of social change” (Moreno, 1946:53). During the 1950s - 1960s, psychodrama methods used as 'group training' became widespread, both in the field of psychotherapy and in the training of people who provide support to others, such as teachers, doctors, social workers, etc. (Schutzenberger, 2020). Educational psychodrama is defined as a teaching-learning process based on the integration of active learning techniques such as role-playing, role reversal, games, psychodramatic images, mirror or soliloquy (Maya & Maraver, 2020). Role reversal and role-playing are the ones most frequently used in

different areas including education (Chistiaens & Baldwin, 2002; Cruz, Sales, Alves & Moita, 2018).

3. Methods

The aim of this study is twofold: (1) to explore value of a psychodrama online program in training social work students for their professional role; (2) to assess the impact of the intervention program on wellbeing, considered to be challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic, and on self-efficacy and spontaneity, considered in this study as dimensions needed to efficiently solve complex social problems.

Hypothesis: *We estimate some trends in improving spontaneity, self-efficacy and well-being as a result of the psychodrama intervention.*

Research Question: *How can psychodrama groupwork and methodology help social work students develop their professional role?*

3.1. Participants

A sample of convenience was used. Students from the Social Work programme of the University XXX, year one (Y1) and two (Y2) during 2020, were offered a new educational opportunity during the lockdown to register for online psychodrama groups as an alternative to fieldwork for developing their professional role. From a total of 167 students enrolled (Y1=93, Y2=74), a total number of 89 students, Y1=42 (45.16%), Y2=47 (63.51%) registered for the psychodrama online program, out of which 15 students, Y1=9 (21.43%), Y2=6 (12.76%) abandoned in the first three sessions. 74 students successfully finished the program, organized in 9 psychodrama groups.

The sample of this study is N= 44 students who voluntarily participated, with the following profile: Y1=21 (47.73%), Y2=23 (52.27%); gender, 41 women (93.18%) and 3 men (6.82%); ages between 17 – 24 years (M=19.48; SD=1.13).

3.2. Procedure

A mixed methods design employing an explanatory sequential approach to data collection was implemented (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 199). The quantitative component consisted of pre- and post-intervention quantitative questionnaires that investigated the impact of psychodrama group intervention on self-efficacy, spontaneity, and wellbeing. Some demographical data were collected.

The *Generalized Self-efficacy scale* (GSES) (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) assesses the strength of an individual's belief in his / her own ability to respond to novel or difficult situations and to deal with associated obstacles. The scale is a self-administered ten-item scale with a four-choice response from 'not at all true' which scores 1, to 'exactly true' which scores 4. The scores for each item are added to give a total score which reflects the strength of an individual's generalised self-efficacy belief. The higher the score, the greater the individual's generalised sense of self-efficacy.

The *Revised Spontaneity Assessment Inventory* (SAI-R) (Kipper & Shemer, 2006) poses one question: “How strongly do you have these feelings and thoughts during a typical day?” The question is followed by a list of 18 adjectives and phrases describing feelings and thoughts, which are rated on a 5-point Likert type scale.

The *Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation Outcome Measure* (CORE-OM) (Evans et al., 2002) is routinely used as an initial outcome measure of well-being and treatment outcomes for individual patients. The CORE-OM contains 34 simply worded items answered on a five-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “most or all the time”, covering four areas: well-being, commonly experienced problems or symptoms, life or social functioning, and risk to self and others. A total score is also calculated. Overall, the measure is problem-scored, higher measures being indicative of more problems. The scale has a good sensitivity to change.

The qualitative component of the study consisted of an exploration of the group experience and perceived outcomes through written reports of students at the end of the intervention program (N = 44). Follow-up focus groups with a sub-group of students (n = 12) were carried out one year later (one for each study year), focused on the value of the psychodrama program for their personal and professional development.

3.3. The Psychodrama Intervention

Psychodrama was used within an educational approach focused on skills and self-development for the professional role of social worker, not on therapeutical issues, which sometimes arise during groupwork. The psychodrama program consisted of a total of 10 sessions of 2 hours, provided online using the Zoom platform, on a weekly basis. Students were organised in small groups (from 8 to 12), each group being coordinated by a volunteer early career psychodramatist, under the supervision of an experienced trainer in psychodrama. Before the groups started, facilitators participated in one training and planning session. The adaptation of psychodrama techniques and ethical consideration for online work were discussed based on emerging literature and practice (Kornienko, 2020; Rhodes, 2020; Weinberg, Rolnick, 2020). Students participated also in one preparation session to discuss contract, informed consent, confidentiality.

The main objectives of the program were: clarification of the social workers’ role; role training focused on developing communication skills, empathy, managing emotions, problem-solving; personal role analysis (strengths and weaknesses); wellbeing. Each session consisted of a warm-up, group work, processing and ending.

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4. Results

4.1. Quantitative data

The quantitative data were analyzed in SPSS 21. The reliabilities of the questionnaires (standardized Cronbach’s alphas) were good and very good for the total sample (N=44),

for GSES (T0: $\alpha = 0.81$; T1: $\alpha = 0.71$), for SAI-R (T0: $\alpha = 0.93$; T1: $\alpha = 0.92$) and CORE-OM (T0: $\alpha = 0.92$; T1: $\alpha = 0.94$). Descriptive results show how the difference between T0 and T1 with GSES (T0: M=29.72, T1: M=32.14) and SAI-R (T0: M=56.80, T1: M=64.26) point towards an increase in perceived self-efficacy and spontaneity. The mean difference for CORE-OM between T0 and T1 shows a tendency to decrease (T0: M=44.08, T1: M=33.74), meaning an increase in wellbeing, indicating that psychodrama intervention can support wellbeing.

Table 1

Descriptive data of self-efficacy, spontaneity and wellbeing scores at T0 and T1

Scale	Pre-test (T0)			Post-test (T1)		
	M	SD	α	M	SD	α
GSES	29.72	3.88	0.81	32.14	5.39	0.71
SAI-R	56.80	11.38	0.93	64.26	9.86	0.92
CORE-OM	44.08	20.28	0.92	33.74	18.39	0.94

The paired sample t test was used to test the statistical difference between the pre-test and post-test measurements. Results show a positive trend of improvement in self-efficacy [$t(43) = -2.88$, $p = .006$], spontaneity [$t(43) = -4.29$, $p = .000$] and well-being (total score $t(43) = 3.37$, $p = .002$; well-being scale [$t(43) = 2.58$, $p = .013$], especially related to problems ($t(43) = 4.08$, $p = .000$), except functioning [$t(43) = .47$, $p = .636$] and risks [$t(43) = .73$, $p = .466$].

Table 2

Paired samples t Test for pre and post-test results

Pair		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)*
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Ef_PRE - Ef_POST	-2.36364	5.44354	.82064	-4.01862	-.70865	-2.880	43	.006
Pair 2	SairTot_PRE - SairTot_post	-7.15909	11.05787	1.66704	-10.52099	-3.79719	-4.295	43	.000
Pair 3	CoreTot_PRE - CoreTot_POST	.25535	.50134	.07558	.10293	.40777	3.379	43	.002
Pair 4	CoreWellbeing_PRE - CoreWellbeing_POST	.27841	.71369	.10759	.06143	.49539	2.588	43	.013
Pair 5	CoreProblems_PRE - CoreProblems_POST	.46023	.74741	.11268	.23299	.68746	4.085	43	.000
Pair 6	CoreFunctioning_PRE - CoreFunctions_POST	.03719	.51810	.07811	-.12033	.19471	.476	43	.636
Pair 7	CoreRisk_PRE - CoreRisk_POST	.05682	.51206	.07720	-.09886	.21250	.736	43	.466

*p (2-tailed) was calculated for the alternative hypothesis

Results confirm the hypothesis showing a positive trend of improvement in self-efficacy, spontaneity and well-being especially related to problems, except functioning and risks.

4.2. Qualitative findings

Thematic analysis of the students' written reports at the end of program and verbatim transcription of focus groups carried out one year later yielded a longitudinal insight into their development over one academic year. The findings are presented according to four overarching themes: (a) *professional benefits*, (b) *personal benefits*, (c) *awareness on intersection between professional and personal roles*, and (d) *wellbeing and education*. For each theme, the categories are summarized in Table 3.

A summary of students' themes

Table 3

Theme	Categories
1. Professional benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension of role knowledge • Soft skills • Developing empathy
2. Personal benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-awareness & self-knowledge • Self-development • Self-esteem
3. Awareness of intersection between professional and personal roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for self-development for professional competence • Managing complex situations • Managing emotions
4. Wellbeing and education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive emotions • Supportive relationships • Supportive learning environment: psychodrama techniques

Professional benefits capture the achievements in the areas of social worker' role understanding, clarification and experimentation, skills developed and empathy.

The **extension of role knowledge** differs according to the year of study. For the first-year students this program was considered among *"the first resources through which I got to know and learn what the work of a social worker entails, but also how difficult it is, how much responsibility you have to take (Y1)²*. Role clarification meant an increased understanding of *"essential qualities that a social worker must have: good organization, devotion to people, listening, empathy, understanding, relating"* (Y1). The second-year students gained new insights and perspectives during role-play activities: *"Different games managed to bring us new visions. I saw how difficult it is to be in the role of a social worker and what deficits I have related to the theory and practice"* (Y2). One year later, one first-year student appreciated that *"they role-played some situations and somehow it showed an overview of the whole job"*. A second-year student gained the courage to work in the field: *"immediately after I finished the course, I submitted a CV to an autism association... I was able to be calm, more understanding and I can be creative at the same time"*. A main benefit for many of the students is voiced by these words:

² Y1 stands for first-year student; Y2 – for second-year student

“everything worked towards a better knowledge of my profile as a social worker and towards an even more ardent desire to get involved in this field and help people”.

The psychodrama intervention developed some of the key **soft skills** required to a social worker, as described: *“devotion to people, listening, empathy, understanding, relating, I developed a desire to help people”.* Communication skills were mentioned most frequently, as in this case *“I got to be able to communicate openly with people I don't know and I got over my shyness”,* or *“before this course I was not so communicative, I was afraid of negative reactions... now, after finishing it, I can say that I see everything completely differently. I am no longer afraid to answer when asked”.* Listening skills were also frequently referred to. Relational skills, especially when working with vulnerable people are more complex: *“I learned to connect, to be able to manage my emotions better, to be able to talk to others, to be able to listen in the first place (Y2, follow-up).* A non-judgmental attitude was mentioned by some students: *“I started to stop having prejudices about people, because I had that in the beginning”.*

Developing empathy is a core skill for social work: *“it helped me to see the situation from the outside, which I usually didn't do. I was just seeing from my perspective, feeling everything from my perspective”.* Overall, a second-year student concluded at the follow-up: *“we learned to listen, to observe and somehow put ourselves in that person's shoes, that is, to try to empathize with them, listen to all their needs and to be with them”.*

Personal benefits were highly valued by all the students, in many cases even more than the professional ones, mostly for the first-year students, triggered personally by some of the activities or role-plays. The following categories were emphasized:

- **Self-awareness & self-knowledge:** *“Here I rediscovered myself, much calmer, patient, caring, brave, ambitious, and I also rediscovered my desire to want more... because the fear of failure made me forget what I know and what I really am” (Y1); “I started to listen to my emotions, to my body, to get to know myself better” (Y2);*
- **Self-development:** *“I managed to know myself better, to change certain concepts that were wrong and to become a better version” (Y1); “They made me a more positive and creative person at any moment of my life” (Y2, focus group);*
- **Self-esteem:** *“These meetings helped me realize who I am, what value I have and how much I can do. I learned to like myself as I am, different, with distinct opinions compared to others” (Y1); “I realized that I could have more confidence in myself and in my own strength, I have become more tolerant with myself and others” (Y2).*

The groupwork offered a safe environment for reflection on both strengths and weaknesses in terms of personal characteristics, abilities, attitudes, what resources they have and what are the areas of further self-development: *“as my colleagues also said, we found perhaps more resources in us, we realized at a certain point where we need to add more things, where we need to work more” (Y1, focus group).*

Awareness of intersection between professional and personal roles

One of the core objectives of the psychodrama intervention was to help students experience and understand, in the safe space of groupwork, the complex relationship between the person (history, experiences, personality, roles) and the professional role of becoming a social worker and having to help diverse vulnerable people.

All students raised their awareness about the benefits and **need for Self-development for professional competence**, as eloquently expressed by one: *“I believe that a social worker needs to know and understand himself before helping other people”* (Y1). Some realized how personal problems may affect their work: *“first of all, it is important to solve your own problems, so that you can then solve the problems of others”* (Y1). Some second-year students deepened their understanding about the risks of projections and subjectivity if personal problems overlap with those of the clients: *“I thought that maybe I could understand them better, going through this, but it made me understand that I have to work on myself first... after that I can work with this category of beneficiaries”* (Y2). Following words, sum up the value of such programs for professionals working in the social field: *“it was an evolution in everything that are emotions... and limits are very important for every social worker, I think this part of the training is very important for us, not just the explanations”* (Y1, focus group); *“Change starts with us; personal development has helped us, and we, in turn, will continue to help”* (Y2).

Managing complex situations is a competence to be developed continuously and was addressed using role play and role training: *“With the help of role-playing games, I was able to put myself in different situations and give myself an exercise in thinking about how I would solve different problems”* (Y2); *“it taught me when I come across a more difficult situation to analyze it from several perspectives until reaching a conclusion, respectively a solution”* (Y1). Most students discovered that: *“I can handle some situations, but I still have a lot to learn in order to find solutions to all the problems that beneficiaries have”* (Y2). The feedback one year later was that psychodrama techniques helped them *“understand the needs of others and how we can act”* (Y2).

Managing emotions is another core competence in social work, strongly related to personal characteristic and experiences, which may be triggered by the clients difficulties: *“I think that we also learned at the same time to manage our emotions when it comes to a very emotional story of the beneficiary, in the end that touches us... this confirmed for us, if we really match or not for this job”* (Y2). Students' emotional development is evidenced by the following words: *“I learned that when we are dealing with a complicated situation, we have to stay calm, stress free and solve the situation”* (Y1); *“it helped me understand how important it is to identify each emotion, each feeling we face”* (Y1); *“This course strengthened me a lot on the more sensitive side, I would learn that I don't have to get emotionally involved... just to give everything I can to help them”* (Y2). Looking back the conclusion of one second-year student was that *“really, in social assistance you meet a lot of situations, most of them negative and yes, we can handle them more easily through personal development”* (Y2).

Wellbeing and education, the fourth theme, emerged from the data as being highly challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic: *“It was a special time for everyone, the pandemic with all the transformations in our personal lives, everyone was scared and agitated... this personal development group made me feel like someone is next to me, it was no longer a question of the pandemic and all the hysteria, but it was about us, we were connected with each other, it was pleasant, warm... it helped me learn to somehow manage crisis situations, not to panic, to be calmer, to control myself”* (Y1, focus group). The psychodrama online group proved to be of real support by creating a space for:

- **positive emotions:** *"I also laughed along the activities" (Y1); "it made me stop from the daily hustle and breathe, enjoy what makes me happy at that moment" (Y1);*
- **supportive relationships:** *"I made friends... the warmth offered by the group, the moral support, the feeling of belonging, the energy of the group will remain imprinted in my soul" (Y1); "Such understanding, empathy and compassion I believe cannot be found anywhere" (Y2);*
- **supportive learning environment:** *"Our group was very welcoming, a small family, ready for new challenges, reliable, but above all, empathetic, who did not judge and did not laugh... we would have preferred to continue practicing in this way" (Y1); "It was something different from college... it was so interactive, with psychodrama there were certain little games... it helped us explore ourselves, you got to know yourself well...it was so interactive... a productive method" (Y2, focus group).*

Most students agreed that psychodrama techniques *"take you a little out of your comfort zone and teach you many things"* (Y2, focus group).

5. Discussions

The world has changed, and no one prepared us for this. During the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected almost every aspect of our work and lives, education responded to the risks posed to physical and mental wellbeing of the students through innovative educational practices (UNESCO, 2021). Although there have been theoretical and practical contributions from educational psychodrama for decades and the use of psychodrama in the university shows positive results for professional role training, there is insufficient empirical evidence focused on the effectiveness of psychodrama in higher education (Maya & Maraver, 2020), compared to clinical settings (Orkibi & Feniger-Schaa, 2019). Results of this study show a positive trend of improvement in self-efficacy and spontaneity, considered in this study as dimensions needed to efficiently solve complex social problems. Overall wellbeing, which was highly challenged, registered a trend of improvement after the psychodrama intervention, especially related to solving problems. Scores for life or social functioning, and risk to self and others did not show statistically significant tendencies.

For a more in-depth understanding, qualitative findings have shown that psychodrama promoted wellbeing by stimulating positive emotions and human connections, a sense of belonging, cohesiveness, acceptance, warmth. Cultivation of positive capacities and experiences may increase well-being and positive mental health (Orkibi, 2019). Socialisation and relationships, significantly reduced during the pandemic, and group cohesiveness are proved to be therapeutical group factors (Yalom & Leszcz, 2008). Moreover, some studies show the importance of emotion as an enabling dimension for creativity, knowledge and skill acquisition in learning processes (Quinlan, 2016).

Present-day teaching-learning models focus on meaningful learning of content. Psychodramatic techniques are characterized as active techniques through which the protagonist, in this case students, can learn by exploring, deepening and constructing roles (Maya & Maraver, 2020). With role reversal, the protagonist places him/herself psychologically in the place of this other person, which allows to obtain a more accurate

perception of the individuality of the complementary role (Cruz et. al, 2018). It was experienced by students as a powerful tool. Other studies showed that for helping professions enter the shoes' of the work figures and understanding them helps in the development of skills for the helping relationship, empathy, and ethics of care (Cohen, Roman, Sarel-Mahlev, 2021).

Like other studies, a positive and supportive learning environment, using experiential methods with social work students as a bridge between theory/abstract concepts and practice/application, facilitated both professional and personal development, (Anghel, Amas, Hicks, 2010). Benefits for professional development were in the areas of clarifying the social worker's role, managing complex situations and soft skills, such as communication skills, managing emotions, and non-judgmental attitude. In the personal area, were valued benefits in the areas of openness, positive emotions, positive relations (befriending with colleagues), increased self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-esteem. Self-awareness is a critical skill used to be aware of one's hidden personality traits for effective practice. Knowing the true self is a pre-requisite of using self to ameliorate human sufferings (Kaushik, 2017).

An important conclusion of the study is an increased awareness the reciprocal influence between personal and professional issues and acknowledging the importance of self-development in training for the social work practice, as evidenced in the literature (Ruch, 2000, Reupert, 2009;). As social work involves entering the lives of people who are in distress, conflict or trouble, to do this requires not only technical competence but also qualities of integrity and self-awareness. The discussion of personal development is based on the concept of reflective professional practice (Lishman, 1998). Self-reflection supports insight into the way personal background affects practice, the impact of the emotional content of the interactions between social worker and client and helps in managing emotions and maintaining professional boundaries (Ruch, 2000).

Social work literature emerged during the pandemic questions how to improve social work education to better equip social workers for this 'new normal' (Golightley, Holloway, 2020) and the unknown future and reduce mental health risks. Results of this study indicate that psychodrama can be an effective teaching tool in developing the professional role of social worker and addressing the intersection between personal and professional development. This is vividly expressed by the words of one student, research participant: "We try to know and accept ourselves before we try to get involved in the lives of others. This self-knowledge leads to our personal development and, implicitly, to obtaining this balance and emotional stability which are very important in the job of social worker".

6. Limitations, future directions and implications

The main strength is the novelty of the online psychodrama program introduced as an alternative to fieldwork and an educational opportunity during the pandemic. Three limitations are acknowledged: firstly, there are private dimensions that may have influenced the wellbeing of students during the pandemic; secondly, the lack of a

control group; thirdly, the variation of psychodrama activities between the groups, as psychodramatists were free to choose their activities as long as they followed the program's objectives.

Lessons learned from this program can inform future directions of education of social work students to enhance their preparedness to act in this new world marked by increased complexity and uncertainty. Social work education in Romania should prioritize more the complexities between personal and professional issues and include hours of self-development / personal development in the training curriculum, complementary to fieldwork practice. Self-development programs for the professional role should be tailored for each year of study, with specific objectives. An alternative would be the requirement to complete a certain number of hours of personal development before the accreditation by the Social Workers' College, as in the case of counsellors and psychotherapists.

Future research should focus on creating and validating personal development experiential programs for social worker students focused on the emotional complexities of the professional role.

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