

Circus workshops in the child psychiatry

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Abstract

The following paper is about the possible psychological effects of social circus, and our experiences with teaching circus methods in children psychiatry. In the beginning the paper try to place social circus in a wider theoretical frame, and searches for the place of it among psychological methods and therapies. We look at the wider and the more specific psychological constructs, what can be effected by social circus, especially the factors which are damaged in children with psychological or psychiatrycal problems. We examine the different parts of circus, how they can help in different problems. The further aim is to research the effects of a continuous social circus group, and to find it's own way among psychotherapies.

Key words: Social circus; children psychiatry; psychotherapy.

Taller de circo en psiquiatría infantil

Resumen

El siguiente artículo trata sobre los posibles efectos del circo social, y sobre nuestra experiencia aplicando métodos para la enseñanza del circo en psiquiatría infantil. Al comienzo, se tratará de situar al circo en un marco teórico amplio, dentro de los diferentes métodos y terapias psicológicas. Se centrará en constructos psicológicos específicos que pueden afectar al circo social, en especial a aquellos aspectos que están dañados en niños con problemas de índole psicológica.

Examinaremos las diferentes partes del circo, cómo puede éste ayudar en diferentes problemas. El siguiente objetivo será investigar los efectos del circo social en grupo de modo continuado, para encontrar su lugar dentro de las diferentes psicoterapias.

Palabras clave: Circo social; niños; psiquiatría; psicoterapia.

Introduction: What can affect the circus

We will present the adaptation of social circus in the psychology field as follows: therapeutic effects, large context placement and a concrete program which is realized in the child psychiatry department of Heim Pál Hospital.

The circus can cause positive and developing effects in many fields and psychological dimensions. In the beginning we summarize a few groups of those, which in the case of children with mental problems are especially vulnerable fields

with a need for development and correction. Children in psychiatric care are often with low self-confidence, concentration difficulties, lack of perseverance and patience, anger and emotional control problems, low self-knowledge, lack of social creative capabilities and trust in others and stigmatized or excluded. Learning juggling, acrobatics and wire-dancing can help self-assessment improvement, self-efficacy development because I can affect the outside world, my actions have importance, meaning and result in the world, experiencing the results of perseverance, the growing motivation, developing anger and emotional control and cooperation, while creating a playful, observer and confidential community among participants. Besides this the group's moving type, the nonverbal communication, not only bypasses the common communication and mental difficulties among these children but offers the possibility of articulating preverbal traumas and memories, which could be very effective and corrective for children prematurely abused or with attachment difficulties. Besides the participants create an art work during the group, which represents values for all of the social class, and make the creators pride before their environment and which changes the common image about them and their image about their place in the community too. The circus's magical word on the one side makes attractive the occupations for the young people, and on the other side it is such a medium, where they can escape from everyday problems, and where everyone start from the same point. Circus art's important characteristic is also stretching, trying our boundaries and so helping to deepen our self-knowledge. Through the circus world's curved mirror children have the possibility of reflecting about the world around them.

The circus's interpretation is larger context

Because circus-therapy is rarely applied and researched innovative therapeutic possibility in the field of psychology, firstly I would like to place in a larger context, searching those connecting points, which have more scientific literature and in which the circus could be integrated too. After this I will present the specific, individual effects, values of circus.

Circus as nonverbal therapy

Art therapy's central idea is, that during every spontaneously creation a mental content is expressed (Prinzhorn, 1968). Beside this the therapy's nonverbal nature is very determinative, which make possible to express symbolical, image-analogical, imaginative state of mind of regressive states against the logical-rational, verbal expressing way, which suppose a more mature mental functioning. As Jung said: "the spiritual material is becoming - in some grade- a new reality, though a kind of materialization and concretization, which talks directly about our soul and perceptions, avoiding the intellectual understanding" (id. Trixler, 1996, 105. o.). Nonverbal's advantage is too that many times the supposed premature hurts and unconscious traumas in psychiatric diseases which affect our later life in a determinate way, happen in a very premature period, in a preverbal lifetime, when we do not have linguistic expressing tools yet for processing those. Nonverbal therapies ignoring verballity, with the help of imagination, by primary thinking processes make possible

to express and process these traumatic experiences. From the beginning moving helps discover and percept the world, and it is the tool of expression and communication. "Moving it's the key of emotional life, remembering, intrapsychic concept world and symbolical processes" (Bagdy, 1991, pg. 5.). On the preverbal phase the children discovers and stores the world in motion-structures. These premature motion-prints are not available consciously in the later life, but determinate in a large way our attitudes. Moving is the basis of the symbolical thinking development, and the later rational conception knowledge. So because our emotional life is based in moving, this conducts us to that thought which is fundamental in nonverbal, primarily moving psychotherapies, and contains in that cognitive restructuring of mental functions can be achieved principally by psycho-motorium (Bagdy, 1991). These are such therapies which see the way in motion in achieving mental results. The individual experiences and group processes during the therapy help the corrective experiences of premature traumatization. The nonverbal therapies arc generally starts from the restructuring and reintegrating of the subject, gradually approaching to being in relationship, relation to others, through living and reorganizing common experiences, being out from a community, the participation of the individual in community. In the beginning phase building the relation to own body is important, then rebuilding the attitude to others and different roles, modification of emotional expressions, through empathy, imitation and comprehensible empathize.

The circus-therapy can be classified among expressive, dynamic, creative therapies, which contain the nonverbal therapies too, with the difference that foregoing circus groups, leave out the psychological analytic, interpreter work, the verbal part.

Among others applying art therapies to patients with schizophrenia is very important, in one hand because of fell apart, incoherent thinking which is specific to psychotic states, in the other hand because in their case suffering a preverbal traumatization during personal development is frequent (Trixler, 1996). In the same time the schizophrenic psychotic's abstracting capability is getting worse, the concretization and the analogue thinking come to the front, which contains that these patients become available through the nonverbal channel of communication, the connection is available through this. The so-called symbolic concretization (Arieti, 1974) concept hides the access to the experience for the viewer from outside. Accordingly we have to understand concretized phenomenon symbolic. The nonverbal understanding in this level's importance and necessity may evolve from the connection, the premature mother-child relationship difficulties (Fekete, 1996). Beside the symbolical expressing way, or the trauma's corrective experience, the nonverbal therapies make possible to feel the cathartic, deep, archaically emotions which are definitive in the therapeutic process. Another advantage of artistic expressions is, that ambivalent, conflicted emotions, and experiences can be transmitted and showed in a specific moment, avoiding linearity or time sequentality. Experiencing and accepting ambivalence it's very important for the mental development, but in the same time because of it's tensional characteristic is important to make expressible, placing outside. The creation can be interpreted as an

impermanent object which connect the inside and outside reality, so not just placing outside and acceptable, but taming acceptable and integrative the inner mental contents. Beyond this art therapy is convenient to express transpersonal, spiritual experiences, delivering the unspeakable (Fekete, 1996).

Group dynamic processes generally speed up in case of art therapies, since creativity, creation and symbolic communication helps connection and allows more space for the appearance of emotions and anger. Besides exercise therapies, as well as music therapies, stimulate the experiencing of a collective, somatic and archaic experience through rhythm and joint motion, which enables experiencing fusion and separation in a safe and controlled environment (Trixler and his colleagues, 1989). Thus, individual experience rises to a collective level, which evokes more elementary forms of connection, from self-orientation towards the recourse to another person.

In case of children, non-verbal therapies are especially important, on one hand because in their case early, proverbial traumas, disorders of mother-child relationship are determining, on the other hand verbal expression, discretion and framing of their difficulties and feelings is not yet mature. Therefore child's therapies usually involve game therapy elements and pictorial representations.

Thus circus-therapy can be interpreted in the context of non-verbal therapies using the elements of joint creation, improvisation and work with own body and touch.

Circus as sport

A great deal has been written on the psychological advantages of sport and the potential of its additional therapeutic use. These emphasize primarily the development of self-evaluation, which receives a central role everywhere, anger regulation, reduction of aggression, the subservience of concentration, following of rules and persistence, as well as teamwork, cooperation, listening to others, and trust in others, as well as their personality developing effects (Sztancsik, 2011). In case of children with behavioral difficulties or hyperactivity the development of these abilities can be particularly important and causes the remission of symptoms. Besides, the importance of experiencing the positive experience of sporting, the participation in activities providing pleasure is not negligible. The development of motor coordination also has numerous psychological consequences. For example in case of autism sensory integrational trainings are strongly emphasized, as well as in case of children struggling with hyperactivity, learning disabilities of behavioral problems.

The effects of circus in the light of the international literature

Nakahara and his colleagues (2007) study specifically in their research the effects of juggling in case of psychiatric patients. In the research they studied women suffering from anxiety disorders, in case of whom after six months of juggling both trait- and state anxiety were lower than in the control group, and depressive symptoms decreased as well. The authors mention less frequent occurrence of anxiety inducing memories – mediated by eye movements -, as well as the relaxative, meditative

nature of exercise as a mode of action. Besides this, a rhythm given from the outside can help in the more optimal functioning of self-regulation, which is often disturbed in case of children traumatized in their early bindings.

Another study examines the neurobiological effects of juggling (Driemeyer et al, 2008). During the research they studied the results of learning and practicing of three-ball cascade and found that there is a demonstrable structural change in the brain's grey matter in the juggling group compared to the control group. As the effect of juggling they found increase in the grey matter in certain areas of the brain. The article highlights the effect of learning, namely that qualitative change which is created during the acquisition of a new ability, since the exercise of the already learnt movements didn't show these levels of structural changes in the nervous system. The growth of brain plasticity could be observed in the first week of studying, which suggests that a short-term exercise can also access structural changes in the brain. Which confirms the short-term effects of circus groups.

Posner and his colleagues (2005) examined art training in childhood in their researches, and found results indicating that high motivation experienced at receptive children has a positive effect on executive attention, the ability to control emotions and thoughts, as well as on overall cognitive function. Other research results (Esposito, 2005) point to the direction of occupation with art and better cognitive control, although more research is needed for proving the causal relationship. There are some results as well which confirm the improvement in childhood dance learning and efficiency of attention connected to structural changes of the brain.

Circus as an complementary therapeutic form

The evaluation of psychological, social and neuronal effects of circus therapies and their specificity is an interesting question. In my esteem social circus – similarly to numerous other therapeutic forms – can be perceived rather as an aspecific therapeutic form, which is not a symptom-specific treatment approach, but promotes and develops individual competences in a comprehensive, holistic, biopsychosocial way. In this respect it can be regarded less like a primary treatment, but more like a technique which can associate additionally to other symptom-oriented treatment forms. The holisticity of circus lies exactly in the development of general abilities and psycho-social constructs which contribute to one's overall well-being. This later defines the methodological aspects of circus therapy's efficiency studies, namely it is not a matter to be assessed on its own, compared to other specific therapies, but rather of their complementary.

The specific effects of circus therapy, its therapeutic use

The study of Maglio and McKinstrey (2008) summarizes the evaluation of a social circus group, embedded in a holistic approach, reviewing the physical, cognitive and emotive effects of circus, emphasizing the specific significance of each stage of circus therapy. In case of the warm-up games they highlight teamwork, cooperation, verbal and non-verbal communication. During the acrobatics they mention emerging body awareness, trust, positive risk-taking, the providing and acceptance of physical

support. Body awareness is an important element of non-verbal therapies as well, as experience of the body can be the base of the emerging, developing identity, which is especially important in case of patients who are psychotic or underwent early traumas (Fekete, 1996). Acrobalance can be a resource of experiencing teamwork, body awareness, trust, safety, interaction, as well as problem solving and self-efficiency. Juggling can be the ground of experiencing challenges, coordination, developing motoric skills, perseverance, practice, creativity and improvisation, quick thinking and quick reactions. Balance exercises can help defeating or reducing fear from heights and physical borders, as well as they evoke trust in others and in ourselves and responsibility, support, paying attention to others. During the performance they experienced also the appearance of creativity and cooperation, joint support, try-out of roles, problem solving and multidirectional communication as well as overcoming inhibitions.

The Cirque du Monde (Lafortune and his colleague, 2011) guide of social circus provides also an overall summary on the positive effects of circus. One of the biggest and most obvious advantages of circus therapy is the development of self-evaluation. This can be achieved on one hand through performances, with which they can show to the outside world what they can do and receive positive reactions. On the other hand due to the characteristics of circus arts, with hard work and practice they can acquire something, which at first glance seems impossible to many people. Experiencing self-efficacy belongs to this also, that with the investment of their own force they can create something great.

Self-regulation is also an area, which is often deficient in case of these children. Patience, endurance, concentration, self-discipline and regulation of emotions are all developing during the occupation with circus. On one hand they can face in a safe environment what happens if they don't succeed or not like they've planned. During practices participants can learn how to control their own reactions, anger, temper, as well as they can reflect on them. They can experience the reasons of failure, as well as they can learn to set realistic personal goals and search for strategies with which these can be achieved. In this the medium of game and the levity of stake helps a lot. Later they can internalize these in other situations in their life.

The establishment of common goals and cooperation strengthens the feeling of belonging somewhere and acceptance. During common creation they can experience trust in others, mutual help and empathy. Trust is especially articular in case of acrobatic tasks, which require body contact. They can also experience what they are able to do for others, how they can set their own abilities to serve others which causes a feeling that everyone in the group is essential for the community.

Communication also evolves through the group, on one hand as a result of co-working and inventing the joint performance, on the other hand through common games, checks carried out in groups – the group form of playing with juggling tools. The practice of circus arts often requires creative work and ingenuity. During doing the circus they can experience releasing and working on and structuring imagination.

There are many kinds of circus areas, thus circus is accessible for everyone, it excludes nobody. It symbolizes that communities and cultures are diverse. People

who would otherwise shun each other can meet here in a neutral space, they can redefine their relationship with each other.

Another relevant area, which can develop during group sessions is flexibility, that is surpassing their own goals, self-realization and cooperation for a common goal. This flexibility is very important in terms of adjustment. In addition, circus presents a lot of liberated joy and fun. The children with psychiatric problems are often at risk of deviant behavior or other risk searching behaviors, such as drug abuse. Getting acquainted with circus, on the one hand, if it arouses their interest more seriously, it can cover their creative energies or their risk-seeking behavior, as well it can fill a “motivational gap” in their lives, giving them a goal. In the circus there are some dangerous operations, that is why it is important to establish and follow some rules. Thus, instead of forcing them, rules gain a positive, meaningful significance, that they can practice dangerous operation safely. Thus, they take care of themselves and each other, their assessment of hazards is developing.

A positive attitude towards difficulties and failures is important which receives a lot of support in the group. It is also important to create connection and establish a parallel between the experienced situations and everyday life. Thus the establishment of a connection with everyday life can be created, that the abilities and attitudes experienced in the medium of circus can be taken on into everyday situations.

In what the circus is unique in psychiatry

Among the many non-verbal therapies, perhaps it is the following idea, which highlights mostly the circus workshops with psychiatric patients. Circus can work as a really good metaphor for psychiatry. The surreality appearing in circus, the quickening of imagination, that everything is the opposite of itself as well or even fears, impressions, noises, lights, these can all be the symbols or co-phenomena to mental illnesses. In addition, the relativity of reality, the uncertainty of that what I perceive is the reality, which can be observed for example on patients coming out of a psychotic state, is also a common phenomenon in circus, an area which the circus performers eagerly play with. The circus tent becomes a symbolic space, where the inner world of a person suffering from mental disorder can come into life and where on one hand fears and imaginations can be placed outside and on the other hand they become tamable and workable. In this regard, for example, dealing with, fraternizing and occupying fire may be important as the embodiment of fears and impulsions.

The social integration effects of circus

One of the important objectives of social circus is social integration. Psychiatric patients also face marginalization and stigmatization by society, at school from classmates, teachers or in employment, in their smaller or wider environment. The perception of mental illnesses and the attitude towards patients came a long way in our society, but even today it is surrounded by a kind of mystical gloom often mixed with fear that is a breeding ground for stigmatization. The action in performances, which are closely intertwined with the circus, a provides the possibility for patients to stand out in front of the community with a valuable work of art and to show what

they are capable of. Thus, they can influence the picture of them in the community, as well as their picture of themselves. In addition from their marginalized role they can get into a role, which is desired or envied by many. In addition, the action is a tool for them, where they can reflect on the world around them.

Although the essence of social circus is social responsibility, yet the classic circus, and the circus as a metaphor is an interesting embodiment of social exclusion. As the old traveling circuses choosing an alternative way of life were in a marginalized situation, except that for them it was a chosen role, they can be parallelized with other marginalized groups. By this on the one hand, it can get closer to or may be more attractive to the stigmatized groups, representing their marginalization in a positive and constructive mirror, on the other it represents deviance and oddity as a value, it promotes diversity and acceptance.

Circus-occupations in the child psychiatry

The location and the target group

We set up social circus groups in the child and psychiatry department of Heim Pál Children's Hospital since the April of 2013. The participants of the group are kids staying in the department who got in with a very wide range of problems. Approximately 10-15 person participates in the group, some of whom are in the hospital for extended periods of time, up to several months, while others are staying only just 1-2 weeks, thus they take part in the circus group only one or two times. Hence, the group is open and it has a highly variable composition, which is not beneficial in many ways, but we haven't yet managed to create a closed group. In this it also plays a role that in the case of a closed group, a large part of the kids would miss it, as fluctuation is quite high. For examination children usually spend two weeks inside. Those young people who have a more severe or prolonged acute condition (e.g.: psychosis) spend a longer period of time inside.

There is a very big difference in ages as well: there are children from about 4 to 18 years on the department. The most common problems with which children get in are conduct disorder, hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder, autism, spectrum disorders and psychiatric disorders requiring emergency care (crisis conditions, suicidal intensions or attempted suicide, self-destructive behavior, sudden psychotic conditions), schizophrenia, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic disorder (PTSD), emerging personality disorders, mood disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, eating disorders. Attachment disorders are very common, which may consist of a wide variety of underlying diseases as well as increasing child abuse.

The structure of the circus group

The circus group is supplementary to the therapeutic and rehabilitation work operating at the department. Three professionals or instructors, who are proficient in circus arts and in their education also, including me working as a psychologist in the department, lead the group. During the occasions the first half-hour usually includes

games combining joint movement and drama pedagogic elements, in order to tune on the group, warm-up and get energized. Then each instructor teaches a device, so one can practice the tools in three smaller groups. After the more structured practicing free exercise follows, where everyone can get to know the tools they like more deeply. In the end of the group we do a little performance, where children can show each other what they have learned in the group. In this case, we urge them to perform in smaller groups and work on some kind of common choreography. The presentation- and the warm-up games serve to create a foundation for group cohesion, community experience and a safe and trusting environment. The performance held at the end of the group lets them to experience success, overcome their fears and taste the fruit of their hard work. The performance, as it was mentioned previously, is an organic part of the circus, and has a very large role in the improvement of self-esteem and social integration.

During the group, trainers already mention them to think about what they would like to present at the end of the session and how. As well as they encouraged the participants to perform collectively in pairs or small groups to feel that there is a beginning, middle and end of the show. It helps a lot to timid children to dare to act. The group leaders also offer the role of master of ceremonies if someone is eager to take it on. The teaching of this is the responsibility of teachers as well: they tell a couple of turns, how to do it well, what phrases and elements are used commonly, as well as the main rule which is do not criticize anyone. Of course it is good when the kids put their own individuality into it, so they can be encouraged to involve their own stories or jokes.

Our experiences

Depending on the structure and dynamics of the group and in the light of growing experience, the structure of the group changes. It is important to find the optimum between the freer, improvised, and the bounded atmosphere. The advantage of structuring is the sustenance of motivation and persistence, which is not always an easy task to maintain among children involved, as learning each ploy often requires more enduring work than what is available in the case of a children who is impulsive or has attention deficit or even low self-esteem. However, the freer atmosphere can result in a more relaxed mood, a richer experience, and the growth of the creative energies. Finding the optimal structuring during the setup of performances is particularly important. Despite the fact that throughout the group therapeutic effects are in the focus, with the help of circus as a tool, showing the things mastered to other people is an important part of this, among others in order to increase self-confidence or reduce social discrimination. However, it is important for teachers to pay attention not to stick to their own ideas, only those items should be included in the show which the children really feel theirs and they like it. For this reason, it is better if they have more alternatives to offer. During the performance instructors perform as well to give ideas and to demonstrate the structure of a show. It is important to present it in details also because it is a very difficult task, much more complex and complicated than it seems at first glance. Generally, people acquire only after many

years of performing experience how one “should” behave on stage. This optimal management is also a difficult question, because based on previous experience, at a time when preparation for a performance is rather freer, and the whole thing is based on the creativity of the participants, sometimes very touching and honest, surreal, artistically valuable pieces are born. This usually only works when someone has sufficient motivation and passion towards a juggling tool. It is also very important that the action has a sense of achievement, a positive impact on self-esteem. Indeed, even though it is not the technical knowledge what is essential, when someone is a bit more thronging and yet we convince him to stand on the stage with something, which he did not have time or motivation to exercise, it can have a negative impact, the experience of overcoming fear can turn into a feeling of being ashamed or into an “I knew it would not succeed” feeling. In this case, it is important to manage this, emphasizing the acceptance and success, as well as the development of a tolerant atmosphere in the group right from the start is a very important task which requires emphasis.

During the teaching of circus arts it is important to expand the tasks compared to the children’s abilities, and figure out that optimal goal they can achieve with strong investment, so they can also have an experience of success. It can be an interesting observation and feedback to the children how each of them manages their own successes and failures individually and within the group, comparing themselves to others. Sometimes it may be useful to teach different tricks to the children so the resemblance with others won’t be so explicit. If someone is very unmotivated or bored, it is worthwhile to show him a more spectacular, “more professional” trick, which opens perspectives and thereby gives motivation for practicing.

During the diagnostic work in the department as well as during the establishing of therapeutic relationship we have a lot of positive experience considering the group. Since social circus is an entirely different medium - naturally paying attention to retain the roles and frames of psychologists-, we meet the children in another quality than in a two person psychological situation. Children often open up in a completely different capacity and by a different side, providing a more complete picture in the diagnostic work. On the one hand one element of this is being together with peers, on the other hand, the fun environment and experiencing ourselves in another, previously unknown quality. In addition it contributes to the transformation of the sometimes appearing, opponent “stupid psychologist, wants to talk again and do some tests” attitude, to a little closer connection experienced in another situation that can be reinvested in the therapeutic work very well. In addition, children can gain some valuable and surprising experience of themselves, with which we can also work well in the future.

Looking to the future, directions and objectives

In the future it might be worthwhile to establish a fixed, closed group in which the arch of the process and the evolving group dynamics can be better followed. This would allow a research, which would greatly contribute to the more exact mapping of the psychological effects of circus, as well as improve its scientific acceptance. It

would be interesting to examine the effects in some special patient groups despite that in our opinion this rather works as a holistic, non-specific form of therapy. However, the specific groups would create the opportunity to adapt the group better to the individual needs. On the other hand, the diversity of circus can reach that everyone can find for himself or herself the most attractive, the most enabling self-expression segment.

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Notas al pie

1. *Clinical children and youth psychologist*.

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