

Psychodrama as a Preventive Measure: Teenage Girls Confronting Violence

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ABSTRACT. The problem of male violence against women has affected the lives of many women since ancient times. Women are victims of child sexual abuse, date rape, marital assault, marital rape, and sexual harassment. In this article, the author describes an innovative approach to combat violence by employing techniques generally used in drama therapy and psychodrama. Such work is aimed at increasing young women's awareness of violence, enhancing their agency in preventing and dealing with violent situations, and engaging them to take part in educating their peers on issues of male violence. High-school girls ($N = 19$) participated in weekly sessions for 6 months. Empowered by the group director, the young women staged 2 productions in schools, sharing their insights with more than 200 peers.

Keywords: preventing violence, psychodrama techniques, teenage girls

IN A TYPICAL YEAR, 120 WOMEN IN CANADA ARE KILLED by their husbands, ex-husbands, or boyfriends (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1993), and almost 450,000 are smacked, punched, strangled, beaten, sexually assaulted, or threatened with a gun or a knife (Statistics Canada, 1994). Also, results of an in-depth study show that across the country, approximately 80% of victims of criminal harassment are women (Bunge & Levett, 1998). All the data indicate that women are constantly victimized. Feminist advocates and community activists have helped to incriminate most types of assault and encourage more women to take the perpetrators to court. However, because of loopholes in the existing judicial system and because many incidents against women are unreported, many offenders either are never arrested or are acquitted when they go to trial. Even though some perpetrators are found guilty, a light sentence often disappoints the victims and their families. As a result, violent crimes

against women have not declined, and many women feel revictimized by the legal process. Indeed, a recent news release from Statistics Canada reported that the number of spousal homicides against women increased from 68 in 2000 to 86 in 2001 (Spousal Homicide, 2002).

Some feminists argue that the frequent portrayal of women as victims of male crimes has led to destructive effects on women's psyches (Rushing, 1993). The continuous depiction of women as victims directly and indirectly implies that they are incapable of defending themselves or combating male violence on their own. This construal of women as passive victims of violent crimes has cultivated a sense of powerlessness in them, trapping them in the dynamic of self-fulfilling prophecy. This portrayal of women denies their sense of agency, discouraging them from taking full control of their lives and forcing them to withdraw themselves from meaningful activities. Many women are hesitant to go out at night for purposes of personal advancement and social networking. Some studies show that many women totally avoid going to certain places by themselves, even during the day (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). Even when they go out, they cannot fully enjoy activities because fears overtake pleasure. To advise women not to go out alone after dark is an act of disempowerment. It deprives them of their basic human right to live life to the fullest as a person; at the same time, it further jeopardizes their chances to acquire more effective strategies to deal with violent situations. Violent experiences, conventional advice, and anticipation of victimization limit women's opportunities for personal development.

Unless it is an informed personal choice, women do not need to limit their social activities or give up opportunities for personal growth because of the threat of violence. To empower women, helping professionals can take a more proactive approach toward helping women fight violence. Johnson and Lewis (2000) stated that most drama therapists discover the exciting possibilities of drama therapy by experience, not theory, so the possibility of employing the processes and techniques of drama therapy and psychodrama to help women overcome fears of male violence is promising. It has been long established that dramatization elements can bring great therapeutic effects to people's lives, and one of the important aspects of drama therapy is public performance (Emunah, 1994). Torre (1990) reported successful results after conducting a drama project with women to raise their consciousness about stressful connections between the workplace and the home. The Community Education Team (1999) also reported a project involving drama facilitators who collaborated with junior high and high school students in creating skits on topics related to relationship violence. These researchers obtained some positive results as well. In examining these projects, I was convinced that it is appropriate to introduce the processes and techniques of drama therapy and psychodrama to help increase women's awareness of male

violence and to empower them to develop applicable strategies for various violent situations.

Psychodrama is defined as “a scientific exploration of truth through dramatic method” (Moreno, 1953, p. 81). It is widely recognized as a form of psychotherapy in which the participants enact or reenact situations that bear emotional significance for them. Signified in the word *psychodrama* is the expression of an individual’s intellectual and emotional processes through speech and body movement. In typical psychodrama sessions, clients are directed to act out different personalities that are significant to them. In a group situation, each member is the therapeutic agent of the other, contributing to each other’s transformation and personal growth. The major components of each psychodrama session include warm-up, action, and sharing (Kahn, 1964). Such techniques and processes help participants obtain insights into their own personalities and feelings as well as those of others.

All individuals involved in psychodrama, including the therapist, are theoretically able to recognize certain problems of their own in the process; therefore, psychodrama is not confined to people whose problems are pathological. Indeed, psychodrama can benefit anyone who keeps an open mind and seeks new alternatives to matters in life. Because drama therapy is interdisciplinary in nature, its methods and techniques are very diverse. The therapist uses techniques of improvisation and theatrical sensibility to work with individuals who would benefit from such work. Dramatic roles can be used as a vehicle for not only experiencing and integrating new aspects of one’s life, but also expressing suppressed shadow aspects of the self. In this way, facets of a person’s personality that have been concealed from others and, more often, from the self can be unleashed (Emunah, 1994).

Drama therapy and psychodrama are forms of healing art that share commonalities in the therapeutic process. Many studies show that people of various age ranges can take advantage of psychodrama or drama therapy, but it is most effective when it is used with adolescents (Dayton, 1990; Emunah, 1985). The need for adolescents to make sense of the world and to develop interpersonal skills through dramatic modes is great in the educational system. Pickering (1997) pointed out that, in developing personalities, teenagers are likely to experience a full range of emotional and social complexities. Drama lessons or therapeutic sessions provide them the opportunity to release strong emotions with guidance. A young person who experienced psychodrama said, “I learned to trust in our psychodrama group. I can’t remember the last time I trusted anyone” (Bannister, 1991). One significant reason for such success with adolescents is that psychodrama connects the natural healing methods that are used by children through plays and role plays. This connection makes it easier for them to discharge internal impulses through enactment and to gain insights. Evidence shows that, when researchers use such techniques in

the educational system, students as young as seventh graders can understand complex issues of violence against women and think proactively about ways in which violent situations can be approached tactically (Community Education Team, 1999). On a psychodramatic stage, participants can have their anxieties, fears, and tensions relieved, and their attention can be shifted to focus on developing meaningful surviving strategies.

Method

Program Background and Goals

Get on to Stopping Violence Against Women was a project I designed that was funded by the United Way of Greater Toronto, Canada, as a preventive and educational program to empower the minds of young women of high-school age. Through this project, I worked with the Canadian Information and Community Services (CICS) as group director to enhance these young women's abilities to deal with violent circumstances in their surroundings. I used psychodrama as a tool to help the girls overcome anxieties about violence, to unlearn fear and gender stereotypes that weakened their psychological strengths, and to restore their spontaneity in responding to violent situations. In the case of preparing young women to deal with male violence on a daily basis, I believed it was pivotal to help them reduce a sense of victimization and develop a sense of self-reliance. Instead of reinforcing a sense of helplessness and hopelessness in them, I believed the best way to empower them was to encourage them to develop practical and useful strategies that would prevent them from being targeted for abuse and victimization. Only when there is a thorough understanding of social dynamics and gender issues and an opportunity to reconstruct an improved self-image can young women be better prepared to deal with male violence on their own in their lives.

Participants

The Get on to Stopping Violence Against Women project engaged young women from 15 years to 20 years of age (Grades 9–12) who were studying in a formal school. I recruited 19 students from two high schools in Toronto, Ontario, with the help of their teachers or resettlement workers in school. Students volunteered themselves but were referred by the aforementioned individuals, because I was not a regular member in their school. For those who were minors, I obtained consent from their parents. All participants were coincidentally immigrants, and many of them were recent newcomers to Canada. Although some students spoke English effortlessly, many of them were just managing to speak it and using great effort to express their opinions

and emotions effectively. The composition of the group was culturally diverse, including Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Russian, Iranian, and Ukrainian students. However, being immigrants and newcomers had provided these young women with a sense of togetherness, as if they were sharing an equivalent identity, even though their backgrounds were different in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and religion. Also, the uniqueness of the newcomer experience had prepared the participants to be more open and ready for learning. They looked forward to discovering new resources in their immediate environment and finding ways of empowering themselves through participation in such an extracurricular activity.

Procedure

Once I identified objectives and communicated them to group members, the group met weekly for 2 hr over the course of 20 sessions. In accordance with concepts of drama therapy and psychodrama, I believed that, through the enactment of emotions expressed in body movements, gestures, and even dancing and singing in group sessions, anybody who could function well socially and emotionally would be able to benefit from the activities and gain a deeper knowledge about the self. Therefore, I required no detailed assessment or analysis of the participants' psychological personalities prior to the commencement of the group sessions.

In addition to regular warm-up activities, action, and sharing, I advised participants to write down personal goals for future assessment and to keep a journal for recording personal growth. As the group director, I used some of these entries on self-discoveries, personal doubts, or concerns to provide participants individual feedback, to bring common concerns to group discussion, or to develop relevant cases for group activities. The young women were shy in the beginning of the project, but gradually they became open to playing different roles in the staged social contexts and interpersonal relationships. It was also in this stage that I helped them bond with each other despite their differences. I introduced acting games and exercises to help participants to loosen up and gain confidence in expressing emotions through acting and to build a group identity. When group cohesiveness was established, group members were ready to work with each other, and they felt comfortable articulating their views about male violence without fear of being judged by peers. Storytelling was a relevant exercise I used in this phase to ease participants' minds when talking about violence. With this technique, I instructed members to tell a short story as a group before they gave an account of a violent incident.

In the project's second phase, I presented the educational and skills development elements more intensively. I initiated some serious discussion on

different types and topics of male violence, such as random sexist crimes, date rape, incest, sexual harassment, spousal and child abuse, and racial violence. I encouraged participants to speak their minds and offer strategic solutions to the problems. For example, from a box containing notes with unknown situations, participants randomly drew a violent situation, and then I asked them to use their imaginations to role-play the situation both as a perpetrator and as a victim. To help them overcome psychological barriers and visualize their abilities in responding effectively to a violent scene, I developed a simple empowerment dance, which integrated the idea that women are strong, calm, intelligent, and confident. The group practiced the dance in each session to reinforce the belief that women are capable agents and that they can deal with violent situations innovatively. I frequently encouraged participants to enact the strategies they invented. Members often provided each other with moral support and constructive feedback to sharpen ideas and improvise strategies.

In the third phase, I shifted the emphasis of the sessions from individual creativity to group creativity. Group processes provided members with opportunities for collective creativity. For example, they recreated the dance that I originally choreographed, incorporating their ideas and personal styles. As a result, the empowering dance became a collective production that signified the group's shared willpower to confront violence. In addition, I gave members the opportunity to reenact violent situations that we had discussed. Situations included sexual harassment on the bus and in the mall. Participants gradually integrated those isolated incidents into a story with a personally relevant social context, making them the working script for public performance. Near the end of the sessions, I selected three scenarios (two girls nearly sexually assaulted in an elevator, a girl being stalked at night, and bullying among peers in school) as rehearsal materials for the purpose of peer education—the performance.

In the final phase, I worked with members to consolidate their learning and prepare them for the performance. After overcoming their anxiety about public performance, these young women were ready to show what they had learned and to teach their peers ways to protect themselves from violence. They were very excited about the performance and wanted their peers to be proud of them. At this point, the group entered its maturity; members knew how to respect differences among themselves and how to work with each other. Ongoing negotiation and compromise with each other led them to the decision of including the dance in the performance as well. In this phase, they volunteered themselves for unique roles in the various scenarios, requiring no intervention or mediation from me. In anticipation of questions, some members came up with mock answers, which again showed their personal growth and achievement over the course of the sessions.

Final Performance

Participants presented their performance twice in the two different schools to which they belonged. Between the two performances, 120 female students in Grades 10 and 11 attended the presentations. During the question and answer (Q & A) period, intriguing dialogues emerged about the need for more radical strategies if an attack becomes vicious. Although no consensus could be reached, the message was clearly conveyed to the audience that women must act proactively and develop the confidence necessary to deal with violent situations. Participants reported that the most empowering aspect of the process was the ample opportunity to reflect on self-doubts, personal beliefs, and new knowledge that was generated from this experience. Reenacting their performance in front of people other than their group peers and standing up for their beliefs in the Q & A period challenged these young women to demonstrate their personal strength, calmness, intelligence, and confidence. These were the personal qualities that I sought to instill in participants in this project.

Results

Participant Evaluations

The participants' evaluations showed that they had expanded their horizons and learned about women's right and ability to stop violence. At the beginning of the project, newcomer participants said they hoped to make more friends, to feel good about themselves, to improve their English skills, to reduce anxiety about violence, and to gain personal confidence. They seemed to have reached most of these goals at the end of the project. They reported feelings of success because they had achieved more than just their individual goals; they were happy with their accomplishment as a group as well. They felt privileged to have had the opportunity to express their fears and face them with the help of peers and a professional. They found the educational sessions, the theater exercises, and the games to be informative and, as an bonus, they learned about critical thinking skills and community resources. The anticipation of a group presentation to a school audience had attracted some young women to attend regularly with no absence. The following statement expresses a sentiment that appeared in many participants' evaluations: "Confidence is most important to me because sometimes I am not confident. I'm shy. But in this project, I've gained confidence."

Many participants reported that, after joining this group, they talked more with others in school or in their social circles about issues of violence. They were proud of the final performance and were more aware that women do not have to tolerate violence. One participant stated, "I always thought that girls

can't do anything but freak out in situations like what we discussed; but now I feel knowledgeable to say that there are a lot of strategies women can use to get out of certain situations." Indeed, many participants identified with the protagonists they created in the scenarios, and they admired the calmness, courage, and confidence that the characters demonstrated in situations of sexual and racial assault.

The rapport established between the participants and myself in this program was very strong, promoting fast changes in participants. With my expertise and commitment to empower women, I had gone through similar experiences as these young women had, being a member of a racial minority group, a non-White, and a female immigrant. Thus, I could empathize from a personal angle and handle sensitive issues tactically and effectively. Personal identity (be it racial or otherwise) played an important role in the shared feeling of sisterhood that helped bridge psychological gaps and create a sense that "we are all in the same boat." This sense of community was demonstrated by the way group cohesiveness was swiftly established among members after they realized that they were all immigrants.

Audience Evaluations

We collected evaluation forms from the school audience after the presentations. Ninety percent of the students in the audience found the presentation to be thought provoking; only 10% stated that they were not sure what to comment. A conversation with the school administrator suggested that students in the latter group might contain newcomers who had problems expressing themselves on paper because of language barriers and were not familiar with the practice of giving feedback and those who simply did not care. A majority of audience members who praised the presentation described the strategies that were presented as "very useful" or "useful." The most impressive result was that most students were able to recite the four elements of a woman's personal quality that we stressed throughout the presentation: (a) personal strength, (b) calmness, (c) intelligence, and (d) confidence. They saw these concepts in the opening dance, and the scenarios further elaborated them. This success in transmitting our message to audience members demonstrated that, when concepts are conveyed through creative art, they are likely to be retained.

Many students in the audience reported that their awareness about violence was raised by the performance. They perceived that young women need to be more alert and daring, always thinking proactively about how they can protect themselves from violent situations. They expressed the desire for self-defense lessons and a violence-free environment. They acknowledged that, if they do not act as if they are scared, especially if they have rehearsed the appropriate responses, then they are more likely to be able to control the situation. The

audience found the discussion following the presentation to be necessary and helpful because the suggested coping strategies were expanded. After all, the primary aim of the presentation was not to show off group members' theater skills or suggest a set of stagnant strategies. It was about helping them consolidate their learning by conducting an educational presentation that empowered both performers and audience members. About half of the respondents expressed an interest in participating in similar projects in the future because they had witnessed the benefit of empowerment in this prevention program. This result suggests that the creative approach to combating violence was valuable to its regular members and that there was a rippling effect from the presentation, engaging a wider audience to future participation.

Discussion

Violence against women is still a social reality that calls for our attention to defend against it. In spite of the efforts of feminists, community activists, and concerned citizens to eradicate violence, many women, regardless of age, race, ability, and religion, still suffer from physical, sexual, and mental abuse. The current judicial system does not permit male violence against women to go unpunished, but acceptance of male domination and assumptions of female compliance still remain. As a result, women's personal development may be hampered. Many women, overtly or covertly, are forced to choose between living a full life by taking risks or limiting themselves by confinement.

Although there are services and pragmatic programs to help women deal with violence in their lives, these services are often reactive and passive, assuming that women are incapable of self-protection or that they need to be protected by a third party (e.g., men, the police). These aftermath services and traditional approaches to stopping male violence are not effective enough and cannot confront the problem alone. Citizens need something more proactive that empowers women so that they are better equipped to face dangerous situations and solve problems related to violence. The need for ground-breaking preventive and educational programs for women is pivotal in preventing women from believing that they are the weaker gender.

After experimenting with the techniques and approaches of psychodrama, using it as a tool to work with young women of high school age, and observing its positive results, I conclude that the use of creative and preventive measures to empower women and stop violence should be encouraged. Get on to Stopping Violence Against Women was a successful project. It not only was valued by program participants and rated highly by the audience, but also proved that, when women realized their inner strengths and personal power, they could see options and possibilities to handle violence strategically. It is more important that new insights of one individual could generate more

insights in a group of young women and in a larger student population. The conventional wisdom of “An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of remedies” applies here.

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