

REFLECTIONS ON AN ART-BASED PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COURSE FOR SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

SORINA DANIELA DUMITRACHE*

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Social Work Department

Abstract

There is a high correlation between personal histories of trauma and distress experienced by caregiving professionals in their work. In such cases, there is, furthermore, a high correlation between lack of social or professional support, and a lower ability to cope with the demands of the work of assisting others in pain (Figley, 1995; Brady *et al.*, 1999; Kohlenberg *et al.*, 2006; Baird & Kracen, 2006). Given that the primary feature of the social work field is working with vulnerable persons and those who have experienced various kinds of trauma, specialists must possess self-awareness and the capacity for self-reflection in order to better cope with their professional challenges, and to prevent countertransference and secondary traumatization. The aim of this article is to highlight the role and impact of an art-based course on the personal and professional development of a group of third-year undergraduate students in social work. The elective course was based on an experiential, humanistic, art-therapeutic approach involving the following methods: emotional and corporeal focalization; drawing, psychodrama; cinematherapy, dance/movement therapy; the use of therapeutic cards; collage techniques and creating/working with puppets; and the keeping of a diary. The results show that participating in an art-based self-reflective elective course enhanced students' abilities in ways that could be crucial for future practitioners: it improved their capacity to access their own as well as others' inner worlds, emotions, thoughts, feelings and experiences; they were better able to be supportive and empathetic with others; it helped them to develop self-regulation skills and resilience.

Cuvinte-cheie: grup experiențial, autocunoaștere, art-terapie, asistență socială, reziliență.

Keywords: experiential group, self-reflection, art-therapy, social work, resilience.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. THE IMPACT OF WORKING WITH VULNERABLE PEOPLE AND THE ROLE OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT GROUPS FOR SPECIALISTS

Working with vulnerable groups, with people suffering or exposed to trauma,

*Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest, Bd. Schitu Magureanu 9, sector 1, Bucuresti, Romania; E-mail: sorina_dumitrache@yahoo.com; sorina.dumitrache@sas.unibuc.ro

can be emotionally challenging for helping professionals in general, and for social workers in particular (Adams *et al.*, 2006). Studies in the literature emphasize that specialists who work with trauma or are routinely exposed to different traumatic experiences (including police officers, physicians, nurses, social workers, firefighters, journalists, specialists in the penitentiary system, prison guards, employees in the field of emergency medicine, specialists in the field of child protection, domestic violence, sexual abuse, etc.) report negative effects such as vicarious traumatization, compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress (Figley, 1995; Canfield, 2005; Bride *et al.*, 2007; Whealin *et al.*, 2008; Adams *et al.*, 2006). Studies focused on these effects have emphasized the importance of developing training and support programs to help such specialists cope with their work challenges (Diaconescu, 2015; Dunkley & Whelin, 2006; Canfield, 2005; Baird & Kracen, 2006; Dumitrache, 2017), and also to get in touch with their own vulnerabilities and resources, and their personal life scenarios, all of which can interfere with their relationships with clients through countertransference (Sewell, 2020; Chow, Y. M. *et al.*, 2011).

Formal education in the helping professions (e.g. social work, psychology, nursing, medicine) does not always enable students to fully understand that helping others to overcome traumatic events could mean dealing with their own emotions and personal life histories (Sewell, 2020). Staempfli & Fairtlough (2018) have thus pointed out the importance of self-reflection in the practice and education of social work students. Focusing on intervention programs, they have highlighted the need to value social work's emotional and relationship-based components, and the necessity of enhanced empathy on the part of the students, for their beneficiaries. Other studies have highlighted the role of the experiential approach in strengthening participants' connections with their inner world and life experience, and the impact this can have on their relationships with their future beneficiaries (Di Gursansky, Quinn & Le Sueur, 2010; Chow *et al.*, 2011; Yip, 2005; Furman *et al.*, 2008; Friedman and Goldbaum, 2016; Davis, 2016; Mecu, 2010; Mitrofan, 2010, 2011).

Since the helping professions involve interacting and working with the person as a whole, and since clients bring to this process their own resources and vulnerabilities, social work students can attain higher levels of personal and professional effectiveness through gaining a deeper understanding of their own life scenario and vulnerabilities, overcoming their personal blockages, and being aware of their own resources and strengths. These are, in fact, the preconditions for professional growth and excellence.

In Romania, several personal development group programs for students (in the fields of journalism, IT, geography, psychology) have been conducted, using narrative therapy-based intervention groups (Constantin & Mitrofan, 2018) and creative improvisation techniques involving literature (Mitrofan & Constantin, 2015). Two studies have also focused on personal development programs for

students in the helping professions, mainly those in the psychology faculties: one study focused on beginner psychologists' training, involving the use of art therapy, drama therapy, dance/movement therapy, metaphorical scenarios, creative meditation, and the personal diary method (Năstasă & Cazan, 2013). The other study focused on students from the social and human sciences who participated in an experiential group involving the use of cinematherapy (Dumitrache, 2014). Vitalia & Răban-Motounu (2013) have emphasized the role of personal development experiential groups in increasing participants' self-acceptance and self-esteem, and in improving their self-image. Năstasă & Cazan (2013) have demonstrated the importance of experiential groups involving drama therapy, art therapy, dance/movement therapy, Gestalt therapy, therapy of Unification, to enhance the personal support of beginner psychologists (students doing a master's degree in School Counseling and Human Resources in Organizations).

In an earlier study, we underscored the decrease in anxiety levels of students from the social and human sciences who participated in a cinematherapy experiential group (Dumitrache, 2014). The technique of creative improvisation through literature was used in a unifying personal development group by Mitrofan & Constantin (2015), with positive results, including an increase in participants' self-esteem, sociability, empathy, emotional intelligence and creativity. A study conducted by Constantin & Mitrofan (2018) indicates that narrative therapy can help increase students' emotional intelligence.

2. METHOD

2.1. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study is to emphasize the role of an experiential personal development elective course in the training of third-year social work undergraduate students, and the course's effects on participants' personal growth and professional development, as revealed in their diaries and feedback notes.

2.2. PARTICIPANTS

The seminar was first held in the academic year 2016-2017; it was continued over the following three years and was then held online in 2020-2022 and in face-to-meeting afterwards (2022-2023). All the participants in this current study (2019, 2022, n=100, third-year undergraduate students in social work) enrolled voluntarily in the seminar, and participated in the processes of self-reflection, and personal and professional development.

2.3. DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE

The course's objective was to assist students in a self-reflective process,

focusing on their personal and professional lives in order to build resources and overcome limits, towards better coping with the challenges of their future work.

The design and coordination of the group intervention involved art therapy, cinematherapy, drama therapy, and other experiential techniques adapted from Gestalt therapy and unifying experiential therapy (Mitrofan, 2010, 2011, 2012; Dumitrache & Mitrofan, 2012; Răban-Motounu, 2014; Dumitrache, 2014).

The program had 12 meetings, and each session had a specific objective, theme, and experiential challenges or exercises. The meetings were described in the article “I learned to better understand those around me and myself”. The impact of an elective course of *Self-reflection, personal and professional growth* on social work students [“Am învățat să mă înțeleg mai bine pe mine și pe cei din jurul meu”. Impactul unui curs opțional de *Autocunoaștere, dezvoltare personală și profesională* asupra studenților la asistență socială.] (Dumitrache & Lazăr, 2022).

In working with the students, meditative guidance, emotional and corporeal focalization, and awareness were used. These played a significant role in the process of self-exploration, in facilitating a deep connection to the inner self and to the others from the group. The humanistic, art-therapeutic approach included drawing, psychodrama and drama therapy; cinematherapy, dance/movement therapy; the use of therapeutic cards; collage techniques and creating/working with puppets; and the keeping of a diary. Depending on the type of exercises designed for the meeting, participants were invited to keep the other group members comfortably in sight, to move or to stay connected only to their inner self, but to always return to the group, to the connection with the other participants. Respect for the person's unicity and potential was promoted during sessions.

The seminar was conducted through face-to-face meetings. At the start of the program, students were invited to keep a personal diary, to record their insights and reflections regarding the themes and exercises of the seminar. Anonymity was an important aspect to consider and was assured. At the end of the program, they were asked to give anonymous feedback regarding their overall experience.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of the diaries and feedback provided by the students and the effects of the intervention during the semester resulted in the following.

3.1. DIARY NOTES

- “This diary was very helpful to me because, although this is not the first time when I write about my feelings, my emotions or the events that left their mark on me, this time was different. Through this diary I wanted to ‘make peace’ with those events and this

method helped me strengthen the idea that I am strong and that I can do everything I set my mind to. Thank you! (...) This course gave me the motivation to do what I feel, without asking for permission, without blocking myself or getting clouded by others. To focus first on your well-being, without hurting other people, but without sacrificing yourself for the well-being of others. I trust myself more and my ability to accomplish things”.

- “Self-knowledge is beneficial when working as a social worker because it’s essential to know yourself in order to help the others, so it will be easier to help the beneficiaries deal with their problems. Empathy, patience, creativity, openness, you learn them all in the self-knowledge course”.
- “The activities that we carried out during the course made me realize my fears, accept them and, little by little, face them. Also, they helped me discover my resources”.
- “I want to thank our professor for this wonderful experience, she shared with us the most constructive information and emotions. I learned so many things that will help me not only in my job as a social worker, but also in my everyday life”!
- “I recommend this course to all students, it’s an interesting way to learn things about yourself and about others. For me, it was the best choice”.

3.2. FEEDBACK NOTES

- “After the end of each course, I was leaving with a good feeling that would stick with me for a few hours. I found out what I really like, what defines me and I allowed myself to dream about my purposes in life”.
- “This self-knowledge course helped me gain a better understanding of my blockages that I had along the way, of my past and present feelings.” “I am an emotional person, but during this seminar I’ve found the courage to express myself”.
- “Self-knowledge - a seminar that changes your life for the better and answers many questions regarding the social work field. Self-knowledge is very important when you decide to become a social worker. One of the reasons is understanding transference and countertransference, avoiding projections and preconceived ideas, in order to grow professionally”.
- “It was the place where I’ve felt the most comfortable, I’ve often forgotten that I was attending a seminar. This subject has a good influence over each of us”.

- “This course gave me the chance to accept myself as I really am. To discover that a sensitive person is a beautiful person that has something wonderful to offer in this life. Thank you!
- “Optional in the faculty, but compulsory in everyone’s life“.

3.3. EXTRACTS FROM THE ART-THERAPEUTIC WORK

Image 1, 2

The collage technique. “How do I cope with difficult situations?”



“After the clouds the sun appears, a ray of hope in my soul and in the world. I need to take better care of my inner space.” (participant V)

Image 3, 4.

The collage technique. “Me and my resources. From darkness to light.”



“I can be myself! I can! I have thought my only purpose was to make sure that the others are happy (family members, the closed ones) but I was suffocating my real self. It was dark inside and only brilliant on the outside, as an appearance. Now I understand that I

am more than what the others need from me. I am more aware of my potential and my personal resources, I feel *home* inside and from this inner home I feel more equipped to assist the others in real need. But first of all I need to take care of myself.” (participant W)

Image 5.

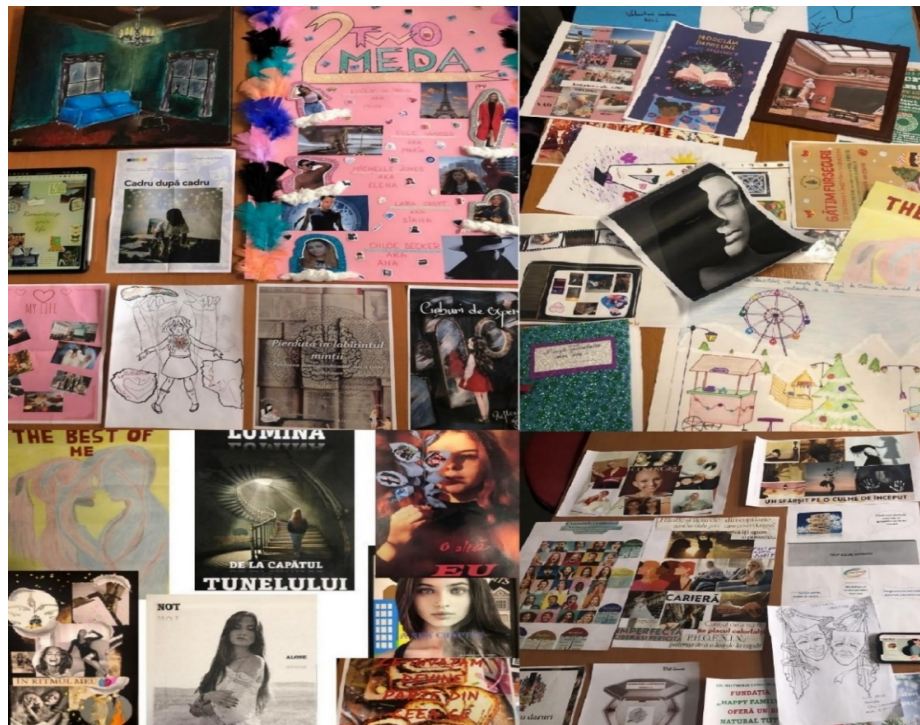
My life in a poster. The drawing technique. “Escaping from the prison of the others’ constraints and imposed limits.”



“Now I feel prepared to follow a path of my own. Being free of the past gives me back the power and the strength to go on and to use my personal resources in healthy way”. (participant Y)

Image 6.

Students’ works during the personal development meetings



The results showed that, at the end of the program, the participants were more aware of their personal resources, and of the impact their own life scenario could have on their future work and vice-versa, as is revealed in their notes.

3.4. LIMITS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The results are based solely on the analysis of the diaries and the students' feedback, which means that we are talking about an evaluation based on subjectivity regarding the assessment of development. Therefore, in the future, we aim to add quantitative data, to furthermore highlight the value of the techniques and tools that we used and also of the entire programme that we have developed.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Our research shows that participating in the personal and professional experiential art therapy-based group enhances students' empathy, ability to contain their emotions and capacity to trust, as other studies have also underscored (Năstasă & Cazan, 2013; Huet & Holttum, 2016; Dumitrache, 2014). The development of self-acceptance and self-esteem was another aspect reflected in the students' diaries and feedback notes (Vitalia & Răban-Motounu, 2013). Being seen and mirrored by the others, being valued for who one is (Constantin & Mitrofan, 2018; Rankanen, M., 2014, 2016) increases one's self-confidence and also one's acceptance of the uniqueness of each person, which can only be of great help in the practice of social work and in the social worker's professional development (Chow *et al.*, 2011; Spencer, 2012).

The diary connected each participant with the life experiences they had undergone, with their inner child, with their capabilities, and was also a great tool in developing the inner therapist; it served as a gentle reminder that they are not alone. The diary method has been used by several other authors with positive results (Năstasă & Cazan, 2013; Rankanen, 2014, 2016; Chow *et al.*, 2011). In our study, it turned out to be a silent witness to the student's inner world, and an important self-reflective and therapeutic tool, as the students described it.

The results showed that, at the end of the program, the participants were more self-reflective and more aware of their own resources, strengths, capabilities, and of the impact their identity and their own personal life scenario could have on their work. Self-reflection is a significant skill and a key element in the curricula of social work students, as other studies have underscored (Chow *et al.*, 2011; Walton, 2012). Our findings highlight the importance of an art-based self-reflective personal and professional growth program in social work curricula, in order to better prepare future practitioners in the field for the rigors of their profession. Self-reflection, and personal and professional growth experiential programs play an important role, helping social work professionals adopt a healthier approach while

assisting their future clients, and aiding in the prevention of compassion fatigue, burnout, secondary and vicarious trauma.

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REZUMAT

Există o corelație ridicată între experiențele personale traumatice și distresul resimțit în munca profesioniștilor din domeniul asistării oamenilor în suferință. În astfel de cazuri, există, în plus, o corelație ridicată între lipsa de sprijin social sau profesional și o capacitate mai scăzută de a face față cerințelor activității de asistență a altor persoane aflate în suferință (Figley, 1995; Brady *et al.*, 1999; Kohlenberg *et al.*, 2006; Baird & Kracen, 2006). Având în vedere că principala caracteristică a domeniului asistenței sociale este lucrul cu persoane vulnerabile și cu cele care au trecut prin diverse experiențe traumatice, specialiștii au nevoie de un nivel ridicat de awareness și de capacitatea de autorefecție pentru a face față mai bine provocărilor profesionale și pentru a preveni contratransferul și traumatizarea secundară. Scopul acestui articol este de a evidenția rolul și impactul unui curs bazat pe artă asupra dezvoltării personale și profesionale a unui grup de studenți din anul III de licență în asistență socială. Cursul opțional s-a bazat pe o abordare experiențială, umanistă, art-terapeutică, care a implicat următoarele metode și tehnici: focalizare emoțională și corporală; desen, psihodramă, cinematerapie, terapie prin dans/mișcare; utilizarea cardurilor terapeutice; tehnici de colaj și crearea/lucrul cu marionete și ținerea unui jurnal. Rezultatele arată că participarea la acest curs opțional de autorefecție bazat pe artă a îmbunătățit abilitățile studenților în moduri care ar putea fi cruciale pentru viitorii practicieni: le-a îmbunătățit capacitatea de a-și accesa lumea interioară, emoțiile, gândurile, sentimentele și experiențele proprii, dar și pe ale altora; au fost mai capabili să fie solidari și empatici cu ceilalți; i-au ajutat să dezvolte abilități de autoreglare și reziliență.