

“Symbolic payment”

The interpretation of symbolic payment in a Dramatherapy Research Group with obese women.

For the above research three Dramatherapy groups, of 12 sessions each, took place. As there was no charge for their participation in the group the participants were asked to bring a symbolic payment to each session. They were instructed that the items they brought should be of no value nor something they had bought specifically for the group. The purpose of this gesture was so that the participants together with the co-therapists had a feeling of mutual give and take. The issue of payment in therapy is a very important subject and it plays a significant part in the group process. Garfield (1971), mentions that clients who paid for treatment were considered to have a higher level of motivation.

This paper will examine a few of the items brought over the twelve sessions by six members who participated in the third group. A summary of each member's development in the group will be given and a connection will be drawn between this process and her symbolic payment.

The aim of this research was to determine whether Dramatherapy was an effective medium for bringing about change in obese women by enhancing their self-confidence and self- image, as well as improving inter-personal relationships. These changes would hopefully lead to a shift in their food/body conflicts, which could result in weight loss.

There is a growing population of overweight people in Western society, for whom obesity is a serious problem, for both health and aesthetic reasons. Our society is characterised by an overindulgence in food, dieting and a preoccupation with the body's weight and shape, which has reached social epidemic proportions (Hsu, 1996). One of the reasons for this increase is the importance society has

placed on being slim, as an expression of a person's self-worthiness (Bruch, 1973, Fairburn & Wilson, 1993).

According to Rosen (1995, p.369) "Body image" refers to a person's mental image and evaluation of his or her physical appearance and the influence of these perceptions and attitudes on behavior.

Rabin (2003 p.11) says about the obese and anorectic that they have not developed, or may have lost, the ability to self-nurture; they eat but do not *feed* themselves. Never satiated, both become people who eat and continue to cry.

In a Dramatherapy session the therapist works with the personal issues of the members and their relationships within the group, on a metaphorical and symbolic level. During the development of the session we have the opportunity to animate these symbols. Often the theme facing a group at a particular time is too painful to deal with directly and with words, consequently another outlet is necessary. Through dramatic action, the unconscious is awakened and the members find themselves acting, drawing, making stories and being creative spontaneously. It is far more difficult to censure one's actions than one's words and as a result the actions are clearer and more straightforward (Robertson 1999).

A few words about the participants

Julie

Julie was a 37-year-old actress. She was very tall and very overweight. She had done all kinds of jobs in order to make a living. Julie was outspoken and very amusing. She did not mind making a fool of herself.

Julie's father had died twenty years before at the age of 67 from cancer. Her mother at the time of Julie's interview was 72 years old. Julie had one older sister and a younger brother who both lived at home with their mother. Julie lived on her own, although her mother often needed her help specifically and tired her with all her demands.

Julie's last boy friend was Mohamed, a Kurd she met in the centre of

Athens sleeping in the street. He was 8 years her junior. He had left Greece two years previously.

Rea

Rea was a 31-year-old music teacher. She was unmarried and lived on her own. Rea was in the process of building her own home, which was nearly completed. Rea had a brother who was six years older and worked with his father in their shop that sold toiletries. In Rea's family there was a problem with overweight persons. Both she and her mother were obese. Rea had put on a lot of weight suddenly after the break-up with her boy -friend two years previously.

Annie

Annie was the youngest in the group; she was a 24-year-old librarian. She came from an island but she had been studying in Athens and after qualifying in June 2002 she had found a job with a government minister. She had a sister five years older than herself, who was very thin. Annie's father had been in the army so as a young child they had travelled a lot. They finally settled when she was 12 years old. Annie said that she had a hard time changing schools and friends.

Annie had her first relationship with a man the previous year and it had lasted for seven months until March 2002.

Lisa

Lisa was the eldest woman in the group; she was a 55-year-old house- wife. Lisa had a 27-year-old daughter who had left home recently and was living with her boyfriend. Lisa was an only child. When she got married her husband moved into her parental home. Later, when they built their own home her parents came with them. In 1987 her father died of cancer. At the time the group took place Lisa's mother was still alive, she was 90 years old and still very active. Lisa said that she had always got on well with her parents and had never considered asking them to live on their own. Only in the last twelve years it had become clear to her that having her mother living with her all her life was a problem. However, given the age her mother had reached she felt it would be unkind to make her live on her own now.

Angela

Angela was a 28-year-old civil engineer; she was divorced and had a 9-year-old son. Her marriage had broken up three and a half years previously. At first she had had custody of her son but as her husband and his family were constantly interfering with them she let him go and live with his father in the spring of 2002. She was very bitter about her marriage and said that her weight problem had started with the troubles at home.

In her own family she was the eldest with two younger sisters. She felt that her mother had never been close to her when she needed her because she was constantly working. With her father her relationship was better but he suffered from depression so he was not much help to her. He had not wanted her to get married to her ex husband.

Dimi

Dimi was a 52-year-old divorced housewife, living with her 25-year-old daughter. Dimi was the fifth child in her family.

Dimi's father had been in the army so they changed homes very often when she was young. In primary school she went to a different school every year. Dimi said that her parents did not have a harmonious relationship.

Dimi had worked as a civil servant at the Ministry for Defence. Later on, she left her job and worked with her husband at his jewellery shop. Her husband was oppressive; he did not allow her to smoke or to wear make-up. She separated from her husband after twelve years of marriage because he had affairs. Dimi suspected him of having an affair with her eldest sister who lived in the flat above them.

The group in action

In order to give you a picture of how the group worked and how the members related to their symbolic payments, I will give you a few extracts from session 6. The conversations were taken down verbatim by the co-researcher.

Session 6

A talk about the symbolic payment started. They each put their payment in the basket. Julie's was a chocolate bar wrapping, Lisa had brought a small china Chinese man, Annie a small pomegranate, Angela a magazine advertising office equipment, Rea put in a ruler and Dimi a tourist gift from Rhodes.

Angela: "I never think before hand what to bring to the group. What does this mean?"

Researcher: "Maybe you want the group to offer you more."

Dimi: "I don't think about it much, this was the first thing I saw in front of me when I was leaving. My husband had once brought it as a gift and I don't like it."

Lisa: "I try to find something spontaneously without thinking what it means. This china man is something unusual."

Rea: "Maybe the ruler I brought represents what I need in my life at the moments, a form of measure."

Annie: "I think about what to bring carefully. For today I had something else prepared which I forgot at home so I stole this pomegranate from the floral decoration of my lunch table."

Julie: "I don't think about it."

Researcher: "Annie then is the swat of this group." The members laughed.

Annie: "I was never a swat at school."

Julie: "Now is your chance to be one." More laughter.

Reflections.

Six months later Annie had lost more weight than anyone else in the group proving that she had been the swat of the group.

The symbolic objects.

I would like to mention some of the symbolic payments each member brought and share my thoughts with you.

I will begin with Julie. As Julie said during the last session, most of the objects she had brought as her symbolic payment were connected to food except for the two last ones. Also there were two sessions for which she forgot to bring her symbolic payment. The co-researchers had the feeling that Julie was the revolutionary member who wanted to defy the whole process so she brought objects connected to food or she forgot. To bring a chocolate bar wrapping or a menu from a fast food shop could appear to be saying: "I have eaten it all up so now what are you going to do about it?" Only on the last two sessions the objects she brought were not connected to food. On the 11th session she brought a paid bill, something that had been dealt with and on the 12th session a small bottle of green nail polish, something extravagant. Maybe she had chosen this for her last payment as it was something colourful and theatrical, something that possibly represented her more truly.

Six months later Julie had lost 5 kilos.

The symbolic gifts Rea brought were apparently more significant to her than the rest of the group. She said that they symbolized how she saw her life from her childhood up until now. The cool -ade powder drink in a single pack was certainly a child's drink as well as the ruler the crayons and other similar objects.

Rea had attended a psychotherapy group in the past and therefore she was familiar with the group process. She understood what was happening at a deeper level and she had often tried to get the other members to open up. She shared a lot of information about herself and told the group several dreams, which were obviously connected to the group and her feelings about her mother. In one dream she described herself eating the raw flesh of her mother and waking up feeling satisfied.

As a result of her participation in the group, perhaps the most outstanding progress Rea made, as she mentioned herself, was her

opening up to her mother about feelings she had kept hidden for so many years. She had tried hard to control her eating but had failed to lose weight during the time of the group.

Six months later Rea had lost 12 kilos

Annie had chosen carefully all the objects she brought. The first object Annie brought was a 10 lepta coin perhaps indicating a fee she needed to make. After the first session all the symbolic gifts Annie brought were items which had something to do with her past and often something she wanted to forget about her past like a book on friendship given to her by a friend. Perhaps part of her past represented to her a self she wanted to change. I had the impression that Annie's payments were not so much objects that she had wanted to get rid of but loved possessions that she wanted to give to someone else for safe keeping.

Annie came to every session and was never late indicating that the group was very important to her. Annie did not manage to lose weight during the twelve sessions, in fact she had not tried to. She had only just begun to accept the fact that she would be happier if she were slimmer and not only for health reasons as she had stated at the beginning.

Six months later she had lost 32 kilos.

The symbolic payments Lisa brought as she herself mentioned during the last session were all totally dissimilar. She explained this phenomenon as her love for changes. If one were to examine the objects more closely perhaps some other significance could be given to them as well. For instance the whistle that she had kept by her bedside after the bad earthquake in 1999. Was she trying to say that the security of the group was enough and she no longer needed it? Or was it purely that the earthquake seemed far away and the whistle felt unnecessary?

The last payment she brought was a Xmas candle which looked like something she had bought as it had cellophane paper on it. Maybe Lisa had wanted to pay for her last symbolic payment as a form of thank you for her participation in the group.

Lisa, like Annie, had not missed one session and she had not been late once. She was very good at all the creative activities and surprised the whole group with her talent in acting.

Six months later she had lost 3 kilos.

The symbolic gifts Angela brought were items, as she herself pointed out, with direct or indirect connections to her work, like the sun tan lotion she had never used as she had not been on holiday. Only the last item, a pencil case, that had belonged to her son was connected to something more personal. Perhaps this was an indication that she wanted to become more interested in her personal relationships.

Angela was shy and very self-conscious. She trusted the group fairly early on and was able to open up and talk about important matters.

The biggest positive change in Angela was that she had compared her mother's indifference to her as a child to her own towards her son with the result that she was able to make changes in her behaviour

Six months later Angela changed address so she did not receive the tests sent her, as a result it is unknown whether her weight has changed.

The symbolic gifts Dimi brought were items, which had no value to her as she had pointed out herself, in fact two had belonged to her ex husband and she had wanted to get rid of them. One being a tourist gift from Rhodes and the other a miniature bottle of ouzo in a kitsch wrapping. Perhaps she was trying to say that the group also had no value to her.

At the beginning of the sessions Dimi gave the impression that she really liked the group and was very happy to be coming. She was very outgoing and chatty. Then on the third session she didn't come nor did she notify. After this she came intermittently until the 9th session. On the 9th session Dimi interrupted Annie several times while she was about to reveal something very important about herself and Rea pointed this out to Dimi. Rea said that maybe Dimi found

sharing personal information difficult and that was why she was interrupting Annie. Dimi denied that she had interrupted. After that session Dimi did not come back.

Dimi in a telephone conversation with the researcher was adamant about not going back to the group. She said that she was an impulsive person and if people didn't like that it was their problem. Also she said that she did not like all the exercises the researchers asked them to do. She was not good at them and she could see no connection between the exercises and their weight problem. She had imagined something else completely when she first came and she resented the researcher treating them as guinea pigs.

Dimi was the classical client that Yalom (1931) refers to as the 'Monopolist'.

The *bête noire* of any group therapist is the habitual monopolist, a person who seems compelled to chatter on incessantly. Although a group may in the initial meeting welcome and perhaps encourage the monopolist, the mood soon turns to one of frustration and anger.

Conclusion

By taking part in this Dramatherapy intervention the women were able to feel that they belonged to a group, which represented them. They had a common denominator, which had brought them all together. They did not need to be embarrassed about their weight in the company of the group as every one of them was facing the same problem. According to Yalom (1931 8) one of the first factors experienced in therapy is the installation of hope. Not only is hope required to keep the patient in therapy so that other therapeutic factors may take effect, but faith in a treatment mode can in itself be therapeutically effective.

The symbolic payments the members brought to the group were significant to them and with each member's help I tried to make some sense out of them. It appeared to me that the way each member had chosen her symbolic payment was significant to her as a person and gave an indication of what she was getting out of the group. It was as

though, the more thought each member put into the selection of an object the more significant the group became to her. A word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider “unconscious” aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained.’(Jung 1964)

According to Maclagan (1999) the capacity to symbolize represents the patient’s development of a sense of separateness between herself and the word, both internally and externally, so that a bridging process becomes feasible. This was one of the reasons for the symbolic payments. Through the symbolic payment the group participants were parting with something personal.

There was no scientific proof of the meaning these items possessed apart from that given to them by the participants and the reflections of the two therapists. The only evidence of truth was the acceptance of each member’s ‘soul- graffiti’ by the other persons present in the group.

However, in conclusion in almost all cases there was a direct correlation between the importance each member gave to the symbolic payment and the positive effects of the therapy group.