

Eduardo Carvallo

Eva Pattis Zoja

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Expressive Sandwork:

*An experience working with Colombian vulnerable
population.*

The Importance of Incorporating Social Work in Psychotherapy

What we will be presenting is the result of teamwork we have developed over the last ten years, thanks to the efforts and dedication

of a group of (generous) volunteers, Jungian analysts and IAAP routers from different countries and continents, some of whom are with us here today. (Please, could you raise your hands those of you who are here so that everyone can see a small part of our team).

Very slowly, in the last ten years, we have built a methodology that we have called “Expressive Sandwork” - a trans-cultural, non-verbal tool that has been an effective psycho-social support for children in situations where individual psychotherapy has not been possible.

This approach may appear unusual for two reasons: it is based on Jungian concepts applied to social life, and it is related to group processes.

In a James Hillmanns article written in 1989 called “From the Mirror to the Window: Curing Psychoanalysis of its Narcissism”, he mentions that psychoanalysis needs to pay attention to social problems. He gets us to reflect on the fact that while analysts and their patients have remained looking at each other in the mirror for a

long time, in the outer world there is a society that has been desperately waiting.

Since then, the way we understand our profession has changed a great deal. Today, approaching Hillman's proposition (and running the risk of actually taking it literally) we could say we need to move again, and this time not only from the mirror to the window, but from the window to the door.

We need to open our psychoanalytical consulting rooms, reconsider our individual settings and our theoretical concepts. We need to get our hands a little bit dirty.

This reminds us of a Freud's well-known position, when in 1918 he talked for the first time about a plan to open sessions, with no cost, to treat people in need who could not afford a psychoanalytical treatment.

This social vision of Psychoanalysis was established with the "Free Clinics" in Vienna and Berlin, which worked between 1920 and 1933 until they disappeared during the Nazi regime.

Some 100 years later, Expressive Sandwork sees itself as a small contribution to this vision, in a world that has undergone enormous changes.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE EXPERIENCE

I. Defining Vulnerable Communities

In many of the regions where we live, we currently co-inhabit with people who live in very precarious conditions.

Collective groups that are exposed to conditions that threaten their members biologically, psychologically and spiritually, interfering with their natural capacity for development and adaptation. These are the so-called vulnerable communities.

These conditions mainly affect children, who are exposed to drugs, violence, sexual abuse and other experiences their psycho-biological system is not prepared to assimilate.

II. Colombia: A “Sample” Country

The experience we share today was developed in Colombia. In spite of its economic indexes place it as a developing country, as most other Latin American countries its poverty levels are very high.

Official 2012 figures reveal 10.5% of the general population are at extreme poverty levels. This means that their income does not reach USD \$ 1,50 per day.

As a way of evading their reality, a lot of these communities members resort to consume low cost psychoactive drugs. The presence of brain damage between this people is often responsible of their impulsive and aggressive behaviour that permanently affect the physical integrity of the rest of the community members and especially the children.

Besides these conditions shared by practically every poverty-stricken community around the world, in Colombia there are two

phenomena caused by an unconventional warfare that has existed there for over 50 years: community displacement and heavy criminality among teen-agers known as hitmen.

In Colombia, entire communities decide to abandon their land, their properties and ways of earning their living because of the threat of death due to the confrontations between the Government Armed Forces and the Guerrillas or Paramilitary Forces; or as has happened on several occasions, after suffering massacres perpetrated by these latter groups, who have accused them of complicity and being “informers” of the enemy.

In 2011 Colombia has top place in the world list with most displaced victims enforced by armed conflict: 5.2 million inhabitants.

This displacement is usually made from rural villages to large cities. This mobilization breaks all cultural references, social links and the natural forms that the different families have to maintain their daily survival and living, exposing them to very complex adaptation dynamics that generally are accompanied by deep poverty. The

passage from the rural to the urban environment is made at a very high cost to group and individual psychic dynamics that threaten or paralyze their ability towards self-regulation.

We will get into this later, when we describe an example of a Sandwork process.

Let us first make just one theoretical observation about Sandwork inside our Jungian framework.

III. As Jungian psychologists, is there something we can do about this reality?

The contributions that psychology has introduced during the last 100 years have had a great impact, enriching our capacity to see reality, helping to make visible what remains invisible around us.

This has allowed our psyche to “incorporate” our experiences from the individual unconscious and from the collective unconscious.

We could also say that thanks to this evolution that has “affected” our individual consciousness, little by little in these latter times another field of experiences has started to emerge: the collective consciousness.

By collective consciousness we are referring to the experience of knowing – from an individual consciousness – that we form part of a collective that affects us and which we affect with each one of our apparently non-transcendental actions. We are an individual consciousness that forms part of a system. Or as C.G. Jung wrote: "Hardly the little finger knows itself as member of the hand".

Unfortunately, this collective consciousness has developed more from the destructive power that we human beings possess than from our potential to establish bridges and build from our Eros.

We could say that Expressive Sandwork is an expression of the activation of this collective consciousness that begins in a human being's “loving” field.

The possibility of putting Expressive Sandwork into practice would not have been possible if the need to intervene in a social context had not taken place first in the individual consciousness. During the different processes of choosing the volunteers to participate in the Expressive Sandwork projects, we systematically asked what their motives to approach this project were, and the answer we received over and over was the following:

"I want to participate because I feel isolated while working in my private practice"...

WHAT IS EXPRESSIVE SANDWORK?

Expressive Sandwork is based on three structures: firstly, the symbolic function, secondly the bond between the child and the facilitator, which develops during the process and can regain the

primary relationship, thirdly the group, which holds the (child-adult) dyads together like an alchemical vessel.

I. Physical and Dynamic Setting

In a large room, twelve children are immersed in silent concentration, each one sitting or standing in front of a sand tray, busy creating their own inner worlds.

On a large table in the middle of the room or on the floor are boxes with countless miniature figures and objects, arranged by category: people, animals, houses, cars, trees, bottle corks, shells and marbles.

Between the boxes, cluttered full of toys and the individuals sand trays, which are aligned along the walls, there is a hustle and bustle. Countless times the children move back and forth between the table and their sand trays, carrying a small animal, two building blocks, three marbles, a handful of toy cars. No child disturbs any other. Each one seems preoccupied with his or her own thoughts.

Besides each sand tray sits an adult. Sometimes their presence is so discreet that they are almost unperceivable. If we look at them carefully, we notice that now and again, their faces unexpectedly blush, revealing that he or she is deeply moved.

If we want to sum up the structure of Expressive Sandwork: we could say that it is a system which contains multiple sub-systems.

We would like to show how a child represents this systemic structure in the sand tray itself. A 14-year-old girl, has build this image. For this girl, Sandwork was about nurturing and caring.



Here you see nurses and doctors, each one caring for a baby in the pram. In the middle on a round table there are baby bottles, nicely prepared. The numbers of the pairs (nurse and baby) correspond exactly to the number of children and adults in this project.

Besides the symbolic expressions of this representation (the mandala-like shape in the centre) it is also a realistic description of the group dynamic: there is a profound trust that all individuals have their place, they are cared for and respected.

Throughout the sessions a “psychic space” will be created between them, which in a way isolates them from their surroundings. Little by little emotional bridges are built between this child and his or her facilitator, and at the same time, on another level, among each of those participating in the experience.

The work is carried out over at least 12 sessions of one hour each.

Each session takes place on the same tray, together with the same facilitator who the child choose in the first session. This constancy in the elements – the space, the tray and the facilitator – is essential to favour the atmosphere of trust throughout the process.

For all this to take place, as well as the empathy and an amount of “psychic sensitivity”, we need one of our most primitive instincts to be activated: the drive to activity.

Together with this observable part of the process, there is often a more intimate and -many times- invisible process: the building of the bond between the volunteer and the child.

The dynamic that is established as from an exchange of looks or the avoidance of it, and the psycho-biological resonance that accompanies this non-verbal encounter, reminds -step by step and session by session-, the primary relationship of the child with his or her parent figures.

These bridges become new references. Deep and lasting bonds different to those they have had up till then.

They are emotional bridges that enrich the inter-subjective experience so necessary for the development of the psyche; yet at the same time, act as intra-psychic bridges that allow the activation of the auto-regulating process so necessary to balance a psyche subject to situations that often overwhelm the possibilities to being assimilated.

Beside the bond between child and facilitator, other inter-subjective experiences are activated and developed among all those participating in the process. In this way, children, volunteers and instructors become resonators and activators of an ancestral memory that reminds us we belong to a wholeness in which we participate through invisible bonds.

The joy and the nature of the connection that, week by week, can be perceived in the encounter of all the participants in this process - the volunteers and those being “accompanied” - give it a ritualistic connotation. Perhaps the strength of this connection is

derived precisely from our need to recover and activate these spaces of bonding with the Other.

The following is a description by a school teacher whose role was to assist the whole group in a Sandwork project as an observer.

“I will just be an observer. The volunteers have to contain the children,” I thought to myself. But it wasn’t like that and I’m happy it wasn’t. I was there entirely, physically, intellectually, emotionally. I was looking with my eyes and with my heart at the volunteer-child duo and I was invaded with emotions that I could differentiate this time. I grew alongside these couples. Most of them looked alike. It wasn’t easy. At one point, I was tired and felt cold. A few nights in a row I dreamed about digging in the sand. This was happening around one of the sessions in the middle of the project. The atmosphere was heavy. I feel pain in my arms and shoulders. I feel burdened. I hear a child patting down the sand. The noise rumbles in my ears. It’s the only sound I can hear. I feel pain in my whole body. Maybe these children felt similar pains. I look at the volunteers’ faces

and I see their pain also. We all share this pain. At the end of the session, the child who was patting down the sand looks at me. His face is peaceful, he seems to have left all his pain in the sand and I understood that".

III. Building the Expressive Sandwork “Systems”

The Children

The choice of the children who will participate in the Expressive sandwork process is carried out by the leaders of the vulnerable communities which we approach

We have tried to avoid to establish any criteria for the selection of the children. For us, any child who wants to “play with the sand” can be part of the project. But, although there is not a real selection process, we have found that they have been chosen following the intuition and common sense of the community leaders. ()

Among those children we have found – after evaluating their profiles – that we can identify at least four patterns: a chaotic pattern; a depressive one; an anxiety pattern; and children with an expected behaviour pattern for their age.

This heterogeneity in which we find strong and healthy children working next to problematic ones has a powerful effect in the group. Using a Physics metaphor we can say that by resonance, the vibration of the different individuals that conform the group (children and adults) tends to find a "group vibration" and this one tends to harmony. Maybe because of this and of the fact that each child has "its own adult" just for itself for every session, is that it is very easy for the children to follow and respect the few rules they have: work on your own; work in silence and, if you need to, speak only with your adult; do not disturb the others; and don't throw the sand out of the box.

The Volunteers

As for the volunteers, there is a precise and strict selection process that takes place at the beginning of each project. The future volunteers come from different professions: they could be teachers, social workers, retired people, artists, students,... “even” psychologists and psychotherapists are welcome!

The most important criteria in the selection process is their ability to contain their emotions, and to be reliable. Since the volunteer cannot be substituted in his/her session, they have to guarantee their presence at every session and meeting throughout the process without exception.

The volunteers receive a short but intensive training.

Two sessions of self experience in sandwork are an essential part of this training.

It’s obvious that the unconscious of each child activates an intense emotional response in the facilitators psyche. That’s why the

volunteers are assisted by the project's leaders during the whole project.

There are several group meetings where the volunteers can share the experience of the sessions, the emotional impact, the doubts, fears and worries.

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The alchemical reaction between the volunteer and the child begins from the first minutes in which the volunteer encounters the child they happen to work with. We don't assign a child to an adult or vice versa. In the first session, the child "chooses" the adult with whom he or she is going to work with throughout the entire process.

The adults are already in the room, sitting beside the sand trays, and then, at a certain point, the children enter all together. They have been told: "Just choose a sand tray" But of course in a couple of minutes time, they have also "chosen" the adult, who was sitting next to the sand tray.

For us, this choosing process is based in the “tele” function – described by Levy-Moreno – in which we trust as the guide of the bonding process between the child and the person who will be their facilitator, a process that acts both ways.

We are no longer surprised by the synchronicity present in the dynamics between child and facilitator: from possible physical similarities, up to a “coagulation” of elements that existed in the unconscious field and which started to become conscious as the accompanying process unfolded.

The Parents

In all Sandwork projects we try to get the parents involved. During the whole project the parents can talk to the project leader, when he or she has any question or just wants to express something.

The attitude of the volunteers with the parents is obviously similar to the attitude with the child in the Sandwork session:

listening attentively without giving any advice. Giving value to their perceptions and giving importance to their role as parents.

They perceive a new quality, which they themselves might not have experienced before.

Often the parents notice the changes in the children during and after the Sandwork project and they ask insistently if siblings can also participate next time.