

The Cyrano method: Using theatre in offender treatment

Offender incarceration is a much-used response within our correctional system. However, to get the best possible results from incarceration, rehabilitation must be as important a goal as societal protection. In fact, long-term societal protection cannot be achieved without offender rehabilitation.

One potential form of institutional offender treatment is the Cyrano method, a therapeutic approach that uses theatre participation to help offenders release repressed emotions, and get to know themselves and others better. The resulting enhanced awareness may facilitate changes in their behaviour.

This article, therefore, sets out the conceptual framework and key elements of the Cyrano method. It also summarizes the results of initial research that suggests that this treatment tool may impact positively on several aspects of offender institutional treatment.

The basics

The Cyrano method combines catharsis, speech, theatre and expression. It was inspired by the story of Cyrano de Bergerac who whispered poetic lines to Christian to help him express his love for the beautiful Roxanne. By helping Christian both to experience and to communicate his emotions, Cyrano made it possible for the other man to achieve his heart's desire. From this, we drew the premise for a form of treatment -- because the lack of words gives rise to violence that will eventually be directed either inwardly or outwardly.

The Cyrano method supplies the words that inmates need for self-expression but are unable to utter. An extract from a play is selected according to an inmate's specific problems, and the inmate is assigned a role.

Playing the role allows the "actor" to work on himself. An actor must understand the character to play the part, so the inmate is forced to identify the character's emotions, characteristics, qualities and faults -- which are similar to the inmate's own.

The play setting gives inmates a sense of protection as they open up and make themselves vulnerable.

The importance of expression

Socrates theorized that a person who loses the power of language loses their identity. He developed the Socratic method in an attempt to help the soul regain its identity through verbal expression.⁽²⁾

It is also useful to consider the experiences of people with aphasia, a disorder that restricts the ability to speak and understand language. Aphasics often undergo radical personality changes. Calm, rational people become anxious and irritable, while quiet people become aggressive.⁽³⁾ (Loss of speech can also lead to egocentricity, narcissism, frustration and poor self-esteem. The inability to speak clearly causes

internal damage, as well as a rupture between an individual and society.

Methodology

This study was conducted over a 16-week period in a Correctional Service of Canada Quebec Region minimum-security institution, where two three-hour Cyrano workshops were run per week. Some level of attrition was expected, so we decided to begin with 12 inmates.

All of the inmates still had relatively long sentences to serve (to ensure they would finish the study), spoke French as their first language (emotional expression is more likely to occur spontaneously in the language most closely linked to emotions) and had no psychiatric problems.

This group included eight inmates who had been incarcerated for murder; one for manslaughter; one for aggravated sexual assault and theft involving violence; one for hostage-taking, kidnapping and armed robbery; and one for breaking and entering, mischief and possession of stolen property.

A log-book was kept for each workshop. Workshop development and individual inmate progress were noted in detail, as was staff behaviour. Attempts were also made to note any circumstances that could affect inmate behaviour, although it was recognized that it is impossible to control all factors. Observable criteria were tracked, such as inmate motivation and involvement; opportunities for verbal, vocal or body expression; inmate empathy toward others; inmate receptiveness to exercises that bring the unconscious into play; and inmate resistance to suggested scripts.

Ultimately, the workshops began with 11 inmates. The twelfth participant dropped out repeatedly during preliminary stages. Several other participants also withdrew relatively early in the process. After six weeks, the group had been reduced to its final total of four inmates. The departures caused only a few minor changes in the assignment of plays and roles.

Each play involved two characters, so the inmates worked in pairs. Half the group acted during the week's first workshop, the other half acted during the second. However, all offenders were actively involved in each workshop. If they were not acting, they cued the inmates who were. The inmate actors were asked to perform their scenes in their own words at both the mid-point and end of each semester. They also presented a formal performance of the play at the end of the semester, but without an audience.

No specific equipment or costumes were used, apart from simple objects associated with the characters that the inmates could obtain easily.

The inmates were urged to develop their characters through "method" acting. Method acting involves creating a character by expressing genuine feelings. Method actors draw on their own experiences and feelings to portray the emotions associated with their character. For example, to act sad, a method actor must try to feel sad.

Treatment impact

While the small sample size obviously prevents much generalization, these experimental workshops have indicated that the Cyrano method could contribute to correctional treatment in two distinct ways. The character-creation stage of the process could be a valuable diagnostic tool, and rehearsals could be used as a form of intervention.

During the character-creation stage, all of the inmates projected their own inner lives and previous experiences into their roles. They revealed their deepest emotions, self-image and current opinions of key persons in their lives (such as parents). As one participant said, "you can't help but look inside yourself for all the memories and everything that the character feels."

Inmates can, therefore, get in touch with their emotions through their roles. The staff, who were familiar with the plays and roles, helped us assess the inmates' interpretations of characters. For example, one play featured a father who loves his son but cannot assert himself. The inmate actor transformed the character into an authoritarian who continually denigrated his son. Another inmate actor attributed a very negative attitude and an alcohol problem to his character. The script did not refer to such problems at all, but the inmate had an alcohol problem.

The rehearsals clarified problems that appeared during the character-creation stage and allowed the inmates to act on them. For example, one inmate could not express anger. Rehearsals, instructions and exercises were used as concrete tools to work directly on this problem, and eventually produced expressions of anger.

The rehearsals also encouraged positive self-confrontation, and all the inmates learned to see themselves better through their roles. One apparently indifferent and remote inmate broke into tears when he realized that he was behaving coldly toward his son, just as his father had with him. By playing the role of the father, he saw himself in relation to both his father and his son.

The lively confrontation and interaction among characters made it difficult for inmates to rationalize their emotions. The inmates had not only to talk about a situation, they also had to live it. For example, one inmate began a workshop by saying how much he loved his father, only to express contempt and rejection during his performance.

Finally, the rehearsals allowed the inmates to become more aware of others' needs and differences. Their tolerance and empathy levels clearly increased. At the same time, the rehearsals allowed the inmates to observe their own growth. They began to realize that they could overcome their problems and succeed where they were now failing, enhancing their self-confidence.

Discussion

Many offenders hide their emotions. Therefore, little of what offenders say corresponds to what they feel.

This reality highlights the potential of the Cyrano method in working with offenders. The structure of the play and actor identification with a character can bring repressed speech and emotions into the open. Given the potential benefits and the small size of the sample used for this study, the next step should be to test the Cyrano method in larger offender populations.

Speech normally flows from emotion, but many inmates are almost completely unable to verbalize their feelings. The Cyrano method attempts to give an individual the appropriate words, so emotional contact can be made and the connection completed. Offenders can thus reappropriate their emotional lives, using the script to help them find their way to their own words.

(1) 28-11530 rue Notre-Dame, Montreal, Quebec H1B 2X4. This article is based on a master's thesis.

(2) D. Barrucand, *La catharsis dans le théâtre, la psychanalyse et la psychothérapie de groupe* (Paris: Epi, 1970): 37.

(3) J. Ponzio, D. Lafond, R. Degiovani and Y. Joannette, *L'Aphasique* (Saint-Hyacinthe: Edisem, 1991).