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Playing and drawing together with others: commonalities and shared experiences during the pandemic

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Introduction

Playing and drawing together with others invites us to consider that, in times of suffering, offering those we listen to the chance to play, laugh, paint, and draw can allow pictograms to emerge in the creation of images—pictograms that convey what cannot be expressed as spoken words, since pain and suffering are silenced by the impact of catastrophic experiences. Pain is not merely psychological or internal when one experiences catastrophic situations that shake the social foundation and bring about a sense of unease, restlessness, and distress, as explored by Kaës.[1,2]

"Laughter provides a word that would otherwise be impossible. Although an outburst of smiles does not kill the coronavirus, it helps to lighten the burden".[3]

The possibility of play in the current context we are living in seems imperative. Le Breton,[3] in the article titled "The Virality of Laughter," comments:

In this unique moment where most social activities are suspended, family and neighborhood interactions are prohibited, and even the simple act of going for a walk is restricted, laughter is the one thing that cannot be taken away from us. It is a biting and joyful response to the virulence of the situation. It is an escape from anxiety, a refusal to accept that our behavior is dictated by external circumstances.

Allowing oneself to laugh emerges as the opposite of the current moment of uncertainty and fear; laughing is a way of affirming life. The possibility of working, loving, and playing—creating poetry, dancing, painting—are healthy human pursuits that seem to crumble when, in circumstances like those we are experiencing, human beings lose their loved ones, the security to sustain themselves, their jobs, and/or the ability to continue their life projects. Violence prevails in the face of a lack of words, or perhaps it is a response to anguish. Romantic relationships become tedious, perhaps due to the weariness caused by the other's excessive presence. Daily life reveals the sight of overcrowded emergency rooms, hospital corridors improvising space for their patients, ambulances parked with patients inside waiting for a place to take them in, the sight of coffins with corpses leaving hospitals, sometimes with nowhere to bury them. A frightening and desolate panorama from which it seems we cannot escape. Providing a space to talk about what we are experiencing, what is happening to us, to be able to play, share, or laugh—perhaps—may be comforting in the face of this tremendous unease.

Kaës,[2] in introducing the concept of *malêtre*—translated as unease or "being-unwell"—posits as one of his hypotheses that the modern world confronts us with certain disturbances "that affect the narcissistic foundation of our being" (p. 209); he argues that the intersubjective and intergenerational contract has been "shattered." As Kaës was writing this article, the events we have experienced since 2020 were unforeseeable, even by the best crystal ball. For over a year now, we have been living through one of humanity's greatest tragedies. And it is precisely that singular, group, collective, and social narcissistic foundation that we see crumbling and shattering every day. It is a feeling that grows stronger with each passing moment as decrees and statements reveal the disorder and chaos that are increasingly taking hold. Opposing voices, contradictory mandates, and such denialism prevail that today they make Brazil, the country where I live, one of the countries with the highest death toll.

One question we ask ourselves is: what mechanisms can we use to survive psychologically in the face of the imminent social catastrophe, with successive ruptures of the fundamental original narcissistic contracts of affiliation with the human—those that, in Racamier's words, unite us with our contemporaries as human beings. A contract whose failure brings us the devastating experience of genocide, as Kaës asserts.[1]

Perhaps the response to the looming threat of a social catastrophe is to offer spaces for group support, to find within the group a way to weave together and mend that social fabric we feel has been torn, or that broken foundation. Perhaps it is within the group setting that we can find ears that listen and embrace us, smiles that ease the pain, and words that console us in our losses. Perhaps it is within the group space that one's speech, through associative chains, finds a word for what is stuck and can find a word for what one feels.

Perhaps, it is by inviting a shared act of playing and drawing that, upon entering the intermediate, transitional space, individuals can speak and interweave their words, aided by associating their creations (drawings, pictograms) with what they are experiencing and enduring. To speak of what causes distress, what is frightening, and what cannot be freely expressed in words. Perhaps the group setting allows us to weave together and unite what has been experienced as torn apart, and to give value to the feeling of living as a "non-being" imposed by the disorder and chaos brought about by the pandemic in places like Brazil, where, alongside the virus, there is social chaos fueled by the denialism of a genocidal government.

Playing at drawing together here, then, can be a proposal, a healthy outlet when the analyst makes it possible to enter that intermediary space of play, of creation, which offers itself as an object and provides the patient with the possibility of playing by drawing with the words

that spring forth, with their utterances. This approach operates fluidly when we offer them a therapeutic mediator such as the group pictogram, photos, stories, or role-playing that facilitates access to that which is unnameable, characteristic of catastrophic moments.

Playing-drawing as therapeutic communication was famously introduced by Winnicott[4] through his early notes on play and later formalized through the concept of the "squiggle game" as a vital arena where reality and play overlap.[5] These therapeutic sessions are designed to listen to the scribbles-drawings-scribbles produced jointly by the patient and the therapist as they play, co-produced alongside words evoked by the drawing, the feelings, and the stories linked to the moment the patient is experiencing. Thanks to Winnicott, drawing ceases to be a projective technique or psychological test and takes on the value of an image-pictogram—which, like a dream, presents itself in images that allow us to say, or imply, that which belongs to the realm of the unnameable in the therapeutic consultation.

Winnicott introduced the transitional space as the place where playing, laughing, creating, and dreaming are possible. Inspired by this foundational experience, the specific movement from the clinical scribble game to a shared group framework has been mapped out to show how these group associative chains function.[6] We introduce the group pictogram as a therapeutic mediator that invites members of a group, a family, a couple, or an institution to play and draw together on the same sheet of paper—today on a whiteboard on a computer or mobile device. This play also invites them to speak and to speak between the lines about what their creations evoke in them, what they feel and think.

Thinking about working with groups despite the lockdown was the first challenge we faced. We had many questions, including: how much of what we've always done and valued could we maintain in a virtual space, without face-to-face interaction, without seeing each other's faces or gestures? Deprived of what we value. How to escape the feeling of devastation, perhaps; how to make do with what remains when we believe we are unable to be with one another. Perhaps this gathering reflects having shaken off the dust, straightened our bodies, and lifted our heads—finding our Latin American and European colleagues and rethinking and reconsidering the possibilities we have.

Faced with the impossibility of meeting in person, technology—and the use of Zoom—required us to adapt to working with groups, and so, in late March 2020, we launched groups called "Solidarity Listening". In these meetings, we realized that while group members might not be sitting in a circle, looking at one another and talking, they were eager or curious to know what this "Solidarity Listening" would be like. The group members gradually realized that in this space they could speak, share what they were experiencing, and each week they connected and never missed a session. We were facing a screen; instead of a circle, there was a screen and various windows showing each person's face—it was a novelty for them and for us. Faces that looked at each other with fear, spoke, marked moments of silence, and acknowledged one another; and throughout the experience, they began to show closeness, complicity, and a sense of identity in the common and shared experiences that the pandemic had brought them: fear of death, a sense of helplessness, pain, and powerlessness, among others.

It took another period of adaptation to introduce the group pictogram, or the doodling game, into our group and relationship-based sessions (family, couples). We learned how technology enabled us to guide patients to play on the screen—to draw, doodle, tell stories, and talk about themselves, about the other, and about what the encounter between them, with me, and with the jointly produced drawings evoked.

Undoubtedly, the themes that emerged were those imposed by the pandemic: places they wished to be instead of the closed space of the home; horrific figures linked to a dead mother, to the fear of death, and to madness. Themes that did not emerge when we were only listening to verbal dialogues in the Solidarity Listening Space groups, and when we discovered that it was possible to observe and recognize, through gestural signs and silence, what the participant was feeling and needed—when they were able to speak and express what had previously remained unsaid: the fatigue, the physical exhaustion, the excessive demands of confinement, and the burden of caring for a sick family member. Introducing a therapeutic mediator such as the group pictogram (playing at drawing together) facilitated access to difficult content—more primal fears that were not just about the virus, but that the outside world imposed on them, such as the fear of madness and death.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflicts of interest.

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