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Articles

The wound and its contours. A performative discourse on the idea of happiness

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La herida y sus contornos. Un discurso performativo sobre la idea de la felicidad (resumen: p. 15)

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This work, aimed at students in the area of community services, carried out in Coruña (Spain) in March 2022, analyses a health prevention project, located halfway between the arts, psychology, education and social work, which uses performance to facilitate the identification of trauma and the incorporation of the experience as social learning. The researched event is analysed from the perspective of discursive practice and the production of meaning¹, with the aim of the actors generating a discourse of resilience. Three research techniques were chosen, documentary analysis, participant observation and public enquiry, in order to obtain depth in the conclusions and guarantee reliability. The results show the suitability of the performance for the elaboration of grief, by facilitating the expression and meaning of grief.

Keywords: Social work. Performance. Psychological resilience. Social learning. Community education.



Introduction

Life takes shape in moments that the person assumes as vital, narrative, around which the story of the self is constructed, the "once upon a time" that cradles us in the night. But these moments are not neutral, they affect us and as such, they have an impact on the self, engraving themselves in episodic memory; we are in our memories.

The reason for the I is the event, the identity is pregnant with it, it exists in it, as an immanent quality of being, but it remains dormant until the event, be it tears or laughter, tells it: be, and then, the identity is. It dares to be. It chooses to be. Even when it denies the event and says no, this is not for me, it is being.

The "I am" is a phrase interwoven with experience, a subject that preaches the action of a verb, and that goes about defining itself in the right and wrong side of words. Each identity costs a life, is spent and gestated in it. Sometimes it hurts; sometimes it is fullness, depending on the event and its experience. The only certainty is that, before the first event, there was no "I"². There was a context of possibility, perhaps, but nothing worth recounting in the light of a spotlight. The events we experience are architects of identities, sculptors who perceive in the matter that we are, the power of the self and, therefore, when they happen, they tell us. In the end, exaltation and pain tell us, for it is in them that the longing for wellbeing, the glory of overcoming and the recounting of the moments in between appear, which strike the chisel, making matter detach itself on one side or the other of life.

In modernity, there was a recognition of grief, it was worn with pride even in the name and expressed, there was visible mourning, which symbolised the weight of mourning and rites that allowed one to mourn in public and to be consoled in person. Despair was not shameless, it was shown and led to compassion, the Other was also a place to inhabit the pain of the self³.

Today, however, the cosmology of identity is represented as built on a single axis, happiness, which is conceived not only as a right (which it is)⁴, but as the only possible destiny. What can we be, if not happy: nothing. Thus, the ideal of happiness has gradually banished suffering, which has become silent, alien and rare. To such an extent that pain is hardly spoken about. It is not externalised. It is silenced. Our culture is painless. Purely happy. Anaesthetised⁵. And when it is the human being's turn to suffer, he suffers in silence.

It seems difficult, in the context of our society, to find a way to represent the mourning that entangles human beings around themselves. There is no map of grief, which limits sadness and tells the mourner what to do. Geography fails. It is therefore necessary to find a tool that draws happiness, understood as satisfaction with oneself⁶, in overcoming every misfortune. In this sense, the WHO considers that art could be that instrument, as it allows the expression of inner conflicts, through the representation of the pain that is sometimes (also) living⁷. Art does not heal, does not save, does not anaesthetise, it simply lets suffering flow around the limits of representation, which the self draws through the artistic process. And it is there, in the place of the symbol⁸, where pain is constructed as a finite experience that identifies the self in a history, its own (Figure 1).



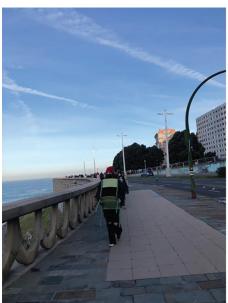






Figure 1. Location of the symbol, photo essay. Photograph: Authors.

In response to this question, an artivist project is designed, "The Wound and its Contours", organised around performance and aimed at mental health prevention, which represents mourning through symbolic acts that, when repeated, allow suffering to be expressed and shared, placing pain on the map of vital learning (Figure 2).

This project, carried out in Coruña, in the post-covid stage (March 2022), is situated in an interdisciplinary framework, halfway between art, social work, education and psychology, and is aimed at students in the final year of their studies in the area of community services, who, on completing their studies, will exercise their professional skills in contexts of vulnerability. The aim is to identify one's own traumas, to reflect on the context and to search for a resilient attitude or environmental learning.

In this sense, 71 students and 3 teachers from the fields of education, psychology, art and social work participate in the project, one of them acting as a proposer.









Figure 2. The wound and its contours, photo essay. Photograph: Authors.

State of play: artistic language as a tool for well-being

Traditionally, art has been spoken of as a set of skills, which, when mastered, lead to recognition. This traditional way of understanding art exists, but it is important to distinguish other potentialities in art. Thus, if we eliminate the technical skill, all artistic action, by facilitating the elaboration of discomfort, becomes involved in the healing processes⁹; therefore, although art and health do not seem to touch each other, they share an objective, the good life¹⁰.

In this sense, one of the strengths of art is its capacity to connect the interiority of the self with the exterior, facilitating expression¹¹. In this way, through the creative process, the artistic is situated on the skin, like a porous membrane¹², filtering the perception of each experience and facilitating its symbolic representation¹³. Representation that allows people to admit their wounds, situating the pain in their corporeality¹⁴ because, without coordinates, pain is not concrete, the "there" and the "here" are necessary to express the mourning¹⁵.

Another issue that art favours is emotional communication since, through the creative act, the self releases the emotions that chain the discomfort¹⁶, being art a powerful mediating strategy, as it allows the subject to open up to his or her intimacy and express it¹⁷.

But, in addition, artistic experience, when recounted, allows people to become aware of the state of the self, favouring the processes of self-knowledge, as well as the emergence of proactive behaviour¹⁸.

Regarding the collective dimension that art can also generate when it is carried out in a group, Amalio points out that "the most fruitful processes of collective intelligence are those that leave room for the emergent..." (p. 281) since they favour creativity by allowing the subject to be filled with initiative²⁰.



Finally, it should be noted that the dynamism of artistic processes increases the component of adaptability²¹ that allows people to develop resilient behaviour²², which is why the WHO urges governments and supranational authorities to implement artistic projects in social and health contexts⁷.

Method

After analysing the possibilities of art as a mediating tool in mourning processes, a metaphor space is proposed, that is, a stage set created by the artivist, based on symbolic objects and repeated acts, which represents, through performance, the metaphor of mourning, that is, of individual psychic suffering, with the aim of getting participants to reflect on their own pain, identifying the trauma and analysing the learning of resilience.

This general objective, in turn, is specified in the following therapeutic objectives:

- 1. Identify feelings and stages of grief.
- 2. Using performance to facilitate the expression of suffering.
- 3. To delimit the temporality of the states of well-being and discomfort, perceiving the relationship of continuity that exists between them.
- 4. Perceiving other people as mourners.
- 5. Determine the learning linked to bereavement.
- 6. Re-elaborate the identity by incorporating these learnings.

In this metaphor space, understood as a potential space, grief is represented through a set of symbolic acts, which act as mediators of that which is to be signified, trauma and resilience, as gestures or images are the invisible thread that serves to weave the meaning of the narrative. In this sense, in order to offer a scenography of possibility, both the acts and the symbolic objects chosen lead to the expression of pain, generating a new way of understanding psychic suffering in the context of each identity. The symbolic acts that make up the performance are:

A straight line along the promenade that runs through the city of Coruña, representing life and the need to stop and catch one's breath when psychological pain does not allow one to move forward.

A line of participants symbolising the equality of human beings in the face of pain and the individuality of each suffering.

The silence during the march, which created a climate of introspection that facilitated the identification of one's own traumas.

The chair, an inanimate object which, when carried, represents the symbolic weight of discomfort. The turns established to carry it allow us to recognise in the observed Other, the burden of pain that we all carry.

The stones represented the wounds, but the word written on them allowed the mourning to be exorcised. So, when the stones surrounded the promenade, showing both the wound and the word that heals it, the collective writing created a text of hope.



Once the words were read, people used the chair to pull themselves up and label themselves in front of a mirror as resilient people, capable of extracting the social learning load from pain.

Research process

The arts-based research seeks to understand the meaning that the actors, in this case the students participating in the health prevention project mentioned above, give to the cultural fact, taking into account that this meaning arises from the interaction between reality and human intersubjectivity, being symbolic¹³.

Therefore, considering that people are "in a constant process of negotiation, developing symbolic exchanges, in a space of intersubjectivity" (p. 55), the object of study of this work, that is, the identification of trauma and the learning of resilience linked to psychic suffering, is analysed from the paradigm of discursive practice and the production of meaning¹ since it seeks to know, through performative representation, the meaning that the actors give to suffering, so that a new discourse full of "meaning" appears, "by means of which people construct the terms that allow them to understand and deal with situations" (p. 55), taking into account that the participants, after completing their training, will exercise their professional skills in contexts of vulnerability, it is important to know whether the necessary cognitive and attitudinal change has taken place to generate reflective contexts that attend to grief and favour resilience.

To do so, participants are first asked to reflect on the dominant social paradigm that defines success in terms of happiness, and then, through performance, to focus on their wounds, in order to discover the changes that suffering has produced in themselves, so that they can develop a new discourse on grief that acts as a factor of motivation, resilience and identity.

When approaching the object of study, three research techniques were chosen, as it is considered that methodological triangulation allows for depth in the conclusions and is a guarantee of reliability²⁴. The research techniques selected are as follows:

- 1. The documentary analysis that determines the variables of the research and allows us to compare the results with the contributions of other authors²⁵, in this sense, the contributions of Fancourt and Finn were especially taken into account, in terms of the potential of art as a mediating tool for psychological and social well-being⁷.
- 2. Participant observation of performance, understood as "the coded result of the act of observing followed by the act of interpreting" (p. 41).
- 3. And the public enquiry²⁷ which gives voice to the account of what happened. To this end, an interview script is created that reflects on the experience and is applied to all the participants, obtaining a response rate of 91%.

Once the responses were obtained, they were categorised according to the variables that favour grief processing: self-awareness, environmental adjustment (resilience), motivation, empathy and social skills.



After completing the categorisation of the results, in order to obtain the degree of richness necessary to define the object of study, three coding criteria are determined and applied: 1) greater frequency; 2) greater detail in the description; and 3) greater specification of the observed event²⁸.

To analyse the interviews, we use the qualitative panel technique, cohort²⁹, designed to study the discourses of people who have participated in the same experience, in this case, the performance, as it allows researchers to delve into the significance of trauma and the analysis of resilience.

Results

The following is a description, grouped in relation to the variables established in the previous section, of the results of the interviews of the project "The Wound and its Contours".

With regard to inner conflict, people consider that the sufferings that leave the deepest mark are: "the death of a loved one and the pain caused by their absence (I 70)" which appears in 53% of the responses, followed by "illness (I 20)" (42%), "unwanted loneliness (I 17)" (33%) and "family conflicts (I 15)" (15%).

Death seems to be the most painful wound, "it is a prolonged mourning, a disconnection from one's own life (I 43)". It implies, in the denial phase, wishing for the impossible "the return of the loved one (I 19)"; it implies "getting angry at the injustice, because I don't understand why she had to die (I 67)"; it means negotiating "learning to make deals with death: him for me (I 70)"; it implies feeling a deep sadness that sometimes leads you to "wish for suicide (I 44)", to "end up accepting that the only cure is to admit the absence (I 43)".

Sometimes, mourning is pregnant with reverie, "the absence of my father (who died when I was 3 years old), provoked in me the need to imagine what my life would have been like with him (I 19)".

But, in addition to death, people face other wounds such as "feeling the continuous rejection of my mother (I 15)", or "the abandonment of my father (I 17)" and even "the abuse of my partner (I 34)", which generate "a vital burden that interferes in other relationships (I 26)".

The analysis of the conflicts has enabled the participants to learn different things, "pain has taught me a lot, I am not the same person, nor do I expect the same from life (I 68)". Thus, there is an awareness of predestination, of inevitability, "It is impossible to run away from difficulties, they are there. No matter how fast you run, they will catch up with you in the end. If I had to draw a lesson, it would be this: you have to face up to problems (I 43)".

In this sense, people point out that they have learned that life does not stop in the face of your pain, "there is no 'stop' in the world" (I 43); "sometimes you suffer so much that you feel that everything stops, but in reality it is You who stops (I 44)"; "life



goes on, it is not there. Every morning you would like not to wake up, but you wake up, and at the end of the day, there is You with your suffering and you know that you have to go on, even though you can't (I 17)".

Another learning that death teaches is the certainty of the end, "the existence of a last hour (I 43)"; "sometimes we live waiting for the apocalypse, a cataclysm, but the end of the world is personal (I 45)". It is therefore important "to learn to live each day as if it were the last (I have not yet achieved this, but I am on the way) (I 43)".

The improvement of self-esteem and the acceptance of the self, also in difficulty, are pointed out as lessons learnt, thus, "I have learnt to value myself more. Sometimes, I say to myself, 'I have been able to' and I know that it is true, that this power is something of mine" (I 6)"; and that is why "now, I trust myself more (I 35)". Along with self-esteem, there is the care of this newly discovered self, "for me, it is not enough to love oneself, loving oneself means taking care of oneself, if you don't take care of yourself, you don't love yourself (I 2)".

This new personal image, "more mature (I 36)" brings with it a feeling of acceptance that translates into learning to live with oneself. "Before I felt invincible, but it wasn't true, life breaks you (I 26)", showing an evolution in the concept of the self, which goes from a triumphant image to a more acceptable and lovable one.

Another important lesson is the emotional self-regulation of conflict:

[...] if I had to tattoo something on my marrow it would be that getting into a loop of despair is of little use, it may be normal to feel that way, but it is better not to stop there for too long. (I 7)

In this sense, one learning that the participants have discovered is the positive orientation in the face of difficulties, since "problems are something like the fuel of motivation (I 32)"; there are no dead ends, "for every problem there is a solution, sometimes even the solution is time, but it exists and we must not lose sight of that perspective (I 43)"; it leads to resilience, therefore, "after what I have lived through, I know that walking, without giving up on life, makes us strong (I 29)".

In the framework of the solution, the Other, the friend, appears defined as the answer to our needs, "next to a problem, there is always a friend, only one or maybe two, the difficulty discovers him and we learn to value his presence (I 28)".

In determining the role of performance in the expression and interpretation of grief, the responses allow us to establish points of relief, which, when joined together, map the relationship between the self and events, offering a symbolic meaning to life itself, a narrative structure, a tale of the self that cradles the night.

Thus, the first thread that weaves the metaphor in the person's womb is an embryonic, narrative space that dialogues with itself: "I had never thought about my own suffering before, I had not contemplated it from the outside, the performance took me by the hand towards myself" (I 8); therefore:



I have been able to look my wounds in the face, and even, (and I say this with a smile), sometimes I have felt strong in overcoming them. I do not define myself as a victim, but as a woman who fights. (I 8)

In this context, the performance becomes a band-aid and a kiss, representing that which is difficult to say, "contemplating pain always turns your guts upside down, but it also turns them inside out, and that is what happened to me during the performance (I 11)", since "expressing sadness provokes a sensation of liberation (I 16)".

But as well as symbolising, the performance is an activator of expression, thus, "although it may seem very basic, the performance helped me to express my pain. I didn't know how to do it (I 6)"; "I had it hidden, so much that I couldn't breathe, it was good for him to go for a walk and it was good for me too (I 8)".

After analysing the participants' responses, empathy was one of the main results, as it was expressed in 70% of the responses. Therefore, it can be said that the symbolic acts provoked empathetic thoughts; thus:

[...] during the course of the performance I thought that other people also have hidden wounds, and that just like me, they don't stop living life normally. I also thought that we don't know what each person has inside them, and that when we judge their attitudes, we do so without knowing. (I 7)

On occasions, empathy gives rise to reflections on otherness as an identity process, "when I looked at my companions while they were writing the stones, I understood that we all suffer and that we all bear suffering as best we can (I 4)"; since "life is not easy for anyone (I 20)", in the end, "the sufferings we endure are basically the same, what changes is the meaning we give to pain and the way we face it (I 6)", and the fact is that "we are human and fragile, very small and needy, but luckily we have each other (I 6)".

Artistic action still offers a final gift, a cosmology inhabited by pain, a dialogue of opposites, in which suffering is defined as a time opposed to happiness, "without pain one would only know a state and it would not even be called happiness, since it would be meaningless to give it a name (I 2)". In this duality, the limit emerges as a certainty, since, "although pain seems infinite and we suffer for a long time, it is only a time, a compass, which leaves us in silence and it is from this silence that well-being is born" (I 43). (I 43).

Discussion

The participants' responses show that pain has a name, inhabits time and is embodied in an event: this one or that one. It does not admit indifference. It demands the expression that allows us to say that which does not yet fit into words, but needs to be named. However, today's society, full of happiness, "enchanted"⁵, limits the expression of suffering by isolating pain in the solitude of the individual, which is why, as the results show, people need to find a medium, in this case performance, that favours the process of recognition and expression of discomfort, and this finding responds to the second objective of the study.



In this sense, performance allows people to establish an inner dialogue between the self and the world that is their own³⁰; hence, the creation of a space - metaphor concretised in a set of symbolic acts, has allowed people to connect with their intimacy, through symbolic representation and embrace their wounds, fulfilling the central objective of the study, identifying trauma and learning resilience; at the same time, they experienced empathy, thus obtaining a benefit linked to community emotional capital, which responds to the fourth objective¹⁹.

The first of these acts, silence, understood as a narrative and sensory thread, generated, according to the participants, a different perceptual context which, in turn, facilitated interiority and allowed people to delve into episodic memory, retracing the events of their own story³¹.

The analysis of the results shows how the direction of the path, straight and forward, and the way of walking, with the feet on the head³⁰, facilitates the connection with the sensory memory, favouring the reminiscence of the wound, which is what the metaphor is intended to achieve. Thus, these first two symbolic acts make it possible to achieve the first two objectives, identification and expression.

In the light of the answers given by the participants, we observed how, through the representation of symbolic acts, the processes of alterity appear, i.e. the perception of the self in an Other³. Thus, the turns that were established to carry the chair allowed people to recognise their wounds, through the contemplation of the Other, producing a process of identification, that is, of otherness, which facilitates the achievement of the first and fourth objective, the identification of pain in oneself and in others³².

Similarly, it can be seen how, through the visualisation of the written stones, placed in the roundabout of the Orzán promenade, the participants showed empathic behaviour, discovering that the difficulties that people go through are not so different and that, for this reason, we all need understanding and support, achieving the fourth objective, the perception of the other person as a sufferer.

Likewise, the reading of the messages written on the stones made it possible to become aware of the phases of grief in relation to oneself, as intended in the first objective of the study. Establishing important learning related to self-knowledge and emotional self-regulation, associated with the fifth objective³⁰.

In this sense, the perception of grief allows the self to situate itself as an active subject, aware that grief has a beginning and an end. Certainly, there is certainty in pain, it exists and is, but its existence is determined by temporal coordinates. All suffering begins and ends in an instant, which the "I" must perceive as real and its own, because until this happens, it will not be able to discover in itself the capacity to overcome it³³. Thus, for the participants, the control of anxiety derived from the uncertainty of grief is acquired through the perception of the limits of suffering, since, as the results point out, grief is not infinite (although it may sometimes seem so); it is a period of time that must pass; In this sense, it is possible to affirm that the third objective, defining discomfort as a state and establishing a time limit, has been fulfilled, facilitating in turn the achievement of the fifth and sixth objectives, identifying the lessons that suffering leaves behind and situating them in oneself.



In relation to the learning processes experienced by the grieving person (objective five), it is important to note that, according to the participants, we do not suffer for the sake of it. There seems to be no randomness or emptiness in pain. Rather, the results show an awareness of predestination, "of mysterious reserve"³⁴ (p.11), by which suffering participates in the essence of the person, being the architect of the self, its meaning. Thus, in the fabric of identity, pain is the knot that makes a story worth telling.

In this sense, pain is fixed in the episodic memory, it marks the event, it is the cross of what we are, the obverse of memories³³, therefore, the well-being of the self depends on the elaboration of grief; and in the light of the results, we can affirm that the performance favours this process⁸, that is, it allows the participants to rework their identity by incorporating the learning linked to suffering in a positive way (sixth objective).

Conclusions

The conclusions drawn from the analysis of the results and their subsequent discussion are not intended to generate inference, but rather to show how, within the framework of the present research, it is possible to use performance to address pain and trauma, favouring self-awareness, resilience and empathy.

These are as follows: Performance acts as a powerful mediator in the learning of attitudes that favour the component of adaptability or environmental adjustment, so it is possible to affirm that the central object of the study, the identification of trauma, its expression and the learning of resilience, has been fulfilled.

In relation to the first objective, symbolic acts, in their reiteration, favour the creation of an inner space in which it is possible to recognise mourning. Silence gives way to sensoriality and the perception of episodic memory, which leads to the wounds of the past.

Furthermore, with regard to objective 6, discursive practice, by developing a dialectic between context, subject and event, makes it possible to understand the meaning that the participants give to suffering, facilitating the self's acquisition of self-awareness.

In this sense, in relation to objective 5, the research shows how the discourse of the mourner is born of the discovery of pain as a wound that, despite being unwanted, heals in some learning process. Suffering is a teacher, inevitable and demanding, from which different lessons can be learned, including, most importantly, the recognition of one's own vulnerability, as well as the certainty of our ephemeral condition, which invites us to make the most of life.

The death of a loved one is the most deeply felt grief, followed by family problems, such as parental rejection or gender-based violence.

The symbolic power of the performance allows visualising the pain of the Other, favouring the emergence of empathic behaviour and other skills that facilitate social interaction, such as positive conflict orientation and resilience, which appear as a result of grief, affecting self-concept and self-esteem, as intended in the fourth and fifth objectives.

Recognising pain and expressing it, through performance, has enabled participants to self-regulate their behaviour and to understand that conflict is also a force that leads to the motivation of the self, thus achieving the second objective.



In the third objective, the limits of pain are established in the certainty of the finiteness of mental states; psychological discomfort and wellbeing are drawn in alternation, like the notes and silences of a pentagram, of which life is the only interpreter. In the cosmology of pain, people offer themselves as broken melodies, like blackbirds that sing before dawn.

Authors' contribution

Both authors actively participated in all stages of preparing the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

Both authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Este trabalho, dirigido a estudantes da área de serviços à comunidade, realizado na Corunha (Espanha), em março de 2022, analisa um projeto de prevenção da saúde, situado a meio caminho entre as artes, a psicologia, a educação e o trabalho social, que emprega a performance para facilitar a identificação do trauma e a incorporação da experiência como aprendizagem social. O fato investigado é analisado desde a prática discursiva e de produção de sentidos, com a finalidade de que os atores gerem um discurso de resiliência. São escolhidas três técnicas de investigação, análise documental, observação participante e inquérito público, a fim de aprofundar as conclusões e garantir a fiabilidade. Os resultados mostram a adequação da performance para elaborar o duelo, ao facilitar a expressão e a significação da dor.

Palavras chave: Trabalho social. Performance. Resiliência psicológica. Aprendizagem social. Educação comunitária.

Este trabajo, dirigido a estudiantes del área de servicios a la comunidad, realizado en Coruña (España), en marzo de 2022, analiza un proyecto de prevención de la salud, situado a medio camino entre las artes, la psicología, la educación y el trabajo social, que emplea la performance para facilitar la identificación del trauma y la incorporación de la experiencia como aprendizaje social. El hecho investigado es analizado desde la práctica discursiva y de producción de sentidos¹, con el fin de que los actores generen un discurso de resiliencia. Se opta por tres técnicas de investigación, el análisis documental, la observación participante y la indagación pública, con el fin de obtener profundidad en las conclusiones y garantizar la fiabilidad. Los resultados muestran la idoneidad de la performance para elaborar el duelo, al facilitar la expresión y la significación del dolor.

Palabras clave: Trabajo social. Performance. Resiliencia psicológica. Aprendizaje social. Educación comunitaria.