Case Report

Art as a resource to fight psychophobia: experience report about the workshop “Anti-Asylum Movement Journey”

A arte como um instrumento para combater a psicofobia: relato de experiência sobre a oficina “Jornada da luta Antimanicomial”

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ABSTRACT: The Brazilian anti-asylum movement has been intertwined with art over the decades, influencing the transformation of psychiatric care and psychosocial imaginary. However, the replacement of asylums with freedom-oriented care is jeopardized if there are no professionals who are part of and advocate for humanitarian mental health care. Therefore, it is extremely necessary to incorporate these themes into the education of future doctors. Thus, the report describes the realization of the “Anti-Asylum Movement Journey” at a private medical school, a workshop which took place on May 18th, National Anti-Asylum Day. It included a poetic soirée, an exploration of the history of art related to mental health, and creative proposals to engage users of the psychosocial care network. The event aims to recall the history of the anti-asylum struggle and reaffirm its necessity, utilizing art as the primary tool to explore ethics and policies that ensure visibility, inclusion, and assistance for mental health patients in their environment. As a result, participants learned the importance and methods of using art in healthcare, preparing them for a more sensitive, critical and politically engaged medical practice. The event also destigmatized and humanized the perception of mental illness in a strictly academic environment.

KEY WORDS: Mental Health; Complementary Therapies; Medicine in the Arts; Art; Education, Medical; Patient-Centered Care; Education, Medical, Undergraduate; Humanization of Assistance.

RESUMO: A luta antimanicomial andou junto à arte ao longo das décadas na transformação do cuidado psiquiátrico e imaginário psicossocial. Contudo, a substituição dos maníacos pelo cuidado em liberdade é ameaçada caso não haja profissionais que participem e defendam o cuidado humanitário em saúde mental. Dessa forma, é extremamente necessário incorporar esses temas na educação dos futuros médicos. Sendo assim, o relato descreve a realização da “Jornada da Luta Antimanicomial” em uma escola médica particular, oficina que ocorreu no dia 18 de maio, Dia Nacional da Luta Antimanicomial, incluindo um sarau poético, abordagem da história da arte relacionada à saúde mental e propostas criativas para envolver os usuários da rede de atenção psicossocial. O evento visa relembrar a história do movimento e reafirmar sua necessidade. Assim, utilizou como ferramenta principal a arte para explorar a ética e políticas que garantam visibilidade, inclusão e assistência aos doentes mentais em seu meio. Como resultado, os participantes aprenderam a importância e os métodos de uso da arte na atenção à saúde, preparando-os para uma prática médica sensível, crítica e politicamente engajada. Por fim, o evento desconstruiu a estigmatização e humanizou a percepção acerca da doença mental em um ambiente estritamente acadêmico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Saúde Mental; Terapias Complementares; Medicina nas Artes; Arte; Educação Médica; Assistência Centrada no Paciente; Educação de Graduação em Medicina; Humanização da Assistência.

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INTRODUCTION

The bases for the intersection of art and psychiatry go back to the 1920s with Freud and Jung, however, it was Jung who put artistic language in evidence with analytical psychology, in which he believed it was possible to give order to inner chaos using of art. In Brazil, these aspects find space in the figures of Osório Cesar (1895-1979) and Nise da Silveira (1905-1999), psychiatrists who were pioneers in the use of art as a therapeutic tool with patients in mental health institutions.

Osório Cesar worked as a doctor for 40 years, created the Junqueri’s Free School of Visual Arts, and organized the 1st Art Exhibition at the Hospital of Juqueri, at the São Paulo Museum of Art. His main work was “A Expressão Artística nos Alienados” (The artistic Expression of the Alienated), in which he presents his method of classifying and analyzing works by psychiatric patients. Although his work is subject to criticism today, his figure was very important in establishing the formation of the field of Art Psychology, valuing art therapy and affirming the human dignity of the mentally ill. He was considered the precursor in Brazil of the analysis of the psychopathological expression of mentally ill people.

On the other hand, the psychiatrist Nise da Silveira worked at the D. Pedro II Psychiatric Center, located in Engenho de Dentro, Rio de Janeiro. There, she assumed leadership of the Occupational Therapy Section, where patients engaged in a variety of expressive activities, particularly painting and modeling. In 1952, she founded the Museum of Images of the Unconscious within the same institution, which housed a constantly growing collection of works produced by inmates, thus establishing a valuable field of research and artistic expression.

These manifestations opened space for the voice of the institutionalized mentally ill, as seen in the following passage: “My real name is coffin burial / Cemetery dead corpse / Human skeleton old people’s asylum / Hospital for all things sick / Hospice / World of beasts and animals” (our translation).

The quoted verse is a poem penned by Stela do Patrocínio, a black woman who spent 30 years in Colony Juliano Moreira-RJ. She was just another survivor of the process of erasure of individuality and freedom carried out by the archaic ways of traditional psychiatric institutions in Brazil in the 60s and 80s. The book, which is a compiled of textualization of her sayings and her writings, begins with the following phrase by Foucault:

The perception that Western man has of their time and space allows a structure of refusal to appear, from which we denounced a word as not being language, a gesture as not being a work, a figure as not having the right to take place in history (our translation).

In this context, the current appreciation of works by individuals who never even had their position or existence taken into consideration, such as Van Gogh or Stela herself, is clear evidence of how the fight for mental health and anti-asylum causes brings to society’s culture itself new perceptions of madness. Added to that, they bring a new context, where mentally ill people play a new humanized role, in which they take their place in the world and in history, an aspect that in life they never had the chance to empower themselves.

This new cultural perception is precisely one of the guidelines of the Psychiatric Reform (RP), consolidated at the 1st National Meeting, in Salvador (1993). In this way, the use of art and culture, in addition to being a merely therapeutic or auxiliary resource in the clinic, now takes on the dimension of producing subjectivity and life, as seen in the works above. As a consequence, from that moment on, the PR process is taken by transformations in the social imaginary and in discursive practices about madness, diversity and difference. Therefore, the strategy via artistic-cultural activities has established itself as a very creative dimension of transformation and intervention within the scope of mental health in SUS (Brazilian Unified Health System), for this reason, its importance finally stands out in guaranteeing basic rights of the population, such as freedom and health, provided for by its guidelines.

In this way, the movement progressively gained visibility in Brazil, the formulation and subsequent approval of Law No. 10.216, known as the “Psychiatric Reform Law”, promulgated on April 6, 2001, was one of the most important milestones. Thus, this law established new guidelines for mental health policies, by providing progressive replacement of asylums in the country for a complex network of services that include care in freedom as a fundamentally therapeutic element.

Thus, there was a gradual replacement of Psychiatric Institutions by Psychosocial Care Centers (CAPS), which articulate the mental health care network in their territory, promoting autonomy, articulating social, educational and legal spheres with health spheres. To guarantee housing for those who were abandoned in these places, Therapeutic Residential Services, therapeutic residences, or simply housing, were created. They consist of houses located in urban spaces with the aim of responding to the housing needs of people with serious mental disorders, whether discharged from psychiatric hospitals or not.

Despite this, hospital participation is not excluded in necessary cases, there are psychiatric hospital beds, beds in general hospitals, reference units for alcohol and other drugs, general emergencies, CAPS III and integration with the Mobile Emergency Care Service (SAMU). Therefore, the reform does not limit, it rather expands assistance to the public that requires this service in all its spheres.

On the other hand, contrary to these forces of humanization and anti-asylum deinstitutionalization promoted by social movements and art, there are, in the process of Psychiatric Reform itself, groups with conservative ideology that defend the reorganization of mental health services with traditional psychiatry as a template, aimed at to the centrality of medical power and hospitalization as main strategies. Thereby, these conservative forces have been taking up more and more space in the defense of these and other asylum-based strategies.

Overall, it is increasingly necessary to revisit the original anti-asylum history and struggle, located in the motto “For a society without asylums” and rescue the ethical-political reasons based on freedom, which guarantee the visibility and
inclusion of mentally ill people in our society. In this context, the objective of the following report is to highlight the relevance of a continuous and progressive approach to mental health, following an expressly anti-asylum logic, and emphasizing the integration of the subjective value of art in these interventions. In this way, art invades the academic world and reveals itself as a vital tool for driving social and cultural changes, both at a collective and individual level, within the scope of the fight for an inclusive and liberating mental health network, free from asylum confinements.

EXPERIENCE REPORT

Initially, the idea for the project arose among a group of local coordinators of IFMSA Brazil UNIFACISA, a local committee located at the UNIFACISA University Center, associated with the Brazilian student organization affiliated with the International Federation of Medical Student Associations. However, it remained dormant due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. On the other hand, with the resumption of in-person activities, interest has resurfaced in addressing this crucial topic and, in due course, taking advantage of Anti-Asylum Day (May 18) to do so. Inspired by the history of the movement and the notable trajectory of psychiatrists who changed the history of Brazilian mental care, such as Nise de Oliveira, it was decided to create the “Journey of the Anti-Asylum Struggle”.

The students who created the project had contact with the important trajectories of the movement also through art, with films such as “Nise: The Heart of Madness” (2015), “Brainstorm”(2000) and the book by Daniela Arbex “Brazilian Holocaust”. Having these experiences, they demonstrated a deep sensitivity towards the topic. Given this, the question arises: if art has historically been used as a therapeutic tool, why not also emphasize it as a means of promoting empathy and humanization in an academic environment where conceptions of psychiatry are often based on the pathologization of individuals?

In this way, 15 coordinators were invited to organize the moment, since initially it would be a multi-centered journey throughout the month, however, for logistical reasons and admission problems, the event ended up being reduced to a single date. Therefore, there was a division of tasks into groups according to the parts of the event, organization of documents and forms. In addition, multiple meetings were held between the members and also with art teachers, poets, nurses, and coordinators of CAPSI (Center for Psychosocial Care for Children), to analyze the feasibility of the action, look for lecturers and set goals. With these aspects finalized, the art was created, publicized on Instagram, a WhatsApp group was created with participants and flyers were distributed throughout the university to invite students to participate in the event.

Thus, on 05/18/2022, the UNIFACISA cinema was the stage for the event, which was initially starred by the nurse specialist in mental health and talented poet, Anne Karolynne de Negreiros. With engaging dynamics, she proposed the construction of a Poetic Soirée open to students, encouraging active participation with recitations, including involving her son. The event was even more special by incorporating the voices of CAPS (Psychosocial Care Center) users, who, even remotely, contributed through videos, sharing meaningful stories with the students.

Despite the challenging logistics that made it impossible for CAPS patients to be physically present due to the distance and nighttime of the event, virtual participation paved the way for a remarkable process of identification and connection between healthcare students and users. This virtual meeting not only allowed a significant exchange, but also promoted protagonism and humanization, reinforcing essential ties between the two communities.

The event had 76 registrations and the participation of a total of 38 people in person, without online transmission, thus, 50% of those registered participated. In relation to the original course, 78.7% of those interested were from the Medicine course, in addition to including students from the psychology course, pre-university courses and even biological sciences.

In this context, the initiative stood out as a true workshop, where, in collaboration with the participants, a dynamic intervention was built through the poetic soirée. This approach is integrated in a comprehensive, playful and anti-asylum manner, adding significant value to the treatment. During the experience, those involved not only became familiar with the practice of this playful intervention in the health sector, but also developed writing and poetic recitation skills. More than that, they opened doors to the possibility of replicating this intervention in other health contexts.

In addition to practical activities, the artist shared valuable insights about her interventions at CAPS, exploring different therapies that cover artistic, visual, plastic, musical expressions, among others. This inspiring sharing not only enriched the participants’ understanding, but also triggered vibrant discussions and a deep immersion into the therapeutic potential of artistic expressions.

Then, after a snack break, the lecture by professor and doctor in literature and art history Rodrigo Vieira began. In it, there was a deep immersion in the evolution of the treatment and social vision of Madness and the mentally ill, through the exhibition of works made from the Paleolithic period till today.

In this way, the moment inspired great interdisciplinary, inciting students’ curiosity towards great figures of art, such as Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch, Francisco de Goya, and many others. Furthermore, material and artistic evidence has demonstrated milestones that illustrate the collective perception of the mind since the prehistoric age and up until now. Milestones in psychiatry stood out, such as the emergence of procedures, Lobotomy, the revolution in psychiatry by Nise da Silveira, with the Museum of Images of the Unconscious, the emergence of Asylums and their ending.

At the end of the event, an extensive moment was dedicated to open speech among participants, highlighting the sharing of reports focused on the topic of mental health. This space provided a deep and moving discussion, covering individual experiences, personal reflections on the topic, clarification of doubts and expressions of praise regarding the event. This open dialogue not only enriched collective understanding of mental health, but also strengthened bonds between those present, creating an
environment of support and mutual understanding.

However, it is important to highlight that, in contrast to the expectations outlined in the idealizations, it was not possible to carry out practical workshops at CAPS (Center for Psychosocial Care), including the intervention with paint on canvas taught by an arts teacher. The unfeasibility of this stage occurred since it was not possible to raise enough resources with the number of registrations in this modality for it to become sustainable. This may reflect both the period of outreach and a possible lower academic interest in spending financial resources on ludic activities and integrative therapies compared to the development of pure technical skills.

**DISCUSSION**

In this sense, it becomes clear that the developed event allowed the public, through contact with professionals close to this type of approach, an opportunity to discuss mental health, exploring non-traditional methods for welcoming and treating patients, especially among medical students. In addition to stimulating meaningful dialogue, the event encouraged, through art, an in-depth reflection on the historical construction of the concept of “madness” and the psychosocial impacts associated with medical attitudes over time.

It is possible to observe the immanent need for these discussions in the academic space, since during the registration period 65.3% of those registered stated that they had never participated in any other event or discussion in the academic sphere regarding the anti-asylum struggle and psychiatric reforms. Furthermore, surprisingly, 22.7% stated that they did not have any knowledge about psychiatric methods historically used in asylums, such as lobotomy, insulin coma and electroshock. Although many have demonstrated some familiarity and understanding of the topic, it is undeniable that a significant number still lack the necessary knowledge for a more humanized medical practice.

Therefore, this scenario reinforces the importance of initiatives that expand access to critical understanding of these topics, promoting a solid basis for compassionate and conscious approaches in the health context, especially in the face of the threat from rising conservative forces that defend asylum-based strategies.

On the other hand, it is observed that modern mental health care is a reality which is often not tangible for the majority of students. This is because in many medical practices, health care and learning is centered on hospitalization, while mental health care, as established by the Psychiatric Reform, is not centered on the beds, “good mental health care needs fewer beds but more vacancies”, says Domingos Sávio Alves (our translation). In this way, bringing the experience and knowledge of professionals who work in the area with art therapy, poem production, CAPS workshops and passion for care in freedom is essential. Thus, generating a more accurate understanding of the importance of multidisciplinary approach and deinstitutionalization at this level of care carried out by those involved in the mental health scenario.

Despite emphasizing the reduction in beds, the mental health care network structure still has emergency care in general and specialized hospitals, Mobile Emergency Care Service (SAMU), specific institutions for addiction and some CAPS (Center for Psychosocial Care). Therefore, understanding the different dimensions in which this network is organized was essential for the students present to be able to advocate for a libertarian and non-exclusive reform, in the face of possible conservative arguments that the urgent or serious aspect is not being addressed.

In this way, contact with these realities from a humanized point of view and the history of madness and asylums allowed students to recognize care in freedom as a fundamentally therapeutic element in mental health, a thought promoted by the anti-asylum movement. Furthermore, it allowed us to understand how the use of art and culture, beyond being a merely therapeutic or auxiliary resource in the clinic, began to take on the dimension of producing subjectivity and life, as foreseen by one of the guidelines of the Psychiatric Reform (RP), consolidated at the 1st National Meeting, in Salvador (1993).

The comments made during the workshop about the quality of the information provided and the relevance of the approaches given, together with the congratulations to the speakers for their performance and the organizers for the event (in its entirety), demonstrate the importance of the topic covered — its relevance permeates the professional field of treatment and enters humanitarianism by bringing out the human aspects of those who suffer and those who are treated. This recognition is unique, as interested students, 78.7% of whom were on the Medicine course and 14.7% on the Psychology course, will securely have contact with mental health care, whether in academic or professional life, since the Psychosocial Care Network is made up of services that include not only comprehensive care beds (in General Hospitals, in CAPS III), but also other general action spaces, such as Basic Health Units for Primary Care (UBS) and the Mobile Emergency Care Service (SAMU).

The need to discuss the different approaches to mental health is essential from a technical and human point of view. Dialogue in a clear and professional manner on the topic is one of the ways to prevent the occurrence of violations of human rights among this public, as well as to train more qualified professionals (in the scientific and personal spheres) to deal with this content. Consequently, providing more humanized care and better outcomes, as, according to Ana Maria Fernandes Pitta:

The mentally ill, previously excluded from the world of rights and citizenship, becomes a citizen subject and not an object of public policies. Since this is a more ethical-political and cultural issue than a technical one, the future of the Brazilian Psychiatric Reform lies in the hope that users, family members, workers — these new protagonists who mature and renew themselves every day — find more sensitive ways of reducing damage caused by our institutions and our foolish choices. (our translation)

Finally, the event was guided by the objective of making attenders of the workshops protagonists of this socio-political transformation of the treatment and stigmas associated with mental health disorders. In this way, through education and culture, we open a path of transformation and awareness among participants, as well as family members, workers and health
users, who can also be this “hope” for the future of Psychiatric Reform, which is exalted in the May 18th, National Anti-Asylum Day, the same day the event takes place.

CONCLUSIONS

From the proposed event, the students present acquired knowledge about the history of psychiatric reform and alternative therapies in the area, understanding the seriousness and psychic and social dimensions of care and madness throughout history. Furthermore, participants became aware of the possibility of directing emotions and creativity towards dynamic activities in order to alleviate psychological discomfort, direct treatments and strengthen the doctor-patient relationship.

Thus, through alternative methods to traditional medicine, participants were able to expand their role as students and health agents, promoting a broader spectrum of mental health and general well-being of future patients and the social cycle. However, from exposure to CAPS users, students understood the impacts of this type of activity on patients’ quality of life, and, in contrast, the importance and benevolence of the human gaze on each user of the health system. Thereby, after the journey, participants are prepared to better understand the vast universe of the human psyche and see beyond medicinal methods, understanding the history of asylums and the importance of freedom for the integrity of patients.

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