

When Dragons Become Heroes: the Resignification and Integration of Negative Emotions through Expressive-Creative Techniques

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Abstract

Introduction: *The present study was centered on the positive role that expressive creative techniques and creative meditation, in particular, have on the ability to emotionally regulate, provide meaning and integrate negative emotions.*

Objectives: *The main objective of this study was to develop a module of personal optimization and self-knowledge, in an experiential group, using as a basic tool “The Story of the Hero”, which includes a set of creative meditations focused on emotional regulation, resignification and integration of emotions. We also aimed to highlight statistically significant differences intra-group, through pre-post-test measurement of emotional regulation capacity in the experimental group, and to emphasize statistically significant differences inter-group, between the experimental group and the control group, regarding the general ability of emotional regulation.*

Methods: *The study combined quantitative research with qualitative methods: experiential group intervention, through creative meditation and expressive-creative techniques. The instrument used to measure the capacity for emotional regulation was Perth Emotion Regulation Competency Inventory – PERCI, for which an adaptation was made for the youth population of Romania.*

Results: *From a quantitative point of view, significant differences were found in terms of an increased general capacity for emotional regulation in the case of the post versus pre-test experimental group ($\text{sig} = 0.046 < 0.05$). Also, statistically significant differences were observed between the control group and the experimental group, post-test, in terms of the capacity for general emotional regulation ($\text{sig} = 0.04 < 0.05$). From a qualitative point of view, the participants in the personal optimization group gained a clearer vision of how they related to their own emotions, understood and overcame some of the blockages in the relationship with their emotions and learned to access useful resources in creating an authentic contact with themselves.*

Conclusions: *The expressive-creative techniques and creative meditation used in the personal optimization and self-knowledge group had positive effects on both the ability to regulate emotions and the attitude of participants regarding their emotions.*

Keywords: *basic emotions, emotional regulation, experiential group intervention, personal optimization, self-knowledge, creative meditation, The Story of the Hero*

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I. Introduction

In his work paper, “*Which emotions are basic*” (2004), Prinz mentions two perspectives regarding the origin of emotions. An evolutionary one, which is based on Darwin’s theories and assumes that emotions are innate and manifest the same for all people, regardless of culture: the emotions found in humans are, in fact, variants of the emotions observed in animals, which over time have evolved and adapted to changes in the environment; and a constructivist one, that assumes that emotions are socially learned and vary from a culture to other.

Although Darwin’s theories were the basis for the evolutionary theories of emotions, over time, the subject continued to arouse interest. Starting from the same idea of universality and similarities between cultures, Ekman and Friesen (1975), and Ekman (1982) studied facial expressions common to all people, regardless of cultural differences. The same universality, this time at the level of verbal expressions, is studied by Russel (1991) in “*Culture and the categorization of emotion*”. The results showed that in each language there is at least one term that corresponds to each basic emotion. The limit observed by Russel comes from the fact that in some languages there are several terms for a basic emotion, meaning either different degrees of intensity or different shades, while in other languages there is only one term that defines a basal emotion. Thus, it is difficult to make an exact correlation between different terms that refer, in the end, to the same basic emotion.

The interest in the study of basic emotions has not decreased over recent years. In 2010, Sauter, Eisner, Ekman, and Scott aimed, with their study “*Cross-cultural recognition of basic emotions through nonverbal emotional vocalizations*”, to investigate whether nonverbal emotional vocalizations, such as screaming and laughing, are recognized by two totally different cultures. This study involved comparing a group of Europeans whose native English language was British to a group of members of the Himba community, a semi-nomadic community of over 20,000 people, living in small settlements in Kaokoland, a region in northern Namibia. The vocalizations of the basic emotions (anger, fear, disgust, joy and surprise) were recognized by both groups. In addition, a number of complex emotions were recognized only within each group, but not outside of it. Also, another interesting result showed that the vocalizations of negative emotions are cross-culturally recognizable, while the vocalizations of positive emotions have specific cultural signals.

In 2011, Tracy & Randles, through their paper work “*Four models of basic emotions: a review of Ekman and Cordaro, Izard, Levenson, and Panksepp and Watt*” made a summary of the work of the mentioned authors. In their paper “*What is meant by calling emotions basic*”, Ekman and Cordaro (2011) assess that there are two essential characteristics of an emotion to be considered basic: a) emotions are discrete, i.e. each emotion can be distinguished fundamentally from another one; the data collected on discrete emotions refer to facial, vocal, physiognomic indices and the study of events that precede each emotion; b) for each basic emotion there are a number of facial, vocal, physiognomic and behavioral indicators. According to Ekman and Cordaro, the basic emotions are: anger, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, contempt, happiness.

In the second study mentioned, “*Forms and functions of emotions: Matters of emotion-cognition interactions*”, Izard (2011) considers emotions to be fundamental to human nature and offers a series of reasonings for which certain emotions are basic: they a) have a simple structure by virtue of the absence of a complex cognition; b) have a higher specificity of functions; c) derive largely from the bio-evolutionary process; d) continue to retain relatively more evolved characteristics; e) appear earlier in ontogenesis compared to emotional patterns; f) are a set of motivational processes important for survival and well-being. According to Izard, the basic emotions are: interest, joy, sadness, anger and fear.

In his work paper “*Basic emotion questions*” Levenson (2011) distinguishes a number of criteria according to which an emotion can be considered basic, namely: a) distinctive character (mainly in behavioral and physiological characteristics); b) “hard wire” (circuits built in the nervous system); c) functionality (provides a generalized solution for a specific challenge relevant to survival, or for an opportunity. According to Levenson, the basic emotions are: joy, anger, disgust, fear, surprise and sadness.

Panksepp & Watt approach, in the paper “*What is basic about basic emotions?*” (2011), the subject of emotions from a neuro-scientific perspective. The authors analyze the brain and the mind from the perspective of the evolutionary stratification of functions, these being classified into: a) primary (instinctive) – basic emotions; b) learned; c) correlated with thoughts. Thus, according to Panksepp and Watt’s theory, the basic emotions, which are found in all species, called “prototype emotional states”, are: search, fear, anger, desire, worry, panic, pain and play.

The present study was based on Paul Ekman's evolutionary perspective of emotions. According to Ekman's definition from his official website: *"Emotions are a process, an automatic particular assessment, influenced by our evolutionary and personal past, through which we feel that something important is happening to our well-being, and a set of psychological changes and emotional behaviors begin to manage this situation."* Ekman talks about the existence of seven basic emotions: enjoyment, fear, sadness, anger, disgust, contempt, surprise.

Among other things, Ekman points out the important role that emotions play in our lives. Enjoyment, for example, has a social role. The basic function of enjoyment is that through it we assure those around us that we are not a threat to them, which has a significant contribution on the survival of our species. Also, the pursuit of happiness is the biggest motivational factor in our lives. Fear also helps, allowing us to avoid or reduce the harm. When we talk about sadness, it has the role of sending signals to others about our need to be comforted in difficult times for us. Anger helps us to overcome obstacles that stand in our way and achieve our goals. Disgust helps us stay away from stimuli that we perceive as offensive and contempt keeps us away from people whose behaviors or gestures seem to be immoral for us. Surprise too helps us, having the role of focusing our attention on what is happening, to assess whether we are or not in danger.

When we talk about emotions and their role in our lives, it is important to keep in our minds the concept of emotional regulation, too. According to Preece, Becerra, Robinson, Dandy & Allan (2018, p. 130) *"people's ability to regulate their emotions therefore refers to their ability to: successfully modify the trajectory of emotions with respect to their (1) experiential, (2) behavioral and (3) physiological manifestations, and (4) know when it is appropriate to activate a goal to modify emotions in the first place."*

Gross (2002) highlights the importance of understanding three aspects: 1) although the concept of emotional regulation is usually associated with reducing negative emotions, in reality, emotional regulation involves increasing, maintaining, or decreasing both negative and positive emotions; 2) although there are many examples of conscious emotional regulation (e.g. changing a subject when it causes discomfort or biting the lip when you feel anger), emotional regulation can occur even without being aware of its presence, for example if someone

exaggerates their reaction of pleasure when they receive a gift they do not like, or when someone quickly shifts their attention from a situation they do not like; 3) emotional regulation is not inherently good or bad (e.g. the same strategy to neutralize empathic distress can have a positive effect on a surgeon who is about to perform an operation and a negative effect on a person who tortures another person).

Two other important concepts used in this work paper are resignification and integration. In Experiential Unification therapy, the transforming power of the metaphor and of the resignification of experiences helps to reconnect the Ego with the Self and stimulates the processes of unification and integration.

Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch (1974) present resignification as a change in a conceptualized context, or an emotional situation, or the perspective in which it was lived; modifying its frame of reference and placing it in the context of the concrete, current situation, transforming its meaning or changing it completely.

II. Objectives and hypotheses

The scope of the present paper is to develop a module of personal optimization and self-knowledge, in an experiential group, through the medium of the tool "The Story of the Hero", which includes a set of creative meditations, focused on emotional regulation, resignification and integration of emotions.

The general objective implies highlighting the efficiency of the personal optimization module on emotional regulation.

In accordance with the objectives, the following hypotheses were formulated:

Main hypothesis:

We assume that through the personal optimization and self-knowledge module, which is based on the "The Story of the Hero" tool, a significant improvement will be achieved in terms of emotional regulation, the ability to offer new meanings and to integrate one's emotions.

The work hypotheses:

1.1. We assume that, following the personal optimization module, will be obtained a statistically significant improvement in terms of the ability to regulate emotion, in the case of the experimental group.

1.2. We assume that, following the personal optimization module, the experimental group will obtain significantly higher post-test results than in the case of the control group, in terms of emotional regulation capacity.

III. Methods

3.1. Design and analyses

The present research has a quasi-experimental design (non-equivalent control group model). This model assumes the existence of two groups, a control group and an experimental one, in which the members of both were not distributed randomly, but by volunteering (each participant joined the group they wanted). In both the experimental group, which benefited from the personal optimization module (as “treatment”), and the control group, which did not benefit from the personal optimization module, the ability to regulate emotion has been evaluated through the Perth Emotion Regulation Competency Inventory (PERCI).

Moreover, the present research combines quantitative research, by measuring the capacity for emotional regulation, with qualitative methods conducted through experiential intervention (in the case of experimental group). The intervention was realized according to the principles of Experiential Unification therapy, and the main technique used was creative meditation, which was the point of development of the tool “The Story of the Hero”.

3.2. Subjects

The experimental group consisted, initially, of 8 people (7 women, 1 man), until the completion of the module remaining 6 (5 women, 1 man), aged between 20 and 27 years. Of the 6 people, 4 had studied psychology, one had medical studies and one worked in sales. The general motivations for participating in the group were related to the desire for self-knowledge and development, acceptance of negative emotions, as an integrant part of life, and gaining optimal strategies for regulating negative emotions, especially sadness and anger.

The control group also consisted of 8 people (6 women, 2 men), until the end of the intervention remaining 6 (5 women, 1 man), aged between 23 and 26 years. Of the 6 people, three had studied psychology, one medicine, one sociology and one worked in sales.

3.3. Material and Measures

As mentioned, the instrument used to measure the capacity for emotional regulation, pre- and post-test was Perth Emotion Regulation Competency Inventory (PERCI). As stated by Preece, Becerra, Robinson, Dandy & Allan (2018), PERCI is a 32-item self-assessment test that measures people’s ability to regulate both positive and negative emotions. PERCI

consists of 8 subscales (Negative-Controlling experience, Negative-Inhibiting behavior, Negative-Activating behavior, Negative-Tolerating emotions, Positive-Controlling experience, Positive-Inhibiting behavior, Positive-Activating behavior, Positive-Tolerating emotions) and 5 composite scales (Negative-Emotion regulation, Positive-Emotion regulation, General-Facilitating hedonic goals, Positive-Containing emotions, General-Emotion regulation).

The PERCI scores are calculated based on population average and standard deviation, as follows:

- scores with 1SD or more above average indicate “low ability” or “significant difficulty”;
- scores less than 1SD above average (whether up or down) indicate “average ability” or “average difficulty”;
- scores with more than 1SD below average indicate a “high skill” or “low difficulty”.

The PERCI questionnaire was validated by two studies conducted by Preece et al. (2018), the first one on a sample of 231 adults and the second one on a sample of 1175 adults. Both studies had a high internal consistency value, which attests the validity of the test. ($\alpha > 0.7$).

Given that in order to establish the capacity of emotional regulation, it was necessary to report to the mean and standard deviation, and the initial questionnaire was conducted on the Australian population, an adaptation of the questionnaire was performed by me on the young population in Romania. The sample consisted of 311 persons, aged between 18 and 30 years, 195 women and 116 men (N=311; M=100.11; SD=30.118).

The sample met all the conditions of normal distribution (Table 1):

- Skewness = 0.271 (-1<0.271<1);
- Kurtosis = -0.506 (-1<-0.506<1);
- Kolmogorov-Smirnov sig = 0.2 >0.05.

Table 1. Data normalization

	PERCI
N	311
Missing	0
Mean	100.11
Median	97.0
Standard deviation	30.113
Minimum	32
Maximum	178
Skewness	.271
Std. error skewness	.138
Kurtosis	-.506
Std. error kurtosis	.276
Kolmogorov-Smirnov	.200

In terms of test fidelity, the internal consistency, Cronbach's α , is higher than 0.70, both in the case of the "General Emotional Regulation Capacity" Scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$) and in the case of all other subscales, and composite scales, which demonstrates that the test measures what it set out to measure.

Table 2. Internal consistency

		M	SD	Cronbach's α	
Subscales	Negative-Controlling experience	15.16	5.363	.790	
	Negative-Inhibiting behavior	13.59	5.865	.826	
	Negative-Activating behavior	16.33	6.341	.908	
	Negative-Tolerating emotions	15.39	5.809	.798	
	Positive-Controlling experience	13.15	5.788	.792	
	Positive-Inhibiting behavior	10.11	5.230	.814	
	Positive-Activating behavior	9.79	5.520	.901	
	Positive-Tolerating emotions	6.58	4.322	.888	
	Composites	Negative-Emotion regulation	60.48	18.326	.789
		Positive-Emotion regulation	39.63	16.749	.813
General-Facilitating hedonic goals		73.63	21.911	.806	
Positive-Containing emotions		26.48	12.742	.793	
General-Emotion regulation		100.11	30.113	.831	

During the personal optimization group, the main instrument used was "The Story of the Hero", a set of creative meditations focused on emotional regulation, resignification and integration of emotions. The set of meditations was designed as a fairy tale, the hero of the story, having a mission, that of (re) discovery of the Self, following a path and some obstacles to overcome. Each of the 6 creative meditations used corresponded to a

'chapter' of the fairy tale: in the first 5 chapters the Hero makes contact with each of the basic emotions addressed in this module (Happiness, Sadness, Fear, Anger, Contempt), whereas the 6th meditation aimed to resume the journey, the participants being placed in a witness state. They only noticed how their Hero's journey had gone so far, having the opportunity to objectively observe how they related to their own emotions.

At the end of each 'chapter' of the 'fairy tale', the re-signification process was supported by expressive-creative techniques (drawing, musical instruments, collage, etc.).

3.4. Procedure

Several steps were followed to accomplish this study. In the first phase, the experimental and control groups were formed. Participation in each of the two groups was voluntary, subjects being able to choose which group to join.

In the pre-test phase, both the participants of the experimental group and those of the control group completed the Perth Emotion Regulation Competency Inventory (PERCI).

The actual intervention phase, in the case of experimental group, lasted for a period of three months and included 10 group sessions. The first two sessions took place face to face and were intended to set the therapeutic framework, the principles of the group and also to increase cohesion and alliance. The rest of the sessions took place online, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first online session aimed to facilitate accommodation to the online work setting, reset the framework and principles of the group, as well as to re-discuss the expectations and objectives related to the optimization group in the new context. The next six sessions corresponded to the unfolding of "The Story of the Hero". The participants came into contact, through meditation and expressive-creative techniques, with their inner hero and their emotions. Meditations which took the structure of a fairy tale, helped participants overcome the limits of the rational side and allow themselves to connect to their emotional side. Also, the expressive-creative techniques facilitated the resignification process (after each meditation participants were encouraged to express symbolically, through drawing, collage, music, etc. the way the meeting with their emotion took place, and, following the discussions within the group, to change something about initial symbol, so that their relationship with that emotion would improve). In the last session, participants concluded about their process and gave each other

feedback. They also offered me feedback, regarding the way I moderated the optimization group.

In the post-test phase, the Perth Emotion Regulation Competency Inventory (PERCI) was applied again, for both the experimental and control group.

IV. Results

The results of the study were divided into quantitative and qualitative dimensions of change.

Regarding the quantitative dimension of post-intervention change, the following results were obtained:

To verify the first work hypothesis: “We assume that, following the personal optimization module, will be obtained a statistically significant improvement in terms of the ability to regulate emotion, in the case of the experimental group”, the nonparametric test for dependent samples, Wilcoxon, was used. The result of the statistical test was $sig = 0.046 < 0.05$, which means that the null hypothesis is rejected and the research hypothesis is accepted. The results show that there is a statistically significant difference between emotional regulation measured pre-test and that measured post-test, in the case of the experimental group. This means that, in their case, the general ability to regulate their emotions has significantly increased.

In addition, significant improvements have also been found in the case of: “Negative-Inhibiting behavior” (NIB) subscale, which means that the ability to control one’s actions when manifesting negative emotions has increased ($sig = 0.046 < 0.05$); the composite scale “Negative-Emotion regulation” (NER), which means that the general capacity to regulate negative emotions has increased ($sig = 0.043 < 0.05$); and the composite scale “General-Facilitating hedonic goals” (GFHG), which means that the ability to reduce negative emotions and enhance positive ones has increased, i.e. obtaining pleasure and avoiding pain ($sig = 0.028 < 0.05$).

Table 3. Experimental group pre-post test results

	N	Mean	SD	Sig.
GER_t	6	98.67	24.039	0.046
GER_r	6	84.67	21.933	
NIB_t	6	13.33	4.761	0.046
NIB_r	6	10.17	3.920	
NER_t	6	55.17	15.118	0.043
NER_r	6	45.83	14.359	
GFHG_t	6	70.33	21.238	0.028
GFHG_r	6	59.00	19.463	

Regarding the second work hypothesis 1.2. “We assume that, following the personal optimization

module, the experimental group will obtain significantly higher post-test results than in the case of the control group, in terms of emotional regulation capacity”, the Mann Whitney nonparametric test for independent samples was used. According to the results, if there were no statistically significant differences between the experimental group and the control group in terms of emotional regulation capacity ($sig = 0.31 > 0.05$) pre-test, the post-test results indicate a significant difference ($sig = 0.04 < 0.05$), which confirms the research hypothesis and demonstrates the effectiveness of the personal optimization program.

Table 4. Intergroup Statistic

IV	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error mean
Intergroup_t				
with intervention	6	98.67	24.039	9.814
without intervention	6	111.50	19.997	8.164
Intergroup_r				
with intervention	6	84.67	21.993	8.954
without intervention	6	110.00	15.362	6.272

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of intergrup_t is the same across categories of IV.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.310 ¹	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of intergrup_r is the same across categories of IV.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.041 ¹	Reject the null hypothesis.

Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

¹Exact significance is displayed for this test.

The qualitative evaluation of the progress was made, on the one hand, during the group sessions, by observing and analyzing the participants’ attitudes towards their own emotions, and on the other hand, comparing the drawing “My inner hero and his emotions” that the participants made on the first session, with the same drawing they made on the final session. Also, after the final session, participants were asked to write a self-analysis essay about their experience.

During the personal optimization group, a series of beliefs and attitudes that the participants had about their emotions, that blocked them in attaining contact with themselves, came out. The most common thought among the participants was that it would be too painful for them to come in contact with their negative emotions. The most common belief among participants

was that connecting with their negative emotions would have the effect of disturbing them so much that it would be difficult for them to refocus to cope with everyday challenges. The general tendency was to avoid contact with negative emotions and even, in the case of some participants, to deny the effects these produce in their lives. Giving a shape, a structure, a color, or face to their emotions, through meditation and expressive-creative techniques, namely working with a concrete symbol and not with an abstract concept, helped them gain better control over their emotions, as they could model, draw, change the shape of their emotions as they needed. Also, during the optimization module, participants were encouraged to find resources after meeting each of their emotions. That helped them to see the *heroes behind the dragons*.

There were noted differences between the initial version of the drawing “*My inner hero and his emotions*” and its final version. If initially not all the participants had represented themselves in the drawing in the form of the Hero, in the final version they included themselves in the drawing, which meant that they became more present and more consciously aware in relation to their emotions. Participants also symbolized emotions in a clearer and more structured form.

The self-analysis essay also helped participants to get a clearer picture of the progress they made. Some of them found, through the essay, new valences of the process, which they had not initially noticed.

At the end of the module, participants described themselves as being more aware of their emotions, more able to control their emotional responses and more understanding and indulgent towards their emotions.

V. Conclusions

Both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of change come to confirm the main hypothesis of this study: *We assume that, through the personal optimization and self-knowledge module, which is based on “The Story of the Hero” tool, a significant improvement will be achieved in terms of emotional regulation, the ability to offer new meanings and to integrate one’s emotions.*

The Hero’s journey gave participants the opportunity to observe themselves, to see how they relate with their emotions, how they tend to act when they feel overwhelmed by emotions, and to find resources within them or in the environment to help

them overcome obstacles. During the trip, they discovered such obstacles, blockages, but also resources to mobilize them prevail over these. They also had the opportunity to look all their emotions ‘in the mirror’ and to allow themselves to integrate them symbolically. They offered and re-offered meanings to life experiences and became successful in finding more appropriate emotional responses to difficult situations.

In terms of emotional regulation, significant improvements have been observed in the ability to regulate negative emotions, control behavior when negative emotions occurred, and in their ability to reduce negative emotions and increase positive ones.

A future direction of the study would imply the devising of three groups: a control group and two experimental ones: one to take place in the classical version, face-to-face, and one to be carried out in the online environment, the experiential intervention being based, in case of both groups, on “The Story of the Hero”. This would represent a breakthrough in qualitative research, because, through it, one could find out what are the influences of the work environment, in the case of experiential personal development groups.

Another future direction would be for the module to cover a wider range of emotional experiences, including positive emotions and complex social emotions, such as guilt and shame.

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