

Poetic and therapeutic encounters in an adolescent drama group

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Abstract

This article reports on a research project that explored the use of drama and movement in facilitating the transformation of narratives of adolescents. Narrative therapy and social constructionism were combined with concepts in drama and movement to create poetic moments. The focus was on transformative dialogue, responsive events, and poetic moments that suddenly open the eyes for a different way out of a problem or into a new way of thinking. A group of adolescents participated in a 10-week programme in which they explored different processes, stories, and relationships. The participants responded positively and spontaneously to constructing a movement drama with a social theme through a process of creative interaction and conversation. A review of the realities and knowledge constructed revealed how drama, movement, and narrative therapy may be used therapeutically with adolescents in a group context. Furthermore, the research showed how a social constructionist approach, linked to languaging and movement, can create poetic moments that may benefit the creative therapeutic process. From a creative position, the author hopes that the construction process reflected on in this research project may lead to new discoveries in meaningful conversations.

Keywords

Drama therapy, group therapy, language, movement, narratives, poetic moments, postmodernism, social constructionism

As an individual with a drama degree and a psychology background, postmodern thinking presented the author with an opportunity to bring two worlds together on the research stage. The author envisaged how an adolescent group would explore physically ‘moving’ their own narratives with the direction of a therapist, as part of actively constructing a movement drama, thereby

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reinforcing a deeper understanding of their own stories and the expressive languages of movement and drama. According to Cecchin (1992), therapists become participant actors in therapeutic stories. He points out that the therapeutic story is a process of co-construction, where the therapist shares the responsibility for the context that emerges in therapy.

In exploring the creative and therapeutic processes involved in dramatising and moving the narratives of a group of adolescents, the author wanted to focus on 'transformative dialogue' (Gergen, McNamee, & Barret, 2001), responsive events, or poetic moments. According to Watzlawick (as cited in Hoyt, 1998), the most frequent factor that brings about change in human lives is what Franz Alexander called a 'corrective emotional experience' in 1946. This may be viewed as a 'poetic moment' that suddenly opens the eyes for a different way out of a problem or into a new way of thinking. A therapeutic space would therefore be created to facilitate conversations that allow adolescents to tap into their creativity and develop future possibilities.

Cunliffe (2002) describes poetic moments as non-theoretical, unpredictable, practical ways of talking that occur in the living, responsive moment. According to Deissler (1996), poetic moments can be seen as relationship-engaged activities that consist of images that are not 'in our heads' but ones that we initially show or express to each other, involuntarily, in our bodily ways of humanly reacting or responding to such events. Wittgenstein (1953) calls these poetic moments 'reminders' because they direct our attention to taken-for-granted, embodied aspects of everyday forms of talk. According to Lock and Strong (2010), it is in our embodied interactions and experiences with others that we benefit from a sort of dialogue with our circumstances and in relating to other human beings.

Creative therapy within the narrative metaphor seems to be one of the less explored phenomena in South African psychology, and 'psychodrama seems to be known more for its applications than for its theories' (Kellerman, 1992, p. 33). This study was therefore exploratory by nature (Durrheim, 2004) and followed a constructionist paradigm (Freedman & Combs, 1996), so as to broaden the applicability of creative therapeutic methods within a postmodern paradigm.

The goals of the study were to explore and describe the following:

- How group therapy and poetic moments happen as part of a drama group process.
- How creative therapeutic interventions can benefit the adolescent and therapist in group therapy.
- How transformative dialogues/poetic moments open and construct a creative and therapeutic space.

Background (exposition)

According to Sey (2004), postmodernism is a broad term for many approaches that set themselves up in opposition to the coherence and rationality of the modern world. Postmodern psychology tends to move towards concepts such as understanding, language, culture, and myth. Concepts such as consciousness, unconsciousness, and the psyche recede into the background (Bakker, 1999). Postmodernism has introduced to the social sciences its use of interpretive methodologies based on the model of language and discourse (Sey, 2004).

Emunah (1994) writes that drama therapy can be defined as the systematic and intentional use of drama/theatre to achieve psychological change and growth. Manifestations of drama in the field of therapy include psychodrama (Verhofstadt-Deneve, 2000), social theatre (Boal, 2000), playback theatre (Dauber & Fox, 1999), and movement as a linguistic activity (Laban, 1980). Drama therapy acknowledges the relevance and interdependence of health and creativity in an approach to space and healing that is interdisciplinary (Jones, 2010). According to Dayton (2005), drama therapy

allows for ‘a creative, symbolic expression of thinking, feeling and behaviour that can lead to an enhanced creativity and spontaneity in the individual and an increased ability to perceive and take action toward desirable life choices’ (p. 136).

Movement as a linguistic activity is directly related to this research project. The body becomes a pathway between perception and action, from which thoughts and understanding are later constructed (Lock & Strong, 2010). Moving the body not only reflects what the individual is thinking, physical processes can create thought processes (Chodorow, 1991). Listening to our own body data probes the possibilities of a physicality of knowing (Snowber, as cited in Bagley & Cancienne, 2002). Musicant (2007) notes that dance/movement therapy and authentic movement have a shared theoretical and methodological focus on the ongoing stream of bodily felt information. According to Shotter (1996), as living, embodied beings (as open systems), we cannot help but be spontaneously responsive to events occurring around us. The concepts of analogue (analogical) and digital (logical), which have become part of the daily general discourse about communication technologies and environments, also resonate with the ‘movement as a linguistic activity’ concept. We cannot not communicate (Watzlawick, 1978). Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) declare that analogue communication includes all non-verbal communication, and they view this form of communication as our primary means to communicate messages about relationships.

Watzlawick (1978) suggests that while much of our intellectual understanding of the world is centred in the dominant hemisphere or ‘left’ brain, much of our more irrational and often unconscious behaviour is determined by the non-dominant hemisphere or ‘right’ brain. ‘Understanding affective emotive processes may provide a scientific foundation for new affective and body orientated therapies’ (Fosha, Siegel, & Solomon, 2009, p. 4). Barker (1992) states that the left cerebral hemisphere seems to lack the creativity needed to come up with innovative responses to challenges. Effective creative therapy with the focus on identifying and creating poetic moments in movement and drama would require constructing languages that can bypass the intellectual ‘left’ brain and find a way into the more creative ‘right’ brain.

The author wanted to expand relational knowledge between participants in the therapeutic context through expressive language. ‘To understand meanings is not, at root, to know what words mean, but to know what things mean – in relation to our own perspective’ (Lock & Strong, 2010, p. 51). Creating a relationship with expressive language relates to a form of re-authoring (Freedman & Combs, 1996), which assists persons to resolve problems in creative ways (White, 1995). In this research project, the focus was on the active and therapeutic languages adolescents created in drama and movement within a group context.

In creating a movement drama by making use of the adolescents’ own voices, bodies, stories, and reflections, group processes inevitably played an important role in the therapeutic context. According to Yalom (1985), therapeutic change occurs through an intricate interplay of various guided human experiences. The therapy analogue of the client–therapist relationship becomes broader in group therapy. According to Moreno (as cited in Kellerman, 1992), every participant in psychodrama is a potential therapeutic agent to the others. It is therefore important to organise a therapeutic drama group in such a way that a therapeutic atmosphere can develop and cohesiveness can be established.

Method and process (complication)

In the author’s mind, therapy is a site for the enactment of narratives of various kinds. The therapist and client participate in a process of creative change. Keeney (1990) remarks that ‘the creative therapist cares less about loyalty to texts and institutions and more about experiencing, utilizing

and sharing the creative inventions of one's own imagination' (p. 23). The author's construction of therapy is informed by ethnodrama (Knowles & Cole, 2008) and therefore does not draw a line between the dramatic and the therapeutic (Cowley as cited in Bagley & Cancienne, 2002) or between therapy and research. Drama and movement create a therapeutic space of dynamic possibilities where the visible and invisible become partners within linguistic action, all of which become part of the research process.

Participants

Against the backdrop of creating a movement drama, 13 adolescents (1 boy and 12 girls) between the ages of 13 and 17 were selected from a free-participant drama group that formed part of a larger private drama school where the author taught creative drama, representing a specific social group as well as a convenient sample (Durrheim, 2004). The sample is therefore not representative of all adolescents and is skewed towards people interested in drama as a medium of expression. It is also skewed in terms of gender, which may impact the interpretation of the tasks and the way the gender issues were represented in the performance itself.

Group therapy criteria were taken into consideration as the author planned the group meetings and process. In the end, the participants who took part in the research project met on a weekly basis for 90 min for 10 weeks. The sessions took place in a large multipurpose room with chairs, drama blocks, a sound system, and some props.

Procedure

If 'epistemology specifies the nature of the relationship between the author (knower) and what can be known' (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2004, p. 6), the author wanted to use the metaphor of the director rehearsing with a group of actors and an unknown script. Social constructionists do not like to place research or data collecting methods in a preconceived structure or category (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2004). This ultimately implies that the author used a variety of data collection methods, which suited the type of study, the group, and process.

The performative and creative process created a therapeutic community of discovery (Bagley & Cancienne, 2002) and growth that were observed and explored as part of the research project. This relates to what Kvale (1995) refers to as pragmatic validity where knowledge is action rather than simply observation and where there is a commitment in research to act upon interpretations. Externalising movement and conversations (White, 1993) encouraged the adolescents to provide accounts of the effects of meaning created in the therapeutic space on their lives in a language of action. Through exercises, engagement, the use of images, and different forms of talk (all units of analysis), a movement drama was constructed that could be seen as a metaphor for the journey the group went on.

Preparation and informed consent. Before the actual 10-week programme commenced, the author shared the types of exercises and possible outcomes (performable product) and process of the research project with the 13 participants in a pre-get-together. According to Jacobs, Harvill, and Masson (1994), one usually makes use of warm-up activities, engaging activities, conversations, and a closing experience in group therapy. Participants were also made aware of possible minor physical risks involved and of the fact that data were going to be video recorded to be possibly used in the future for academic articles and further research. They were informed about confidentiality and their rights. Both the participants and their parents/guardians completed consent forms and received research letters.

During sessions 1–7, chosen exercises (see Figure 1) informed the participants on different levels of experience and at the same time created a space for narratives to naturally unfold. The last three sessions focused on creating a tangible end product. The group also visited a professional recording studio to record their voices expressing themed one-liners and to combine it with emotive pieces of music. As work-shopping sessions continued, the participants became part of constructing a concrete movement drama that had to be performable in front of an audience.

Data collection methods

Exercises and rehearsals. Different units of analysis were generated through creative exercises that stimulate self-exploration, narration, creativity, and group work. The exercises used in the programme were chosen specifically because they facilitate the ability of participants to express themselves openly and directly while creating a feeling of comfort and shared interest, giving them the opportunity to explore their minds and bodies in creative, therapeutic, and dramatic ways in a group therapy setting. The hope was that these exercises would create poetic moments. The exercises used in the programme were chosen from various sources in the field of drama (Barrager-Dunne, 1997; Boal, 2000; Laban, 1980; Lovelace, 1996), which included movement, relaxation, playback theatre, improvisation, voice work, and performance. Some were used as is, and others were adapted to meet the needs of the group. The exercises are divided into categories, for a sense of direction, see Figure 1.

Conversations and performances. Central to this research project was a methodology that drew on narrative and performative inquiry (Belliveau, 2006) from a social constructionist viewpoint. The movement drama originated from the narratives of or dialogues with the adolescents. Working from a social constructionist viewpoint, the author focused on different narratives that could be analysed within the data collection process. Some of these narratives consisted of self-narratives. This is a process of arranging experiences and events in sequences across time to arrive at a coherent account of the self and the world around us (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Within the domain of arts-informed research (Blumenfeld-Jones, 2002), the author wanted to explore the narratives of adolescents in a way that would be creative, self-reflective, interactive, conversational, and finally

Exercise Categories

- o **Drama exercises:** Creative advertisement exercise on laughter theme, improvised video recorded stories, smile game, questions and reflecting on group processes, name games, emotions and facial expressions, mime hand movements
- o **Movement exercises:** Yoga exercises on mood music, Columbian hypnosis, experimental movement exercise based drawings, bodies in big spaces, unknot game
- o **Explorative exercises:** Group storytelling, relaxation and imaginary trip, fake relaxation on 'laughter' CD, mood music and drawing, record dreams on paper, share dreams, share favourites, general conversation about life, parachute game, sharing general life themes, identifying a main theme

The use of exercises and creative therapeutic techniques took place over a period of seven weeks. The data were plural recorded in writing and on DVD.

Figure 1. Exercise categories.

performative. Traditional distinctions between data collection and data analysis thus fell away to some extent, and the distinctions between research and therapy were blurred as well.

Identifying and moving poetic moments. Identifying poetic moments suggested that the author had to become more aware of the obvious taken-for-granted moments in the group therapy context and trust the co-constructed reality. Constantly interacting as languaging agents (Cowley, 2006) suggested that poetic moments would be part of most of the creative processes. As the process moved along, the creation of the actual movement drama started taking on form around an abuse/power theme related to women’s place/role in the world, which the adolescents started interpreting critically. The therapist highlighted these meaningful poetic moments by exploring it verbally with the participants. It was non-directively incorporated into their process of construction of who they are, who they want to be, and what they want to share. This led to an embodied meaning-making process of circular, experiential learning – that combines the body and the mind in an active and layered process (Haber & Weiss, 1999).

Reflections/notes/DVD. With all the participants in the group playing the role of the author, the material and interpretation thereof became richer. In the end, a partnership approach (Alderson, 2001) led to the development of original thoughts and new theories. The group of adolescents constantly acted as their own reflecting team (Andersen, 1992). Myerhoff (1986) defines the above as ‘ceremonies which deal with the problems of invisibility and marginality; they are strategies that provide opportunities for being seen and in one’s own terms, garnering witnesses to one’s worth, vitality and being’ (p. 267). The final performance formed part of the representation of the research project in the form of a DVD.

The performance comes to life

The author created a diagram (see Figure 2) as a framework for what was expected to happen in the creative therapeutic process of transformative dialogue and poetic moments during group sessions. This inevitably became a circular process that could be observed not only in individual sessions but

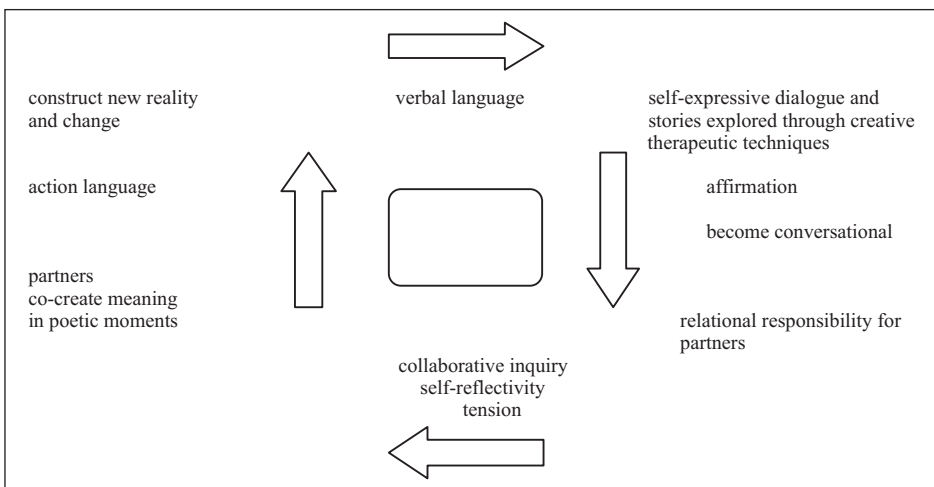


Figure 2. Transformative programme outline.

also as part of the complete programme. The figure combines what the author perceives as academically and practically possible in creative therapy from a social constructionist point of view.

In the process of creating a main narrative to work with, a relationship developed between the speaking and moving of narratives in a space that created a sense of creative inquiry. In the development of the movement drama, the participants started appreciating the process of jointly constructing meaning and being responsible for it. The adolescents uncovered a theme, 'Women's place/role in the world', and started constructing an end product.

In our conversations surrounding women's issues, we explored a 'different kind of conversation' where the participants were asked to speak as unique individuals, expressing their own ideas, being representative of adolescent thoughts or morals. They were voicing their own ideas, creating unique outcomes (White, 1993), and taking ownership of the process. Questions asked and some of the responses appear in Figure 3.

The process of constructing a story lent itself to the process of constructionist conversations. The participants were now in a space where they needed to listen, appreciate, and incorporate different views and stories into an embodied form, not only as a group but also as individuals, to be able to present an end product. This was a poetic moment where real growth and sustainable construction were observable as participants started physically improvising and 'moving' to the words in Figure 3. To place these resources in group motion sowed the seeds for alternative visions of the future (Gergen et al., 2001). The embodied journey and insightful poetic moments had brought them to a place of discovery.

Results (climax)

The piece titled 'The Silent Scream' was performed in front of a live audience, which consisted of members from the adolescents' peer group, friends, family, community members, and teachers. In watching the movement drama, the author observed how the participants experienced a sense of the tension that exists between the body and mind and the language that they attempt to speak

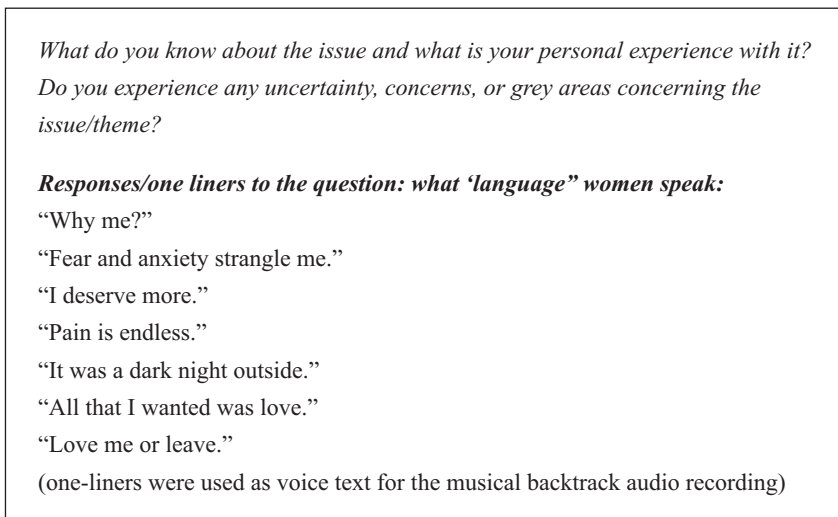


Figure 3. Examples of questions and responses from the group.

separately. The ‘women’ on stage are seeking a voice in a physical world. As the movement drama develops, these body/mind concepts become more integrated as we focus on the physical element of the mind. In the end, the title of the movement drama supports the integrating language that is shared with the audience. See Figure 4 for a summary of the performance.

Discussion (resolution)

The process of therapy may be compared to the actual movement drama *The Silent Scream*. In the first scene, the group is making a statement that needs to be explored. In the second scene, they share facts and different views on a topic. In the final and third scene, these constructs become embodied understandings that finally lead to insight and change – the ultimate poetic moment. By sharing the performance/DVD, the group affirms what they have learnt and created. According to White (1995), such documentation makes change more sustainable and confirms the participants’ newly developed views of themselves. The message makes them part of society; their views and feelings become tangible and their action ‘effective’ (Kvale, 1995, p. 35).

During our explorative process, we created a movement drama with a social theme; an ongoing action/reflection loop (Hoyt, 1998) was created throughout the process. As part of the process, the group was exposed to spontaneous poetic moments of change, which were related to personal stories although we did not consciously focus on them. ‘Drama and narrative together can open and expand therapeutic space and possibilities for alternative stories, self-descriptions, and change’ (Barrager-Dunne, 1997, p. 72).

The performance: The Silent Scream

Scene 1

Adolescents create an embodied statue representing abused women. The audience shares a sense of their disbelief and pain, listening to their unique voices on the backtrack and becoming part of their disembodied movements. A male figure demanding ‘love’ ends off the scene - establishing a negative power that controls these figures.

Scene 2

In the next scene the adolescents explore two stories in a mime fashion. One scene shows a woman whose drink gets spiked at a party, whereafter she is raped and falls pregnant. She eventually goes for an abortion and commits suicide. The other scene is about a young girl who happily falls in love, becomes pregnant, is abused by her spouse and eventually kills him. The power of the two messages is shared with the audience in a stylistic fashion. The two scenes are performed at the same time and visually they give the audience insight into similar yet different forms of women abuse.

Scene 3

In this scene the adolescents focus on emotions and share them with the audience in a metaphorical fashion using their bodies as messengers (body language) of empowerment. In the end they share the message of hope by creating new embodied statues.

Figure 4. The performance.

Postmodern therapists/directors believe knowledge, which is socially arrived at, changes itself in each moment of interaction. Ambiguity and uncertainty have become part of social constructionists' therapies. In this way, it leaves the process open to change and adaptation. It is notable how the directing metaphor (verb) might change to a direction metaphor (noun), ultimately becoming a destination in the process. It is also clear that theatre may be a metaphor for therapy.

It seems that the relationship formed between actors and the audience possibly contains elements of that which transpires between directors and actors. Everything becomes improvisational, whether it is a fixed script or a therapeutic conversation. Hoffmann (1992, p. 57) refers to this way of creating therapy as the 'therapists' narrative'. Postmodern therapists/directors believe knowledge, which is socially arrived at, changes itself in each moment of interaction. Hope and trust become major therapeutic tools for the postmodern therapist. This hope is not embedded in the therapists' make-up or knowledge but in the process. The therapist shares in the responsibility for the context that emerges in therapy (Cecchin, 1992). Finally, the author always wanted to act and interact creatively through the medium of drama with audiences and students, and now the same may be possible with clients in therapy.

In a follow-up group interview of 90 min, 1 month after the performance, the adolescents reported a deeper awareness of the self and others as well as experiences related to personality integration and enhanced relationships. The interview data were recorded on DVD, and findings were summarised from studying the material. Their talk reflected a sense of empowerment through creating a harmonious language between minds and bodies. According to Meyer (2010), the interplay between expression and containment can help the adolescent gain control over their emotions. The movement drama also created a social and psychological connection with the outside world in its performance, making the group more aware of the role they play in communities.

Conclusion (curtain call)

This article would like to draw therapists' attention to unnoticed distinctions and responsive moments that have always been part of therapy but have been overlooked. In this dialogical context, the client and the therapist shape language, reality, share knowledge, commitment, and therapeutic outcome.

Drama and movement have shaped the form of this inquiry. The author hopes that this way of doing and alternative form of looking at questions in therapy may have a positive effect on the uses of this type of inquiry in the future of psychotherapy research in South Africa. Ultimately psychotherapy is a performing art (Keeney, 1990). The potential benefits of this research project will only be realised when these approaches are more readily used, when their impact can be studied further and in more detail. This is an exploratory study, and it would be important for further investigations to consider more mixed groups as well as possibly diversity between homogeneous groups, and as movement is a universal language, it may be that more constructive findings will come to light.

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