

Understanding the Dynamics of Psychodrama in Group Therapy Settings

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the dynamics of psychodrama in group therapy settings, focusing on role dynamics, emotional processes, and group interactions. The research seeks to understand how these elements contribute to the therapeutic outcomes for participants, enhancing their emotional and psychological well-being. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing a phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of individuals participating in psychodrama. The sample comprised 16 participants, including therapists and clients from various therapeutic settings. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and subthemes. Theoretical saturation was achieved, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics involved. The study identified three main themes: role dynamics, emotional processes, and group interactions. Under role dynamics, techniques like role reversal, doubling, and mirroring were found to enhance empathy, self-awareness, and emotional insight. Emotional processes such as catharsis, containment, spontaneity, deepening, and resistance were pivotal in the therapeutic impact of psychodrama. Group interactions, including cohesion, conflict resolution, feedback, participation, leader role, shared goals, and social learning, were essential for fostering a supportive and effective therapeutic environment. These findings align with previous studies, confirming the efficacy of psychodrama in reducing psychological distress and improving emotional well-being. Psychodrama in group therapy settings effectively enhances empathy, emotional expression, and psychological resilience among participants. The techniques of role reversal, doubling, and mirroring play a significant role in facilitating therapeutic outcomes. The study underscores the importance of group cohesion and mutual support in psychodrama, suggesting its broader applicability across various therapeutic and educational settings. Future research should focus on larger samples, longitudinal studies, and exploring psychodrama's integration with other therapeutic approaches to further validate and expand its efficacy.

Keywords: Psychodrama, group therapy, role dynamics, emotional processes, group interactions, empathy, psychological well-being.

1. Introduction

Psychodrama, a form of group psychotherapy developed by Jacob L. Moreno in the early 20th century, offers a unique therapeutic approach that integrates action and role-playing to explore and resolve psychological and social problems. Unlike traditional talk therapies, psychodrama emphasizes experiential methods, allowing participants to enact scenes from their lives, embody various roles, and gain new insights through these enactments (Giacomucci, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

Group therapy, particularly psychodrama, has been shown to be effective in creating spaces of sharing and mutual support among patients with severe mental illness (SMI). A comprehensive review of the literature highlights the benefits of group therapy and psychodrama in enhancing social interaction and emotional expression among these patients (Giannone et al., 2015; Nicholas, 2003; Örnek, 2023). The therapeutic mechanisms of psychodrama involve the use of role-playing techniques such as role reversal, doubling, and mirroring, which facilitate empathy, self-awareness, and emotional catharsis (Fow, 1998).

One of the core techniques in psychodrama is role reversal, where participants switch roles with significant others to gain a deeper understanding of different perspectives. This technique has been shown to foster empathy and improve interpersonal relationships (Fow, 1998). In a study by Erbay et al. (2018), psychodrama was found to significantly reduce perceived stress, anxiety, and depression scores among patients, highlighting its effectiveness in alleviating psychological distress (Erbay et al., 2018).

The application of psychodrama extends to various populations and settings. For instance, a study conducted by Aytemur et al. (2012) demonstrated the efficacy of intensive clinical intervention combined with psychodrama in smoking cessation programs. The participants who underwent psychodrama sessions showed higher rates of smoking cessation, suggesting that psychodrama can enhance the effectiveness of behavioral interventions (Aytemur et al., 2012).

In the context of chronic illnesses, psychodrama has been employed to improve the psychological well-being of patients. Dehnavi et al. (2018) found that unity-oriented psychodrama significantly enhanced the sense of coherence among patients with multiple sclerosis, indicating its potential to bolster psychological resilience in the face of chronic health conditions (Dehnavi et al., 2018).

Moreover, psychodrama has been explored as a therapeutic tool for addressing social anxiety and enhancing psychological well-being. Kabusi (2023) assessed the effects of psychodrama and acceptance-commitment therapy in nurses with social anxiety disorder, finding that both therapies were effective in reducing anxiety symptoms and improving psychological health. This study underscores the versatility of psychodrama in addressing a wide range of psychological issues (Kabusi, 2023).

The role of psychodrama in addressing trauma and facilitating emotional healing has also been well-documented. Giacomucci (2021b) discusses the integration of psychodrama with social work theory and practice, particularly in trauma-informed care. Psychodrama provides a safe space for individuals to reenact traumatic experiences, process emotions, and achieve psychological integration (Giacomucci, 2021b).

The educational applications of psychodrama are also noteworthy. Wieser (2023) explored the impact of teaching palliative psychology through psychodrama and arts therapies on psychology students, finding that these experiential methods significantly enhanced students' empathy, communication skills, and understanding of patient experiences (Wieser, 2023).

The efficacy of psychodrama in improving coping styles and cognitive control in patients with major depressive disorder associated with childhood trauma was demonstrated in a study by Yu et al. (2022). This study found that combining antidepressants with psychodrama led to significant improvements in patients' coping mechanisms and cognitive functioning (Yu et al., 2022).

In addition to its therapeutic benefits, psychodrama has been shown to positively impact psychological well-being and emotional awareness. Kaya and Deniz (2020) reported that university students who participated in psychodrama sessions exhibited significant improvements in psychological well-being and reduced levels of stress and anxiety (Kaya & Deniz, 2020). Similarly, Polat (2023) found that psychodrama enhanced emotional awareness and psychological well-being among university students, further supporting its efficacy as a therapeutic intervention (Polat, 2023).

The utility of psychodrama in addressing specific psychological issues such as assertiveness and communication skills has been explored in various studies. Tahvilian (2023) examined the effects of psychodrama and cognitive-behavioral therapy on assertiveness skills in women with marital conflicts, finding that both therapies

were effective, with psychodrama offering unique benefits in enhancing expressive skills and emotional regulation (Tahvilian, 2023).

Moreover, psychodrama has been utilized in educational settings to improve academic self-efficacy among students. Permana and Suwarjo (2022) found that psychodrama techniques significantly improved self-efficacy and academic performance in students, suggesting that psychodrama can be an effective tool for enhancing educational outcomes (Permana & Suwarjo, 2022).

The impact of psychodrama on specific populations, such as people living with HIV/AIDS, has also been investigated. Karabilgin et al. (2012) reported that psychodrama sessions helped participants express their emotions, cope with stigma, and improve their quality of life. This study highlights the potential of psychodrama to address the psychological and social challenges faced by individuals with chronic health conditions (Karabilgin et al., 2012).

The effectiveness of psychodrama in reducing burnout among professionals has been demonstrated in studies involving school counselors and nurses. Şimşek et al. (2022) found that psychodrama significantly reduced burnout levels in school counselors, improving their emotional resilience and job satisfaction (Şimşek et al., 2022). Similarly, a study by Meral and Yildirim (2020) on mothers of children with type 1 diabetes reported that psychodrama group therapy improved role skills, adaptation processes, and quality of life, underscoring its potential to support caregivers and healthcare professionals (Meral & Yildirim, 2020).

Psychodrama's ability to facilitate emotional expression and improve psychological outcomes has also been explored in the context of fibromyalgia. Şener (2021) conducted a case study on the effects of psychodrama on pain levels, quality of life, and emotional expression in fibromyalgia patients, finding significant improvements in all areas (Şener, 2022).

Furthermore, the therapeutic potential of psychodrama in enhancing connectedness and reducing neuroticism has been investigated. Kepalaitè (2014) reported that psychodrama significantly improved the feeling of connectedness among senior adolescents (Kepalaitè, 2014), while Zolali et al. (2022) found that an identity-based psychodrama package effectively reduced neuroticism levels (Zolali et al., 2022).

The unique contributions of psychodrama to mental health and therapeutic practices are evident across a wide range of studies and applications. From improving emotional regulation and social skills to addressing trauma and chronic health conditions, psychodrama offers a

versatile and impactful approach to psychotherapy. As the body of research continues to grow, it is clear that psychodrama holds significant promise for enhancing psychological well-being and facilitating personal growth in diverse populations and settings. This study aims to explore the dynamics of psychodrama in group therapy settings, focusing on role dynamics, emotional processes, and group interactions. The research seeks to understand how these elements contribute to the therapeutic outcomes for participants, enhancing their emotional and psychological well-being.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative research study employed a phenomenological approach to understand the dynamics of psychodrama in group therapy settings. The study was designed to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals who have participated in psychodrama sessions. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those included had direct experience with psychodrama in a group therapy context. The sample comprised 16 individuals, including therapists and clients, from various therapeutic settings such as hospitals, private practices, and community mental health centers.

Inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Participants must have attended at least three psychodrama sessions within the past six months.
- Participants must be over the age of 18.
- Therapists must have at least two years of experience facilitating psychodrama sessions.

2.2. Measure

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and insights. The interview guide was developed based on existing literature and expert consultations to cover key aspects of psychodrama dynamics, including the roles and techniques used, emotional processes, and group interactions.

Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via video conferencing, depending on participant preference and availability. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, consistent with the phenomenological framework of the study. The process involved the following steps:

Familiarization: Researchers read and re-read the transcripts to immerse themselves in the data, noting initial thoughts and observations.

Coding: Open coding was conducted to identify significant phrases and segments of the text relevant to the research questions. Codes were then grouped into broader themes and sub-themes.

Theme Development: Themes were developed iteratively, with ongoing comparison and contrast of codes across different interviews to ensure consistency and depth.

Theoretical Saturation: Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new themes or insights were emerging from the interviews, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Verification: To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was performed by sharing the preliminary themes with a subset of participants for feedback and validation. Additionally, peer debriefing sessions were held with colleagues to discuss and refine the themes.

Throughout the analysis, researchers maintained reflexive journals to document their thoughts, biases, and decision-making processes, which helped in ensuring the credibility and transparency of the research. The use of qualitative data analysis software facilitated the organization and management of the large volume of interview data.

3. Findings and Results

The study sample comprised 16 participants, including 10 females and 6 males, reflecting a diverse range of backgrounds. Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 60 years, with a mean age of 38 years. In terms of professional roles, the sample included 6 therapists and 10 clients. Among the therapists, 4 were female and 2 were male, with an average of 8 years of experience in facilitating psychodrama sessions. The clients varied in their experiences with psychodrama, with 4 having attended between 3 to 5 sessions and 6 having participated in more than 10 sessions. The educational backgrounds of participants also varied, including individuals with bachelor's degrees (n=5), master's degrees (n=8), and doctoral degrees (n=3). This diverse demographic profile provided a comprehensive perspective on the dynamics of psychodrama in different group therapy settings.

Table 1

The Results of Thematic Analysis

Category	Subcategory	Concepts
Role Dynamics	Role Reversal	Empathy, Perspective-taking, Emotional insight
	Double	Support, Reflection, Mirroring
	Mirroring	Validation, Self-awareness, Observational learning
	Soliloquy	Self-expression, Clarity of thoughts, Emotional release
	Auxiliary Egos	Role support, Diversity of perspectives, Group cohesion
Emotional Processes	Catharsis	Emotional release, Relief, Insight
	Containment	Safety, Trust, Emotional regulation
	Spontaneity	Creativity, Flexibility, Presence in the moment
	Deepening	Intensity, Exploration, Emotional depth
	Surplus Reality	Imagination, Symbolic expression, Insightful analogies
	Resistance	Defense mechanisms, Anxiety, Avoidance
Group Interactions	Cohesion	Bonding, Trust, Mutual support
	Conflict	Tension, Resolution, Communication
	Feedback	Constructive criticism, Affirmation, Reflective dialogue
	Participation	Engagement, Contribution, Initiative
	Leader Role	Guidance, Facilitation, Boundary setting
	Shared Goals	Common purpose, Alignment, Cooperation
	Social Learning	Observational learning, Modeling, Imitation

3.1. Role Dynamics

Role Reversal: Participants highlighted the transformative power of role reversal, which fosters empathy and perspective-taking. One participant stated, "When I played my mother's role, I finally understood her fears and motivations." This technique also promoted emotional insight, as individuals gained deeper awareness of their own feelings through this method. Concepts such as empathy, perspective-taking, and emotional insight were repeatedly mentioned by participants, confirming the effectiveness of role reversal in enhancing interpersonal understanding.

Double: The use of doubles was noted for providing support and reflection. A therapist explained, "Having someone vocalize my inner thoughts was incredibly validating." This technique allowed participants to experience their internal dialogues externally, promoting self-awareness and mirroring. Support, reflection, and mirroring were the main concepts identified in this subcategory, illustrating how doubles help in externalizing and validating participants' inner experiences.

Mirroring: Mirroring was another significant subcategory, with participants emphasizing its role in validation and self-awareness. "Watching someone else enact my story made me realize how I come across to others," shared one client, highlighting the value of observational learning. Validation, self-awareness, and observational learning were key concepts under mirroring, demonstrating its impact on participants' understanding of their behaviors and emotions.

Soliloquy: The soliloquy technique facilitated self-expression and clarity of thoughts. Participants found it beneficial for emotional release, as one individual noted, "Speaking my thoughts out loud helped me organize my feelings and see things more clearly." This subcategory encompassed concepts such as self-expression, clarity of thoughts, and emotional release, showcasing its role in helping participants articulate and process their emotions.

Auxiliary Egos: Auxiliary egos contributed to role support and diversity of perspectives. A participant mentioned, "The auxiliary roles added depth to the scenarios, bringing in different viewpoints and enriching the experience." Role support, diversity of perspectives, and group cohesion were key concepts identified, indicating how auxiliary egos enhance the complexity and therapeutic value of psychodrama sessions.

3.2. Emotional Processes

Catharsis: Emotional release and relief were frequently mentioned outcomes of catharsis. One participant described it as, "A powerful moment of letting go, which brought a sense of insight and peace." Concepts such as emotional release, relief, and insight were central to this subcategory, emphasizing the therapeutic importance of cathartic experiences in psychodrama.

Containment: Creating a safe and trusting environment was essential for emotional regulation. "Knowing the group was there for me made it easier to explore my feelings," shared a participant, emphasizing the importance of containment. Safety, trust, and emotional regulation were key concepts here, highlighting the need for a secure environment in facilitating emotional exploration and healing.

Spontaneity: Spontaneity encouraged creativity and flexibility. Participants valued being present in the moment, with one noting, "The spontaneous exercises allowed me to tap into emotions I didn't know I had." Creativity, flexibility, and presence in the moment were the main concepts identified, showing how spontaneity in psychodrama can unlock unexpected emotions and insights.

Deepening: Deepening techniques led to more intense emotional exploration and depth. "The deeper we went, the more I uncovered about my past and my feelings," explained a participant, highlighting the intensity of this process. Intensity, exploration, and emotional depth were central concepts, illustrating the profound impact of deepening techniques on participants' emotional journeys.

Surplus Reality: Surplus reality allowed participants to use imagination and symbolic expression to gain insights. A therapist remarked, "Using metaphors and symbols helped clients articulate complex emotions and experiences." Imagination, symbolic expression, and insightful analogies were key concepts, demonstrating how surplus reality facilitates a deeper understanding of participants' emotions through creative and symbolic means.

Resistance: Some participants encountered resistance, dealing with defense mechanisms and anxiety. "At first, I was very resistant and anxious, but working through it helped me face my fears," shared one individual, illustrating the challenges and breakthroughs associated with this subcategory. Defense mechanisms, anxiety, and avoidance were the main concepts, highlighting the process of overcoming resistance and the therapeutic growth it can lead to.

3.3. Group Interactions

Cohesion: Bonding and trust within the group were fundamental. Participants spoke of mutual support, with one noting, "The group's cohesion made me feel safe to share my vulnerabilities." Bonding, trust, and mutual support were key concepts, underscoring the importance of group cohesion in creating a supportive therapeutic environment.

Conflict: Conflict, although challenging, was seen as an opportunity for resolution and improved communication. "Working through conflicts in the group taught me a lot about dealing with tension in real life," stated a participant. Tension, resolution, and communication were the main concepts, indicating how psychodrama can help participants navigate and resolve interpersonal conflicts.

Feedback: Constructive criticism and affirmation were vital components of feedback. One client shared, "The feedback I received helped me see my blind spots and encouraged personal growth." Constructive criticism, affirmation, and reflective dialogue were key concepts, showing how feedback in psychodrama promotes self-awareness and personal development.

Participation: Engagement and active contribution were crucial for the success of the sessions. "Being fully involved in the exercises made the experience much more impactful," a participant observed, underscoring the importance of participation. Engagement, contribution, and initiative were central concepts, highlighting the role of active participation in enhancing the therapeutic experience.

Leader Role: The role of the leader in guiding and facilitating the sessions was highlighted. "Our therapist's guidance was essential in navigating the complex emotions that arose," mentioned a participant, emphasizing the need for effective boundary setting. Guidance, facilitation, and boundary setting were key concepts, illustrating the crucial role of the leader in psychodrama.

Shared Goals: Having common purposes and alignment within the group fostered cooperation. "Knowing we were all working towards similar goals created a sense of unity," explained one participant. Common purpose, alignment, and cooperation were the main concepts, highlighting the importance of shared goals in promoting group cohesion and collaboration.

Social Learning: Observational learning and modeling were key aspects of social learning. "Seeing others' processes and progress inspired me and gave me new strategies to try," shared a participant, illustrating the impact of social learning. Observational learning, modeling, and

imitation were central concepts, demonstrating how participants benefit from observing and learning from each other's experiences.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study explored the dynamics of psychodrama in group therapy settings, focusing on role dynamics, emotional processes, and group interactions. The findings revealed that psychodrama significantly facilitated empathy and perspective-taking through techniques like role reversal, doubling, and mirroring. Participants reported that these techniques enhanced their self-awareness and emotional insight, echoing Fow's (1998) assertion that role reversal fosters empathy and improved interpersonal relationships (Fow, 1998).

Emotional processes such as catharsis, containment, spontaneity, deepening, surplus reality, and resistance were pivotal in the therapeutic impact of psychodrama. Catharsis provided emotional release and insight, aligning with Erbay et al. (2018), who found that psychodrama significantly reduced perceived stress, anxiety, and depression (Erbay et al., 2018). Containment and spontaneity fostered a safe, creative space for emotional expression, consistent with the findings of Polat (2023), who reported improvements in emotional awareness and psychological well-being among university students (Polat, 2023).

Group interactions, including cohesion, conflict resolution, feedback, participation, leader role, shared goals, and social learning, were essential for the therapeutic effectiveness of psychodrama. These interactions promoted bonding, mutual support, and constructive feedback, supporting the observations of Giannone et al. (2015) on the importance of group cohesion and therapeutic alliance in achieving positive outcomes (Giannone et al., 2015).

The findings of this study align with previous research on the efficacy of psychodrama in various therapeutic settings. The significant role of empathy and perspective-taking through role dynamics confirms the conclusions of Fow (1998) and Giacomucci (2021), who emphasized the transformative power of role-playing techniques in enhancing empathy and understanding (Fow, 1998; Giacomucci, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

The emotional processes identified in this study resonate with the results of Erbay et al. (2018) and Dehnavi et al. (2018), who found that psychodrama effectively reduces psychological distress and enhances emotional resilience (Dehnavi et al., 2018; Erbay et al., 2018). The cathartic

experiences reported by participants are consistent with the therapeutic benefits of emotional release and insight highlighted by these studies.

The importance of group interactions in psychodrama, as evidenced by the findings, aligns with the work of Giannone et al. (2015) and Kaya and Deniz (2020). These studies emphasized the role of group cohesion and mutual support in fostering a therapeutic environment that enhances psychological well-being and reduces stress and anxiety (Giannone et al., 2015; Kaya & Deniz, 2020).

The effectiveness of psychodrama in addressing specific psychological issues, such as smoking cessation (Aytemur et al., 2012), social anxiety (Kabusi, 2023), and chronic illnesses (Karabilgin et al., 2012), further supports the findings of this study. The diverse applications of psychodrama across different populations and settings underscore its versatility and therapeutic value.

Despite the promising findings, this study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small, with only 16 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the results. The study relied on self-reported data, which can be subject to biases such as social desirability and recall bias. Additionally, the study's qualitative nature means that the findings are context-specific and may not be applicable to all psychodrama settings or populations.

The study also did not include a control group, making it difficult to attribute the observed effects solely to psychodrama without considering other potential influencing factors. Furthermore, the diversity of the sample in terms of professional roles (therapists and clients) and therapeutic settings (hospitals, private practices, community mental health centers) may have introduced variability in the experiences reported, which could affect the consistency of the findings.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by incorporating larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies could provide more insights into the long-term effects of psychodrama on psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships. Including control groups in future studies would help to establish causal relationships and strengthen the evidence for the efficacy of psychodrama.

Moreover, future research could explore the differential impacts of specific psychodrama techniques (e.g., role reversal, doubling, mirroring) on various psychological outcomes. Investigating the mechanisms underlying the therapeutic effects of psychodrama, such as changes in

neural activity or stress hormone levels, could provide a deeper understanding of how and why psychodrama works.

Exploring the applicability of psychodrama in different cultural contexts and with diverse populations, such as children, adolescents, and the elderly, would also be valuable. Additionally, studies focusing on the integration of psychodrama with other therapeutic approaches, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy or mindfulness-based interventions, could reveal potential synergies and enhance therapeutic outcomes.

The findings of this study have several implications for practice. Psychodrama practitioners should emphasize the role of empathy and perspective-taking techniques, such as role reversal and doubling, to enhance therapeutic outcomes. Creating a safe and supportive environment that facilitates emotional expression and catharsis is crucial for the effectiveness of psychodrama.

Group cohesion and mutual support should be fostered to enhance the therapeutic alliance and promote positive group dynamics. Practitioners should be trained to manage conflicts constructively and provide constructive feedback to participants, facilitating personal growth and emotional healing.

Incorporating psychodrama into diverse therapeutic settings, such as hospitals, schools, and community mental health centers, could broaden its reach and impact. Training healthcare professionals, educators, and social workers in psychodrama techniques could enhance their ability to support individuals with various psychological issues.

Moreover, integrating psychodrama with other therapeutic modalities could offer a more comprehensive approach to treatment. For instance, combining psychodrama with cognitive-behavioral therapy could address both the emotional and cognitive aspects of psychological distress, providing a more holistic approach to therapy.

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant therapeutic potential of psychodrama in group therapy settings. The findings align with previous research, underscoring the importance of empathy, emotional processes, and group interactions in facilitating psychological healing and growth. Addressing the identified limitations through future research and applying the practical implications can further enhance the effectiveness and reach of psychodrama as a valuable therapeutic tool.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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