

It's Not Enough Just To Say It Works

Research Into Psychodrama and Experiential Therapies

Charmaine McVea

Charmaine McVea is a psychodramatist and psychologist in private practice in Brisbane and a staff member at the Queensland Training Institute of Psychodrama. She is currently undertaking doctoral research into protagonist processes that lead to healing painful emotional experiences during psychodrama.

Psychodramatists need no convincing about the efficacy of psychodrama - we experience the benefits in our own development and in the work we do with our clients, and we have an understanding of the underlying principles of spontaneity theory and sociometry. Yet, to outsiders, psychodrama is often associated with drama and 'acting out' and as a consequence struggles to be recognized as a legitimate therapy.

At the same time there is a big push in the health field to promote 'evidence-based' treatments, and this push is having an impact on how therapists are encouraged to work. It is also influencing people seeking therapy, who are being educated to look for independent 'evidence' that the method is appropriate for them. Health insurance groups are increasingly looking for research evidence to determine which therapies they will fund. Therapeutic approaches that can support their position with research become the 'treatment of choice' not because they are necessarily more suitable or more effective than other

approaches, but because they can point to published evidence for their claims.

Unfortunately, psychodrama has produced limited research into the effectiveness of the method in therapeutic contexts, and there is a need for further research that is directed at understanding the contribution psychodrama makes to therapeutic processes and outcomes. Research can also be of direct benefit to practitioners when it enables us to challenge our preconceived ideas about the work we do, and find better ways of doing it.

By adopting research approaches that are congruent with our identity as psychodramatists we can build research in ways that excite interest among practitioners and promote psychodrama at the same time. Developments in psychotherapy research - and particularly experiential psychotherapy process research - provide possibilities for research into psychodrama that can inform our practice and assist us to communicate our findings to the broader counselling/therapy

profession and the public.

The Current State of Therapy-Oriented Psychodrama Research

In a recent analysis of studies of the treatment effects of psychodrama Wieser (2003) concluded that while some good results were emerging, much more research was needed, and greater attention to scientific rigour was required.

Although psychodrama is commonly used as a therapeutic tool there are surprisingly few studies that specifically investigate the effectiveness of psychodrama in therapeutic settings. When studies are done, the results are encouraging. For example, Burger (1994) found that psychodrama assisted battered women to develop greater assertiveness. Ragsdale, Cox, Finn & Eisler (1996) reported that war veterans with PTSD who participated in an intensive group treatment with a major psychodrama component, improved on measures of hopelessness, guilt, shame, loneliness and emotional expressiveness. Their research wasn't able to isolate the impact of the psychodrama component of the program, but they noted that they had a lower drop-out rate than similar programs that employed other exposure-based therapies instead of psychodrama.

Some research has focussed on specific psychodramatic techniques such as doubling and role reversal investigated out of the context of a psychodrama session. Bohart (1977) found that having participants reverse roles with someone they were experiencing conflict with, led to a greater reduction in anger and hostility, than did the act of expressing anger alone. Hudgins and Kiesler (1987) found that the psychodramatic technique of doubling led to a deeper level of experiencing and produced a higher level of self-disclosure at intake interviews, than the use of a standard interview procedure. In a single-case study, Drucker (2000)

found that the technique of the containing double, a modified doubling technique designed to contain overwhelming affect reduced dissociation in a client with PTSD symptoms.

Studies such as these contribute to an understanding of how the component parts of psychodrama can assist the therapeutic process, and can provide links between psychodrama and broader research findings. For example, Greenberg and Safran (1989) noted that high levels of experiencing have been consistently related to good outcomes in psychotherapy, so we might propose that the use of doubling in psychodrama could assist us to achieve good outcomes.

Broader Research Relevant to Psychodrama

Other areas of psychological research are providing indications that experiential, action oriented approaches to therapy may be important. From their research into traumatic memory, Van der Kolk, McFarlane and van der Hart (1996) identify the need to activate the experiential context of the memory, in order to heal. They also recommend the use of experiential processes that enable clients to take action in response to their traumatic experience, to regain a sense of mastery.

There is a small but growing body of experiential psychotherapy research that is encouraging in its findings because of the parallels to psychodramatic processes. With adults suffering from depression, Greenberg and Watson (1998) found that a therapeutic approach that included four modes of processing to access emotional experience - attending, experiential search, active expression and interpersonal contact - was more effective than attending alone. They concluded that engaging in experiential tasks assisted clients to resolve issues in more personally meaningful ways.

In a study of 'unfinished business', Paivio and Greenberg (1995) found that the empty-chair technique was more effective in achieving client reports of resolution than a psycho-educational intervention. Clients' reports of 'feeling resolved' were related to a change on the Beck Depression Inventory and the experiential treatment achieved greater improvement on all outcome measures.

Experiential psychotherapy research views therapy as an evolving process that is mediated by the therapist and the client, rather than a treatment that can be standardised and tested (Watson, Greenberg & Lietaer 1998). There is a growing interest among researchers in investigating issues of immediate relevance to practitioners. Investigating significant events within therapy and measuring the impact of therapy in terms that are meaningful to clients, assists us as practitioners to build our understanding of how therapy can achieve good outcomes. This movement is being led by a number of researchers in the experiential psychotherapy field (e.g. Bohart 2000; Elliott 2002; Greenberg 1999).

A summary of recent experiential psychotherapy research can be found in Elliott, Greenberg and Lietaer (2004).

Case Reports

Where the psychodrama literature makes a major contribution to therapeutic practice is in the rich tradition of case reports (e.g. Holmes, Karp & Watson 1994; Kellermann & Hudgins 2000) that warm the reader up to the experience of the protagonist and the director, and stimulates thinking about the possibilities of the method. This is the type of information that practitioners look for to expand their understanding and to help them reflect on their own practice. However, these reports rely heavily on the perspective of the director, and

sometimes the protagonist, to describe and interpret the experience, and have generally not been exposed to the type of rigorous examination that, from a research framework, enables conclusions to be drawn with confidence.

Building On Our Strengths

Applying established case-study methodologies that combine the richness of case reports with analytical rigour may be a way to build on this tradition, providing research that assists psychodrama practitioners in their work and promotes psychodrama by being available for public scrutiny. This would contribute to the development of research within psychodrama by (a) investigating issues that are relevant to psychodrama practitioners, (b) using methods that capitalise on an established orientation to case reports and (c) linking psychodrama research to established practice in related areas, such as experiential psychotherapy research.

Some of the ways we can develop case-study research in psychodrama include:

1. Focussing research questions on issues of relevance to practitioners and clients by studying significant events within sessions, how they come about, their impact on clients, and how the director might make use of these events (e.g. Mahrer and Boulet 1999).
2. Examining multiple cases, to test whether results are replicated across cases, and to identify whether results are general, typical or variant (e.g. Hill, Thompson and Williams 1997).
3. Developing plausible therapy and non-therapy explanations for post-psychodrama changes by such means as:
 - a. mapping outcomes against processes within psychodrama sessions (e.g. Greenberg 1986; Elliott 2002), and
 - b. comparing processes and outcomes of successful and non-successful sessions.
4. Using videotapes of psychodrama sessions to

enable information to be collected from a variety of sources - including director and protagonist recall of significant events, and independent researchers participating in process analysis (e.g. Greenberg 1999; Mahrer 1999).

5. Using measures that are being used by other experiential psychotherapy researchers so that our work can be readily placed alongside a larger body of work (refer to the Network for Research on Experiential Psychotherapies www.experiential-researchers.org/index.html).

Conclusion

We can be optimistic about the possibilities for psychodrama research. The psychodrama outcome research that has been done is encouraging, and the broader field of experiential psychotherapy research supports many of the underlying principles of psychodrama.

The act of doing research can be enlivening - affirming some of our practices, and challenging and extending preconceived ideas of what we do and its impact on clients.

Developing a stronger research base, relevant to practitioners and clients and open to scrutiny within the counselling/therapy professions, will further build our professional identity. Case study research is one way that we can build on our established interest in case reports, to establish a tradition of rigorous research.

References

Bohart A (1977), Role playing and interpersonal conflict resolution, *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 24: 15-24.
Bohart A C (2000), Paradigm clash: Empirically supported treatments versus empirically supported psychotherapy practice, *Psychotherapy Research*, 10(4): 488-493.

Burger J B (1994), *The effects of psychodrama treatment on levels of assertiveness and locus of control in women who have experienced battering*, Doctoral Thesis, The College of William and Mary.

Drucker K (2000), *Investigating the effectiveness of the containing double intervention for a subject with post traumatic stress disorder symptoms*, Doctoral Thesis, American School of Professional Psychology, Arlington, Virginia.

Elliott R (2002), Hermeneutic single-case efficacy design, *Psychotherapy Research*, 12(1), 1-21.

Elliott R, Greenberg L S & Lietaer G (2004), Research on experiential psychotherapies. In Lambert M (Ed), Bergin and Garfield, *Handbook of psychotherapy and behaviour change* (5th ed.), Wiley, New York.

Greenberg LS (1986), Research strategies. In LS Greenberg & W M Pinsof (Eds), *The psychotherapeutic process: A research handbook*, Guildford Press, New York.

Greenberg L S (1999), Ideal psychotherapy research: A study of significant change processes, *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 55(12), 1467-1480.

Greenberg L S & Safran J D (1989), Emotion in psychotherapy, *American Psychologist*, 44(1), 19-29.

Greenberg LS & Watson J C (1998), Experiential therapy of depression: Differential effects of client-centred relationship conditions and process experiential interventions, *Psychotherapy Research*, 8(2), 210-224.

Hill C E, Thompson B J & Williams E N (1997), A guide to conducting consensual qualitative research, *The Counseling Psychologist*, 25(4), 517-572.

Holmes P, Karp M, & Watson M (Eds.) (1994), *Psychodrama since Moreno: innovations in theory and practice*, Routledge, London.

Hudgins M K & Kiesler D J (1987), Individual experiential psychotherapy: an analogue validation of the intervention module of psychodramatic doubling, *Psychotherapy research*, 24(2), 245-255.

Kellermann F P & Hudgins M K (2000), *Psychodrama with trauma survivors: Acting out your pain*, London/Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley

Mahrer A R (1999), How can research discover how to do psychotherapy? *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 55(12), 1425-1427.

Mahrer A R & Boulet D B (1999), How to do discovery-oriented psychotherapy research, *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 55(12), 1481-1493.

Paivio S C & Greenberg L S (1995), Resolving "unfinished business": Efficacy of experiential therapy using empty-chair dialogue, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 63(3), 419-425.

Ragsdale K G, Cox R D, Finn P & Eisler R M (1996), Effectiveness of short-term specialised inpatient treatment for war-related posttraumatic stress disorder, *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 9, 269-283.

van der Kolk B A, McFarlane A C, & van der Hart O (1996), A general approach to treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder. In van der Kolk, McFarlane & Weisaeth (Eds.), *Traumatic stress: the effects of overwhelming experience on mind, body and society*, Guilford Press, New York.

Watson J C, Greenberg L S & Lietaer G (1998), The experiential paradigm unfolding: relationship and experiencing in therapy. In Greenberg, L. S., Watson, J. C. & Lietaer, G. (eds). *Handbook of experiential psychotherapy*, Guilford Press, New York.

Wieser M (2003), *Studies in Treatment Effects of Psychodrama Therapy Ordered on Basis of ICD-10. Preliminary Results*, Paper presented at the 15th International Congress of the International Association of Group Psychotherapy, Istanbul, Turkey.

