

Drama Therapy Review
Volume 9 Number 2

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https://doi.org/10.1386/dtr_00136_7

Received 1 February 2023; Accepted 15 June 2023

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Chasing the sun: Discovering Chinese therapists', students' and educators' proficiency in the use of dramatic reality

ABSTRACT

In this clinical commentary, we present insights about introducing drama therapy in China. We highlight how challenging our own cultural assumptions regarding Chinese nationals, namely that they may feel restricted when entering dramatic reality, enabled the possibility of rich, detailed and ludic responses. Relying on our joint knowledge of drama therapy and a Chinese cultural context, with one from the United States and the other born in China, we designed a lecture and drama therapy process for Chinese nationals at a family communication conference in Beijing. We discovered diverse theatrical expression in our encounter with Chinese educators, therapists and students resulting largely from careful cultural preparation and an openness to experience.

KEYWORDS

drama therapy
sociodrama
Chinese educators
therapists
students
dramatic reality
diversity

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IP: 12.215.236.66

On: Fri, 13 Oct 2023 21:59:08

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Dramaterapia
sociodrama
educadores chinos
terapeutas
estudiantes
realidad dramática
diversidad

MOTS-CLÉS

drama thérapie
sociodrame
éducateurs chinois
thérapeutes
étudiants
réalité dramatique
diversité

RESUMEN

En este comentario clínico, presentamos ideas sobre la introducción de la dramaterapia en China. Destacamos cómo desafiar nuestras propias suposiciones culturales con respecto a los ciudadanos chinos, a saber por ejemplo que podrían sentirse restringidos al ingresar a la realidad dramática, permitió la posibilidad de respuestas ricas, detalladas y lúdicas. Basándonos en nuestro conocimiento conjunto sobre la dramaterapia y un contexto cultural chino, uno de los EE. UU. y otro originario de China, diseñamos una presentación y un proceso de dramaterapia para ciudadanos chinos en una conferencia de Comunicación Familiar en Pekín. Descubrimos diversas expresiones teatrales en nuestro encuentro con educadores, terapeutas y estudiantes chinos como resultado en gran parte de una cuidadosa preparación cultural y una apertura a la experiencia.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans ce commentaire clinique, nous présentons des idées sur l'introduction de la drama thérapie en Chine. Nous soulignons à quel point la remise en question de nos présupposés concernant les ressortissants chinois – à savoir qu'ils peuvent se sentir limités lorsqu'ils entrent dans la réalité dramatique – a permis la possibilité de réponses riches, détaillées et ludiques. En nous appuyant sur notre connaissance conjointe de la drama thérapie et d'un contexte culturel chinois – l'un de nous venant des États-Unis et l'autre étant né en Chine – nous avons conçu une leçon et un processus de drama thérapie pour les ressortissants chinois lors d'une conférence sur la communication familiale à Pékin. Lors de notre rencontre avec des éducateurs, des thérapeutes et des étudiants chinois, nous avons découvert diverses expressions théâtrales, résultant en grande partie d'une préparation culturelle minutieuse et d'une ouverture à l'expérience.

Recent years have seen more western drama therapists being invited to China to share their background, experience and culture with Chinese therapists, students and educators.

However, for some facilitators, such preparation might seem more like *chasing the sun*. Not only because flying east from the United States follows a setting sun directly, but also because of the daunting challenges of understanding a 5000-year-old civilization, different language and a culture that can so sharply contrast their own.

When we accepted an invitation to Beijing for the *Family Communication Conference* where we would introduce participants to drama therapy, one of our main concerns was preparing the participants to enter the dramatic reality of drama therapy. How much introduction might they need? Should we teach basic improv skills first? How willing or reticent might the participants be to become involved in theatrical play?

We are a married couple living in Northern California. We have five children from previous marriages and travel between the United States and China while engaging family and friends from both countries. Stephen was born in California and is a theatre and mental health professional, a registered drama therapist and board-certified trainer. Ping is a CPA, born in Nanjing, during the cultural revolution, and spent most of her adult life in Shenzhen, China as she participated in the meteoric rise of China to economic power.

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Stephen was lead facilitator in the following commentary while Ping assisted and offered translation, though professional translation was also provided. Ping's major and invaluable contribution was in preparation of the talks and workshops, providing cultural and sociological context for the conference.

Dramatic reality

For this commentary, we will utilize the definition of dramatic reality suggested by Dr Susana Pendzik who suggests that dramatic reality can be defined as the active projection of the imaginary world onto the real world (Johnson and Pendzik 2012).

LECTURES

Before our weekend workshops began, we were asked to prepare a lecture on family communication. Since this subject is vast, we focused on relevant cultural issues while also introducing drama therapy. We revisited Chinese family values and traditional patriarchal Confucianism, through our bi-cultural insight, observing that generally families in China tend to ask the children to obey parents, with little room for domestic exchange or feedback. Though these generalized conditions have been evolving in recent decades we wanted our cultural preparation to respect these traditional values.

Therefore, we sought to develop an acronym. It needed to be simple enough for students and professionals but containing actionable and relevant information to improve communication. We decided on the acronym MIND. This acronym was in English, and while not translating verbatim to Mandarin, it served our purpose. The acronym stands for **M**entalizing, **I**nterior Story, **N**eed and **D**esire. We thus prepared to convey to participants these four concepts throughout the lectures. And wherein communicating **N**eeds and **D**esires were straight forward ideas, we sought to help the participants understand **M**entalizing (or theory of mind), which is the ability to think about another's thoughts (Frith and Frith 2006) and **I**nterior Story, which is an individual narrative that someone might tell themselves regarding their life journey.

We found this tool useful in helping communicate the idea that family members have thought content that may go unexamined and a personal story, and whether such thought content, personal story or needs and desires were different from one's own. The way one sought to understand these concepts could greatly improve family communication. Ping thought this might present as novel to many in this current generation of Chinese who still have cultural foundations in family, collectivism, and in the ideal of societal and familial rank over emotions.

To reinforce these ideas, we set about creating interactive moments, where volunteers could experience mentalizing and interior storytelling through live demonstration.

To understand mentalizing we brought to life, through drama, a guessing game that is used to assess children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD.) It involved having a volunteer put our monkey puppet in one of the two boxes, then having the facilitator move it to the opposite box after the volunteer had left the stage and in full view of the audience. Through mentalizing the audience was to guess where the volunteer might look when she returned. This illustrated how those with spectrum disorders (some who lack

general mentalizing observation), often guess that one will look in the new location, since it can be more difficult for them to imagine that others have minds different from their own.

To illustrate interior story, we designed a process where one participant shared that she was passed over as a child when her sister received a dress and she did not. This story seemed to still be part of her personal narrative as she allowed herself and a student volunteer to pretend to bring her a dress onstage in a queenly fashion. Later, using more volunteers from the audience, she sculpted a family picture that had her 'sister' physically far removed at first, but ended with her accepting her sister back to a central family role. We observed how easily these volunteers were able to present dramatic reality on the spot for the purpose of these simple exercises.

After the first round of lectures, participants made inquiries into our acronym, as they seemed to find the tool and the illustrative presentation of interest.

PARTICIPANTS' INTRODUCTION TO DRAMA THERAPY AND SOCIODRAMA

After the lectures on the first day, the second day was a pre-conference workshop that would also include a 90-minute introduction to drama therapy and sociodrama featuring family challenges with 190 participants assembled in the main ballroom.

We thought a nice theatrical *Tabula Rasa* might be to first divide into *break out* groups based on the twelve Chinese signs of the zodiac. The smaller groups were given an activity to quickly act out; like being in a swimming pool or watching fireworks. Thus, warmed up in this way they, returned to their own section in the room to find ten props, hat, two cups, blank mask, a piece of cloth, a few pieces of fake food, some play money and a tray (borrowing from David Read Johnson's prop set-up for individuals in the DRP 1 assessment-Johnson 66). The groups then selected a 'leader' who reported back to get the instructions. Chinese often go by their job title and last name and do not find the idea of choosing leaders as classist as those in the West might. We therefore decided that using this device of leader selection for all the twelve groups would feel comfortable to the conference participants and facilitate the instructions for the scene work to come. Participants expressed comfort after this exercise by referring to what team they were on and who their 'leader' was.

The groups then were given themes such as 'a grandma', 'cell phones', 'New Year' and told to devise a two-minute scene in ten minutes. They could use the props however they wished, and they could use people as pictures, furniture, even the wall of a house but they should use everyone in the group. That was it!

However, what followed was not the simple two-minute basic scenes that a visiting drama therapist might have expected from a large group (which we later discovered had only one person with prior acting experience). Instead, what evolved was specific, detailed, moving and profound culturally based social scenes that lasted for anywhere from five to twelve minutes. It was as if we had given detailed instructions to professional actors to present the complex issues of modern Chinese society. Such was the clear accessible understanding of the dramatic reality that the participants exhibited.

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THE SCENES

Though not within the scope of this commentary to detail all scenes, we will give some context and highlights here. The first scene was fun and tame, though still culturally interesting, as a New Year's child-eating monster is scared away by fireworks. In fact, this scene was the kind of fanciful, playful and energetic enactment we had imagined for such short preparation. However later, we began to see cultural complexity, pressures and diversity as the scenes revealed difficult and deeper issues emerging within the dramatic reality.

Among such early scenes was an enactment that started conventionally enough, then became more complex as the translator began to describe the events. The large group began to fill the stage portraying children about to complete their homework. As they studied, other group members who were apparently outside the window began vocalizing what seemed to be frog noises. The 'children' ran to the window to inspect the frogs and enjoy the night music. At this point an angry parent entered to tell them to get back to studying, however, the children remained distracted. Stephen then lost the thread of the narrative as the group member playing the mother seemed to seize something from another part of the house, exit to outside and shake her hand around until the frogs fell silent and were then covered with a cloth. As the scene wrapped up our translator informed that this was the true story of a mother who had poisoned a pond of frogs in order that her children might study for their exams in peace.

The scenes then deepened further, becoming more intimate and personal. In-laws met at dinner to discuss the future of their soon to marry children, an internet café was raided by parents so that their sons might not become addicted to computer games and in a stunning display of East-West contrast a long and complex scene showed a promising son-in-law, who had been invited to attend a grandfather's tribute, told that the surviving grandmother believed him to be an old lover from her past, and that as a potential future family member he should play along with this in order for him to make a good impression. Ping thought this an acceptable request. Whereas Stephen was amazed by such a suggestion. Ping, being from China, saw subtle misdirection and in some cases withholding information for the sake of family as appropriate. Stephen, coming from a western perspective, saw nearly any kind of truth variance as questionable. However, both of us saw that in either case the intentions presented in this scene were sincere and not self-serving.

In any case our expectations had been that this workshop would have been spent 'coaxing' connectivity from the group while introducing participants to transformation and aesthetic distancing through the various improvisational and therapeutic interactive exercises. This was not necessary. Instead, with minimal prompting, we witnessed an incredible yield of understanding, dramatic process, narration and a startling use of ludic characters and roles. This surprised Ping, who had thought her cultural peers might be more restricted in this area. However, it could be that the cultural preparation, like the zodiac warm-ups, the acronym (MIND), the socio-dramatic revelations during the lecture and finally within this workshop itself helped facilitate more room for communication and allowed for greater range of expression and trust in the participants.

WEEKEND WORKSHOPS

As the weekend workshop began, we had a new group and we modified and repeated the afore mentioned exercise, this time asking them to create scenes

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from their work as educators and therapists. These scenes were more interpersonal and elicited profound internal revelation.

In one scene, a child played by an adult participant hid in a closet because she did not wish to go abroad to school. The child's mother worked tirelessly to get her to come out of the closet and finally called the child's therapist. The scene lasted nearly fifteen minutes and at the scene's conclusion the child was reunited with the mother.

The women were asked to 'de-role' and analyse the very moving dramatic reality they had created. The participant playing the mother expressed genuine pain upon hugging the person playing the child hiding in the closet, saying the improvised experience had 'raised a similar fear' she had in her own childhood, demonstrating that the Chinese educators, counsellors and students, whether they possessed a background in theatre or not, were fully capable and surprisingly ready to let these emotions out, with little time to prepare. The rest of the weekend contained opportunities for the participants to create fairy tales, masks and continue improvisation based on questions they had regarding applied theatre and entering dramatic reality with their various populations.

CONCLUSION

It was our conclusion that facilitators presenting the therapeutic arts in China and especially drama therapists, should not assume that Chinese participants will be unable or unwilling to reveal themselves in exercises that ask for dramatic reality. Conversely, one should be ready with interventions that go beyond basic introductions and simple improvisation, as many of our participants were ready with questions and observations that demonstrated an advanced understanding of theatrical reality and its presentation. This was possibly the result of careful cultural preparation that respected the past and present cultural system in China, while not limited to such preparations. As for chasing the sun, we allowed the sun to set on our assumed cultural beliefs during our week in Beijing and flew westward, home.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Breithaupt, Stephen and Yang, Ping Y. (2023), 'Chasing the sun: Discovering Chinese therapists', students' and educators' proficiency in the use of dramatic reality', *Drama Therapy Review*, 9:2, pp. 331–37, https://doi.org/10.1386/dtr_00136_7

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skills and acting to special populations. He is the author of *Attention, Affect and Action* (Theradrama Inc., 2018), a guidebook of drama therapy games for special populations, available through Amazon. Stephen utilizes drama therapy with several community populations, including those with schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder and the developmentally delayed. In addition, Stephen Breithaupt has taught drama therapy and theatre internationally, travelling extensively in China while lecturing and conducting interactive workshops. He is married to the co-author.

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Ping was born in Nanjing and grew up in Hubei province during the cultural revolution. As an adult she both witnessed and participated in the enormous economic surge of China, living as a CPA in Shenzhen. She moved to the United States in 2009 seeking to satisfy her curiosity regarding western cultural life that she had only been exposed to in her reading. She is married to the co-author.

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