

The active self: Drama therapy and philosophy

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between drama therapy and philosophy. It outlines key debates concerning the relationship between self, personhood and philosophy. Specific themes pertinent to drama therapy are reviewed. The themes concern concepts of self and subject, the self in relation to action and role, and the concept of the embodied self. The article shows how drama therapy's active methods, including role play, group improvisation and play-based work, all could be said to have an innate connection to such philosophies of the self. The article identifies ways of examining the relationship between therapists' discourse and their philosophical positions on selfhood. The implicit philosophy contained within drama therapists' accounts of practice is analysed, revealing how it relates to the ways therapist and clients engage with the process and content of the therapy. The article demonstrates how such discourse analysis of accounts of therapy can reveal how clinical practice is built upon philosophical assumptions about the situation the client presents in therapy, the context that their "problem" or needs are seen within, the nature of the therapist's intervention and the notion of what greater fulfilment for the client can be. The article shows that this approach to analysing discourse deepens and illuminates how practice and the process of therapeutic change is understood.

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Introduction

This article aims to provide an analysis of aspects of the relationship between philosophy and drama therapy. It concerns the relationship between contemporary philosophical debates about the nature of identity and drama therapy theory and practice. The article examines how contemporary debates can be relevant to drama therapy, and considers the ways in which drama therapists reflect philosophies of identity within their clinical practice. Accounts of practice from Casson (2004), Landy (2001) and Dokter (1996) will be examined in the light of these philosophical debates, in order to explore the ways in which philosophy and drama therapy connect.

Self, philosophy and drama therapy

The nature of self has been a central concern to philosophical debates. Notions of "identity," "self" and "person" are crucial to examine in relation to the ways drama therapists see themselves,

their clients and the nature of drama as a therapy. Pitruzzella (2004), for example, has written about the relationship between identity, existential philosophy and drama therapy. Drama therapy has drawn on a wide variety of sources in forming theories and models: Jennings (1994, 1997), has talked about theories of the self drawn from anthropology and from theatre, Landy (1994, 2001) from the social sciences, social psychology and the writings of Sarbin and Allen (1968) and Scheff (1979) in relation to ideas of the self and role. This eclectic mix in drama therapy writing reflects the broad richness of approaches to understanding practice from a *theoretical* point of view. This article will look at some key themes within contemporary *philosophical* debates, focusing on specific philosophical concerns which the nature of drama therapy foregrounds concerning the self.

As an arts therapy involving processes including dramatic projection, embodiment and role taking, certain aspects of identity and relationship are emphasised by the very nature of the form of the therapy (Jennings, 1997; Landy, 2001). These factors include the foregrounding of playfulness, of the transformation of identity through drama, of being a witness to oneself and others, the idea of the self as constructed through roles, and the notion that a relationship with the arts and with other people engaged in art forms can be transformative (Emunah, 1994; Jones, 1996).

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These areas immediately offer connections to certain philosophical approaches and debates about selfhood. Here are ideas such as the self as reflexive, of the emphasis of action and physical encounter as vital to identity, and as a part of personal change. Philosophical debates relating to these concerns include what being a “person” involves, the nature of individual identity and the relationship between individuals, others and their environment. In an article of this length it is not possible to examine in great depth the background and detail of individual philosophers or philosophical schools. The approach will be to look at key themes within contemporary debates, and to give an indication of philosophical positions drawn upon by drama therapists, or which are implicit in the discourse of drama therapists. These themes concern concepts of self, subject and concepts of connection, the self in relation to action and role, and the concept of the embodied self.

The concepts of self and subject

Concepts of the “self,” being a “person” or being a “subject” are the concerns of many contemporary philosophers in terms of definition and debate. Henke (2000, p. xv) has referred to the self in relation to what she calls the present “poststructuralist moment” in history. She describes this as a time where the concept of a “stable” identity and the idea of what she calls the myth of a universal subject, or a unified monolithic “self” is no longer viable, and is seen as a “phantasmagorical cultural construct” (2000, p. xv). She draws out a tension between humanist philosophical schools and those that draw on deconstruction and poststructuralist perspectives. Some, for example Smith (1993), describe the difference often identified between these approaches as a distinction between the idea of “self” linked to humanism, and of “subject” linked to deconstruction. Self is seen as a term for “the human being as metaphysical, essential and universal” whereas the term subject refers to the culturally constructed nature of any notion of identity (Smith, 1993, p. 189n). Others have drawn on notions of the self and its relation to narration, or the construction of stories, as a way of seeing selfhood. Jay has described this approach as seeing the self as shifting narratives being created by a “subject,” who imaginatively brings together conscious and unconscious material (Jay, 1984, p. 25). Bergland (1994) has summarised, at its simplest, much of this complex examination and debate in the following way, as between:

a self, an essential individual, imagined to be coherent and unified, the originator of her own meaning, or... a post-modern subject – a dynamic subject that changes over time, is situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses (p. 134).

Within this debate, and, given many of the reasons and situations that people coming to therapy find themselves in, it is, I think, useful to consider a point made by Gilmore. This is that to many marginalised people, the kind of philosophical stance that seems to express “glee associated with the dissolutions of notions of self is hardly a welcome prospect for those already too familiar with the social reality of selflessness” (Gilmore, 1994, p. 15n).

On the one hand I see in this a criticism, a condemnation of philosophical energy put into debates as described above. The individuals referred to by Gilmore are seen to struggle with their sense of self or in their attempt to maintain identity in the face of forces such as illness, poverty, social exclusion or prejudice. The critique is that philosophical analysis can seem an extravagant, unreal indulgence in the face of everyday tensions in attempting to create coherence. However, these philosophical debates about fragmentation, creating narratives and the relationship between a sense of self and the contemporary world can relate directly to the dilemmas that clients often bring to therapy. In addition, they relate to the way the therapist sees himself, or herself, in relation to the client. Too often, the self assumed within therapy case studies, or within theory, is not looked at as being subject to philosophical views and differences. It may seem as if the idea of a unitary self, for example, is taken for granted. By examining the relationship between philosophical debates and the ways the self is conceived of, it is possible to identify how they relate to the clinical encounter in drama therapy.

Some, for example, have criticised the nature of therapy, and its relationship to individual identity, from a philosophical perspective. One critique is that it emphasises individual experience and perception to the exclusion of political, social and contextual factors. The argument is that this creates an isolation of the individual from the context they live in. Seeing the self in this way is said to fail to engage with social and political factors such as poverty and exclusion that can be seen to be the root “cause” of many clients coming to therapy (Smail, 1998).

Tudor and Tudor (1994) identify the need to engage with the nature of identity from a philosophical perspective as central to therapy. They see this as a key issue concerning how the therapist’s own assumptions about human nature influence their beliefs, notions and responses regarding any client’s ability to change. As illustrations of this, they cite how a therapist influenced by “determinist” approaches would draw more upon systems of diagnosis, classification and treatment, whilst a therapist drawing on a “voluntarist” philosophical perspective would emphasise “mutual and ongoing assessment” (Tudor & Tudor, 1994, p. 390). They use this analysis of the philosophical position of therapeutic work to assert the importance of sensitivity to difference. This enables therapist and client to be alert to the, often unconscious, processes and assumptions at work regarding the philosophies implicit in clinical work regarding what the self is. They see this as a key element within practice: being alert to defining another person’s reality and, equally, to rigidly defending realities. They argue that “we need to be aware of and be explicit both about our views of human nature and about the essence of phenomena in order to be clear about our clients” (Tudor & Tudor, 1994, p. 392). The aim here is mutuality, and sensitivity to assumptions and frameworks: to see how these are present in the actions and responses within therapeutic encounters. In this way, they show the importance of paying active attention to the way implicit or explicit philosophies of selfhood affect the clinical encounter between client, therapist and setting. The need is to raise awareness of what each bring about their own philosophical assumptions.

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