

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE USEFULNESS OF PLAY IN TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS THERAPY WITH ADULTS.

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ABSTRACT

The research is a phenomenological exploration of the usefulness of play in transactional analysis therapy with adults, via an exploration of the experiences of play in therapy among transactional analysis students from the Manchester Institute of Psychotherapy (MIP), United Kingdom in 2009.

KEY WORDS

qualitative research, phenomenology, play, transactional analysis, Child ego-state.

INTRODUCTION

Before beginning my transactional analysis training, my background was creative, I had completed a Theatre Studies degree in Scarborough, North Yorkshire where a lot of the focus was on using play as a foundation for creating performances, as well as developing my own writing skills. Upon moving back to Manchester I started doing voluntary work using drama therapy with adults with learning disabilities, which is what lead me into being interested in training to be a psychotherapist. I unfortunately had to stop my voluntary work as it clashed with my psychotherapy training, but my passion for creatively exploring the self has remained, it is for this reason that I am interested in seeing how my own work as a therapist using transactional analysis can be mixed with using creative methods.

The history of play therapy, as taken for Schaefer's book *Foundations of Play Therapy* (2003), is that it was first developed in 1909 when Sigmund Freud documented his work with 'Little Hans', a five year old boy with a phobia of horses. Play therapy then took a different direction after Carl Jung split with Freud, as Jung explored his own experience's of playing, he felt humiliated doing this but it released a flood of fantasy material, imagery and emotion. Jung found that by expressing his emotional turmoil in this way he was then able to process

and reintegrate the emotional material in a less threatening way. In 1921, Hermain Hug-Hellmuth formalised play therapy by providing play materials for children to use to express themselves. Anna Freud (1927/1974) worked with children to consciously understand their thoughts, feelings and behaviours so they were able to make a new decision, while on the other hand Melanie Klein (1932/1975) believed a child's play was a window into their unconscious the same as an adult's free association, she focused on the child's experience of abandonment, envy and rage. This was the main birth of play therapy but over the years there have been many other developments in other therapeutic areas such as Object Relations, Cognitive Behavioural therapy, Client Centred therapy, Gestalt and many more.

On the transactional analysis course, we are often taught that for change to take place it must happen in the Child ego-state. The Goulding's Redecision work (*Goulding & Goulding, 1979*), used a form of role play and two chair work to do this, but I am interested in finding out if more traditional play/creative techniques are useful in connecting adults with their inner child to aid the therapy process. My reasons behind this are that play therapies are used as a way of helping express our most painful and suppressed memories when we cannot find the words to verbalise them. With this in mind I hope to prove the significance of play with adults in transactional analysis therapy to bring about change in a more integrated way and that it proves to be quicker than talking alone.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first book I read with regards to play was '*Foundations of Play Therapy*', edited by Charles E. Schaefer, (2003). This book consists of fourteen chapters by different authors including Schaefer and is focused on working with children using play therapy. Each chapter looks at a different therapy model these are; Psychoanalysis, Jungian analysis, Adlerian, Child-Centred therapy, Filial, Gestalt, Theraplay, Cognitive Behavioural therapy, Family therapy, Group therapy, Ecosystemic therapy, Phenomenological therapy, Object Relations, and Prescriptive therapy in relation to child play therapy. This book is a very good

introduction to different methods of using play therapy as the authors describe the history of the methods, who they were primarily developed by, and includes case studies to give examples of how the techniques can be put into practice. As the book is focused on working with children the authors look at the roles of the parents and their level of involvement in the process as well as the role the therapist plays whether this is to be actively involved, or taking more of an observer's role. I found this book very helpful for my research as it has provided me with an in depth account of the philosophies and history of play therapy, the ideologies behind each method and how they have developed over time. The chapter on Gestalt play therapy was very useful as it provides ideas for techniques that can be used in practise such as how to use play to explore the use of the five senses; touching, seeing, listening, tasting and smelling, as a way of strengthening the self, and how experimenting with the full use of the body through play is a good way of reconnecting with the disassociated parts of the self:

“Troubled children restrict and disconnect themselves from their bodies, particularly children who have been molested and abused.” (Schaefer, *Foundations of Play Therapy*, 2003, V. Oaklander, p. 147).

The next book I looked at was *‘Play Therapy The Art of The Relationship’* by Garry. L. Landreth, (2002). This book was again based on play therapy with children and begins by looking at the meaning and function of play. When reading it I was trying to imagine what this would mean when applied to adults and I found that play with adults could offer the opportunity to clients to get in touch with their real self by learning to be creative and spontaneous, and also that play is symbolic and can be looked at as a metaphor which is why play offers the space to communicate those things we find too traumatic to communicate with words:

“Emotionally significant experiences are given meaningful expression through play”
(Landreth, 2002, p. 11).

What I liked most about this book was the questions it asks of the therapist with regard to the reasons behind choosing play materials and also that it gives good objectives when starting a therapeutic relationship:

“The play therapist is an adult who ‘intently observes, empathically listens, and encouragingly recognizes not only the child’s play but also the child’s wants, needs and feelings’.” (Landreth, 2002, p. 98).

The reason I liked this is because in transactional analysis terms play engages the Child ego-state, as a therapist it is important to make sure your Adult is functioning highly so that any work being done is at the full service of the client, and is encouraging of the changes they want to make.

Another book edited by Charles E. Schaefer which I have used during my research is *‘Play Therapy With Adults’*, (2003), this book consists of sixteen chapters written by different authors and looks at how play therapy can be used with adults as a vehicle for creativity, role rehearsal and mind/body integration. The main thing that I learnt from this book is how play as a process is healing in itself and that there may not be a need for cognitively analysing the metaphors to make change:

“Physical motion invites release; creativity nurtures insight.” (Schaefer, *Play Therapy with Adults*, 2003, D. Ward-Wimmer p. 8).

This book also looks at how play is therapeutic when working with trauma as it offers the opportunity to tell your story while remaining distant, this is done by inviting the client to play a role in the traumatic experience rather than re-experiencing the trauma by talking it through:

“I would encourage my clients to play out their fear indirectly, to couch their stories in fictional terms, to express themselves nonverbally through sound and movement, to take on and play out the roles of various figures associated with the trauma.” (Schaefer, *Play Therapy with Adults*, 2003, R.J. Landy, p. 15)

‘*Play Therapy with Adults*’ also provides specific guides for techniques which can be use in a play therapy therapeutic setting with adults, and also the importance of using humour when working with adults as a way of creating change. The chapter by Steven M. Sultanoff, ‘*Integrating Humour into Psychotherapy*’ explains how humour influences a change in behaviour:

“Individuals experiencing distress tend to withdraw and disengage from relationships and opportunities, while individuals experiencing humour become more energized, attentive and pursue connections with others, thus changing their behaviour.” (Schaefer, *Play Therapy with Adults*, 2003, S.M. Sutanoff, p. 117).

And how humour influences changes in cognition as well as the many other benefits of using humour as a play tool with adults:

“Humour helps create distance from traumatic events by providing perspective that may change the way clients view the events.” (Schaefer, *Play Therapy with Adults*, 2003, S.M. Sutanoff, p. 117).

‘*Expressive Therapies*’ a book edited by Cathy A. Malchiodi, (2005), consists of nine chapters written by different authors including Malchiodi. Each chapter looks at an individual form of expressive therapy these are; art, music, dance/movement, drama therapy/psychodrama, poetry, play and sandtray therapy. It explains the history of these therapies as well as giving specific examples of methods which can be implemented in

therapy practice. With this in mind Malchiodi also emphasises the importance of having the correct training if using an expressive therapy is going to be a major part of your work with clients. I found this book to be a good resource for looking at different creative techniques that can be used with adults, I believe this to be useful as often what works for one person may not work for another, someone who finds role play too shameful may find painting or writing poetry a lot more therapeutic:

“...for a child who has limited language, and elderly person who has lost the ability to talk because of a stroke or dementia, or a trauma victim who may be unable to put ideas into speech, expression through art, music, movement, or play can be ways to convey oneself without words and may be the primary form of communication in therapy.” (Malchiodi, 2005, p. 4).

Throughout reading these books on Play Therapy the most important message that came from each them books was that the decision to use play techniques must be taken carefully because although play can be useful in developing the therapeutic relationship, if the work is to be focused on working with trauma it is important that a therapeutic relationship is built before working with play therapy techniques. The reason behind this is the same as when talking about trauma, the client needs to feel safe and boundaries need to be in place to maintain the work so as not to re-traumatise the client.

Changing Lives Through Redecision Therapy by Mary McClure Goulding and Robert L. Goulding (1979) is a transactional analysis model that uses two-chair work to make a change. I have chosen to look at this book as it is a way of using role play that has been tried and tested in the transactional analysis field for working with adults. They focus on the injunctions that are the ‘Don’t’ messages we hold in our Parent ego-state which stop us from meeting our needs:

“Injunctions are messages from the child ego state of parents, given out of the circumstances of the parent’s own pains: unhappiness, anxiety, disappointment, anger, frustration, secret desire. While these messages are irrational in terms of the child, they may seem perfectly rational to the parent who gives them.” (Goulding and Goulding, 1979).

And also the counterinjunctions which are also known as drivers (Kahler, TAJ, 1974), these include *‘be strong, try hard, be perfect, hurry up and please me’*:

“Counterinjunctions are messages from the Parent ego state of parents that are restrictive and, if adhered to, may also prevent growth and flexibility.” (Goulding and Goulding, 1979).

With this in mind the child makes a *‘decision’* to take on these messages, some may be rejected, but it is the decisions made by the child that impacts on their life, such as the message to not be a child for example, could mean this person grows up never allowing themselves to have fun, this is the decision they have made in order to be accepted. Redecision work comes in when they try to make a new decision cognitively to have more fun, but still find they are not able. The Goulding’s talk about this stuck place as being an *‘impasse’* the client wants to have fun, they have decided in their Adult that they want to have fun, but they are still not able to, this is because the new decision has to be accepted by the Child ego state, and this is the basis of Redecision work. The client is asked to remember an early scene where the decision not to have fun, and not be a child was made and work this is explored through two chair work so that the client can make a rededecision in their Child ego state to have fun, and be a child. I have found this book to be a good resource for using a play technique in a transactional analysis setting, but I feel this kind of work needs to be undertaken with someone who has been in therapy for a long time as this method was developed by the Goulding’s when working with transactional analysis therapists. For someone who has just come into therapy I do not believe they will be able to engage in this work out of an adapted place as it requires having a lot of insight into your own processes,

and the ability to make a new decision in such a short space of time would be difficult without having already been in a long term therapeutic relationship and having worked through understanding a lot of script issues.

METHOD

As this research project is an exploration of an idea regarding psychotherapy, I have chosen to use a qualitative design as it allows an inquiry into the human experience of the idea which will be individual to each participant, allowing me to pick up themes and patterns. I do not believe doing a quantitative research project around this idea would give me an authentic response that would be individual as my questionnaire would have been more specific rather than exploratory.

When choosing the qualitative method I decided on a phenomenological study to explore the lived experience of individuals from my transactional analysis training group, from their individual experiences I can compose a description of the essence of their experience (*Creswell, 2007*) to find out the usefulness of play in transactional analysis with adults as experienced by this group.

The reason behind choosing transactional analysis trainees to be participants in my research project is because they are clients of transactional analysis therapy and can give a balanced perspective from their experiences as clients, but also from the perspective of being a therapist from their experiences on the training course. I believe having transactional analysis trainees as my research participants is more ethical than using members of the general public as they have access to therapy and supervision should any of the questions stimulate a traumatic experiences.

Although role play and two chair work is widely used in transactional analysis, especially when using the Goulding's Redecision model (*Goulding & Goulding, 1979*), there is not

much emphasis on using creative play methods to enhance the therapy process, for this reason I have asked my participants to phenomenological explore what happens for them when looking at the idea of using play therapy techniques in their own personal therapy. The questionnaire I designed was split into two sections. Section A consists of five questions which could be answered in an order that felt most comfortable and explored how they felt cognitively, emotionally, behaviourally, physically and spiritually about the idea of play being used in their personal transactional analysis therapy sessions. Section B was a description summarising their experience of these questions.

DATA COLLECTION

The data was collected via email, each participant was sent a questionnaire and asked to email their responses if they consented to their answers being used in my research. The option to withdraw was also available to them if they changed their mind after responding, I have kept confidentiality by keeping the questionnaires as an attachment, printing each one off and looking at them altogether. There are two reasons for keeping confidentiality, the first reason is to enhance the authenticity of the responses. I feel that if the participants knew that they could not be identified from their responses they were more likely to be honest rather than providing the responses they thought I might want to see. The second reason is so that I can bracket my own experience to gain a fresh perspective of the phenomenon (*Moustakas, 1994*), the confidentiality of the responses aid's this process as it does not allow my own knowledge of the participants to affect my experience of their responses.

DATA ANALYSIS

After collecting all of the questionnaires I wrote down all of the key words from Section A from each response under the headings Think, Feel, Behaviour, Body and Spirit on a flip chart so that there was a list of key words that I could use to create a description of the essence of the experience (*Creswell, 2007*) of the whole group.

FINDINGS

The next phase of the research project involved looking at the similarities and differences between the description I had devised from the grouped key words and the individual descriptions in Section B of the questionnaire to ensure the final description was congruent with each individual's experience. It also offered me the opportunity to refine my description in order to arrive at a textural and structural description of the essence of the phenomenological experience (*Creswell, 2007*) of the usefulness of play in transactional analysis therapy with adults. This can be seen below:

“Play in transactional analysis therapy with adults for a group of transactional analysis trainees in personal therapy is about having fun, being creative, spontaneous, impulsive and is a way of expressing the child ego state and exploring injunctions and script processes. There is a possibility of feeling shame and embarrassment and for that reason they would be apprehensive at first, especially when doing role play, but it does appeal to them as they feel it would be a good way of meeting needs that have been discounted and by being allowed to fully express themselves it would be a healing process. There would need to be a good relationship with the therapist so that questions could be asked to gain more adult information on the process so as not to adapt to the therapist's suggestion as this would make them withdraw from doing the work and compound the feeling of shame. In light of the potential for regression and getting in touch with traumatic events safety and boundaries are paramount. They do feel that using play is a good way of developing the client - therapist relationship. If this relationship is established and they felt safe, although they would be nervous and feel tense with anxious feelings in their abdominal area they would be keen to try it and be quite excited. They would enjoy experiencing their free child energy and would have a sense of freedom, liberation, fun and a chance to be and would feel they are doing something that is just for themselves, and the process would likely bring about previously unexplored material

to work with and understand.”

DISCUSSION

On reflection of the research process, when considering using play as part of transactional analysis therapy with adults, the group of participants have confirmed that it would be useful in creating a relationship between the therapist and client, as well as a method for getting in touch with the Child ego state (*Berne, 1977*), and exploring discounts (*Schiff & Schiff, TAJ, 1971*), injunctions (*Goulding & Goulding, TAJ, 1976*), drivers (*Kahler, TAJ, 1974*), and scripts (*Berne, 1961; Steiner 1974*).

Play can also be used as a way of exploring past traumatic experiences. The research participants felt that this is the part that could cause feelings of shame and a need to withdraw but that if they felt they had a good relationship with their therapist and felt safe they would be willing to use play as a way of exploring these issues. The implications of this in clinical practice would be that the client is ready to explore the trauma and that the therapist has an ability to contain the work with good grounding skills in case the client does regress. I believe that these skills need to be in place before a client is willing to talk about their trauma anyway, and that using play techniques would be beneficial if the client is willing as it allows them to explore the issues while keeping a distance, for example using role play, dolls, drawings etc. allows the client to look at the experience from an outside perspective, the elements of fantasy involved providing a boundary from actually giving an account of the experience which could easily regress the client. With this in mind I believe therapy should be client lead and that any suggestion for using a play technique is just that; a suggestion. The client would decide if this is something they feel would benefit them more than talking about the issue.

CONCLUSION

Conducting a phenomenological exploration of play in transactional analysis with adults has

been a positive experience for me. It has given me a structured project to focus my time on looking more in depth at play therapy and finding out more about the history of the methods has given me an interest in broadening my psychotherapy horizons to discover more about different psychotherapy theories, particularly Jungian analysis as here the use of play was developed by Jung exploring his own process with play as an adult, and Gestalt therapy as I am interested in the use of the senses and the body to integrate the whole self. The books I have read have given me different ideas on how to structure a play therapy session, and I have become more aware of the need to tailor work specifically for individuals, rather than using one method for all. I feel that my background in theatre and writing means I have enough skills to use drama therapy, movement, and poetry as a tool in the therapy process and I would be interested in learning more about the use of art and music as I have no background in this but would want to be able to facilitate the use of these should a client be interested in exploring themselves through either medium.

I feel that by having transactional analysis trainees explore the issue has given me a more in depth account of the experience than I would have achieved by using members of the general public as their training has allowed them to apply transactional analysis theory to their own personal experiences of being a client in therapy. I share with the participants the excitement of using play with transactional analysis as well as the apprehension they expressed with regards to keeping the work safe and boundaried, but I feel that the response from my colleagues has given me permission to use play techniques in my own clinical practice which for me is the most important outcome I could have gained from engaging in this project. I will address the safety issues by gaining more training in play techniques, having adequate supervision, developing a trusting relationship between myself and the client and ensuring the client has the ability to cathect enough Adult (*Berne, 1977*) before engaging in the play techniques. I will ensure that the use of play is contracted with the client so that it is client lead and they are aware of the right to stop any work that makes them uncomfortable or feels like it is not aiding their process. In conclusion to this I feel that using play in transactional

analysis with adults would be a useful way of encouraging change in the therapy sessions in a more integrated way. Looking firstly at the Adult ego-state, for the work to be non adaptive it has to be done out of an Adult choice, if the client feels, like my participants, that they want to do it but that something is holding them back through fear the this would be a good point to start to look at the Parent messages that put a block on the work as a way of de-confusing the Adult, and I feel that by looking at the Racket System by Erskine and Zalcman (*TAJ, 1979*) the discounts (*Schiff & Schiff, TAJ, 1971*), injunctions (*Goulding & Goulding, TAJ, 1976*), drivers (*Kahler, TAJ, 1974*), and scripts (*Berne, 1961; Steiner 1974*) issues will come out and offer a lot of work which can be done to enable the client to look at what is stopping them from engaging in play. At the same time this will affect a change in their every day lives as these same discounts, injunctions, drivers and scripts will effect other areas of their life. When the client is able to engage in play therapy I believe this work will allow the Child to be expressed and have their needs met as was explored by the participants in the research. If I was to take this research further it would be to look at the use of play techniques and how they fit in with transactional analysis in my own clinical practice as a case study, and in particular how using the Racket System (*Erskine and Zalcman, 1979*) could enable the use of play in transaction analysis.

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APPENDIX

Six individual textural and structural descriptions:

“Play in TA would be a way for me of cathecting my child ego state, with that in mind I think my ‘free child’ would very much enjoy the use of play in therapy. However I would need very safe boundaries and need to have everything explained and would also need to have full trust of the therapist as I would probably be nervous of feeling humiliated. Play therapy is not for everyone and needs to be used in a safe and boundaried way.”

“I think play and role play are central to the use of TA because it releases and realises the symbolic and early child ego-state content. It enabled the therapist to work closely with the

child and helps the client to have perspective about what is happening to them. It also helps with the client therapist relationship, in that it can bring the two people closer together. Finally I think play in TA is useful for dealing with difficult and emotional issues because it enables these issues to be explored in a safe environment.”

“I love the idea of play in adult TA. I haven’t experienced this but would like to.”

“I think play therapy would be a useful tool in working with clients. But think the therapist would need to check out which particular technique to use, as I have mentioned for me, some techniques would be a definite no, no...why? Not sure, just doesn’t sit right with me. I think if the therapist was open and explained the reasons for working in this way I would be ok. Think I need more information to answer this question fully.”

“The essence of my answer’s is that key words such as ‘free child, little professor, energy and fun come to mind when I think about play being used within TA. I feel apprehensive at first about using play with in TA however it might be fun! At first I would feel bodily sensations such as my heart rate increasing and tension in the top half of my body which would ease as I relaxed and enjoyed what I was doing.”

“I guess some of my answers appear contradictory. I assume it is because I have conflicting views about this topic. I can ultimately see huge benefits in this work in that it will likely bring about previously unexplored material to work with and understand. However on the other hand I am also wary of misinterpretation on the part of both client and therapist. I believe some people can obtain easier access to their free-child ego state, especially if they have don’t grow up injunctions, however again, I feel wary about the regressive nature of this therapy and the potential richness of the material it may elicit from perhaps traumatic childhood events. I find it difficult to access my free-child energy due to my drivers and injunctions. I feel ‘safer’ being a grown up in charge. So I would feel anxious if my therapist suggested I engage in play because I would feel at my most vulnerable being in a child-like situation, and therefore giving permission to another grown up to keep me safe. I can’t imagine trusting someone enough to do this with. I would also be fearful of humiliation and shame. So the idea of play therapy does not appeal to me in particular. However, I would also be equally curious as to what I might learn and at the same time be reluctant to pass by a potentially fruitful experience. So a mixed bag of feelings and ideas surrounding this interesting topic.”