

PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC PLAYBACK THEATRE: THEATRE AS THERAPY

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Abstract

Playback Theatre (PT) will soon accomplish its 50 anniversary. From the very beginning, its effects on both audiences and performers led to the use of the expression “the therapeutic question”, referring to feedback related to many of the therapeutic factors and effects of group psychotherapies. Acknowledging its therapeutic potentiality, for more than a decade now, a therapeutic version of PT, called Psychotherapeutic Playback Theatre (PPT), was developed and practiced. In Portugal, a research project on the topic of PPT, funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), was initiated in 2023. Its preliminary results will be presented in this paper. We will start by sharing a short depiction of the project, then follow it with an abstract of the systematic review of the literature published in the context of the project, and conclude by presenting some data concerning the participants involved in the PPT groups since established. The latter includes both the group of psychotherapists who received the first-ever training on PPT offered in Portugal and the therapy-centered participants of the groups that were established throughout the country.

Keywords: *Group therapy, Psychotherapeutic Playback Theatre, impact study, expressive arts.*

1. Introduction

In the middle of the 1970s, in New York, Jo Salas and Jonathan Fox presented their model of improvised community theatre, inspired both by Psychodrama and oral tradition, which they called Playback Theatre (PT) (Salas, 2013; Fox, 1994). Although the main goals of this initiative were community-centered, it became clear that many of the participants would experience effects that resemble group therapy advantages and effects, in what became known as the “Therapy Question” (Fox, 2013). These effects became, throughout the years, a subject of research in many different contexts and countries, and the benefits of participating in PT sessions were documented in different areas.

Different authors showed that PT, among other effects, can: facilitate and improve empathy, while also facilitating a change within reactions to aggression among children and adolescents in forensic contexts (Bornmann & Crossman, 2011); facilitate interventions among people experiencing mental illnesses (Moran & Alon, 2011); facilitate the development and understanding of empathy among adolescents in the school context (Ng & Graydon, 2016); help reduce both social and personal stigma associated with people living with mental disorders (Yotis et al., 2017); facilitate an improved mutual understanding between police officers and former prisoners, culminating in improved interactions / attitudes (Smigelsky & Neimeyer, 2018); help promote both mental and emotional well-being among older adults (Chung et al., 2018), as well as their social involvement, personal transformation and creativity (Keisari et al., 2020), and facilitate group cohesion, empathy, construction of new meanings, thus assisting in the therapeutic processes in general, including that of group therapy (Gonzalez et al, 2022).

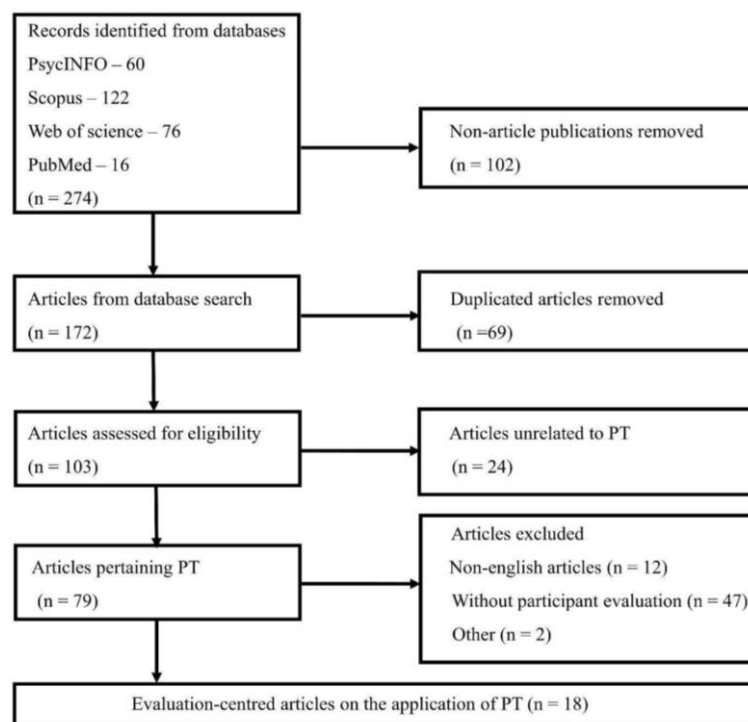
These research initiatives were pivotal in promoting the appearance of Psychotherapeutic Playback Theatre (PPT) (Kowalsky et al., 2022), as well as in the building of the research-grant application submitted in 2021 by the authors of this paper to the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). Having been approved said research project will reach its end in 2024 (FCT Exploratory Project “Therapeutic Playback Theatre: Impact study”, reference 2022.07713.PTDC). In the context of this project, around 30 group psychotherapists were recruited and trained in the therapeutic application of PT. Of this group of trainees, some implemented therapeutic groups that followed this new format. The main aim of the project is to assess both the most impactful effects that PPT has on its participants, and the experience of everyone who took part in its implementation, therapists and participants alike. Furthermore, an Implementation Manual for therapists, as well as a systematic review of literature on the topic of Playback Theatre applications were produced. We will now start by presenting an abstract of the literature review.

2. Systematic review of literature

As part of the above-mentioned project, and to facilitate the preparation of the training program, we sought to identify all scientific literature published since 1990 on the topic of Playback Theatre applications. For that, we used four well-known electronic databases (PsycINFO, Web of Science, PubMed, and Scopus), and the keywords “playback theater” OR “playback theatre”, searching for “title”, “abstract”, and “keywords”.

We started with a universe of 274 written documents, 172 of which were from peer-reviewed journals. Eliminating duplicated articles brought the number of papers to 103. However, only 79 were found to have been focused on PT. We then eliminated 12 non-English written works, 47 that did not use any kind of evaluation tools, and 2 additional articles for other reasons, which brought our search to a final tally of 18 articles (see Figure 1).

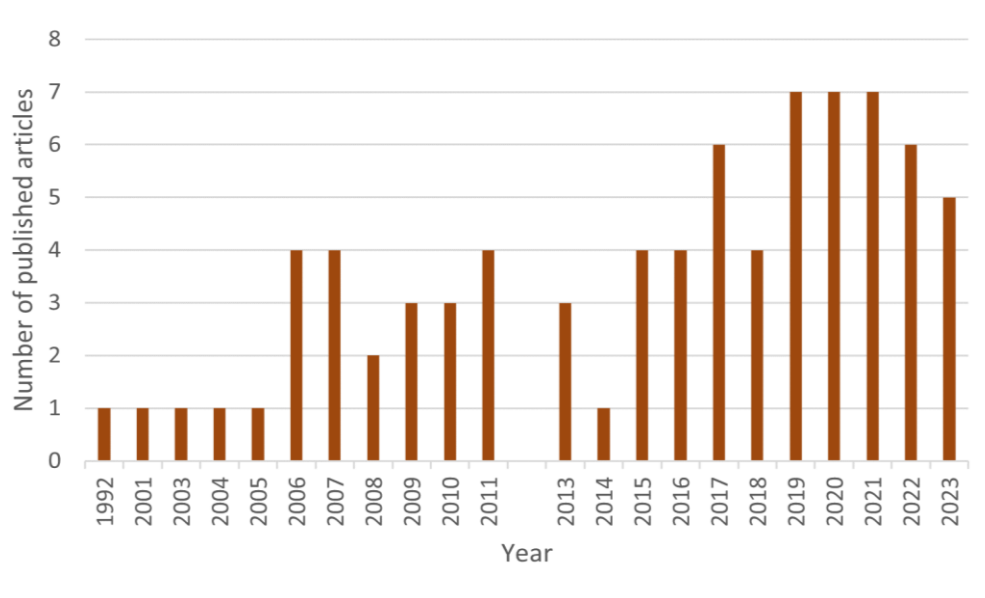
Figure 1. Selection criteria for PT literature review (from Gonzalez, Lima, & Preto, in press).



The main results of this review can be seen in our final document, soon to be published in *The Arts in Psychotherapy* (Gonzalez, Lima, & Preto, in press). For the purpose of this presentation, we will simply underline the fact that, as can be seen in Figure 2, the number of publications has been increasing throughout the years, with research being conducted in more than 20 countries, as well as with audiences/participants of different ages groups, from children to older adults. Some of the contexts of application were primary schools, high schools, universities, prisons, older adult centers, communities of people affected by natural disasters, and personal development groups, among others.

Furthermore, we found effects of Playback Theatre in such diverse areas as lowering symptoms associated with depression, anxiety, PTSD, and ADHD; enhancing self-esteem, self-concept, meaning and purpose in life, confidence, creativity and spontaneity, comprehension of others and of the world; increasing the understanding of the emotions of others, empathy, and the ability to express oneself. Several beneficial aspects were found concerning communitarian issues, raising the sense of community, generating mutual understanding, and, in some cases, improving relations between groups dealing with conflicting views, such as former prisoners and police officers.

Figure 2. Number of publications (following chosen criteria) on PT since 1992 (from Gonzalez, Lima, & Preto, in press).



3. Training

One of the most critical components of this project consisted of recruiting therapists motivated to receive training in the therapeutic application of Playback Theatre. Knowing that we had limited time for the training process, we focused our recruitment by targeting individuals with previous experiences with (therapeutic) groups, and preferably knowledgeable in Expressive Arts, hence at ease with theatrical forms. We gathered more than 30 professionals and started the training in June 2023, which was concentrated on weekends, so that people residing in cities other than Lisbon could take part. The training is still going on, in the form of supervision meetings, intervision, and moments centered on the sharing of different experiences. More than 20 therapists successfully finished their training.

The training was delivered by two experts in Psychotherapeutic Playback Theatre (PPT), who were trained at the Israel Institute of Psychotherapeutic Playback Theatre and who, since, have authored the main books and papers on this subject (Kowalsky et al., 2022; Keisari et al, 2022). One of the experts is a dramatherapist and conductor of PT groups with older adults, while the other is one of the founders of PPT. Additionally, one of the leading researchers from the project, a psychodramatist and theatre director for more than 20 years and a playback for 7 years, also provided training in the therapeutic application of PT. Training merged theoretical contents with the practice of the formats of PPT, doing so by using the training group members' shared personal stories to approach the dynamics of a therapeutic group.

As part of the implementation of the project, a handbook for PPT trainees, but that can be used by other audiences interested in group psychotherapy, was created and published (Lima, Gonzalez, & Preto, 2023). It is available in an Open Access format through the following web address (<http://hdl.handle.net/10400.12/9510>). This manual covers the general framework of PT, as well as some main concepts from Narrative Therapy, Psychodrama, Dramatherapy, the power of the Expressive Arts in therapy, the contributions of Humanistic Psychology, and the specific aspects of group psychotherapy. Its main aim is to facilitate the work of the PPT psychotherapists, through the organization of a proposed therapeutic sequence, inspired in a model of group developmental stages.

Being a handbook produced in the context of a research project, it also contains a set of suggestions for a research protocol, including a research design and instruments for data collection. This manual has been used by the trainees in the implementation of their therapeutic groups and their research designs.

4. Implementation of therapeutic groups

At the moment these lines are being written, PPT groups are being implemented. Starting in January 2024, most of the trained therapists began, usually in teams of two or three therapists, their own PT therapeutic groups, thus honoring the challenge that was issued during the recruitment and training stages. Groups are formed by adults and are being developed in both private clinics and public health facilities. Extreme caution was taken in terms of ethics, with informed consent forms being delivered to all

participants, with all the needed information about the process and the research design, inviting people to take part in it.

The trained therapists are being accompanied in supervision, using an online platform, which makes it possible for all trainees to participate. Groups are being developed, or expected to start soon, throughout the Portuguese territory, from North to South, including the islands.

5. Preliminary results

In terms of its execution, the project, which will finish at the beginning of the second semester of 2024, has been a success. Most of the outcomes and goals are either finished (Implementation Manual, Systematic Literature Review, training, implementation of at least 6 PPT groups, 2 communications in international meetings) or ongoing (assessment papers, English version of the Manual, communications of the results in more national and international meetings and congresses).

There are currently 12 groups already active, and about three more are expected to start, including in Porto, Aveiro, Coimbra, Leiria, Lisboa, Cascais, Faro, and Funchal. All in all, we expect that almost 100 participants will be involved until the end of this year, most of them finishing at least 12 sessions of PPT, and thus contributing to our impact study. We are using a control group, to better assess the impacts of this new form of group therapy on participants.

Apart from quantitative measures, qualitative methods are being used, including interviews and analysis of audiovisual documents recorded during the sessions. These results will start to be published throughout this year.

6. Discussion

The use of arts, especially theatre, in psychotherapeutic contexts, has been developing in recent years, as we could confirm in the number of publications found in our literature review. They are a resource that brings relief to many, and that complements the exclusive use of talking therapies. Deepening our knowledge of the specific mechanisms that underlie the impacts of expressive arts is only possible with thorough research, including quantitative and qualitative data collecting.

Furthermore, group psychotherapy continues to be an invaluable format, even more so in times like ours, where societies are creating citizens more and more closed in individuality, and closed to the sense of otherness. To disseminate not only this new format of group psychotherapy but also the scientific studies that validate this and other therapies is a joint task to be done by the practitioners and researchers communities all together.

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