

SHADOW DRAMA: REFRAMING AND INTEGRATING THE SHADOW FOR IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION THROUGH CREATIVE ART-BASED PSYCHODRAMA

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Abstract

Disowned or marginalized aspects of experience may shape emotional responses, self-evaluation, and identity outside conscious awareness. This participatory action research study aimed to develop and examine Shadow Drama, a structured experiential exercise integrating drawing, mask-based dialogue, role enactment, and symbolic representation. The exercise was iteratively refined across three action–reflection cycles and implemented as a single dedicated session, introduced when disowned aspects became salient within a broader one-to-one intervention program (12 sessions, approximately 90 minutes each). Six participants contributed to protocol development across four phases, with in-depth qualitative analysis focused on Phase 4, representing the fully developed version of the exercise. Data included session transcripts, participant feedback forms, and researcher reflexive and analytic memos. Inductive reflexive thematic analysis identified three recurring processes: reinterpretation of previously rejected traits, identification of unmet emotional and somatic needs, and symbolic integration of latent strengths. Results were associated with increased expressions of self-compassion, emotion regulation, identity coherence, and greater confidence in participants' capacity for self-directed growth.

Keywords: *Shadow work, identity transformation, art-based practice, embodied enactment, shadow drama.*

1. Introduction

Disowned or marginalized aspects of experience are commonly described in depth and integrative psychologies as parts of the self that are excluded from conscious identity due to emotional, relational, or cultural constraints (Jung, 1959/1951). When such aspects remain unacknowledged, they may continue to influence emotional experience, self-evaluation, and relational patterns outside of conscious awareness (McLaughlin, 2018). Contemporary integrative and parts-based approaches emphasize that bringing these aspects into awareness can support psychological wholeness, emotional integration, and access to previously restricted internal resources (Schwartz, 2013). Moreover, Psychodrama and related action-based approaches provide established methods for working with internal roles and self-states through enactment, role-taking, and embodied dialogue (Moreno, 1946/1983). These methods emphasize experiential engagement with internal parts of the self and have been shown to support emotional expression, perspective-shifting, and integration through action rather than verbal reflection alone (Blatner, 2000). Art-based expressive methods also, utilize sensory-motor activities and visual media to create non-verbal pathways that bypass analytical language, allowing individuals to access implicit memories and emotional material stored in the brain's perceptual networks. These methods facilitate the transformation of internal imagery into symbolic forms, making previously unconscious emotional states accessible for conscious observation and cognitive integration (Lusebrink & Hinz, 2004).

Within person-centered traditions, emotional processing, empathic attunement, and authentic self-expression are central change mechanisms (Elliott et al., 2013; Rogers, 1957). However, they rely primarily on reflective dialogue, with limited use of structured, action-based methods for engaging disowned aspects of experience. In response to this gap, this action research study aims to develop and examine a structured experiential exercise for shadow work, integrating art-based methods, role enactment, and symbolic representation within a person-centered, non-psychoanalytic framework. In contrast to depth-oriented shadow work, which often involves dream analysis and archetypal interpretation (Jung, 1959/1951), this study adopts a non-interpretive, experiential approach grounded in embodied expression and personal meaning-making. Methods such as art-based expression, role enactment, and symbolic representation—when used non-directive—align with person-centered values and facilitate emotional and somatic access by bypassing habitual cognitive patterns (Rogers, 1957; Blatner, 2000; Lusebrink & Hinz, 2004).

2. Research method

This study employed a participatory action research (PAR) approach to develop and refine a structured, person-centered Shadow work. It was embedded within a 12-session art- and play-based program grounded in the Intentional Meta-Being Coaching framework (Fazel, 2025)*.

The PAR design supported iterative cycles of action, reflection, and adaptation within a practitioner-led context, with participants contributing to refinement of the Shadow Drama method (Kidd & Kral, 2005).

Participants in the broader program included approximately 20 international students at the University of Debrecen, Hungary. From this group, six individuals were purposefully selected to participate in a single Shadow Drama session based on the emergence of salient themes such as avoidance, self-criticism, or distress related to disowned aspects of identity. The sample included three women, two men, and one transgender participant, aged 20–40. These individuals were distributed across developmental phases (Phases 1–3: $n = 1$ each; Phase 4: $n = 3$), with Phase 4 representing the finalized Shadow Drama protocol. Each participant completed twelve individual sessions of approximately 90 minutes, with Shadow Drama implemented as one dedicated session within this sequence. Ethical approval was obtained (EPKEB 2025-051 [2023-165]), informed consent was secured, and reflexive documentation was used to monitor researcher positionality. Sessions were facilitated by the first author, a female practitioner–researcher aged 51, with over a decade of experience in coaching psychology and person-centered practice. Her background supported the ethical navigation of power dynamics and the creation of psychologically safe environment.

Data sources included Participant’s post-session feedback forms, interview excerpts, and researcher reflexive and analytic memos. The use of multiple qualitative sources supported triangulation and enhanced interpretive depth in practitioner research (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 185). Inductive reflexive thematic analysis was conducted across action–reflection cycles to examine processes of externalizing, dialoguing with, and integrating Shadow elements (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Given the dual role of the first author as practitioner–researcher, a second researcher independently reviewed the data and participated in collaborative reflexive discussions to support critical interpretation and support reflexive challenge. Ongoing memo-writing supported reflexivity and analytic rigor (Berger, 2015). In-depth analysis and illustrative quotations are drawn primarily from Phase 4, reflecting the fully developed form of the Shadow Drama protocol.

2.1. Person-centered shadow work process

Shadow work implemented in a single session following rapport-building, when a disowned aspect was limiting progress. As Zweig and Abrams (2020/1991) state, “*we must confront the shadow, acknowledge it as part of the self, and find a way to bring it into our lives and our identity in a transformed manner*” (p. xvi). This process, we named Shadow Drama, involved four steps: (1) **Acknowledge**: drawing the Shadow on paper to externalize a disowned, unwanted, or avoided aspect of the self; (2) **Engage**: using the drawing as a symbolic mask, with the practitioner enacting the Shadow within a structured experiential dialogue; (3) **Integrate**: drawing a transformed representation of the Shadow on a wooden figure; and (4) **Embrace**: assigning a name to the wooden figure to affirm the reframed Shadow as part of the self.

3. Results

As Phases 1–3 involved partial and evolving versions of the intervention, these stages are presented in summary form to document method development. In-depth thematic analysis is therefore focused on Phase 4, which represents the fully developed Shadow Drama protocol.

Iterative Development of the Shadow Drama. Across three early developmental phases, progressive refinements to the Shadow-focused intervention were implemented and evaluated. In Phase 1 ($n = 1$), drawing on a wooden figure along with discussion about Shadow’s purpose, perceived benefits, and protective functions facilitated recognition of an internalised critical voice and partial self-acceptance; however, increased internal pressure and persistent procrastination indicated limited behavioural consolidation. In Phase 2 ($n = 1$), paper-based drawing followed by the same discussion elicited emotional activation, but clear Shadow transformation or integration was not observed, and subsequent changes could not be confidently attributed to the exercise the Participant said “*I can’t talk to a piece of paper,*” that inspired me to use the drawing as a mask. In Phase 3 ($n = 1$), the inclusion of mask-based dialogue and wooden figure work enabled direct confrontation and symbolic reframing of core fear with strong emotional impact; In this phase the participant in the end mentioned “*I want to name it as red chick*” and held it close

* IMBC is a person-centered coaching framework aimed at supporting intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal transformation.

to his chest, as if attempting to embrace it. The act appeared to mark a moment of symbolic integration, suggesting that the process was becoming more internally meaningful and emotionally embodied.

3.1. Shadow drama outcomes (phase 4)

Inductive reflexive thematic analysis across interview responses, feedback forms, symbolic drawings, wooden figure work, and researcher memos in Phase 4 identified three recurring themes:

Reinterpreting Previously Rejected Traits. All participants initially described their Shadow aspects using negative or morally loaded language, framing them as weaknesses, failures, or emotions that were difficult to show or accept. Participant 4 (P4) initially labeled her Shadow as “*stupid*” and described feeling “*hopeless*” and experiencing a “*dreadful feeling*” related to perceived mistakes; during mask-based dialogue, she reframed this aspect as childlike and lacking knowledge, stating, “*It’s like a child... they don’t know better... I can’t get mad at myself when I was three years old,*” and her feedback indicated that the process helped her “*change my perspective on the situation.*” Participant 5 (P5) reinterpreted her “*shameless anger,*” initially experienced as a source of “*struggle and fear,*” as an “*insightful and creative*” force, leading to the creation of the “*Naughty girl*” that integrated devil-like anger with a “*smiley face*”; Researcher memos documented a shift from anger during the mask-based dialogue to increased calmness during the creation of the transformed figure. Participant 6 (P6) initially described her sadness and vulnerability as something she was “*afraid of showing*” and as a “*weakness,*” depicting sadness in black and surrounded by symbols of achievement; following the process, she stated, “*I learned that I can be vulnerable and strong at the same time.*”

Identifying Unmet Needs: Across participants, Shadow engagement was accompanied by emotional and bodily responses (e.g., tension, breath, crying, relaxation), alongside increased awareness of needs for compassion, validation, emotional expression, and bodily connection. P4 reported that the exercise helped her “*understand where my frustration was coming from.*” She realized she was the one “*treating her this way*” and acknowledged that “*She doesn’t deserve to be treated that way*”. Researcher memos described a visible moment of insight during the mask-based dialogue, followed by a shift from anger and sadness toward greater calm and a need for self-compassion. P5 described the session as feeling like “*an exhale after holding breath for too long.*” She reported that the focus on embodiment helped her recognize the importance of “*connect[ing] with my body and my emotions.*” Feedback forms and researcher memos documented references to breath, bodily awareness, and a shift from cognitive focus to bodily engagement. P6 reported difficulty expressing vulnerability and described maintaining a strong external “*character.*” During the session, she reported needing space to focus on herself and identified a need for self-validation, stating that “*the validation that he needs is validation from himself.*” She also reported giving herself “*permission*” to engage in enjoyable activities. Researcher memos documented crying, emotional tension, and subsequent relaxation.

Uncovering Latent Strengths: In the final phase, participants created symbolic representations integrating disowned aspects into new identity forms, marked by positive language, symbolic ownership and playfulness. All three participants engaged fully in the process and willing to keep the symbolic figure. P4 reframed her mistakes as learning opportunities, stating, “*I am grateful for the mistakes I make; I can afford them,*” and described the session as “*turning a new leaf.*” She defined her action plan as viewing mistakes as “*opportunities for growth.*” Researcher memos noted playful engagement and a request to draw an additional figure to take home. P5 uncovered “*spontaneous*” creativity, evidenced by the “*Naughty girl*” figure that integrated her anger with a “*smiley face.*” P6 discovered an “*inner winner*” through the character “*Miew,*” who combined feminine/masculine traits and wore a “*crown*” and a “*star*” describing it as having both vulnerability and strength. Researcher memos documented singing and playful behavior during the wooden figure activity.

Table 1. Summary of Cross-Case Synthesis for Phase 4 (Shadow Drama).

Dimension	P4: “Dumbo”	P5: “Naughty Girl”	P6: “Miew”
Reinterpretation	from “stupid” to innocent reduced self-directed anger past-self reframed as understandable mistakes reappraised as part of learning	reduced shame around anger expressed anger rather than suppressed anger reframed as part of self-expression anger viewed as usable Showed emotional energy	acceptance of vulnerability reduced emotional inhibition vulnerability integrated with strength vulnerability reframed as supporting functioning
Unmet Need	kindness toward self awareness of frustration triggers internal emotional needs treat self with more care	acceptance of emotional expression bodily release and breath recognition of mind–body & body–emotion disconnection	self-acceptance emotional expression need recognition of misaligned public–private self emotional self-permission
Latent Strength	kindness toward mistakes increased calm and playfulness growth-oriented self-narrative mistakes used as learning resources	acceptance of emotional intensity spontaneous emotional flow integration of anger with positive self-image embodied engagement with emotions	internal validation positive affect and emotional release integrated “inner winner” identity self-directed motivation and autonomy

4. Discussion

The present findings suggest that Shadow Drama functioned as a structured experiential process through which participants moved from self-alienation toward greater emotional integration, identity coherence, and self-directed growth. Across cases, the recurring thematic patterns support conceptualizing the Shadow Drama process as four core stages: (1) Acknowledge, (2) Engage, (3) Integrate, and (4) Embrace (AEIE), capturing a progression from externalization and experiential dialogue to symbolic transformation and identity-level ownership of reframed self-aspects. The results showed alignment with established theories of shadow integration and associated with four key outcomes:

Development of Self-Compassion: Across all participants, reinterpretation of disowned traits was accompanied by a shift from harsh self-judgment toward a more compassionate stance. This pattern is consistent with conceptualizations of the Shadow as containing psychologically disowned material that, when approached with awareness and acceptance, can be reintegrated into the self-system (Jung, 1959/1951). Rather than eliminating or correcting these aspects, participants re-authored their meanings (e.g., from “*stupid*” to innocent, from “*shameless*” to creative, from “*weak*” to “*vulnerable and strong*”), suggesting a movement from moralized self-evaluation toward contextualized self-understanding. These shifts parallel models of self-compassion, which emphasize kindness toward oneself in moments of perceived failure or inadequacy (Neff, 2003). In this study, reinterpretation appeared to facilitate a kinder stance toward the self, allowing participants to relate to previously rejected aspects with warmth rather than judgment.

Emotion Regulation: Identification of unmet emotional and somatic needs was linked to observable and reported changes in emotion regulation. Participants described bodily release, shifts in breath, crying, and increased calm, suggesting engagement of bottom-up regulatory processes. P5 labeling the session as “*an exhale*” illustrates this embodied shift from tension toward physiological settling. These findings are consistent with embodied and experiential models of affect regulation, which emphasize that emotional regulation is supported through somatic awareness and experiential processing rather than cognitive reappraisal alone (Fogel, 2009, pp. 9, 97). Consistent references to breath, release, and bodily reconnection suggest that the method may support regulation through emotional expression and physiological settling rather than suppression or intellectualization, and may be particularly valuable for people with over-controlled or achievement-based emotion regulation patterns (e.g., P5, P6).

Identity Coherence: Symbolic integration of latent strengths supported greater identity coherence, as previously split qualities were combined into more coherent self-representations. P4 also mentioned Mistakes “*allow me to learn, to be hopeful, naïve and childish at times* and P6’s character mentioned integrated “*vulnerable*” and “*strong.*” P5’s transformed character was depicted Smiling “*Naughty girl*” which “*looking devil in the front.*” It reflects processes described in both Jungian and contemporary integrative frameworks, in which Shadow material becomes a source of vitality and psychological resource once acknowledged and incorporated (Jung, 1959/1951). Participants’ reports of playfulness, singing, and requests to take the figures home further suggest that these representations functioned as ongoing identity anchors, extending the integration beyond the session itself.

Self-Directed Growth: Across cases, these experiential and identity-level shifts were accompanied by increased confidence in participants’ capacity for self-directed growth, reflected in concrete intentions and action-oriented narratives. Rather than positioning changes as externally driven, participants described self-directed commitments. For example, P4’s stated “*I will welcome every mistake as an opportunity for growth*” This pattern aligns with self-determination theory, which emphasizes autonomy and internalized motivation as central to sustainable growth (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These shifts were grounded in experiential and symbolic processes rather than abstract goal-setting, supporting the view that identity-level, emotionally integrated change may provide a stronger foundation for self-directed growth than purely cognitive or behavioral planning. These findings not only support the feasibility of Shadow Drama but also suggest that its underlying AEIE process (Acknowledge, Engage, Integrate, Embrace) may offer a structured, replicable pathway for working with disowned aspects of identity through experiential methods. By translating abstract therapeutic goals into embodied, symbolic, and creative steps, this process-level structure contributes a coherent framework for integrating emotional processing, symbolic transformation, and identity work within a single-session format. By integrating these elements within a person-centered framework, Shadow Drama extends existing practices by offering a concise, process-oriented structure—through the AEIE sequence—for engaging disowned aspects at both emotional and identity levels. This structure functions as a bridge between insight-oriented, parts-based, and embodied experiential methods. While these findings underscore the potential contribution of Shadow Drama to person-centered and experiential approaches, several limitations should be acknowledged. The small, purposefully selected sample limits the transferability of the findings, and the action research design prioritized developmental refinement of the method rather than formal evaluation of effectiveness. As the first author also served as practitioner–facilitator, researcher positionality and potential bias may have

influenced both the process and interpretation of the data, despite the use of reflexive memos and collaborative analysis. In addition, outcomes were based on qualitative self-report, symbolic material, and researcher observations rather than standardized outcome measures, limiting conclusions about the magnitude or durability of change. Future research with larger and more diverse samples, independent facilitators, and mixed-method and longitudinal designs is needed to examine the generalizability and longer-term impact of Shadow Drama.

5. Conclusion

This study developed and examined Shadow Drama, a structured, single-session experiential method that integrates art-based expression, mask dialogue, role enactment, and symbolic transformation within a person-centered framework. Findings suggest that the process may facilitate reinterpretation of disowned traits, identification of unmet needs, and integration of latent strengths—alongside increases in self-compassion, emotion regulation, identity coherence, and self-directed growth. These outcomes support the feasibility of Shadow Drama as an experiential approach to shadow-focused work and highlight its potential contribution to person-centered and integrative therapeutic practices. Grounded in the AEIE process (Acknowledge, Engage, Integrate, Embrace), the method offers a replicable pathway for facilitating identity-level change through embodied, symbolic, and relational processes. As a process model, AEIE provides a clear structure for engaging disowned aspects of self in a way that supports integration without imposing interpretive meaning. Further research is needed to evaluate its effectiveness, generalizability, and long-term impact across diverse settings and populations. The method is therapeutically informed but not a substitute for psychotherapy, and may not be appropriate in contexts involving acute trauma, active psychosis, or where emotional regulation is severely impaired.

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