
Practitioner's Corner

Psychodrama and Poetry in the Service of Gender Empathy

Edit Szathmári, PhD^{1*}, Veronika Ferencz, MA²

¹Psychodrama Leader, Assistant Professor, Institute of Psychology, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary; ²Psychodrama Leader, Independent Practitioner, Budapest, Hungary

***Corresponding Author:** Edit Szathmári : szathmari.edit@ppk.elte.hu

Gender identity is a central theme in most adult psychodrama groups. It appears in verbal check-in stories, relationship-themed game offers, and free interactions. Nowadays, it is essential to consider the social context regarding gender, which often highlights the defining and limiting role of a country's culture at a particular age. Some forms of poetry are similarly prevalent in the psychodramatic warm-up methodology: for example, shaping important keywords into poems, utilizing the conciseness of haiku to form a theme, or expressing a common experience within a smaller group of members. In this case study, the authors highlight the intersection of these two phenomena through a play that our previous group had performed. The location is Hungary, with its Central and Eastern European traditions and restrictive gender policies. The misunderstanding between the genders that emerged as the group's theme, the resulting tension, and the helplessness experienced in the face of the broader social environment led us to the play, in which the genders had to switch roles. Both groups were tasked with writing a poem about the everyday challenges and lifelong experiences of their gender and putting it on the stage. The enormous empathetic impact on both group members and leaders is also noted.

KEYWORDS: Psychodrama; poetry; gender; empathy

INTRODUCTION

The presented case was not a result of conscious preparation and detailed planning. Both the authors while leading a psychodrama session together witnessed the organic emergence of the theme of everyday gender-related experiences and tensions, and did their best to capitalize on the momentum to address the topic immediately, increasing awareness and fostering empathy among the members. After creating and executing the presented play and experiencing its immediate

cathartic and long-term positive effects, it was found to be valuable to share with colleagues, while also reflecting on the factors that contributed to its success.

To set the scene for the case, after briefly reflecting on the applied art form of poetry and the occurrence of gender-related topics in psychodrama, the authors also presented the Hungarian cultural and social context relevant from a gender perspective.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender is a central theme in most adult psychodrama groups, particularly when approached from an awareness perspective (Parlak & Çamaş, 2021). In practice, gender frequently emerges during verbal check-ins, in relationship-centered play scenarios, and through spontaneous interactions among group members. When addressing gender-related themes, it is crucial to consider the broader social context within which the psychodrama group is conducted. The gender-related roles, expectations, and limitations imposed by a specific country's culture and historical period significantly shape how gender is experienced and expressed within the group. Thus, psychodramatic exploration of gender must be grounded in a culturally and temporally informed framework to facilitate meaningful insight and transformation.

On a global level, there is an increasing understanding and interest in gender roles, gender inequality, and restrictive gender norms, and their wide range of effects spanning from health and education to economic and political power (Aulia, Marzuki, & Arpanudin, 2024; Cardella, Hernández-Sánchez, & Sánchez-García, 2020; Klasen, 2018; Kleven, Landais, & Sogaard, 2019; Huang, Gates, Sinatra, & Barabási, 2020). Gender also impacts mental health; there are gender-specific challenges because of social and biological factors that make gender an important consideration for mental health professionals (Camp, Vitoratou, & Rimes, 2020; Kiely, Brady, & Byles, 2019; Otten et al., 2021; Valentine & Shipherd, 2018).

In the Hungarian context, long-term sociocultural factors play a critical role in shaping gender dynamics within psychodrama and broader psychosocial processes. Persistent gender inequalities remain a defining feature, as documented by the European Institute for Gender Equality (2022). These disparities are reinforced by entrenched conservative gender roles (Nagy & Vicsek, 2008; Scharle, 2015) and the influence of Central and Eastern European traditions, which continue to shape social norms and expectations (Nagy, 2012; Nagy, Lisowska, & Ruminska-Zimny, 2022). Furthermore, Hungary is characterized by a predominantly masculine cultural orientation, as highlighted in the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) Survey (Nagy & Vicsek, 2014), which emphasizes traits such as assertiveness, competition, and traditional authority structures. These factors must be taken into account when examining gender as it manifests in psychodrama groups in this country.

Beyond long-term cultural impact, the following recent sociopolitical developments have been affected the specific group of the case and introduced additional layers of complexity to gender-related dynamics. The disproportionate burden placed on women during pandemic management has further exacerbated the existing gender inequalities (Kováts, 2020). In parallel, gender-restrictive

policies, such as the banning of gender studies (Prager, 2019) and increasing censorship targeting LGBTQ+ content, including the mandated wrapping of certain books (Rutai, 2024), reflect a broader trend of institutionalized control over gender discourse. However, it evoked some surprising acts of solidarity and broader discourse over gender, too. Public instances, such as that of the so-called “alkaline doctor,” a director of a hospital, who caused permanent damage to his ex-girlfriend by pouring lye on her genitals (Fülöp, 2024), illustrate how gender-based misunderstandings and hostility intensified societal tensions and infiltrated therapeutic spaces. These developments contributed to a collective sense of helplessness, symbolized by Hungary’s ongoing failure to ratify the Istanbul Convention, which undermines efforts to address gender-based violence at both systemic and individual levels. Such factors inevitably impact the emotional atmosphere, thematic focus, and trust dynamics within psychodrama groups.

In a tense situation like this, one’s own mental health and empathy toward other social groups might be crucial to create an atmosphere of general understanding and space for calm discussions and interpersonal connections between these groups. Psychodrama was found to be effective in improving the symptoms of various mental health conditions (López-González, Morales-Landazábal, & Topa, 2021), including those affected by gender-based inequality and violence, by empowering them and helping them to process their traumatic experiences (Bucuță, Dima, & Testoni, 2018; Mondolfi Miguel & Pino-Juste, 2021).

Beyond that, there are various studies on how psychodrama can foster empathy (Kipper & Ben-Ely, 1979; Tanzi, Biasco, & Baile, 2014). Role-reversal psychodrama technique stands out as a significantly effective tool to aid the individual in creating a mental representation of the experience of others because of its neurological mechanisms (Yaniv, 2012). For example, in a psychodrama-based training program for professionals, Dogan (2018) found a significant improvement in empathetic skills, especially through the role reversal technique, which aids the individual to raise awareness of the perspective and experience of the other in a given situation. In a study conducted among adolescents, psychodrama also increased the participants’ empathy (Şimşek, Yılmaz Yalçınkaya, Ardic, & Yıldırım, 2020). In a control-group setting, applying quantitative and qualitative analysis, Soysal (2021) found that the most commonly reported effect of a 20-week psychodrama program was the enhancement of empathy, which was significantly attributed to role reversal. In a comparative study among role reversal, first-person perspective, and third-person perspective, Wu and colleagues (2025) found that role reversal had the most significant effect on empathy in both cognitive (taking the others’ perspective) and affective ways (feeling connected to others’ experiences). Poetry therapy was also found to be effective in developing empathy.

When incorporating different art forms in psychodrama, intermodal transfer serves to enrich the modes through which sensory stimulation, emotional evocation, and reflective thought are facilitated (Orkibi, 2011). Specifically, using poetry in therapy is a long-researched area. Mazza (2016) (see also Mazza & Hayton, 2013) has developed a three-dimensional (3D) model of using poetry in therapeutic context, which can be interpreted in the context of psychodrama. The first receptive/

prescriptive dimension when using the existing literary work of art is to validate a feeling or enhance group discussion. The second, expressive/creative dimension covers the process of writing, creating pieces of art by group members. According to research results, expressive writing can provide a sense of order and control and promote group process variables, such as cohesion (Alfrey et al., 2021; Mazza & Hayton, 2013; Pennebaker, Evans, & Evans, 2014). The third, symbolic/ceremonial component in a psychodrama context can refer to a performance connected to a specific event or life situation. Research results suggest that poetry therapy has a positive impact on emotional awareness and empathy (Dogan, 2018; Schoonover et al., 2020), and coping and cultural well-being (Ihanus, 2022).

In practice, by integrating various artistic and expressive modalities, psychodrama practitioners can deepen participants' engagement and insight. For instance, shaping significant keywords into poems allows for symbolic and emotional reprocessing of core themes. At the same time, the use of haiku provides a concise yet potent medium for distilling and expressing central experiences. Additionally, conveying shared experiences within smaller subgroups enhances intimacy and collective resonance, fostering a more nuanced and multidimensional therapeutic process.

METHOD

The case presented occurred in a psychodrama group led by the authors, who had previously collaborated on multiple groups. The group focused on self-awareness, with no clinical patients involved, and its members joined voluntarily. After the end of the group process, the authors requested and received written consent from all group members to present the case study in an anonymous way and to share the poems. There were four female and six male members, including LGBTQ+ members, with an age range spanning from the early twenties to the late forties. The group had one full-day session per month, originally planned to last for 1½ years. However, since the COVID-19 restrictions impacted the process, the duration was extended by another 6 months.

The given session fell in the last quarter of the group process. In the morning of the session, after check-ins and warm-ups, there was a deeply involving, protagonist-centered play by a young female member about her relationship with her boyfriend. During the integration phase of the play, the members shared personal stories about relationship problems, dating issues, and various gender-related difficulties, which inevitably raised some tension in the group. During the discussion that followed, the leaders identified the emerging group theme of gender-related experiences and brainstormed ways to elaborate on it, building on the members' current warmed-up state. As a result, a group-level approach was chosen, with two main goals: first, to raise awareness of gender-related everyday experiences and the role of societal and cultural influences in them, and second, to facilitate mutual understanding of each other's experiences, rather than increasing tension between genders. From a methodological perspective, building on previous experience with using poetry in psychodrama, the authors agreed to incorporate this method into the warm-up phase of the play. Poetry

seemed adequate not only as a distinct art form enriching the experience but also from the perspective of condensing and elevating the topic to a broader level, by which, beyond personal experiences, cultural norms and traditions can be formulated. Based on knowledge of the group, the authors determined that the role reversal technique could be applied in this case. These considerations led to the creation of the play in the structure summarized in Table 1. After explaining to the group that an essential topic of gender was emerging from the previous play, the authors communicated that the group would work on it together. First, members were asked to form gender-based groups, with LGBTQ+ participants encouraged to choose a grouping that felt most comfortable. They decided to join the group that represents the way society perceives them, meaning the male and female groups, respectively, resulting in a female group of four and a male group of six members. The groups were then asked to create poems that describe the main experiences of their genders in our society. In all, 20 minutes were dedicated to writing, and then the authors asked the groups to read aloud their poems. To present the poems in this paper, the authors applied ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2023) to translate from Hungarian to English, using the following prompt: “Translate it to English and make it rhyme.”

Excerpts from men’s poem:

At home, he’s the wise provider, so grand,
 But on weekends, he’s sitting by the fishing stand.
 A cool, flashy dude, he’s shining with pride,
 But if gets hurt, whimpers like a dog that’s been tied.
 ...
 A good woman forgives all with joy,
 Or if not, she raises the cub on her own.
 She can’t expect her man to say true
 Instead, a car from Germany, maybe two.

Excerpts from women’s poem:

What’s your complaint about the comments they make:
 “You should give birth” or “I would fuck you deep?”
 Just put on some foundation, give it a go,
 But hey, that’s a lot of makeup, you know!
 ...
 Have your boobs, have your ass,
 My man surely knows it all, at best.
 If I’ve got an opinion, “your period is here,”
 But I need to thank if he ever cleans.

The raw, rich, and explicit presentation of these experiences had a visibly moving effect on all members. There were sighs, tears, and the leaders were surprised over their own emotional involvement. At this point, the groups were

asked to reverse roles: leave the poem where they had created it and exchange places, physically sitting in each other's chairs. The authors instructed them to read the other group's poem again for themselves and make a play inspired by the poem that they would later present to the whole group. It was highlighted that they were free to use any idea, thought, or feeling that the poem created in them for the play; 20 minutes were dedicated to this preparation. Both groups smoothly followed the instructions. After preparation, both groups presented their plays. The men's group in women's shoes brought a vignette to the stage where a woman on public transport gets rude comments from various men. The comments expressed contradictory expectations, and the protagonist was left helpless and alone. The women's group in men's shoes presented individual monologues on stage, addressing men of different life stages and life situations. They shared heartbreaking stories about the consequences of not being able to connect or attach to others or themselves emotionally. Protagonists showed their vulnerability.

After the plays, during the integration phase, the members were asked to provide feedback on their roles and share stories and experiences from their lives related to the plays. The verbalizations represented the catharsis of every group member, both by playing a role and watching "their" play. A recurring topic was the stereotyping and oversimplification of one another when using only the gender lens. Interestingly, all members, including LGBTQ+ members, shared the suffering of this effect. They also expressed the need for mutual understanding and empathy, and shared some moments of realization, interpreting their own situations through the lens of the plays. At this point, the leaders and authors of this paper were again amazed to find themselves emotionally involved and affected by the whole play. As discussed later, this can mainly be attributed to living in the same society with very similar gender-based experiences.

EVALUATION

Considering the above-presented short-term effects and the following long-term effects of the play, it exceeded our expectations. In the remaining sessions, the play served as a reference point for gender-related issues on stage, and there were several additional sharings and check-ins in connection with the realizations that emerged through the play. In general, there was an increased awareness of the effect of one's own gender and more profound empathy toward the "other" gender during subsequent sessions. Members began reflecting on their roles and opportunities for enabling or challenging the current *status quo* regarding gender.

Evaluating what led to this unexpected extent of effect, the following main factors were identified:

1. The play reflected an emerging theme of the group at the right moment.
2. The group was in a mature working stage, where the trust, strength of connections among members, and their capacity for dealing with difficult themes allowed for the level of discomfort and confrontation this play required.

Table 1. The structure of the play.

Phase	Activity	Goal	Main events
1	Writing poems in gender-based groups	Raising awareness of their gender-related experiences.	Both groups wrote a poem about the everyday challenges and life-long experiences of their gender.
2	Reading aloud poems	Sharing their piece of art with the whole group.	Emotional reactions, catharsis in both groups.
3	Switching roles, preparation for playing the other group's poem	Understanding and empathizing with the other group's experience.	Group discussions and preparations for the play.
4	Playing poems on stage	Presenting their understanding to the other group and getting physical experience of the other gender.	Emotionally involving and cathartic plays for both on stage and audience members.
5	Integration	Integrating the experiences and self-reflections.	Articulation of own reflections, and sharing.

3. Owing to previous sessions, the group members were familiar enough with basic psychodrama and poetry techniques to create their own poems and plays.
4. There was an ideal, nearly even gender distribution within the group. Considering the cultural context, it was fortunate also to have group members of LGBTQ+ identity.
5. Leaders and members were from the same culture, which helped leaders to recognize the emerging theme, although it also heightened their emotional involvement.

Our experiences were in line with previous research results. An increased level of empathy emerged within the group, which might be attributed to the combination of role reversal and poetry therapy in the psychodrama context (Alfrey et al., 2021; Dogan, 2018; Schoonover et al., 2020; Soysal, 2021; Wu et al., 2025). Interestingly, the structure of the play incorporated all three dimensions of Mazza (2016): the creation of poems as the expressive/creative dimension, and the presentation of the other groups' poems both symbolic/ceremonial and receptive/prescriptive dimensions. Using poetry in all dimensions might have helped to effectively deal with such an emotionally and socially difficult topic, such as gender in a group setting, by giving the participants space for creating a comfortable level of involvement in the topic.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our main conclusion is that applying poetry promoted sensitivity and awareness of gender-related themes through its intermodal transfer effect (Orkibi, 2011). The application of role-reversal was crucial in catharsis.

Considering the main learning points of the case, the authors recommend applying this technique in the later phase of the group, when members are familiar with the psychodrama method and mutual trust allows for more sensitive topics to be elaborated. Such a method requires a balanced gender distribution and an appropriate warm-up for the theme. In case there is a minority gender, this technique might cause a higher level of stress and a lower level of sensitivity for the minority. In the event of insufficient warm-up, members may be less engaged in the plays. This method can be applied to other social themes that emerge within the group, although it may be most effective when no more than two groups are created that interact in everyday life, and there is no clear aggressor-victim dynamic between them. For instance, this method would be worthy of to be applied to doctors and patients, Gen Y and Gen Z, drivers and cyclists, etc. It is essential to be culturally informed when identifying the theme and selecting the art form, particularly if the leaders and participants come from diverse cultural backgrounds. As one of the reviewers of this paper carefully commented, to learn more about the applicability of this method in different cultures, cross-cultural replications of this case study would be greatly needed.

As a preparation, leaders need to be aware of their involvement in the given theme and catch the moment of organic emergence of the theme or prepare a warm-up exercise. If they choose a theme at a social level, leaders can expect to be touched by pieces of the art presented. To illustrate the long-term effects of the method, this case was the authors' primary motivation for joining a working group in critical psychology (Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009) within their psychodrama community.

A limitation of this case study was that the authors did not pre-test or post-test the members' awareness and attitudes toward gender-related experiences (Parlak & Çamaş, 2021). When experimenting with this method, it may be beneficial to assess attitudes toward the given topic, thereby identifying attitude change and the effect of the technique.

Another limitation was the biased nature of human perspectives. The authors perceived and processed this experience through professional and, inevitably, personal filters. To give a clarification on positionality, both authors at the time of conducting the group were females in their forties with university degrees and experiences with heterosexual relationships and singlehood.

As a direction for the future, the authors suggest incorporating other art forms, taking into account leaders' experiences and the group's preferences.

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