

## Original Article

**Drama – Creative Play with Health-Giving Power****Barbro Mattsson-Lidsle, MNCc, RN**

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e-mail: Barbro.Mattsson-Lidsle@novia.fi**Abstract****Background:** Drama has primarily been employed in education for the purpose of teaching nurse students in a creative way to understand thoughts and emotions so that they may grow as caregivers. Through drama an inner conception of oneself, of one's inner strength and health, can be released.**Aim:** The aim of this study is to describe drama as creative play within caring and its health-giving power.**Material and method:** The research was conducted through a drama group and interviews. Eleven women diagnosed with breast cancer participated as informants. The drama group met for a period of nine months, and drama was created from life stories, relaxation and imaginary journeys, the painting of inner pictures and the drawing of life paths. The main methodology used is hermeneutics and therefore the data material was interpreted hermeneutically on structural, rational and existential levels.**Results:** Drama as creative play is a restful balance between active actions and inner rest. Drama releases a joy of living, opens up new ways of viewing oneself and others and the discovery of a new life course. Drama may not transform life itself but one's perspective of life. Drama may release what is important in life and new values in life which in itself brings health.**Discussion:** Drama as creative play requires courage because thoughts and emotions that have often been repressed are brought to the surface and may alter one's conceptions about illness, about one's identity as a human being and about one's own life. Drama sets in motion a movement toward an inner establishment of values that are important in life and the strength to act in accordance with one's own life course. Drama as creative play within caring can give patients strength to create order in life and provide space for inner healing and health.**Key words:** drama, health, caring, caring science, hermeneutical methodology**Introduction**

Drama is a method that has principally been used to make knowledge more intelligible within education. By giving nurse students the opportunity to enter into different clinical caring situations through repeating these situations, the students have been able to bring about new opportunities for working through and reflection. Drama as a dynamic and embodied activity is seen as arousing the desire to learn more but it has also been viewed as an action that involves the whole human being. In this way, a deeper understanding of oneself, a self-awareness and growth as a human being and a caregiver becomes possible through drama. Through drama thoughts and

emotions have been allowed to develop and become distinct, and gradually also words have been formulated about their meaning, and this has in turn made the thoughts and emotions more manageable. Meaning has been created and been incorporated into one's own self-image when thoughts and feelings come alive in a creative way in an artistic form and through symbolic language (Ekebergh 2013; Hägglund & Fredin 2011). Drama is seen to be caring because it may, for instance, alleviate the patient's experience of pain (Bojner Horwitz, Kowalski & Anderberg 2010). According to Rylatt's (2012) study, dance, drama, music and movements help human beings with dementia to communicate, express joy and enjoyment and to show engagement.

But drama also entails soul-searching and working with one's inner world which can be of great import in holistic caring. According to Heikkinen (2002), drama is creative play that can help human beings find an inner conception of themselves, their inner strength and health. (cf. Mattsson-Lidsle, Snickars-von Wright, Lindholm & Fagerström 2007) Drama often also reveals difficulties and hidden realities and therefore also creates a space and the possibility for patients to work through their feelings. (Sinding, Gray, Grassau, Daminakis & Hampson 2005) According to Grafton, Gillespie and Henderson (2010), drama is a becoming, a natural inner spiritual resource and a natural force for health that brings vitality and contentment in life. For this reason, it would be interesting to further explore drama to attain a new understanding for what drama as creative play means within caring and how drama can be used within caring to release sources of power for health.

### **Aim, research questions and theoretical background**

The aim of the present research has been to find the power for health that drama as creative play may release.

This study seeks to find the answer to the following research questions:

- a) what is drama as creative play?
- b) what is the power of drama that can release and bring forth health?

The theoretical background and core concepts of this study are health, power and drama as creative play. According to Eriksson (Lindström, Lindholm Nyström & Zetterlund 2014; Eriksson 1990; 2007), health is more than the absence of illness. Health means being whole in body, soul and spirit. Health is also seen as a constant movement between health and suffering and in this movement there is both strength and will to live one's life in all its nuances of happiness and desire, suffering and pain. This healing and health-giving power resides in the human being but it is through encounters with other people, with an abstract other or with nature, that this inner source of strength can be released. We assume that the source and the power of health is found within the human being, and when human beings are able to become reconciled with the circumstances in life they grow as individuals and become whole. According to Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2001), human beings have been given this power as an inborn gift that will help them become the person

they are able to become, to grow and realize themselves.

We view play as an important part of caring and a means to achieve health. According to Gadamer (1997), we are able to relax through play and so reach the existential. There is both a playfulness and seriousness in drama which creates opportunities for active participation, demonstration, beholding and discussion. The world of play is predetermined by seriousness and purpose which are realized only if the players lose themselves in play. Consequently, for play to be effective it is important that participants rely on and trust the surrounding world. Through creative play, which may occur both on a concrete plane through creative activities and on an abstract plane through thought, one is able to shape one's own health and gain new power from one's inner source of strength. According to Heikkinen (2002), the playful setting-in-motion of will and power to create something new provides the basis for drama. Through wholeheartedly enter into play it is possible to observe and create order in an imperfect world, to have a moment of a clearly defined perfection. Drama creates a so-called window of opportunities where it is possible to discover and learn something new about oneself and the surrounding world.

### **Methodology and material**

The principal methodology of the present study is hermeneutics. A deep and expanded understanding is sought through an interpretive movement between the whole and its parts, between pre-understanding and new understanding and through the union of theory and empiricism. Women with breast cancer were chosen as informants. The choice of a homogenous group is motivated by the fact that breast cancer is the most common form of cancer among women, and it substantially changes the woman's body image as well as life perspective which in turn require time and space for working through. The informants were found through a cancer association, and twenty women were invited by letter to participate in the study. Out of these twenty, eleven decided to participate as informants in this study. The women were between 34 and 64 years old and they had become ill with breast cancer during the last two years. All of them had had surgery and received radiation therapy, five had also received chemotherapy. Ten of them worked and one was a pensioner. They were invited to participate in a closed group once a week for a period of nine months. The drama exercises were led by a drama instructor and involved the creation of drama from

life stories, relaxation exercises, the painting of inner pictures, the drawing of life paths and group discussions to work through feelings and to get to know themselves. The data was collected through interviews. The women were interviewed individually three times. The first interview took place before the drama group met for the first time, the other after three months and the third after nine months. The first interview dealt with the informants' experiences of having breast cancer and expectations on their participation in the drama group. The second interview concerned whether the drama exercises matched the informants' expectations, their experiences and desires concerning the continuation of the drama group. The third interview discussed the women's views on their illness and their lives today and the impact of the drama exercises. The interviews were conducted as open qualitative interviews that lasted for between 45 and 60 minutes at a time. All interviews were recorded and conducted by the same interviewer and then transcribed into text format.

The hermeneutical interpretation began with the researcher's reading of the transcribed interviews for the purpose of attaining a holistic view of the material. By bringing together each informant's three interviews the researcher gained an overview over the individual woman's experiences during the nine months that she participated in the drama group. In this way, the researcher was able to follow each informant's movement of health, that is, to attend to what happened along the way, what insights and what kind of envisioning that has been dedicated through drama. The researcher posed the research questions to the material and allowed patterns to emerge. A further interpretive phase was carried out where the focus was only on the healing power and health. In this interpretive phase the whole material was brought together. The interpretive phase was now supported by Ödman's (1997) hermeneutical method with different levels of abstraction which means that the interpretation occurred on rational, structural and existential levels of interpretation. The rational level of interpretation captured the meaning in the informants' testimonies and words. The structural level clarified this meaning in relation to the informants' life context. At the existential level, the researcher entered into an encounter with the text and made the text's meaning a part of herself for the dedication of a more profound or more existential understanding.

### **Ethical considerations**

The ethical purpose of this study is to create new knowledge for the good of humanity and caring. The research follows the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012) for good research praxis. The aim is to refrain from harming or causing the informants unnecessary suffering. This is guaranteed by for instance informing them about the procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation in it and their right to interrupt their participation at any time. The women signed a consent form for participation in the study, and the research is approved by the ethical board at Åbo Akademi University.

### **Results**

The findings are described in relation to the research questions: what is drama as creative play and what is the power of drama that can release and bring forth health?

#### **Drama as creative play**

In this study, drama as creative play means to meet in a group to create stories from life, to practice relaxation and go on imaginary journeys, to paint inner pictures and draw one's own life path.

By performing one's own story for another a new understanding of one's own life opened up that

neither the player nor the co-player could have imagined earlier. The drama opened up an understanding for how it is possible to think about and view one's life in different ways. One discovery that was made was how it is possible to push on in life without considering how one feels or how one's near and dear ones feel. Consequently, the drama opened up the understanding for how it is possible to think in another way and receive new meanings as regards one's own being.

*For me, it has been an eye-opener that one learns to live the part of someone else. One comes to view things in a different light. When I have watched an exercise performed by others I have become aware of that I would never have thought like that, one becomes aware of new approaches.*

Drama as creative play releases tensions and has a relaxing effect. Imaginary journeys during relaxation may provide conceptions of places, people and events. In one's own thoughts it is possible to mentally conceive of what something looks like, to meet different people, to experience events and achieve a new understanding of self and life. This can be seen as a window of opportunities where it is

possible to discover and create new meanings. During relaxation, imagination plays the lead role and by losing oneself in play for a moment it is possible to freely shape an image and a conception of oneself and one's life.

***These wonderful relaxation exercises have been most important; being able to relax the body, mind and everything, to be able to relax.***

***You were given clues as to where you went, whom you met, when you met different people that were in your own life.***

The painting opened up for feelings of joy, anger and sorrow, and engages thought, feeling and imagination. The picture speaks to and opens up for an understanding of self. This can be seen, for instance, in painting sorrow and anger in a different way than before. Growth takes place when the picture is made visible and is presented to others.

***We have painted a lot and I have noticed that it gives me something, it doesn't look like much but it speaks to me.***

Drawing one's own life path opens up an understanding for previous events, turning points and emotions. The life path consists of different occurrences, stories and the meaning of events. Through drawing one has the opportunity to think through why one has acted and felt in a certain way. Seeing one's own life path may release thoughts and feelings, joy and sorrow.

***We drew our life path and it was interesting, things appeared that you haven't even thought about when you started the journey. On the pages I drew what had happened. These were the darker and brighter moments.***

### **The power that releases health**

Through drama as creative play, a joy of living is released and becomes a power that in turn can release health. Joy of living helps human beings find their own life path and take responsibility for their own life course. The joy of life arouses the will to live life with all its nuances of happiness and desire, suffering and pain. Through drama exercises it is possible to re-discover true joy which sometimes emerges solely as a small expanding glimpse because it may be repressed or hidden from life.

***I have a sadness within, outward I am happy, lively; no one knows how I feel inside. I do not feel real joy, sometimes I do. Playing a part is the easiest way to be together with other people.***

Joy of living also brings an inner faith, peace and quiet to rest in being, in the moment. Drama helps one to find happiness in the moment and to live in the here and now, but also to find the courage to take the step toward becoming all that one always desired to be. By pausing in life it is possible to find inner peace and insight about that all one gets in life is what one has for the moment.

***It has helped me to live in the here and now. Now I look ahead. I take step by step and enjoy what I'm doing for the moment.***

Drama can provide the strength to have the courage to take a step toward what is new and to have the courage to do new things in life, which in turn may give one a belief in oneself and pride in being able to do it. Confidence grows through accomplishing something new in one's life and consequently creates a space where one is able to allow other people to come closer.

As one's own strength develops it creates a space for discussions about difficult matters, illness and life with next of kin. This has given one's friends and family tools in life and helped them to be strong and find hope.

***I have developed a trust in myself in new way and my confidence has helped me to have the courage to get up and do something that I can show others. This has empowered me.***

***It has been so much easier to talk about the illness with my near and dear ones. I received support in how to handle and discuss major issues like these with my children. I think that it has also given my children a tool that they can use when they need to.***

When life itself is called into question as a result of illness, and the threat of death is present, drama does not always transform life itself but instead changes one's conception of life. This provides strength to begin a re-evaluation of life and of one's relation to oneself and others. New values serve as guidance in life. Through pausing, enjoying life and listening to one's own inner tone it is possible to find one's own basic values for life. Drama exercises are not performed solely for the sake of illness, but to release life.

***Life may not be any different, but I think in a different way.***

***You have other values, the way you live. I can enjoy and make the most of a beautiful day which I haven't done in a long time.***

***I have a future now. I didn't have a future back then. I can make the most of my time; I live in the here and now. I am proud of myself, that I have been able to take a break, because this is all I get.***

Drama releases trust and an inner peace to rest in a being in the world. The path that is constructed through reason is given less space, and more space is instead given to listening to the voice of the heart. The heart begins to show the way toward a life course of one's own. Drama provides the strength to see what one wants to change in life and which is destructive, so that

one can find an inner fundamental tone and the basic values one celebrates and truly honours and wants to follow. The healing power is thus found within human beings themselves. One finds the holiness of life and gratitude for having what one has, that the situation is what it is, and that one is who one is and has contributed to the world simply by being born and living one's life.

***I have achieved an inner peace, a different kind of peace that I have not had before, before the illness.***

## Discussion

The present research demonstrates that drama as creative play is a potential path to health for the suffering human being. Just as nurse students may attain new possibilities for working through and reflection through drama so also women with breast cancer may find a new becoming in the world through drama. Meaning is created through creative work in an artistic form (Hägglund & Fredin 2011) and one's own basic values get a stronghold in the one's inner being. Drama arouses a desire to learn among nurse students, while this study shows that drama may also arouse the desire to live in a context of illness and suffering. Consequently, drama is thought to have a liberating power that is health-giving. In drama, a movement takes place in which there is a natural give and take, and when play is created in a safe context, a joy of living is released and one's conceptions of oneself and of life changes and in turn open up for new values, a new direction in life and a new life course. Drama makes it possible for the human being to be able to become reconciled with the circumstances in life (cf. Eriksson 2007). Awareness brings courage and strength to act in accordance with one's own life course and a becoming of one's innermost self as a whole human being. According to Seaward (2000), it is a power that reunites body, soul and spirit, and this reunion

may take place when one trustingly and in peace and quiet is able to rest in becoming. According to Lerdal (2002), it is precisely by finding a balance between activity and rest that one's inner strength may be released. Drama can create order in one's existence, so that it is possible to experience a moment of a clearly defined perfection. In drama is found a seriousness and holiness that Lindberg (26) refers to as a holy playground in which freedom opens up for power that heals in the light movements of play.

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