

Wits School of Arts

Drama for Life



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Research Report

A self-revelatory performance study on the use of storytelling with puppets to explore the experience of a daughter with an absent father.

Background:

South Africa has been rated as the second country in Africa with high levels of absent fathers (Freeks, 2017). Most children in our country are not privileged enough to experience a relationship with their fathers. It is now common for a child to have a single mother as their sole caregiver and for the father to be absent from the child's upbringing (Freeks, 2017). These high rates of absent fathers in South Africa today may be attributed to several reasons, such as our country's history of apartheid, poverty, unemployment, traditional gender roles, and substance abuse. While it's true that our nation has been faced with a lot of challenges, it is my opinion that fathers should not use this as a justification for abandoning their children.

According to Richter, Chikovore, and Makusha (2010), the apartheid system in South Africa broke down family structures through immigration and forced labour. Black fathers were often compelled to leave their families and go work in mines or factories. Additionally, apartheid's harsh policies, including evicting families from their homes, also weakened family structures, making it difficult for parents to be present in their children's lives (Richter, Chikovore, and Makusha, 2010). This separation has contributed to the breakdown we see today in South African family structures. Furthermore, there is also the issue of high rates of unemployment and poverty, which led to fathers not being able to provide for their families. Salami (2018) points out that our country's economy has been struggling for a while now due to inequalities of the past, limited access to education, and an economy that is slow to grow and create jobs. Many families experience financial hardship, which has an impact on social and economic issues that have impacted family dynamics (Salami, 2018). Given that fathers are emphasized as providers in most South African cultures, fathers who cannot provide for their children may feel embarrassed and like failures. As a result, they might distance themselves from their children. A study done by Helman and Retele (2016) with South African families asserts that traditional gender roles have contributed to the issue of father absenteeism by

perpetuating social expectations and gender inequalities that limit men's involvement in their children's lives. This study argues that a strong emphasis on mothers being natural caregivers and fathers being providers by nature can be problematic, as it can produce gender inequality and toxic masculinity. This emphasis has created a division in responsibilities, which has led men to spend less time with their children and discouraged emotional attachment, as many South African cultures discourage men from expressing their emotions and vulnerability, making it challenging for them to form nurturing and loving relationships with their children (Helman and Retele, 2016).

Another issue that contributes to father absenteeism in South Africa is alcohol consumption. The World Health Organization (2019) has ranked South Africa as the 19th-largest drinking country in the world and the third-largest drinking country in Africa. Based on Mohato et al.'s (2009) research, alcohol consumption has been connected to child rejection and abuse, as well as poor parent-child relationships. Due to the addictive nature of alcohol, many parents tend to prioritize drinking over their parenting responsibilities, which has led them to be physically and emotionally absent from the lives of their children. Alcohol has also contributed to fathers being unable to financially support their children, as finances that should be allocated to children have to be now used to feed their alcohol addiction.

Growing up without a father can have long-term effects on a child's emotional and psychological development which can lead to a variety of problems throughout their lives (Wilson, 2017). East and O'Brien (2006), in their study, found that the absence of a father has been linked with various negative outcomes. These include low self-esteem, early engagement in sexual activities, poor academic performance, interpersonal problems, struggles with identity formation and autonomy, behavior problems, and emotional and psychological problems (East and O'Brien, 2006).

As a daughter who grew up without a father, I can resonate with some of these factors, particularly struggling with self-esteem, the development of identity and sense of self, and interpersonal and trust issues. Realizing the impact of father absenteeism on individuals, I wanted to investigate and explore how puppetry can be used to address this issue. This was done through the self-revelatory method, which falls under the broader umbrella of Practice-as-Research (PAR).

During my honours year, I fell in love with the idea of storytelling and performance through puppetry, which allows people to share their stories in depth and in a way that they can hold using distancing. I have always had a rich imagination and a deep love for storytelling, and coming across this approach has enabled me to self-introspect, share my experiences, and express myself effectively. I have also learned that puppetry has a rich history in our country, and it has been used as a powerful tool in protests for activism and advocacy (Kruger, 2007). Puppets have also been used to address HIV and AIDS to create awareness and promote prevention (Kruger, 2007). Furthermore, puppets have also been used in schools and television shows (e.g., Takalane Sesame) to educate children and in community theatres to communicate important social issues such as health and safety.

Puppets are also used in therapy to facilitate healing, understanding, and positive change (Bernie, 2005). Puppetry in therapy is founded on the idea that creating puppets, playing, engaging, watching, and reacting to puppet performances have therapeutic benefits due to their expressive qualities (Bernier, 2005). In Drama Therapy and play therapy, individuals usually engage in spontaneous play, often with puppets provided to them by the therapist, and they can often choose from a range of options. Then, the therapist observes and analyzes the selected characters, roles, the dynamics of the play, and themes of the narrated stories, and such information is used to assist in psychological assessments to understand various aspects of the client, including their needs, values, struggles, and strength to help them achieve their therapeutic goal and needs (Johnson, Pendzik, and Snow, 2012).

Having decided on the topic of my research, I found self-revelatory performance as a suitable approach to conduct my research, which was done in an autoethnography research approach. Self-revelatory performance is “a form of drama therapy and theatre, that involves the creation of an original theatrical piece based on current personal issues in need of investigation, healing, or transformation” (Pendzik, Emunah, Johnson, 2017, p. 37). Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that studies a researcher’s personal experience to understand social experiences or the complexities of the phenomenon that is being studied, which in this case is father absenteeism (Poulos, 2021). It requires the researcher to analyze and critically reflect on their own experiences of the phenomenon under study and to present her

experiences creatively through creative writing, story, and arts (Poulos, 2021). Practice as research is an approach that combines art or creative practices with research methods. It involves using the process of creating, performing, or being involved in any artistic or creative works as a means of inquiry to learn and produce new knowledge (Barrett and Bolt, 2014). The focus is not only on the final product but also on generating insight, knowledge, and critical analysis through the process of the practice itself. Practice as research recognizes that artistic practices have the ability to produce new understanding and knowledge and that these practices can be valid forms of research on their own (Barrett and Bolt, 2014).

Participants:

I was the only participant for this research. My personal experiences of growing up with a physically and emotionally absent father served as a foundation for this study. I was driven by the desire to understand why my father's absence still affects me even today as a grown woman. As a drama therapist in training, I was triggered by the potential value of Drama Therapy, and I wanted to explore how this issue can be addressed through methods I have grown fond of in my own journey as a therapist in training. I am aware of how triggering this topic can be, and for this reason, I saw it as important to first understand my own experiences before involving other potential participants in my research. I hope this research will help shed light on the value of Drama Therapy and its methods, specifically puppetry and self-revelatory performance, to other Drama Therapists in using these methods in their practice

Rationale:

There are a variety of notable gaps in the study of absent fathers within the South African context. Existing studies mostly focus on how father absenteeism impacts male children, mothers, and families, and they are mostly based on the views of professionals such as researchers, doctors, and psychologists, who often don't have firsthand experience in the matter, rather than giving voice to the experiences and emotions of individuals experiencing this, in this case, the voice of a daughter. I

believe allowing a daughter to share their story will help build knowledge through firsthand narratives and lived experiences. It points out that narratives help us understand the complexities of being human by examining the actual experiences of individuals or groups. Therefore, I believe a daughter sharing their narratives can add depth and context that quantitative data alone cannot provide. This will help researchers, practitioners, and therapists develop a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and needs of this specific population. There is also a limited body of research that has explored the use of puppetry in a self-revelatory performance, specifically on the phenomenon of absent fathers. Therefore, this research may show the benefits of including artistic approaches in exploring, analysing, and addressing important issues such as the impact of absent fathers. Furthermore, there is not enough information about the benefits of puppetry for adults; existing studies mostly focus on the benefits of puppetry for children. This research can help show the value of puppetry as a therapeutic approach that also works for adults. This knowledge can be beneficial to scholars and professionals in the field of Drama Therapy and may help shape therapeutic practices in this field.

As a young South African woman who has personally experienced the challenges associated with not having a father, I have felt a need to acknowledge and examine these experiences so that I can learn and grow from them. Growing up, I have always wished that I had a father. I have always longed for a father figure in my life, even though I had a supportive and loving mother. One of the impacts that I have noticed is the fear of being rejected, which has greatly impacted my self-confidence. Another important impact that I have become aware of is the struggle of trusting others, especially men. This has also impacted my perspective on relationships. I find myself pushing people away before relationships can even form because I fear they might reject me, just like my father. Moreover, growing up without a father has also caused me to develop a biased attitude toward men. I grew up believing that males are incapable of loving; even today, I find myself criticizing and blaming males in most situations. Therefore, I felt the need to pursue this study so that I could understand my experiences and learn more about the complexities of father absenteeism so that I could grow both personally and professionally and also get rid of the negative stereotypes that I have about men. I believe that this is important, especially as a drama therapist in training, so that in my practice I can be able to

work with men and help them in a way that is pleasing and satisfactory. I also hope that with this research I will be able to use the knowledge gained to in the future develop therapeutic interventions tailored to the needs of individuals who have experienced father absenteeism should I have to work with such individuals. I believe having to personally experience the impact of absent fathers can help bring a unique understanding and empathy when working with individuals who have had similar experiences, as this will help build rapport and trust, which are important in drama therapy.

Research questions:

With this research, I was aiming to answer the following research questions:

What are the impacts of an absent father on their daughter?

In what way can puppetry be used as a tool to address the impact of an absent father on their daughter?

What are the effects of puppetry, in terms of self-expression and storytelling, in a self-revelatory performance process?

Aims and Objectives:

The aim of this research was to investigate the impact of an absent father on their daughter, explore the potential of puppetry as a tool to address this impact and examine how puppetry facilitates self-expression and storytelling in a self-revelatory process. This study involved creating stick and paper puppets and examining their aesthetics, which included the process of making the puppets, the choice of characters made, the features and movements assigned to them, the language used, and the context of the narratives.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

In the first section of this review, I will be focusing on the definition of absent fathers, factors that contribute to fathers being absent in the lives of their children, and the impact of absent fathers on their daughters. In the second section, I will be focusing on Drama Therapy and practices that inform my research. Specifically, I will be looking into puppetry, which falls under projected work/play, and therapeutic theatre, focusing on self-revelatory performance, which is a method I explored for my research.

Father absenteeism

Father absenteeism, according to Freeks (2022), is when a father chooses not to be emotionally or physically active in his child's life or is forced to do so due to uncontrollable circumstances. This may occur as a result of things like divorce, work-related distance, poverty, imprisonment, neglect, or death. Similarly, Mancini (2010) views father absenteeism as a state in which a father has disregarded or been unable to fulfil his fatherly duties over an extended period of time. Padi et al. (2014, p.46.) explains that father absenteeism can be attributed to a father who is either "fully, partially, physically, emotionally, or economically absent from their child's life." I agree with all three perspectives; however, I agree more with Mancini's viewpoint as it aligns with my research. In this study, I will refer to father absenteeism as a situation where a father has chosen to be entirely absent from their child's life and has rejected them.

Most scholars who have written about absent fathers in the South African context make reference to social and economic problems as major causes of the high rates of absent fathers in the country. Such as the study of Tau (2020), which validates this, as she holds that poverty and high employment rates are major factors that influenced high rates of absent fathers. Similarly, Salami and Okeke (2018) view finances and lack of fathering skills as the primary causes of father absenteeism. These scholars highlight that the economic hardships faced by many South African men have caused a strain on their parenthood, as the majority of fathers struggle to take care of their children due to unemployment and limited job opportunities. Some fathers often have to relocate in search of employment or to find a job in another city,

far from their children, resulting in prolonged separations and disconnected relationships with their children (Tau, 2020). These scholars emphasize these circumstances as causes that have perpetuated the cycle of absent fathers in South Africa. Furthermore, Salami and Okeke state that many South African men have limited or don't have the skills needed to handle the complexities of fatherhood, such as communication skills and emotional support. This might be a result of exposure to toxic masculinity and a lack of positive male role models.

Other scholars state that high rates of HIV/AIDS have had an influence on the prevalence of absent fathers in South Africa. Swartz and Bhana (2009) assert that the impact of HIV-related illnesses and the high death rates of fathers have made it impossible for them to be physically present in their children's lives and fulfill their parental duties. Also, the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS has led fathers to distance themselves from their families and children due to fear of social judgment.

Imprisonment and death rates are other factors that have been said to have contributed to the high levels of absent fathers in South Africa. This country has been rated globally as one of the countries with a high percentage of imprisonment, particularly of males (Koketso, Lehlokwe, and Mafa, 2019). Even though South Africa has 243 prisons, of which only nine are female prisons, there have been reports that the country's jails are overcrowded (Sibisi and Olofinbiyi, 2021). In 2021, the Department of Correctional Services reported that their male prisons are overcrowded, and due to this, there are strains on resources and facilities to accommodate the number of prisoners (Sibisi and Olofinbiyi, 2021). Many of these inmates are fathers, and them being in prison physically separates them from their families and makes them unable to fulfil their roles as fathers. This absence has led to a breakdown in family structures and relationships, leaving children without the presence and support of a father (Koketso, Lehlokwe, and Mafa, 2019). In the same way, South Africa's challenges of violence, crime, and health have contributed to high rates of deaths, particularly among men, since they are at higher risk of experiencing violent crimes and dying from them, thus resulting in their children being fatherless (Koketso, Lehlokwe, and Mafa, 2019).

It is understandable for fathers not to be present in their children's lives because of arrest and death. However, it is interesting to note that the idea of blaming social and economic problems for father absenteeism is prevalent in literature. Both men and women go through societal and economic hardship; however, despite these challenges, most women still choose to prioritize their roles of being caregivers and being present in their children's lives, despite hardships. Therefore, the challenges of unemployment, poverty, finances, and social judgments cannot be used as scapegoats for neglecting responsibilities. Freeks's (2022) study about absent fathers in South Africa supports this view by providing data from the South African birth registry of 2021. The study indicates that out of all children born in that year, 21.3% did not reside with both parents, whereas 32.7% lived with both parents (Freeks, 2022, p. 9). Furthermore, the findings indicate that 42% of these children were solely living with their mothers, while 4% were only residing with their fathers (Freeks, 2022, p. 9).

Fathers play an essential role in their children's lives; thus, they need to stop making excuses and commit to being present in their children's lives. Numerous studies have stressed the advantages of fathers being involved in their children's lives. Fathers play an important role in the development of their children. They provide different perspectives and lessons from those that mothers offer (Madsen, 2009). Having a father who is actively involved in their daughter's life might therefore give them access to a variety of viewpoints and experiences that can be helpful in forming their worldview. Fathers also offer unique guidance and support that helps to shape their children's attitudes towards gender roles and by modeling positive behavior (Madsen, 2009). By choosing not to be part of their children's lives, they deprive their children of these important developmental benefits.

Wilson (2017) also asserts that girls who were raised by their fathers tend to have better self-esteem, are more confident, and have healthier interpersonal connections. Fathers also serve as positive male role model for their daughters, which positively impact their daughter's lives. This is because it forges strong and lasting relationships and memories that contribute to the long-term well-being of their daughters. Overall, it is important for fathers to be part of their daughters' lives to help promote their daughters' healthy development and well-being (Wilson, 2017).

Drama Therapy

Jones (2010,p.8) defines Drama Therapy as “the ‘intentional use of healing aspects of drama and theatre as the therapeutic process. It is a method of working and playing that uses action methods to facilitate creativity, imagination, learning, insight, and growth” (Jones, 2010, p. 8). While Sue Jennings defines drama therapy as “the specific application of theatre structures and drama processes with a declared intention that is therapy” (Jennings et al., 2005, p. 17). Similarly, a scholar Susan Pendzik (2021) articulates that Drama Therapy can be broadly defined as the use of dramatic and theatrical tools to aid in self-development and healing. This definition includes a wide range of interventions, such as performance, role-playing, free play, use of projective tools, storytelling, and numerous other creative methods, all of which have the capacity to create embodied imagination known as “dramatic reality, where painful and sensitive real-life issues can be experienced, expressed and worked through without overwhelming individuals” (Pendzik, 2021, p.247).

Puppetry and dramatic projection

A puppet can be seen as an innate object usually made out of fabric, wood, plastic, paper, and other materials often used to present characters (Smith, 2014). They can also be described as the extension of the puppeteer, and they are dependent on the puppeteer to bring life to them through manipulation, which includes assigning to them emotions, motives, dialogue, and so on (Smith, 2014).

Puppetry within the context of drama therapy can be seen as a form of dramatic projection and can be used in various therapeutic methods for various therapeutic goals. The concept of dramatic projection is one of Phil Jones's nine core principles, which he developed in 1996 (Rudel, 2020). Dramatic projection can be described as “the placement of aspects of ourselves or our feelings into other people or things” (Jones, 2010, p. 137). It happens when a client projects their emotional pain or problem into a dramatic representation. Projection can help us become aware of our suppressed thoughts and feelings and help us communicate them, which is necessary for transformation to happen (Rudel, 2020). This concept relates to my

research, as I have used puppets as a projective tool to understand how growing up without a father has impacted me within the framework of self-revelatory performance of Drama Therapy. Robert Landy (1983) mentions that within Drama Therapy puppets are usually used as an extension of the “self” or to represent others in connection to the “self” and are used to represent the story of the puppeteer, which is usually a client, and puppets are used to present their world and help them externalize and explore their feelings, thoughts, experiences, and internal conflicts. They enable individuals to work on their struggles in a distanced way through metaphors and symbols (Landy, 1983). John Bell (2023), in the article titled “Puppets Have Always Performed Another,” confirms that puppetry involves creating another character and bringing it to life by attributing it with actions and qualities. What the puppeteer projects onto those characters or character sheds light into the puppeteer's thoughts, feelings, and view of the world, which can open up interesting, complex, and sometimes challenging areas of research to explore (Bell, 2023). These views, assert my beliefs and the reason I was drawn to puppets to explore my experiences of having an absent father—that using them will help me gain insight into my own emotions and potentially address the complexities that come with it. They also confirm my assumptions that puppetry can help me delve deep and thoroughly into this topic, as Bromfield (1994) mentions that puppets provide psychological safety, which leads to deeper self-expression. Puppets encourage individuals to delve into sensitive topics with ease and enable them to share their feelings and thoughts authentically, which leads to greater understanding (Bromfield 1994).

Therapeutic Theatre

Drama Therapy uses both process-oriented and presentational/performance forms of therapy, known as therapeutic theatre, which can take on a variety of forms (Park, 2019). Therapeutic theatre can happen in a variety of ways. For instance, a group can work on a prewritten script that somehow relates to their lives to create a performance, or they might work together to create an original performance that reflects all the group members' experiences, or they might work individually to develop their story into a performance (Park, 2019). Furthermore, there is no restriction on this method when it comes to art genre; the performance can be

anything: a dance piece, storytelling, puppet show, poetry, and so on (Jacques, 2020).

Self-revelatory performance

In 1983, René Emunah created a form of therapeutic theatre known as self-revelatory performance (Snow, 2016). She defined this methodology as a form of therapy and a genre of theatre, that builds upon the works of Grotowski, Artaud, and other theatre directors and companies who explored the performer's own process in theatre, and the relationship between the actor and audience (Snow, 2016).

Therefore, it's both theatre and therapy, and both qualities are equally important. She describes self-revelatory performance as "a path toward deep knowing and healing" that happens through the process of "working through," which involves the exploration of psychological issues that are currently impacting the performer's life through dramatical or theatrical means (Snow, 2016). This is a crucial process of self-revelatory performance because it gives the performer control over their problems, fosters a transformed mental state and heart, and also provides closure and healing (Snow, 2016).

David Read Johnson (2016) explains how healing and transformation happen by naming elements involved in the process of "working through" that potentially lead to healing. The first element involves our individual unconscious and subconscious, which includes forgotten or suppressed memories, thoughts, and feelings, as well as fantasies, desires, and images that come to mind but have not fully entered consciousness. During the early stages of self-revelatory performance, these unconscious and subconscious aspects can be brought to awareness through personal reflections and exploration of dramatic elements. The second element involves collaboration with the director, which includes conversations, observation, and immediate feedback, which can give the performer a new perspective. Also, how the performer responds to the director's feedback leads to a deeper exploration of the main issue. The third aspect involves the utilization of stories, myths, or texts from other authors, which provide a metaphorical framework for the performer's work. These stories can offer powerful insights and prompt new perspectives on the performer's personal story. The fourth element encompasses the influence of stagecraft, including props, makeup, and lighting, all of which can lead to fresh

discoveries and alternative modes of expression for the performer. The last element focuses on the audience, often made up of the performer's friends, family, and other significant people in his or her life. Their reactions can impact the performance, potentially leading to on-the-spot changes and evoking different emotions, fostering a strong sense of connection, which can help the performer get validation, acceptance, understanding, and respect, which are important for their healing process. In self-revelatory performance, it is only through these elements that the performer can attain what Emunah calls the "move through," which is healing and transformation that involves actions such as "letting go, taking hold of, coming to terms with, confronting, embracing, shifting, admitting, committing, forgiving, inviting, renewing, revolting, revisiting, and recreating" (Leah Shapiro, 2016, p. 32).

Methodology:

The overarching method for this research is Practice as Research (PaR). Practice as Research is a methodology in which knowledge is gained through the practice of doing, unlike traditional research that involves desktop-research work or asking people what they know about your topic of interest through conducting interviews and surveys or using other conventional research models such as case studies (Frederik, 2014). Practice as research requires a researcher to get physically involved in gaining understanding and acquiring knowledge, such as developing artistic work (e.g., creative writing, dance, music, theatre/ performance, visual exhibition, etc.), and such work is seen as the research itself because it allows the researcher to test ideas, generate new insight, and create innovative work (Nelson, 2013). Practice as Research is also known as practice-based research, and my research is practice-based, as I have created stick and paper puppets and engaged with them as projective tools to explore my story of having an absent father. I chose to explore my study within the methodology of self-revelatory performance due to the belief that knowledge is constructed from experience, and using both product and process of the performance will enable me to discover new perspectives and meanings that may not have been apparent through the traditional research methods (Greenwood, 2019).

I conducted eight sessions where I worked on analysing my experiences of growing up without a father through puppetry and storytelling. I relied extensively on Drama Therapy techniques to collect my data, with the intent of creating a process that reflected René Emunah's self-revelatory performance model. This approach intergrades drama therapy and theatre techniques to create an original theatre piece that addresses the performer's current issues with the aim of promoting healing transformation. As outlined by Pedzik, Emunah, and Johnson (2017), the early stages of self-revelatory performance involve investigating the central themes of the issue at hand, focusing on what is most current and essential. This process involves an examination, exploration, and cultivation of awareness regarding how these themes impact the performer's present and possibly future life (Pendzik, Emunah, Johnson, 2017). Additionally, this stage requires the performer to engage in extensive self-observation through reflective journaling and dramatization (Pendzik, Emunah, and Johnson, 2017). Then, the later stages involve decisions regarding the content of the performance, as well as determining the audience to invite for the performance and engaging in reflections post-performance (Pendzik, Emunah, Johnson, 2017). Therefore, based on this, I had the sessions presented in the table below to analyse my experiences and gather data.

The following table is an account of the session I had and how data was collected:

Sessions	Main Activity	How data was collected &/ motivation
Session 1	Creating puppets and practicing storytelling with them	By analysing the aesthetics of the puppets that have been created, the nose, eyes, costume, the colour used, and symbols that are assigned to the puppets. As well as the language, voice texture and themes that are evoked in the process.
Session 2	Working with Story	To find metaphors and symbols that assist in holding my story.

Session 3	Story mapping, through dramatic projection	To help understand my journey, identify and examine potential patterns of emotional triggers in my past and present life. Also to explore new possibilities.
Session 4	6-part Story	To gain a deeper understanding of my inner and external world (identify and explore my challenges related to father absenteeism, and ways I deal with them)
Session 5	Creative writing and devising a performance	Interrogating, thoughts, feelings, emotions, and memories that come up during the previous process.
Session 6 and 7	Rehearsal of the performance	Through journaling my thoughts feelings and experiences and through the constructive feedback I got from my examiners
Session 8	Performance	By examining my emotions, feelings and body language during the performance and the context of the performance. Also by identifying and analysing the themes of the story, language used, choice of characters, the environments in which the story is being placed. As well as the style in which the story is told how symbols and metaphors are used to convey meanings and messages.

Research instruments used:

Video recording and photography

I filmed all the sessions that I had, which played a very crucial role in analyzing my experiences and gathering data. I also took photos to capture key aspects of my

processes, such as the puppets I created and their aesthetics, and the images that emerged during the session of story mapping, where I worked with a variety of projective tools. Documenting my process in this way allowed me to reflect on my journey, revisit, and evaluate the aesthetics and narratives of my work, which helped me gain a deeper understanding of my process. It also provided valuable insights into the development of my performance.

Journaling

I also journaled my feelings, thoughts, and experiences after every session so that I wouldn't miss or forget any important information that unfolded during the sessions. I found this incredibly useful practice as it also allowed me to reflect on my emotional responses, insights, and challenges encountered. By writing down my immediate reactions, I have been able to gain clarity about my motivations, which has enabled me to process complex emotions and identify patterns in my experiences with the creative process in my exploration of father absenteeism. Therefore, it served as a tool for understanding myself, my experiences, my research topic, and my creative journey.

Ethical Consideration:

I was the only participant in this research study, and I was fully aware of the potential emotional and psychological risk involved since I was dealing with my personal experiences. To reduce the potential risk of harm to myself, I attended weekly therapy sessions with my psychologist to address any emotional and psychological difficulties the sessions could have evoked.

Data analysis and Discussion

In this section, I will be presenting the eight sessions that I had in chronological order, as I have experienced them. René Emunah's (2019) integrative five-phase model will be used to help structure and analyse my processes, as she mentions that

these phases can be better understood as an examination of the progressive unfolding of therapeutic processes and that they are usually overlapping and have a flexible structure that is not rigid. My intention with the creative process was to examine what aspect of father absenteeism I wanted to explore in my performance and explore those issues and themes authentically and spontaneously, without predicting any aspect of the final performance.

Gathering Material for the Performance:

Session 1 and 2

In the first session, I worked on creating puppets using a variety of materials, such as wood sticks, googly eyes, paper boxes, cloths, colouring pencils, and so on. The idea was to create stick and paper puppets. I ended up making three puppets: a mother, a father, and a young girl. As I started playing with the puppets and attempted to tell a story of my experience of having an absent father, as I had planned in my proposal, I found it difficult to do so. I felt uncomfortable telling my story in this way through puppets, as it was very direct and lacked metaphors. As mentioned, filming my sessions played a crucial role, especially in this session. The next day, when I watched the session, I saw how difficult it was for me to create the male puppets, particularly when it came to their facial features. I saw how I would constantly create and remove certain features from their faces. I also recall being stuck during this creation process. This might be due to the lingering memory of my father's facial reaction the first time I met him. Even today, I am unable to discern if it was shock, anger, or annoyance, but certainly, it was not positive and has stayed with me ever since. Hence, I believe my difficulty in creating the face of the puppet that represented him came from this memory. It may also have been influenced by another impression I had when meeting him, when I noticed the resemblance between us and questioned how he could doubt that I was his daughter when we looked so much alike. Another factor could be the fading of his features from my memory, as I have not seen him in years and only encountered him a few times.

However, even though I struggled specifically with creating the facial features of the male puppet, I enjoyed creating the puppets and the session in general. When I first started playing with them, it took me back to my childhood memories of playing with dolls with my cousin and also playing "metswantsho," which involved cutting pictures from magazines or newspapers and playing with them as characters and creating scenery by pasting pictures (houses, schools, cars, and so on) inside a book. For this reason, I believe, in accordance with the interactive integrative five phase model by René Emunah, I was in phase one, labelled "dramatic play "(Emunah, 2019, p. 34). This stage involves establishing a foundation that can support the work that is to follow by incorporating playfulness, creativity, and spontaneity, which enables individuals to tolerate the more regressive work involving often painful self-examination in the later phases (Emunah, 2019). Another important element in this phase is dramatic play, which entails playing out personal, significant themes symbolically and creatively. Thus, I believe that in the second session, I was still in phase one (dramatic play) of the integrative five phase model, which I found to be more structured than session one.

Based on the integrative five phase model of drama therapy, the sessions in phase one tend to be the most structured part of the series, and structured dramatic play tends to lower potential reluctance, fear, and self-consciousness (Emunah, 2019). This was evident in my second session, where I engaged with the material with more ease compared to the previous session, where the plan was to create puppets, play with them, and explore my story of father absenteeism through the puppets. After seeing how I struggled to explore and tell my story in session one, I postponed the session that I had planned to do next, as proposed in the proposal of my research. Drawing from Jung's concept that stories connect with our psychological and emotional struggles, and for that reason we tend to relate to the archetypes such as the hero, the orphan, the wise, the trickster, and so on, because they have familiar qualities that we can relate to; they embody and reflect the realities that most of us have experienced (Watts, Pearson, and Smail, 2013). The story I was drawn to was Red Riding Hood, which is similar to "Tshelane," which I had previously used in my presentation during the proposal stages of my research due to the theme of an absent father in the story. Therefore, I feel like I was drawn to the story of Red Riding Hood due to the similarities between these stories. I invited my sister to read out the

story to me, and I had to choose an image of the story that stood out for me the most. An image that stood out for me was the encounter between the wolf and Red Riding Hood in the forest. I explored and played with these images through the puppets that I had previously created from the previous sessions as well as those I created while I was practicing making puppets in the proposal stages of my research. Based on my experience with the material in this session, I share the same sentiments and agree with Jung's view that stories enable us to engage with our fears and desires in a more engaging, enjoyable, and less threatening manner (Watts, Pearson, and Smail, 2013). One key aspect that really stuck with me from the session was my choice of the part of the story I wanted to explore. Later, after watching my self-taped video and journaling my experience, I found I could draw parallels between that part of the story and my first encounter with my father, and what was key here was the pain of rejection by someone you thought would naturally love you.

As mentioned earlier, the phases of the integrative five-phase model are not fixed; they are flexible and can overlap. I believe that in session two, I began to move to phase two (screenwork). As, I also explored with multiple roles, which provided greater distance (Emunah 2019). The premise is that stepping outside oneself and into roles is freeing; it provides relief from the internal and external constraints experienced in daily life (Emunah, 2019). Through drama, the hidden aspects of ourselves and suppressed emotions can be revealed, desired traits can be explored and embraced, and the undesired aspects of ourselves can be acknowledged and expressed (Emunah, 2019).

I noticed elements of phase two present in session three throughout the other sessions to the performance. However, the elements of phase three (role play) and phase four (culminating enactment) of Integrative Five Phase model were more dominant in sessions three, four, and five.

Emunah (2019, p. 39) mentions that phase three is marked by the "notion of drama as rehearsal for life" and the apparent "thin line in separating drama and real life". This phase involves presenting and examining current life challenges and conflicts. Even though the individuals are working with fictional elements, they begin to make meaningful associations, such as noticing their patterns of behaviour, recalling

helpful or positive moments in sessions, and becoming aware of memories and feelings that were evoked during engagements with the material (Emunah, 2019). They begin to establish links between drama and therapy, which is often an "aha" experience for them (Emunah, 2019). While phase four is based on deeper introspection on key issues that brought a person to therapy. During this phase, the unconscious material became more available: "memories, dreams, associations, and images, some involving family constellations, childhood traumas, and significant events that shed light onto unresolved issues, current themes, and ongoing struggles" (Emunah, 2019, p. 41). The focus is on past events that continue to impact the individual's present life, with psychodrama being the main tool of exploration (Emunah, 2019).

Session 3

Session three was focused on dramatic projection using a variety of objects, such as toys, stones, hair pins, hair beads, brooches, and many others. I also used a variety of clothes to create scenery. I had to pick three tools that represented my past, present, and future experiences of having an absent father. I had to pick three objects for each time frame and use them to create a story without thinking too much about it. I found the stories that came up to be very oblique only after playing all the stories. When I reflected on my choice of selection, I could connect them to my experiences of father absenteeism.

The following are objects chosen, stories told, and reflections for each time frame:

- **Past experience:**

Choice of objects: a rock, a plastic heart, and a dragon.

Story: The story was about a dragon that was searching for food. It spots food from afar on top of the rock; upon arrival, it assesses if it's safe to eat and then starts eating. The story ends with the dragon happy and dancing now that it's satisfied.

What came up during reflections: This story evoked the memory of when I was 16, when I decided to go to the eastern cape by myself, to my grandmother's funeral, whom I have never met, and to meet my father for the first time. I remember being

excited even though I was nervous about traveling by myself for the first time to a place so far, but the thought of finally meeting my father was exciting.

- **Present experience:**

Choice of objects: a toy plastic cup, a pink diamond, and an elephant

Story: The story was about Diamond running after a shell to hide under it. Finally catches it and hides underneath it, until an elephant comes along and crushes the shell, takes Diamond, and places it on its head, exposing it to all the other creatures. Initially, Diamond is scared of the potential danger of being exposed, but later it starts enjoying being exposed and being high up on the elephant's head, where all the other creatures can see its beauty.

What came up during reflections: I can relate this to my personality of being shy, closed off, being an overthinker, and being resistant to trying out new things due to the fear of the possibility of things going wrong. I believe this was influenced by the experience of not receiving the welcome I thought I would when I arrived at my father's house, not just from him but from the rest of his family. Also, finding out that his wife did not even know about my existence and having to come back home embarrassed and hurt, fearing being told "We told you so" by my maternal family, which was the case, hurt me even more.

- **Future experiences:**

Choice of objects: beaded purple necklace, butterfly, and key

Story: The story here was about Butterfly, who was searching for food. While she was searching she then stumbled upon the Key stuck in the grass. Passing it by, she continued her journey and discovered a group of beautiful flowers. However, she couldn't access them as they were behind a locked glass door. The butterfly remembered the key it had seen earlier. The butterfly thought that helping the key might in turn help her open the door. She then returns to rescue the key; they flew together and the key successfully unlocked the door. They made the place their home and lived happily ever after.

What came up during reflections: This story brought back a memory of receiving a Facebook message from my half-brother after six years of not being in contact with my father or anyone from his family. He was informing me that he was soon going to the initiation school and inviting me to the ceremony. He mentioned that they were discussing with my father to do a "imbeleko" ceremony (a celebration ceremony of welcoming a new member of the family) for me, and that should happen before his initiation ceremony, as I was his firstborn. I reached out to my father through a phone call, and he indeed confirmed the plan. He promised to update me once he had the funds for the ceremony. However, after a few months, I came across pictures of my brother's ceremony on Facebook. My father never got back to me as promised and no one informed me about anything. I have not heard from any of them ever since.

Session 4

In session four, I engaged with the 6-part story method invented by Mooli Lahad, which can be seen as an assessment tool used in Drama Therapy to help the therapist gain a better understanding of a client's internal and external worlds by enabling the client to tap into their imagination and to express and explore their narrative (Johnson, Pendzik, and Snow, 2012). My story was about a young girl who lost her necklace at school. She wanted to stay behind after school, but the driver of her transportation was annoyed with having to wait for her and eventually left her behind. A friend offered to stay behind with her and help her find the necklace. They ended up finding it, but had to walk back home. Even though she was tired from the long walk, the girl was happy that she found her necklace.

I could relate this to my experience in 2021, which was the most challenging year of my life. Most of the time, I felt stuck, and everything I tried seemed to fail. I believed that my struggles were somehow connected to the unfulfilled promise my father had made back in 2018 of doing "imbeleko" for me. I remember what my mother said when I expressed my feelings about my father not fulfilling his promise. After seeing pictures of my half-brother on Facebook, she stated that once something is mentioned in connection to the ancestors, it must be carried out. At that time, I didn't think much of it until 2021, when I felt a strong need to have the ceremony.

I would frequently express this to my mother; however, reaching out to my father again was something that I was not willing to do. Therefore, by the end of 2022, my mother took the initiative to do the ceremony for me. Since my father had never acknowledged me in any way, traditionally I belong to my mother's side of the family, and it felt right for my maternal family to do this ceremony for me. During the ceremony, I received a handcrafted white bead necklace, and I was instructed to wear the necklace until it broke by itself, which occurred in December 2023. I recall being so sad when it happened. It felt like I lost part of myself, having carried it with me wherever I went throughout the entire year. I also felt like the necklace gave me luck and protected me, especially considering that I was living far from home.

Session 5

Session five was about revisiting all the sessions that I had. I observed all the puppets that I have created, my six-part story, and the images that I captured of stories that I played. I then engaged in creative writing, noting down whatever thoughts, emotions, experiences, and questions that came to mind for ten minutes without stopping. After that, I highlighted words, phrases, and themes that stood out for me, and I used them to write a story for the performance. By shaping my performance in this manner, I ensured that my performance is not simply a traditional theatre piece or autobiographical therapeutic piece but rather a path of investigation and understanding of my struggles and of finding healing through the use of dramatic methods, which is the essence of self-revelatory performance (Pendzik, Emunah, and Johnson, 2017).

In the book "The Self in Performance," The differences between self-revelatory performance and autobiographical therapeutic performances are clarified as follows (Pendzik, Emunah, and Johnson, 2017): Even though they both deal with real-life problems of the performer, she highlights that self-revelatory performance requires more risk-taking and courage from the performer. This is because in self-revelatory performances, the performer often portrays themselves or another significant figure in their life, delves into materials directly related to them, and focuses on life issues or problems they are currently facing. On the other hand, autobiographical

therapeutic performances mostly focus on the performer's past issues or experiences. Therefore, scenes within self-revelatory performances may be deeply personal as the performer discloses unresolved or painful aspects of themselves. The performance may even draw from material that has emerged during therapy sessions of the process. Another key difference is that self-revelatory performance mainly intends to heal, which comes from the process of “working through” the personal issues of the performer.

Session 6 and 7 the Rehearsals

Pendzik, Emunah, and Johnson (2017) mention that once the key themes of the central issue are revealed, which in my case include struggles with confidence and a search for identity, belonging, and purpose, the performer and the director examine and analyze these personal aspects and work out which information is essential to be communicated and how to be communicated through creative means. Based on the fact that I have found safety in the use of metaphors and symbols, it felt right to use them to hold and share my story.

I had two rehearsals and a live performance. During the rehearsals, it felt like I was still in phase four of the interactive five phase model. The first rehearsal focused on figuring out how to effectively convey the themes of my story and the style I intended to use. This process involved a lot of planning and pauses, especially since I was recording myself and simultaneously manipulating puppets, which I found extremely challenging, and it took more time than I anticipated. However, it provided me with the opportunity to think critically, plan effectively, and assert what would work best for my performance. This rehearsal was specifically done as a presentation to my supervisor and examiners. One of the points that stood out for me from the feedback I got from the examiners was that it was not easy to link the story to father absenteeism; thus, in the next rehearsal, I worked toward changing certain aspects of my performance to help my audience better comprehend the story, as self-revelatory performance is not only meant to be therapeutic for the performer but for the audience as well (Pendzik, Emunah, and Johnson, 2017).

Based on the struggles I encountered in the first rehearsal, I also asked two of my cousins to assist me. One took a video of the rehearsal and performance, and the other took on the role of "stagehands," which involved passing me props and changing scenery. Having them involved made a huge difference in my performance since my focus was now only on manipulating the puppets. I also found the story flow to be much better.

The Performance

Moving to the performance, I was entering phase five of the "dramatic ritual" of the interactive five-phase model. One of the key aspects here is for the performer to feel validated (Emunah, 2019). The role of having an audience is very crucial in this stage, as Emunah mentions that performing in front of a thoughtful audience can be healing by itself (Emunah, 2016). She also mentions that the notion of "working through" is still happening in the performance stage; otherwise, the performance piece will be just a conventional theatre piece or an autobiographical piece that shows the struggles that the performer has already dealt with (Emunah, 2016). A scholar asserts that significant moments of self-revelation happen when the audience witnesses the performers' vulnerability and bravery unfolding in the present moment, which emerges when the performer's emotional response interrupts the flow of the performance and itself becomes woven into the performance (Park, 2019). There is also the concept of dramatic ritual, which is linked to the transitional and celebratory aspects of Drama Therapy. Emunah (2019) mentions that dramatic rituals work best to communicate the intense sensations conjured by therapy processes and their culmination, as well as the deep level of intimacy that has been experienced.

Emunah (2019) suggests that elaborate rituals are most effective in expressing the powerful emotions evoked during therapy sessions and their resolution, as well as the profound sense of closeness that has been felt.

Some rituals within self-revelatory performance may directly involve the audience, such as giving an audience a specific task or inviting them on stage, which highlights

their role of contributing to the performer's healing process (Pendzik, Emunah, and Johnson 2017). Emunah (2016) describes a performance that involved a segment of the performer reliving a traumatic event in her childhood. The performer had instructed the audience to ask her what they were feeling in their body whenever they reached a particular spot on stage, and the performer would stop and answer. This interaction between herself and the audience was not only therapeutic; it created a shared emotional experience and deepened the audience connection to her journey (Emunah, 2016). Based on this, I also planned ways I could create a dramatic ritual for my audience, which included my mother, my aunt, my sister, my aunt, my three other cousins, my three nieces, and my nephew. I thought of the significance of the necklace I was given during my “imbeleko” ceremony. Each person who attended the ceremony was given one white bead, and they had to give it to me while saying a word, a phrase, or a sentence of blessings. All the beads were then made into a necklace. It was one of the most fulfilling experiences I encountered, and I wanted to recreate a similar experience with my audience and relive the moment within a therapeutic space. Therefore, after the performance, I gifted each audience member a white rope by tying it on their wrist and mentioning one thing that I appreciated about them. This was such an emotional experience for me and my audience, and I found it really therapeutic. It also served as validation, especially due to the feeling that I had during the performance that my audience was not grasping what the performance was about. Even though they were told it’s a therapeutic performance, I believe they could not link it to the topic of father absenteeism. However, I believe the ritual facilitated the understanding of the essence of the performance.

Findings:

According to the findings of this study, rejection is a major impact of a father's absenteeism on his daughter's life. Based on data analysis, I discovered rejection to be the key theme that has led to my self-confidence and trust issues. Several studies support the findings of this study, showing that parental rejection produces self-confidence and trust issues. One such study is that of Baker (2005), which discovered the long-term effects of parental rejection to include self-confidence

issues, trust issues, psychological problems, substance addition, and even abandonment of one's own children. The study involved 36 participants who had experienced parental rejection, and 26 of those participants reported having self-confidence issues. Additionally, 17 of the participants were reported to have trust issues both towards themselves and others (Baker, 2005). Similarly, a study by Yasmin and Hossain (2014) discovered a link between parental rejection and self-esteem issues and claims that parental rejection has a major impact on the descendant's self-esteem and life satisfaction. The study also found self-esteem to be more influenced by parental rejection than life satisfaction (Yasmin and Hossain, 2014, p. 448). Furthermore, a study by Khaleque and colleagues (2019) suggests that childhood rejection creates rejection sensitivity, which is a tendency to view interpersonal circumstances, whether real or not, as rejections. Their study also found rejection to be connected to low self-esteem, as well as depression, social withdrawal, violent intimate relationships, interpersonal problems, and a variety of psychological disorders (Khaleque, et al, 2019).

Furthermore, this study found the use of puppetry to be a valuable tool in helping a daughter address the impact of her absent father in her life. Creating situations and engaging with them has enabled me to confront and express my feelings, thoughts, experiences, and internal struggles of father absenteeism in a safe way (Bromfield 1994). I found puppetry not to be limiting and to work similar to psychodrama as it allowed me to bring significant people from my story into a therapeutic space, specifically my father (Kedem-Tahar and Felix-Kellermann, 1996). It also allowed me to explore various aspects of my personal life, such as memories of specific events, past unresolved issues, wished for behaviour and outcomes, and helped me gain an understanding of my current struggles with father absenteeism (Kedem-Tahar and Felix-Kellermann, 1996). Taking on different roles also provided me with a sense of closure as I explored with techniques such as role reversal. This was particularly meaningful for me as I was able to address unanswered questions I had for my father, such as why didn't his wife know about my existence? Or why is he able to father his other children and not me? Therefore, using puppetry in this manner proved to be valuable in that it helped me to move towards healing and closure.

Moreover, this study found value in the use of puppetry and stories to produce a performance. I found that combining puppetry and story naturally led me to use metaphors and symbols, which allowed me to critically engage in the process of working through my personal experience of father absenteeism. Swanepoel (2011) mentions that the symbolic and metaphoric world created within a therapeutic space are linked to issues that have brought that person to therapy. Additionally, symbols and metaphors create a dramatic reality that allows for the expression and exploration of those issues (Swanepoel, 2011). Furthermore, Kirmayer (1993) mentions that metaphors in a therapeutic space help individuals confront their struggles in safe and non-threatening ways. Therefore, I believe incorporating metaphors and symbols enabled me to investigate, confront, and express the hostile emotions related to my experience of father absenteeism without being overwhelmed. It has also led me to work towards closure and healing as I got to celebrate my experiences toward the end of my performance.

Recommendations

I recommend that this study be extended to a wider audience to gain a wide range of perspectives and experiences related to father absenteeism. As noted in the literature review, some individuals may have experienced either complete, partial, physical, emotional, or economic father absenteeism (Padi et al., 2014). I believe it would be beneficial to involve participants with varied encounters of father absenteeism. Another recommendation for this study is to move from the safety of projected work to embodiment. This suggestion was inspired by a discussion I had with the examiners and supervisor during our post-exam reflection session. One of the examiners highlighted the pattern she observed in my exam presentation of constantly being on the floor. This sparked my curiosity about how an embodied performance would unfold and whether I would encounter similar experiences. I believe this would enrich my understanding of father absenteeism and of Drama Therapy methods, specifically of a self-revelatory performance.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted rejection as the main impact of a father's absence on his daughter 's life. Several studies have associated rejection with negative impacts such as issues related to self-esteem, trust, depression, substance misuse, lack of satisfaction with life, social withdrawal, and psychological conditions like social anxiety. Furthermore, the study revealed that the use of puppetry functions similarly to psychodrama by aiding individuals in examining their unresolved present challenges. Moreover, it suggests that the exploration of symbols and metaphors through puppetry encourages individuals to thoroughly investigate, engage with, and express their emotions regarding the issues that led them to therapy, ultimately progressing towards healing. I hope this study helps to build knowledge, can be beneficial to scholars and professionals in the field of Drama Therapy and may help shape therapeutic practices in this field.

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