

Arts Informed Research: Research on the Relationships between Immigrant/Refugee Children and Children Born in the Host Country

艺术启发研究：移民/难民儿童与侨居国出生儿童之间的关系研究

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Abstract

The field of Social Cognitive Psychology has traditionally been the focal point for researching relationships between immigrants and those considered natives in the host countries within social science literature. However, the author considers this paradigm insufficient to comprehend the intricate dynamics. The emotional and unconscious undercurrents in these interactions remain unexplored. Drawing on a background in dance movement therapy, drama therapy, and psychodrama, the researcher introduced clinical arts therapy tools to address this gap. Focusing on girls and boys, drama emerged as the most fitting method. This article provides a glimpse into a novel model of drama groups developed as part of an extensive year-long research program. Initially chosen based on the study's focus and participants' age, the approach eventually aligned with the broader framework of Arts Informed Research (AIR).

Keywords: children, immigrants, arts informed research, drama groups, aesthetic distance

摘要

传统上，社会认知心理学领域一直是研究社会科学文献中移民与侨居国当地人之间关系的焦点。然而，作者认为这种范式不足以理解错综复杂的动态。这些互动中的情感和潜意识暗流仍未被探索。利用舞蹈动作治疗、戏剧治疗和心理剧的背景，研究人员引入了临床艺术治疗工具设法解决这一空缺。聚焦女孩和男孩，戏剧成为最合适的方法。本文提供了对戏剧团体新颖模式的一瞥，该模式是为期一年全面研究计划的一部分。最初根据研究的重点和参与者的年龄选择该方法，最终与更广泛的艺术知情研究（AIR）框架保持一致。

关键词: 儿童, 移民, 艺术启发研究, 戏剧团体, 美学距离

Is there an idea that doesn't deserve be thought again?

Elias Canetti, 1987 (Translation of HW)

Parts of this article are adapted from Wengrower, H., & Serrano Blasco, J. (2009). Técnicas inmigrantes en el país de las ciencias sociales. *Arteterapia—Papeles de Arteterapia y Educación Artística para la Inclusión Social*, (4), 111–135. With permission from the *Art Therapy Journal, Papeles de Arteterapia y Educación Artística*

Creative Arts in Education and Therapy – Eastern and Western Perspectives – Vol. 9, Issue 2, December 2023.

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para la Inclusión Social, published by the Publications Service of the Complutense University of Madrid.

Introduction

This article is based on another piece published in Spanish in 2009 (Wengrower & Serrano Blasco, 2009). The webinars organized by IACAET inspired me to update parts of it and issue it in English. This publication made an inverse move; many times, a scientific text is born in English, the dominant language in academic life, and then it is translated to another linguistic world. This work was *born* (conceived, practiced, and published) in Spanish and Hebrew, and now it is offered to the community that communicates through English. After searching in the bibliography of recent years, it was considered that an updated publication of this research in English is appropriate, due to the lack of arts-informed research on the relations between native-born and immigrant/refugee children and the specific approach adopted here. The bibliography has been updated and other sources were kept as they are seminal to this subject.

This article aims to expose different aspects that should be considered when planning research about the relations between refugee or immigrant children and children who are considered “native” to the host country. Migration and/or people searching for a safer place to live have been a continuous part of human history, leaving their imprint on societies and individuals. Today, approximately 6 million Ukrainian citizens, primarily women and children, have lost their known lives and face the uncertainty that challenges all refugees. People from other countries also continue to leave their homeland on an endless journey.

Migration and refuge seeking have been major social phenomena, especially from the beginning of the 20th century, which increased during and after World War II. Many texts and conceptualizations have been produced concerning those who seek asylum or a safer place to live and on their encounters with the members of their host society. The most salient texts are the image of the *foreigner* or the *outsider* as studied by sociologist George Simmel (1908/1967), neurologist-psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud’s (1930) works on the narcissism of minor differences, and sociologist Norbert Elias’ *Established and Outsiders* (1994). These scholars dwelt on the animosity between groups of identity.

From the beginning of my interest in psychosocial issues related to migrants and refugees, it was clear that the dominant social cognitive theories could not tap the undercurrents of these phenomena. Therefore, I approached them with my clinical arts therapy knowledge and tools, adapting them to non-clinical settings and issues. With time, I found an intellectual home with the arts-informed research (AIR) theory.

Seminal works in the field of AIR were published years after I began to research through drama, movement, and guided imagery and to lecture about this issue in different venues (1991, 1993, 1994, 1995, and so on). During these inquiries, I worked with professionals involved in the well-being (social workers) and education (teachers) of immigrant children, and with children and adolescents.

This text will present a section of a large project that was developed during a school year and included different research methods. In this article, the focus will be

mainly on drama groups with children, in a structure of AIR theory. Other research methods utilized in this project were participant observation, group interviews, word association, analysis of official texts issued by the Ministry of Education, and interviews with the principal of a school as well as the vice principal and teachers. The information collected from the different sources complemented each other, and some were specifically provided by distinct research tools. In the qualitative paradigm, this is called *triangulation*.

Social Sciences Research

In one of the foundational sources for qualitative research, Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated that methodological choices should be based on ontological and epistemological definitions specific to the question and purpose of the research. Other important aspects considered are the age of the participants in the inquiry. In this project, children aged 10 years old participated.

In the ontological matter and according to the social constructionist paradigm and the critical theory paradigm, the author considers that the relations between immigrant children and those born in the destination country are built upon a psychological-social-cultural-political complex in which social discourse, universal and specific characteristics of societies, economic circumstances, and identity dynamics constitute the relationships and images wherein one social group builds on and builds another (Burr & Dick, 2017; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Human realities, therefore, are seen as complex and multilayered and constructed in relationships and structures, which participants interpret. An interesting integration of concepts is offered by Bareka et al. (2019).

As for the epistemological aspect, which stems from the ontological question, the researcher has migration in her personal story. As such, there is another element in the interactive links with the subjects with whom she researches that was taken into consideration. This process might have raised what the anthropologist-psychoanalyst George Devereux (1967) denominated the “researcher’s anxiety.”

The epistemological stand also poses that the researcher and the subjects participating in the inquiry are part of the social net; the researcher is not observing from outside but is part of the reality. Therefore, in this article, the reader will find the expression “researching with children” and not researching children (O’Reilly, 2012). This shift in terminology entails the ethical position of the researcher, implying humility and learning from and with the subjects participating in the investigation. It is necessary to stress this point, as children are frequently represented as non-knowledgeable or unfit to reflect upon their psychosocial life. More about the ethics of researching with children will be presented later in this article.

Previous scoping reviews (Guruge et al., 2015; Wengrower, 2002; Wengrower & Serrano Blasco, 2009) revealed that investigations based on traditional methods, psychometric tools, and exclusive use of a country’s language and/or verbal expressions alone cannot apprehend the nuances and complexities of the migrants’ and refugees’ lives as well as the intricacies of the images and interrelationships with the children of

the host country. Likewise, these methods do not touch unconscious processes/images that play an important role in the dynamics of these children's relations and in the mutual images of refugees, immigrants, and members of the host society (Grinberg & Grinberg, 2009; Santamaría, 2002; Wengrower & Serrano Blasco, 2009).

The methodology chosen was ethnography since the research setting was a school, an institution where children meet daily, and in this way, many peer relations can be observed in their natural setting. Under the social constructionist perspective and Morin's (1995, 2008) theory of complexity, there is the ontological principle that the microlevel (peer images and relationships) reflects contents of the macrolevel (policies, social discourse, etc.) Therefore, in the frame of an ethnography, official documents released by the Ministry of Education regarding the inclusion of migrants/refugees may give information about ideologies, policies, and their implementation. In the same light, school directors and special counselors for issues of immigrant children can be interviewed. Ethnography in a school allows for examining the conceptual systems that reign in educational institutions, the hidden curriculum,¹ interactive modalities, and how to interpret them through interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary theories (Woods, 2005).

To understand the meanings of reciprocally constructed or attributed information between native-born and immigrant/refugees and to examine the non-conscious aspects, arts/art therapy techniques can be implemented. In several co-educational groups, I found that drama was efficient. More details on this tool are presented later in this article.

The research methodology was AIR. Cole and Knowles (2008, p. 59) defined it as

a mode and form of qualitative research in the social sciences that is influenced by, but not based on, the arts broadly conceived. The central purposes of arts-informed research are to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible.

This perspective allows the researcher and the reader to construct knowledge about the questions that are presented in this article. It also suits the complex ontological and epistemological standpoints that were integrated into this research.

Children as Participants in Research

One of the arguments in favor of using a tool based on one or more of the arts when researching with children, and even more if immigrant/refugee children are participating, is the need to overcome language disparities (Guruge et al., 2015; Wengrower & Serrano Blasco, 2009). However, several ethical issues should be considered when researching with children. As Murrow and Richards (1996) stated, there are many ethical dilemmas, which frequently appear unexpectedly. Therefore, investigators have to be attentive to possible unanticipated questions. The central themes to be aware of include the image

¹ Implicit or underdeclared social-cultural and academic meanings and messages transmitted to pupils while they are in school.

researchers might have of children as participants in an investigation, concerning their suitability, vulnerability, lack of competence and relative powerlessness. The imbalance of power between children and the researcher is another crucial aspect to consider. It is recommended to use expressive and playful tools, as children feel safe with and are experts in them. To conduct effective research with children, the researcher needs to be skillful in utilizing these tools, avoid confrontational interventions, and seek their collaboration to understand their artistic and playful expressions. Another strategy to address the power imbalance is to conduct interviews with children in pairs or small groups.

Question of the Research

What relationships do children who are immigrants/refugees and children of the host country form or establish?

Drama Groups

The use of arts to explore the inner world of children and adults has long been documented. Playing through the arts allows individuals to symbolically and metaphorically communicate what they cannot verbalize because it is unknown (non-conscious) or because it is feared the expression would be criticized. In 1985, Elliot Eisner identified art as an aesthetic way of knowing and laid the seeds for what would be called artistic modes of inquiry. He stated that the arts are appropriate for the broad frame of qualitative inquiry, which seeks to give voice to the experiences of the persons participating in the research. Indirect allusions and metaphors are considered legitimate devices for this verbalizing, especially when emotions, relationships, and images of the other are involved. Eisner (1991) expanded Michel Polanyi's concept of *tacit knowledge*, stating that people know more than what they can say in words, thus leading to the integration of arts in/as research.

One important premise of arts as/in research is the knowledge and skills the researcher has in the utilized mode of art, in this case, drama/theater. The author of this article has studied theater, drama, and psychodrama academically and experientially and has been working professionally for many years with children, also in the themes mentioned here. Eisner also underlined how the modes of representation in the scientific community are related not only to theoretical foundations but also to political ones. The intersection of arts in research demands new skills necessitating learning and overcoming the dichotomy between reason and experience.

Considerations for the Use of Drama Groups in this Specific Case

In drama, the participants develop roles and situations they live in or imagine and enact direct or symbolic analogies, which create an aesthetic distance. This distance balances emotions and the reflective process, that is, it is not the acting person who shouts, it is the character being embodied. This process facilitates self-regulation. Group members collaborate based on their tacit, shared knowledge. Aesthetic distancing allows

participants to be moved, aware, and reflect on the emotional processes as they observe what is being enacted (Landy, 1997; Sajani, 2016). In this present example, children expressed themselves about controversial issues (prejudices, negative images) without feeling threatened or criticized.

What Produces Aesthetic Distance?

Using the terminology of Alida Gersie (1987), we can assert that the children used their social/tacit knowledge and manifested the affects they felt through their internal cast. There was much written about aesthetic distance, and some main elements are summarized here.

Aesthetic distance is created on the *stage*. It is a space in the room where the group meets, conventionally established by the group leader and/or group members in order to enact the stories or scenes created either previously or spontaneously. The stage symbolically separates the zone of fantasy and imagination from the here-and-now reality of the group.

The story also sets the situation and the characters in a time and space that are different from the space-time of the group. Landy asserted that people tell their stories through fiction (as cited by Wengrower & Serrano Blasco, 2009).

The roles or characters created for the drama develop aesthetic distance as well. Personal/group aspects existent in the group/social reality are projected and enacted. The interactions and the tacit knowledge imagined or acted are expressed through the camouflage that the dramatic role enables. The use of names different from those of the performers is another instance of aesthetic distancing, safely differentiating between character and actor.

The audience plays a role as well. The group watching the drama is a distancing tool for the actors by being an outsider to the acting group and a witness as well. Spectators can identify with what is unfolding in front of them, reflect about it, and feel it in themselves.

Specific Model of Drama Groups in This Research

The school integrated the drama groups into its timetable as part of the elective arts and crafts activities for fifth-graders. All the groups in this setting were run in periods of 90 minutes over 14 weeks. Two groups of eight children each were formed, each group meeting for one semester. To keep the spontaneity of the participants and avoid stigmatization of the immigrants by identifying them as a special group, the focus for the groups was presented as exploring themes of friendship, which aligned with the goal of this ethnography.

The groups' modality was task-centered instead of process-oriented as in therapeutic groups (Pichón Riviére, 2003). In task-oriented groups, playing and talking about the stated goal of exploration is central. Unconscious issues are avoided by the formal leader, who helps to sort tensions/conflicts that may arise through proposals, metaphors, or play activities. Since the core was friendship, interventions related to acceptance or not of difference, competition, and establishing new relations were suggested as a basis for the play.

Structure of the Sessions

The following structure was followed in each session:

1. Embodied warm-ups started the group activities. Warm-ups included movement and dance in order to facilitate a playful atmosphere and establish the beginning of the session. At the end of the warm-up period, the researcher proposed enacting a story of an encounter with somebody/something new in a group/place. During the next sessions, the proposal was related to what happened in the previous encounter or what was shared verbally.
2. Children self-organized into small groups in different corners of the room and prepared stories/scenes. They discussed their story and then rehearsed it. There were very few props: small mattresses, and their own clothes. The focus resided in the stories, texts, gestures, use of space, movements, and interactions. The researcher moved between the groups, promoting the playing and creation with the existing matter at hand. As Grotowsky (1987) wrote: the actor has mainly his body and his skill. Playing through drama and with their body is a skill inherent to most children.
3. Each group acted their story in the space established as the stage and the audience observed silently. During this period, a theatrical climate reigned in the room.
4. At the close of the session, children shared their feelings and associations to the stories. Groups also shared their understandings and connected them with the knowledge constructed during their daily life.

The drama stories created and performed by the children were seen as their narrative, or how they internalized, created, and reproduced social images and discourse. When they enacted the coming of a new individual/group as a threatening situation, it was because it was part of their view and their imagination, which has also social aspects (Leledakis, 1995). Julia Kristeva (1991), Sigmund Freud (1930), and other psychoanalysts and researchers of cognitive currents, based their theory about the rejection of the immigrant/stranger on the dynamics of establishing and strengthening identity. The newcomer means change, and that threatens the balance established. Hendricks (2022) reminds us that the worth and rank of the social group that a person identifies with are based to a certain extent on comparisons with other social groups. This is stronger in preadolescence, as the participants in this research. The technique to denigrate the other is more used by them, especially those who fear losing their power.

Information Produced in the Drama Groups

The children located interactions and characters in other spaces and time (dramatic reality). These groups reinforced information achieved through other techniques and added others. They *told* how the children built and understood relations with others, especially when they were immigrants. They related migrants to the concept of “new kid” through free association. Instead of presenting categories as discrete unities of meaning, I summarize the stories of the drama groups in the following sections.

The Story of the First Group Using Drama

The first meeting introduced the modality and structure of the session to the participants; they were guided through the drama/movement activities. The children accepted the proposal to create a story about somebody unknown arriving in their town. They immediately decided they would be a family of dwarfs, and somebody would knock at their door during the night when they slept. Throughout all the sessions, this beginning was repeated, but it was not the same visitor. In each session, a different child played the role of the newcomer. The family of dwarfs would open the door for the newcomer but did not establish contact.

Although the group was formed of girls, the character that arrived was male, sat in the corner of the house, observed, and was observed. Very soon, the members of the family declare they want to continue sleeping. They do not do anything to welcome him, they do not change their routines, nor do they attempt to establish a relationship. In other sessions, the dwarf was carefully observed and negatively evaluated; the young children in the drama acted afraid, “he’s big and bad...it is seen everywhere,” even though this newcomer stayed without moving, and as he presented himself, came from “the woods of the little ones” and was lost.

I would like to call attention to other suggestive points. For instance, the name of the newcomer. The first girl enacting the newcomer chooses to be called *Po*, which in Hebrew means *here*. When asked about this name, she did not give any answer; it was clear to her that this was the character’s name. In the coming sessions, this name was kept; although it almost was not used due to the lack of communication between the family and the newcomer. In every session, the story/scene began during the night, creating marginality and mystery. *Po* arrived while the family was sleeping. For children in different cultures, night is a time for fear.

Both elements did not change, even though different girls enacted the role. In one session, there was a preparatory exchange of objects, and the only one that did not have a partner was the newcomer. She moved between pairs and trios and sometimes negotiated an exchange. The similarity between this enacted story and the overall descriptions and analyses produced by different authors is surprising. Elias and Scotson (1994) asserted that the newcomer lacks history and allies in the new location. In another session, the girls prepared the consulting room of a physician. When *Po* arrived, another group member asked, “Who is she?” Although this girl was present when they took roles, dramatic reality and ordinary reality (Pendzik, 2006) mixed, enhancing *Po*’s marginality.

Another interesting theme was the group’s choice to locate the scene in the house of a family. This choice can be linked to theories and research about group identities/intergroup conflicts, specifically the concept of in-group and out-group. The group that one identifies with is determined as the in-group, and the other formation against which one’s identity is created is the out-group (Hogg et al., 2004).

At the beginning of the sessions, the girls contended to act as the newcomer; tacitly they attributed a protagonist role to *Po*. As sessions passed by, and because this character wasn’t included in the playing, the girls wanted to remove it. They wanted to play

only as a family. Being the newcomer was unpleasant because of its marginality, being ignored or attacked, or as some girls said: “It is not nice to be with him.” In actuality, it was not nice to *be* him. Only on one occasion, after talking about the disagreeableness of being the newcomer, the group decides to create a comforting experience. However, it was not sustained in the following weeks, and once, when playing, somebody wanted to expel Po.

Second Group. Monologues

The second group played different situations in which a newcomer arrives: a person seeking for a job, a girl coming to a new class, a baby coming to a family, a rose into a garden of flowers, etc. Towards the final sessions, I thought that characters’ monologues would offer an opportunity to reflect about the experience of the role they enacted the week before. Not surprisingly, the girls talked about motivations and anxieties very openly and their verbal texts resonated with Elias’ (1994) explanations about intergroup relations. These themes appeared only with this technique in such an open manner.

Every participant exposed her monologue, which was based on the text they wrote minutes before; the other participants were a very attentive audience. At the end of each talk, the group asked the character about her emotions, thoughts, and actions.

Examples:

A member of the host society expressed regret for her aggressiveness, and when a girl in the audience asked her about the reason for that behavior, she answered:

“It may be because of social pressure. I thought that if I were her friend, others would say to me: are you a friend of this nerd?” The girl was talking about the procedures groups take in order to preserve their identity, space, and resources. There are many publications that consider the receptors use of *difference* as a strategy against the inclusion of some groups in society (see Delgado, 1998; Elias & Scotson, 1994; Hendricks, 2022). Elias and Scotson (1994) found that the images and terms used to stigmatize are related to the context and group characteristics. In this case, a group of preadolescents selected the term *nerd*, which was a denigrative term used to segregate the in-group from the out-group. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (2003), widely known and influential for her work in social anthropology, observed that those who establish contact with the members of the discredited group are in danger of being suspect of disregard of the common norms and being *infected* by the prohibited contact by members of their group of identity. The avoidance of contact was defined by Douglas as *terror from pollution*, or what Elias and Scotson (1994) called *anomic infection*.

Sophie, who played the role of the new pupil who was verbally assaulted, shared her pain for this, when Lily asked her: “Should you be a pupil who has been here for long time, how would you relate to the newcomers?”

Sophie: “If I would be a popular girl, I wouldn’t be nice to her.”

I asked: “And why this difference?”

Sophie: “You cannot know. She might be more popular than me.”

Summary

This article provided examples of the process of arrival of a newcomer, and the information provided by the incorporation of elements of art forms when investigating the relations of refugee/migrant children and their native counterparts. Movement, especially drama, opens and deepens the possibility of researching the subtle dynamics between these children. During the drama groups, the participants voiced tensions that were not known to the teachers and corroborated descriptive work made before in different countries. They laid a platform to work with children, attending to the anxieties that migratory movements arise in an empathic way with both sides of the border.

Other research tools were part of this project: group and individual interviews, ethnographical observation, free association, and analysis of official documents. The different techniques corroborated the knowledge provided by the other research tools and contributed specific information. The encompassing research frame of AIR and ethnography allowed for an organic inclusion of these research tools.

About the Author

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