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Facilitators and barriers of dramatherapy for individuals affected by poverty: An instrumental case study

ABSTRACT

Poverty and its multifaceted consequences, including stigmatization, prolonged periods of stress and social exclusion, negatively impact mental well-being. Due to an increasing prevalence of poverty, there is a need, aside from economic and political intervention, to develop accessible, and inclusive resources to promote and maintain mental well-being. Within this context, dramatherapy has been posited to be suited to support affected individuals. Yet little research has explored its application with people affected by poverty. Using an instrumental case study design and a qualitative descriptive approach, this study sought to provide an initial exploration of dramatherapy as a source of psychological support for people affected by poverty. The cases of two individuals, Daniel and Bianca, with experiences of poverty before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic were selected from a larger qualitative study. Their experiences of poverty are being described and their perceived barriers and facilitators of potentially participating in group dramatherapy are named. Both participants are open to engaging in group

KEYWORDS

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dramatherapy. They identify several facilitating aspects, yet also note barriers that could limit or prevent their participation. Predominantly, financial worries are named as potential barriers. Other concerns, such as time constraints, accessibility and physical fitness, were also identified. Overall, this case study shows the complexity of poverty and its impact on individuals' mental well-being and mental health support. It encourages further study and may inform dramatherapy interventions targeting people affected by poverty.

Influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic repercussions as well as climate change, war and conflict, global poverty rates have been steadily rising in recent years (Krebs 2022). In 2023, for example, more than a fifth of the population of the European Union was reported to have been affected or at risk of poverty (Eurostat 2023). Although poverty is mainly assessed through a measure based on income (Bray et al. 2020), its impact is not solely felt economically but rather evident across an individual's physical, mental and social well-being (Campbell and Selby-Nelson 2020).

Many people living in poverty possess significant psychological strength and resilience (e.g. Vandsburger et al. 2008; Mhongera and Lombard 2020). Nonetheless, the challenges of poverty, including stress, social exclusion and powerlessness (Goodman et al. 2010), can often lead to lasting mental health difficulties (Campbell and Selby-Nelson 2020). Young people from lower socio-economic communities, for example, have been shown to be two to three times more likely to develop mental health difficulties compared to their better-off peers (Reiss 2013). Consequently, aside from economic and political involvement, psychological interventions may support affected individuals in effectively coping with their circumstances and treating or preventing mental health difficulties.

Yet, there remains a discrepancy in the need and potential of services and their uptake and effectiveness. Previous research has shown that people living in poverty are less likely to access and benefit from psychotherapy, showing lower uptake, higher attrition and lower improvement rates given various logistical, material, experiential or historical barriers and concerns (Goodman et al. 2010). Consequently, there have been repeated calls to develop socially just mental health practices (e.g. Knifton and Inglis 2020; Byrne and James 2020). Previous qualitative research has illuminated therapists' perspectives on working with clients affected by poverty (Borges and Goodman 2020; Ballo and Tribe 2023). Santiago et al. (2013), for example, identified flexibility, tailoring and outreach as important aspects of their services for people with poverty to develop a collaborative relationship and increase engagement, retention and effectiveness of psychotherapy (see Table 1).

Dramatherapy is a form of psychotherapy that uses methods from the theatre with various types of clients in clinical, educational or community settings (Feniger-Schaal and Orkibi 2020). Its field has increasingly prioritized issues of social justice in its development (Emunah et al. 2020; Mayor and Williams 2024). Recent efforts, for instance, have focused on the experience of clients and dramatherapists of colour (Lee et al. 2023; Stevens 2023), those with disabilities (Cook et al. 2022; McFann et al. 2024) or LGBTQI and gender nonconforming dramatherapists and clients (Beauregard et al. 2017). Less research, however, has highlighted the experiences of individuals affected by poverty (Dokter and Sajjani 2023). Congruently, in a recent international survey of

Table 1: Adaptions to treatment to meet the needs of people affected by poverty.

Strategy	Goal	Example
Outreach	Engagement	Identify potential logistical difficulties (e.g. commute) or negative pre-conceptions (e.g. stigma) and proactively employ strategies, such as offering teletherapy as an induction session to overcome such barriers.
Flexibility	Retention	Understand individuals' unique circumstances and allow for variation from typical treatment provisions, such as 'allowing for treatment schedules that may vary from the typical one session per week' (Santiago et al. 2013: 121).
Tailoring	Effectiveness	Stay aware of sociocultural factors impacting the therapeutic relationship and adapt interventions to match a client's sociocultural perspective. For instance, the therapeutic experience may be improved when therapists 'are open to exploring potential doubts or ambivalence about receiving care that may stem from an individual's cultural background' (Santiago et al. 2013: 122).

Note: Adapted from Santiago et al. (2013).

dramatherapists, Dokter and Sajnani (2023) found social class, which they defined as encompassing socio-economic and subjective social status, is rarely discussed in dramatherapy practice. They cite one respondent stating they 'are not able to see it' in their work and critique that socio-economic inequalities are not adequately acknowledged within the therapeutic encounter.

Nonetheless, dramatherapy, as a strength-based and client-centred approach (Emunah et al. 2020), has been posited to be ideally suited to supporting people experiencing poverty (Dokter and Sajnani 2023). *The Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal 1979), for example, describes a range of theatre-based techniques to explore and address systematic oppression and has been used extensively in dramatherapy (Sajnani et al. 2020; Khanna 2023; Mondolfi and Pino-Juste 2020). Sajnani et al. (2020) offer a case vignette of a dramatherapy workshop with women in a social housing complex in Colombia. The workshop followed a tragic incident in the complex that served as a reminder of inequalities faced by its residents. It utilized Forum Theatre from the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 2002), which allowed the women to reflect on their current circumstances and encouraged them to practice and find advocacy and social cohesion. Based on this and other case examples, Sajnani et al. propose that the Theatre of the Oppressed offers 'drama therapists creative and collaborative processes for identifying and addressing the material conditions that lead to psychological distress' (2020: 583). Accordingly, this approach may also be recommended to support people struggling with the consequences of poverty.

Moreover, people with experiences of poverty may be ideally suited to benefit from dramatherapy. Dokter and Sajnani note that 'interdependence is emphasised in working-class community backgrounds' (2023: 136), which, in turn, can facilitate better emotional and social skills. In fact, individuals from lower-class communities have consistently been shown to score higher on measures of empathy and are more likely to help others than their peers from higher social classes (Kraus et al. 2011; Manstead 2018). These strengths are factors promoting resilience in the face of socio-economic adversity (Mhongera and Lombard 2020; Vandsburger et al. 2008). As dramatherapy is often based in group settings and works around emotional expression and support (Trottier 2021; Scroggs et al. 2016), these strengths may uniquely

benefit clients with experiences of poverty and positively impact their experience of dramatherapy.

Yet, little research has addressed how clients perceive dramatherapy, specifically in relation to poverty. A recent comprehensive meta-analysis of qualitative research in dramatherapy showed that clients generally had a positive perception of dramatherapy and were able to use it effectively to work on personal challenges and strengthen communal ties (Constien et al. 2024). Specifically, it showed that clients appreciated the equal relationship they felt with their dramatherapist. This dynamic is also instrumental in Theatre of the Oppressed practices and contrasts traditional power imbalances people in poverty often experience within social services.

However, Constien et al. (2024) also identified clients who noted difficulties in the therapeutic process, which felt unfamiliar or foreign to them. For instance, some described creative or expressive approaches as challenging, embarrassing or even humiliating (Constien et al. 2024). Overall, this indicates a need to engage with clients' perspectives in dramatherapy and incorporate their views into tailored dramatherapy practices. Similar suggestions specifically concerning people affected by poverty have been made across psychotherapy approaches (e.g. Appio et al. 2013; Pugach and Goodman 2015). Yet, no research to date has examined the perspectives of people affected by poverty on dramatherapy, challenging the development of tailored, socially just and evidence-based practices.

The current study

In sum, people living in poverty are less likely to seek therapeutic help and show fewer improvements when they do (Goodman et al. 2010). Consequently, we believe there is a need to create accessible, inclusive and tailored mental health services, which also pertains to dramatherapy. The current study seeks to review factors that may hinder or facilitate the engagement of people affected by poverty with dramatherapy.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study adopted an instrumental case study design. This type of case study explores a particular area or theory using one or multiple cases as specific examples (Stake 1995). Notably, it is not seeking generalizability but rather intends to aid understanding of a specific topic of interest. This case study was based on a larger qualitative study that sought to develop a dramatherapeutic intervention with and for individuals in poverty (Habaal 2023). The two presented cases were chosen to illustrate barriers and facilitators of dramatherapy as they are perceived by individuals affected by poverty.

Setting and recruitment

Participants for the original study were recruited following a purposive sampling approach with the help of an organization working in the social sector with people affected by poverty. Participants first completed an online survey, which informed about the study and screened participants via the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) questionnaire (Eurostat 2021). This questionnaire determines material deprivation based on a household's inability to afford basic commodities or living expenses. To be invited for

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an interview, participants had to meet at least three of the nine criteria of deprivation. All participants invited for an interview received €15 as compensation for their time. Participants were not known to the researchers.

Data selection

Two participants were selected for this instrumental case study. The participants were chosen as they, at the time of the interview, were currently affected by poverty and, as such, were most ideally placed for this study. Both participants described being in a state of poverty for multiple years, beginning before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. To protect anonymity, a pseudonym was chosen, and participants' ages were each changed by ± 2 years.

Data collection

Following the online screening, eligible participants were invited for an in-person interview with the first author. The interview followed a semi-structured schedule that included the following topics: (1) general biography and experiences of poverty; (2) coping with poverty; (3) barriers and (4) facilitators of dramatherapy. To explore participants' perceptions of dramatherapy, they were shown exemplary pictures and given a complementary description of possible aspects of dramatherapy (see Figure 1). The interviews were conducted between June and August 2023 and lasted between 23 and 36 minutes ($M = 30$ minutes).



Figure 1: Exemplary pictures of dramatherapy used during the interviews. Courtesy of Petkovic, Fizkes and Yuri, Shutterstock.

Data analysis

Each interview was transcribed following the conventions of Dresing et al. (2015). Subsequently, following the process of qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2022), the transcripts were read and reread to locate all statements regarding participants' current life circumstances, coping strategies, and barriers and facilitators of a potential dramatherapy support programme. These extracts were further analysed via thematic and frequency analysis. For the current study, a descriptive narrative of each selected case was prepared based on this initial analysis following a qualitative descriptive approach (Sandelowski 2010). This approach seeks an exploration of a specific topic of investigation not guided by a specific theory or higher-order interpretation. As such, it lends itself to investigating areas with little prior research and was deemed suitable to the goals of the current study.

Reflexivity

The initial analysis was conducted by the first author (Yasmin Habaal [YH]). She identifies as a cisgender female with a BIPOC background. The case descriptions of the current study were initially prepared by the second author (Tobias Constien [TC]), with consultation and feedback from the first author. TC identifies as a white, cisgender male, German dramatherapy researcher.

RESULTS

Daniel

Daniel, male, is a white 60-year-old German who now works in a community employment scheme for €1.50 an hour at a social institution in a large town in southern Germany. At the time of the interview, he met seven out of the nine criteria of the EU-SILC questionnaire, denoting severe material deprivation. He describes his experience of poverty beginning in early 2020 with him losing his place of work and his mother dying. The latter loss, in particular, led him into a 'deep hole', i.e. emotional difficulties, which prolonged his period of unemployment. His situation was further exacerbated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The resulting consecutive lockdowns and social restrictions, he describes, 'pushed [him] into isolation' and kept him in poverty.

He describes his salary and benefits as not matching the rising inflation and cost of living, which essentially keep him locked in a state of poverty. For example, he depicts his current situation: 'I'm still struggling to get by financially and I keep hoping that my situation will improve, but uh, at the moment it seems very unlikely'. Consequently, he is very aware of his daily expenses and tries to spend as little as possible. In his free time, he likes to go to the library but otherwise seeks to limit his activities in the interest of saving money. Overall, he describes feelings of helplessness, isolation and being 'slowed down' by his circumstances. To exemplify this situation, he describes:

Sometimes I go a whole day without eating, for example, just really try to stay as quiet as possible in the apartment all day so that I wouldn't spend any money, so I can buy things again the next day. Those are the kinds of situations where from the outside it looks like 'Yeah, he's doing nothing!' but, well, there's nothing you can do.

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Table 2: Facilitators and barriers of dramatherapy in the case of Daniel.

Case	Facilitators	Barriers
Daniel	Social experiences -To connect with other people -To do something together -To support each other	Social experiences -Not getting along with others -Financial cost -Practical difficulties -Time constraints -Getting there via public transport -Sweating through clothes
Bianca	Social experiences -To learn from others -An effective group leader -Distraction from daily struggles	-Physical fitness -Financial cost

Daniel would be open to participating in dramatherapy, noting that he had been in psychotherapy before. In terms of facilitators and barriers (see Table 2), he mentioned connecting and doing something worthwhile with other people as advantageous. Moreover, he raised the potential of people with similar experiences coming together to support each other. However, he also mentions group aspects as potentially limiting his participation, saying that he might not get along with other participants. Moreover, he mentioned financial costs and practical concerns as potential barriers. First, due to the responsibilities of his current job, he says he would need the programme to be outside of work hours, most preferably in the early hours of the evening. Secondly, he states that the programme would need to be easily accessible via public transport. Lastly, he notes the potential of sweating through his clothes and describes the cost of washing his clothes at a laundromat as a constant worry in his life and, in turn, a potential barrier to his participation.

Bianca

Bianca, female, is a white, 53-year-old German who, similarly to Daniel, now works at a social institution in a community employment scheme in a large town in southern Germany. At the time of the interview, she met four out of the nine criteria of the EU-SILC questionnaire, denoting severe material deprivation. She described slipping into poverty in 2015 after being diagnosed unfit to work for health reasons. She has been suffering from several health-related issues that have progressively gotten worse over the years. Among others, she was diagnosed with fibromyalgia, which she describes as ‘pain in my whole body with every movement’. Since losing her job, she has been unable to take on full-time work, citing her ‘physical inadequacies, which – I have to say – always throw a wrench in the works’. Consequently, her physical disabilities are a major aspect of her perspective on poverty, which she defines as the inability ‘to take care of your health, just because it is too expensive’.

Aside from physical concern, she notes financial worries, saying that her current income and unemployment benefits are inadequate. ‘The money is gone, yet there is a whole lot of the month left’. She cites feelings of helplessness and ‘being at other people’s mercy’ as prominent experiences of poverty. To cope, she describes that it is important for her just ‘to do things’, which

helps to not feel helpless, yet she notes that her physical difficulties often challenge her activities. Nonetheless, she rejects describing herself as depressed, citing her energy and willpower as being enough to get her out of any hole. Yet, when discussing potential treatment goals when talking about drama-therapy, she notes ‘acceptance of depression’ as one of her main objectives.

She says she would be interested in participating in dramatherapy, describing it as ‘something for me’. Specifically, she would like to use dramatherapy to work on expressing difficult emotions, such as sadness or anger, but also simply as a distraction from her daily struggles. She notes participating in psychotherapy before and describes her experience as helpful. As main barriers, she names her physical challenges and worries that her body would not let her participate in certain required activities, such as standing for a long period or lying on the floor. Moreover, she worries about the financial cost, noting that she ‘would never have been able to afford some things without help from others’. Nonetheless, she would like to participate in dramatherapy, noting the potential to learn from each other how to cope with poverty. Accordingly, she would like to be in a group of people with similar experiences. In this regard, she also notes the importance of a group leader who can effectively guide the group.

DISCUSSION

The current instrumental case study sought to explore two cases of individuals affected by poverty, Bianca and Daniel, and their perception of barriers and facilitators to participating in a dramatherapy support group. Both Daniel and Bianca describe being pushed into poverty initially by extraneous circumstances, i.e. the death of a mother, prolonged periods of illness, the consequences of the pandemic and difficulties in coping with their current situation. They are open to participating in dramatherapy, noting several facilitating aspects, yet also note barriers that could limit their participation.

The case descriptions demonstrate significant overlap with current literature on poverty as a multifaceted concept (Krebs 2022). For example, both Daniel and Bianca describe financial limitations leading to material, social and ultimately physical or mental deprivation. Accordingly, both participants note emotional and social challenges, such as feeling isolated, helpless or powerless, reflecting the negative correlation between poverty and mental well-being consistently reported in extant literature (Goodman et al. 2010; Campbell and Selby-Nelson 2020; Reiss 2013). Issues such as poverty and class are inherent social determinants of mental health and consequently ought to be acknowledged within the therapeutic space as well (Dokter and Sajani 2023). Overall, this demonstrates a need to engage with clients’ lived experiences outside the therapeutic space while being mindful of not pathologizing class or other identity markers (Mayor and Williams 2024; Dokter and Sajani 2023). It is therefore recommended to centre interventions in the present (i.e. the here and now), keeping in mind that it is not poverty itself that can be treated by dramatherapy but its negative mental health consequences.

Although rather homogenous in their experience of poverty, both cases differ in the perceived barriers to dramatherapy. While practical concerns, such as difficulties commuting, are dominant for Daniel, Bianca names physical fitness as her main concern. Moreover, Daniel notes public transportation or sweating through his clothes as a potential barrier to participation. Financial costs are a worry for both participants, which is noteworthy given that the dramatherapy programme was described as free or without cost in the

interview schedule. Yet, participants described additional cost-inducing factors (e.g. public transport, need for clothes to be washed, etc.) that pose significant barriers to their participation. These aspects might not be immediately apparent when planning dramatherapy, yet evidently they can influence participation rates. Overall, these findings highlight strategies of outreach, tailoring and flexibility in the therapeutic process (Santiago et al. 2013; Constien et al. 2024) and challenge uniform approaches.

Both participants expressed a desire to engage in shared experiences with individuals from similar backgrounds, recognizing the potential for mutual support and learning. This fits well with prior research, which highlights interdependence within lower-class communities and resulting social and emotional strengths (Kraus et al. 2011; Manstead 2018). It also indicates that group therapy approaches may be ideally suited for this specific target group. However, it also shows that both participants would like to centre their experiences of poverty within the therapeutic space. This is notable, as previous research has shown that, specifically, issues around class and poverty have often remained unacknowledged within dramatherapeutic practice (Dokter and Sajjani 2023). Overall, these results encourage dramatherapists to openly discuss poverty and its multifaceted impacts with their clients.

Lastly, the concept of resilience has not been exhaustively addressed within this case study and warrants further exploration. The two participants identified resources that helped them in coping with their current circumstances (e.g. library, strong willpower), reflecting previous research that showed people affected by poverty to be able to muster incredible resiliency, specifically social cohesion and support, in the face of various stressors caused by poverty (Vandsburger et al. 2008; Beasley et al. 2022; Mhongera and Lombard 2020). In the context of dramatherapy, the resilience model BASIC Ph by Ayalon and Lahad (Lahad 2017) has been widely discussed and effectively used in research (e.g. Haba-Ashkenazi et al. 2023; Carpenter 2020). Future studies could use this theoretical model to guide further inquiries within the context of poverty and develop dramatherapy interventions specifically tailored to the participants' resources and their underdeveloped resilience strategies.

Limitations

The original study on which this case study is based was designed as a prospective, qualitative exploration and development of a dramatherapy support group tailored to the needs of people affected by poverty with a specific focus on existing coping strategies (Habaal 2023). As such, it did not recruit current clients of dramatherapy. Furthermore, it should be noted that the identified facilitators (i.e. social experiences, distraction) were not necessarily specific to dramatherapy but could be applicable to any group experience. This may be due to the unfamiliarity of participants with dramatherapy specifically or arts-based approaches in general. Relatedly, participants only viewed pictures of dramatherapy during the interview process. Further investigations that include personal experiences of dramatherapy are needed to allow for clarification on facilitators specific to dramatherapy. Secondly, with only a sample size of $N = 2$, this study cannot claim transferability (Stake 1995). Nonetheless, it provides an initial exploration of the topic of poverty and dramatherapy and indicates further research opportunities. For example, given its sample size, this study fails to comprehensively reflect on the issue of intersectionality. Ethnicity, age or gender, for example, potentially contribute to the aggravation

and marginalization of individuals affected by poverty. However, this study is precluded from examining issues of intersectionality due to its sample size. This necessarily limits the current study and invites further research. Moreover, future studies could explore dramatherapists' perspectives of working with clients affected by poverty (e.g. Ballo and Tribe 2023) or review dramatherapy interventions directed at people living in poverty (e.g. Appio et al. 2013), taking into account a wider variety of perspectives.

CONCLUSION

Poverty is a complex, socio-economic phenomenon, which is inherently associated with affected individuals' mental well-being. Its prevalence has been increasing globally, indicating a need for political, economic and also psychosocial intervention. The two reviewed cases indicate that dramatherapy may be a feasible and suitable source of support for affected individuals. Interventions that target social cohesion, emotional expression and creativity but are also considering potential barriers to participation are recommended. Importantly, this study shows the complexity of poverty and its impact not only on mental health but also on the provision of mental health support. This study sought to provide an initial exploration of this topic within the context of dramatherapy, yet also invites further research.

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ETHICAL STATEMENT

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee at the Nürtingen-Geislingen University (23 C 27F104 W) and informed consent was ensured.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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