



Application of Yishu Psychodrama in Individual and Family Therapy

Lianghong Zhong

Dr. Zhong Psychological Counseling Center, Changsha 410114, Hunan, China.

How to cite this paper: Lianghong Zhong. (2025). Application of Yishu Psychodrama in Individual and Family Therapy. *Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Studies*, 1(1), 19-24.
DOI: 10.26855/jpbs.2025.06.004

Received: January 3, 2025

Accepted: January 24, 2025

Published: February 14, 2025

***Corresponding author:** Lianghong Zhong, Dr. Zhong Psychological Counseling Center, Changsha 410114, Hunan, China.

Abstract

People who have participated in Psychodrama groups and/or received individual case or family therapy in the form of psychodrama would agree that Psychodrama is an efficient way to help people. Psychodrama emphasizes the principle of action, so the director often says, "you don't have to say it, just do it please". Two goals can be achieved through the here-and-now actions: 1) it allows the protagonist to re-experience the stuck past and reinterpret the meaning of past events in order to gain new insights; 2) it also allows 'intuitively happening' of the events that currently trouble the protagonist when they have not happened. Therefore, the fuzzy, chaotic or imagined scenes can be clarified and new life energy can also be found and created. Guided by the core philosophy of Yi Shu Psychodrama and incorporating traditional Chinese culture, this paper carries out a large number of one-to-one cases and family therapy practice, which provides strong practical guidance.

Keywords

Yishu psychodrama; philosophical thought; case study; family therapy

1. Summary of examples of Yishu psychodrama in case and family therapy

1.1 Application in unfinished business cases

A female protagonist who is always angry and has a very fast pace often suffers from inexplicable chest tightness and heartache. She can even clearly hear her own heartbeat. She is extremely uncomfortable and the hospital cannot find any organic problems, so she seeks help. Through the empty chair technique, it is discovered that the protagonist's mother died in a car accident when she was in the third year of junior high school. However, because she was boarding and the high school entrance examination was approaching, her family concealed the news of her mother's death in order not to affect her studies. As a result, the protagonist has long buried her unexpressed love and guilt for her mother who unfortunately passed away. In the play, the protagonist's body reacted very strongly, and her hands and feet were numb and unable to move. Through the Yishu psychological drama with added reality scenes, the protagonist expressed her deep love for her mother and the guilt of not saying goodbye. Through the psychological drama, the protagonist realized the wish that could not be realized in reality. After the end of the play, the case was followed up for two years, and the protagonist reported that the symptoms were basically gone.

1.2 Special cases using "imagery"

For disabled friends, patients after surgery, and other cases where it is not suitable to move to a different position for role exchange or it is difficult for them to enter a role, the "image" method is generally used to carry out Yishu psychological drama. Below I will explain the specific approach through examples:

The protagonist is a polio patient who can only walk with crutches. After accidentally falling and getting injured,

she had to rely on a wheelchair. She was unwilling to accept this cruel fact and was depressed for a while. In the play, we entered her picture through imagery - "an injured bear in the desert". First, the protagonist "looked inward" at the injured bear, expressed her feelings about the "bear" (sadness) and the feelings of the feelings (guilt for not taking good care of the bear), expressed her needs and desires, etc. I used the five questions of Dr. Gong Hong, the founder of Yishu Psychological Drama, "I feel, I am afraid, I need, don't think I, I secretly desire..." to collect information and make a more accurate assessment.

After confirming the previous information, the protagonist exchanges roles with the "bear" in his heart, collects the "bear's" feelings (tiredness and pain) and the feelings of the "bear" (loneliness), needs and desires (need for help, desire to get out of the desert, find water, etc., bring out self-care), and then completes the role exchange in his heart, completing meaningful actions in the image. This process shows the protagonist's ability and the meaning of life. In the end, the protagonist and the "bear" embrace, achieving reconciliation and energy integration between the protagonist and the inner self.

In the play, the injured bear is used to connect with the protagonist's reality. At this moment in the performance, the protagonist is willing to accept and help the "injured bear". At the end of the play, the protagonist said that he was very happy and accepted the reality of having a wheelchair for life. After that, the protagonist named the wheelchairs "Starlight No. 1" and "Starlight No. 2" respectively. Finally, the protagonist expressed his gains and new insights as a sharing session. Of course, my assistant and I will also share what we see from different perspectives in due course. Since the protagonist is a psychologist and has many years of experience in psychological drama learning, we have added a professional review session to this play.

1.3 Application in cases of "sexual trauma"

When the 30-year-old heroine was 6 years old, she played sex games with her cousin. When her grandmother saw them, she scolded her and said she was shameless and an indecent girl. As she grew older, she thought she had met true love, but she would "run away" whenever her boyfriend touched her body. A voice flashed in her mind: "You are an impure girl." As she got older, the heroine fell into deep distress and sought help after a friend recommended it.

In the play, the protagonist chose cloths of different colors to represent grandma and cousin, placed them on two chairs respectively, and chose a rag doll as his stand-in. When the protagonist switched roles to the "grandma", I used the confrontation technique to help the protagonist express his emotions more deeply. The protagonist sincerely apologized to the "granddaughter" (rag doll) in the role of "grandma"; the protagonist also expressed uneasiness and apology in the role of cousin (note that in this case, it was the grandmother's words and deeds that caused harm to the protagonist. If it is a targeted trauma case, in order to avoid causing secondary harm to the protagonist, the protagonist cannot switch roles to the opposite corner).

According to the principles of Yishu psychological drama, such as expressing gratitude, apologizing, expressing love, expressing gratitude, and saying goodbye, the protagonist said goodbye to the past. The protagonist gently picked up the doll that represented his childhood self, and said to "himself" (the doll) with tears in his eyes: "I'm sorry that I took so long to come to you, I'm sorry that you suffered, I want to tell you loudly today that when I was a child, I just played games and didn't understand these things. You are the purest person in the world." In order to strengthen the protagonist's cognition that he is pure, I asked the protagonist to repeat what he said to the "doll that represents himself": "You are pure, you are pure..." When the protagonist returned to his own role, he repeatedly said "I am pure".

Although the above-mentioned personal psychological dramas are dialogues between the protagonist and the inner object, and what is presented is also the protagonist's inner imagination or struggle, the protagonist is in a state beyond reality and truly expresses the feelings and wishes he wants to express, as if they have really been realized. Blimkvist, Moreno, and Rutzel (2000) once said that additional reality is one of the most important, healing and mysterious elements in psychological drama. Because some new concepts are generated, it is like injecting new light, illuminating people's new hope for life, and then passing it down.

In addition, Yishu psychodrama is used to deal with many cases such as the unspeakable emotions and pressures of homosexuals, leaders and business owners. When using Yishu psychodrama to conduct individual cases, any safe objects on the scene can be given special meanings and special roles, such as cups, mobile phones, books, puppets, dolls, colorful scarves, etc.

1.4 Family therapy for children's test anxiety

The protagonist is a family of three - father, mother and son. The son who attends a key middle school has severe "exam anxiety". As the number of exams in the second year of high school increases, his symptoms worsen. He becomes nervous and sweats during exams, and suffers from insomnia, which has seriously affected his daily life and study. He came to seek help after being recommended by a school teacher.

According to the action principle of Yishu psychological drama, we materialized the son's anxiety into a specific role, and used the method of time travel to go deeper into the feelings of the role, and explored a joke made by his parents when his son was in kindergarten: "Son, if you can't make the top three in your studies, your parents will not want you. We will bring the kid next door home to be our child, and you go pick up trash."

From then on, the belief that "if you don't study well, you will be abandoned" was planted in the little boy's heart since kindergarten. He was a little nervous for small exams and very nervous for big exams. When performing a play, my son chose a puppet to represent himself in kindergarten (out of the principle of protecting the protagonist, the protagonist is generally not allowed to enter the traumatic scene of the past to avoid secondary trauma). In the circle of voices saying "If you don't do well in the exam, your parents will not want you anymore", he invited both parents to enter the role of his son to feel it, and the teaching assistant played the voice substitute of the protagonist..." In this process, the parents felt the huge impact of a small "joke" on the young mind, because a three-year-old child could not tell whether it was a joke or reality.

When the main causes of his son's anxiety and nervousness in the exam were presented one by one, the parents apologized to him again and reconstructed his inner experience in family therapy. Afterwards, the role exchange was used again, and the son entered the role of his parents, confirming that no matter how his grades were, his parents' love for him was not affected at all, and that his parents cared more about his physical and mental health and happiness. The pure love between family members was connected from then on. After several consecutive family treatments, the son's test anxiety and somatization symptoms gradually disappeared. In the second year's college entrance examination, he was admitted to his ideal university with a score of more than 80 points higher than the first-class score.

In recent years, more than 200 cases of family therapy have been conducted using Yishu psychodrama. When conducting family therapy, the intuitive and action-oriented approach of Yishu psychodrama can effectively enable each other to reflect deeply, correct irrational beliefs of family members, and better aggregate family energy and connect family emotions.

1.5 Family therapy for fear of death

Ms. Lin is a terminal cancer patient. For a long time, she has been wondering where she will go after she dies. She can't figure it out. The more she thinks about it, the more scared she becomes. Her family is unwilling to discuss this topic. When the word death is mentioned, the family members cry. The protagonist is very upset. The word "death" has become a taboo in the family. The family found me through the doctor's recommendation.

The play started with a positive topic asking Ms. Lin who could help her. The protagonist said "Guanyin" without hesitation. So, an additional reality scene started in the ward. Ms. Lin told Guanyin about her fear of death and her concern and reluctance for her family. Then, Ms. Lin entered the role of Guanyin and used the protagonist's clothes to represent the stand-in. "Guanyin" said: You have suffered a lot and paid a lot for your family. You have done what you can. Your children are doing well and they care about you very much... When the time comes, I will take you to the Western Paradise, where there is no disease, loneliness and solitude... That is the place you like. After saying this, she wanted to hug the stand-in (wrapping a pillow with clothes)... After that work, Ms. Lin overcame her fear of death.

A week later, family work based on psychodrama elements was carried out in the ward. All of Ms. Lin's family members participated. The content focused on the emotional connection and expression of the family. First, the family members were invited to express their gratitude and appreciation to Ms. Lin one by one. Due to Ms. Lin's physical considerations, the family members became Ms. Lin's stand-ins. If the content was in line with Ms. Lin's inner thoughts, they would nod, and other members could participate and supplement at any time.

Through positive expression, a safe and warm environment was established in the ward, and the topic of death, which was taboo for the family, was gradually discussed. First, the family was asked to talk about where Ms. Lin might go if she passed away: heaven, a beautiful woman, a fairy... Ms. Lin was always smiling during the relaxed and free speech; then, the family was asked to express their future plans for life and work, so as to reassure Ms. Lin;

finally, the whole family discussed the farewell method the protagonist hoped for, thus breaking the taboo topic in this family.

Thanks to this family work, the whole family overcame their fear of death. More than 20 days later, Ms. Lin passed away peacefully. Her family reported that she had again made plans for her afterlife a few days before her death. The whole family accompanied Ms. Lin peacefully through the last years of her life, avoiding the regrets of the whole family due to fear and fear of communication.

2. Common techniques and methods for using Yishu psychodrama to conduct case or family therapy

Role exchange, role playing, scenery, empty chairs, catharsis and integration of emotions, love supplementation, sculpture, monologue, transcendence of reality, embodiment, meditation, stand-in/multiple stand-ins, painting, imagery, positive empathy, sociometry, etc.

3. The scope of the content of Yishu psychodrama in case or family therapy is shown in Table 1

Table 1. The scope of content of Yishu psychodrama applied in case or family therapy

Sexual trauma	Bullying in school	Domestic violence, etc.
Confused	Damaged parent-child relationship	Marital confusion/extramarital affair
Test anxiety, etc.	Unfinished business or the sadness, guilt, etc. that comes with it	
Substance addiction such as alcohol, game addiction, etc.	Psychological trauma caused by special experiences/events	
Issues of loss and the meaning of life, etc.	other	

4. Important principles for applying Yishu psychodrama in individual or family therapy

- (1) Confidentiality rules, safety rules and other matters that need to be agreed upon must be clearly stated at the beginning and end.
- (2) Let every participant understand the work process and methods of Yishu psychological drama.
- (3) Warm-up needs to be more thorough and should be carried out throughout the whole process.
- (4) In terms of performance rhythm, it is necessary to synchronize with the individual or family, and not drag them along. First find the motivation source, and then enter safely.
- (5) The key point is for the protagonist or family members to regain better spontaneity and take responsibility for themselves.
- (6) Regardless of whether the exploration is about the past or the future, the performance should be in the here and now.
- (7) The process should be performed in the form of actions, and must not be conducted in the form of "storytelling".
- (8) The director must maintain consistency and adhere to the principles of objectivity, sincerity, acceptance and empathy.
- (9) The sharing principle is the same as group courses. Participants can share their gains and new insights.

5. Conclusion

Yishu psychodrama is a form of group counseling but is not limited to group counseling. According to the author's many years of clinical experience, it is also effective for individual or family therapy:

First of all, Yishu psychological drama will follow the three processes of "warm-up, performance, and sharing" to start the work. Warm-up will always run through a psychological drama. Warm-up is enough to make the case and family participate more spontaneously and benefit them more in a safe environment and atmosphere; the drama will assess whether the case and family are physically and mentally prepared and start with good spontaneity; the sharing stage will invite participants to speak after the drama, such as what have they learned? What have they realized?

What new decisions have they made, etc.!

Second, the issues being dealt with are brought to the "here and now". Whether the issues being dealt with by Yishu Psychodrama are in the past, present or future, whether they have happened, are about to happen or will not happen at all, the issues will be brought to the present moment, that is, from the "past present" to the "present present". In the field function of Yishu Psychodrama, the protagonist will have painful memories and gain a "real psychological feeling" of being protected, valued, cared for, accepted and supported at the present moment. The brand-new feelings exist in the objective reality experience, and this experience is re-encoded into the memory system of life.

Third, Yishu psychological drama emphasizes action and concreteness. Psychologists with a psychological drama orientation emphasize action and concreteness from the beginning of the warm-up. It is not about whether the question-and-answer method is clear or vague. Generally speaking, the psychological drama director will say "please do it". This action-oriented method can easily bring the protagonist into the multi-dimensional space of life. The protagonist creates a "new reality" in an action-oriented way, perceives "new experiences", and produces "new insights". This intuitive method makes consultation more effective, and it is easier for the protagonist to make adjustments in cognition and make real changes in real actions.

Fourth, apply traditional Chinese culture to individual and family therapy. Based on the holistic view and Qi theory model of Huangdi Neijing, adjust the individual and family as a whole. Huangdi Neijing says that "all diseases are caused by Qi". In the play, the theory of mutual generation and mutual restraint and first release and then supplement is used to make the protagonist express emotions reasonably, and to use supplement love to achieve the part where the protagonist is stuck. In addition, the core concept of *Tao Te Ching* that "man follows the earth, the earth follows the sky, the sky follows the Tao, and the Tao follows nature" has a profound impact on individual and family therapy. The theory of "nature and harmony" contained in it has a good guiding significance for the participants' cognition and behavior changes. The "Book of Changes" says "One yin and one yang are called Tao". Lao Tzu's Tao is the unity of yin and yang. This Tao is composed of an invisible "nothing" and a visible "something", forming the idea that "all things in the world are born from something, and something is born from nothing". These ideas can guide me to use them in the Yijing psychological drama, empathize with the protagonist's feelings of "existence or non-existence", and then use the psychological drama techniques to repair the self-relationship and the relationship between me and others.

Fifth, the boundary that the director must maintain is to clearly understand his own role. When conducting case or family therapy, there are some special roles that may need to be played by the director. The director needs to switch roles in a timely manner to avoid hindering the positive flow of the counseling relationship, and more importantly, avoid allowing the protagonist to empathize, destroy the counseling relationship, affect the counseling effect, and cause harm to the protagonist. Psychologists who prefer psychodrama need to receive systematic professional training in psychodrama to ensure that the director's self-growth and professional growth continue to improve, so that psychodrama can become a tool to help more people achieve a better life.

References

- Blatner, A. (2004). *Introduction to psychodrama: History, theory and practice* (Zhang, G., Chen, J., Lin, C., et al., Trans.). Psychology Press. (Original work published 2004)
- Gong, T. (2007). *Yi Shu: The integration of traditional Chinese medicine, psychodrama and creative arts* (Xu, J., Zhang, L., Tu, R., et al., Trans.). Psychology Press. (Original work published 2007)
- Kellermann, P. F. (2007). *Psychodrama and trauma therapy* (Chen, X., Li, Y., & Hong, Q., Trans.). Higher Education Press. (Original work published 2007)
- Knittel, M. G. (2012). *The application of psychodrama in case and family therapy* (Chen, X., Lin, S., & Liang, J., Trans.). Psychology Press. (Original work published 2012)
- Laozi. (2017). *Tao Te Ching* (Cao, Y., Comp.). China Textile Press. (Original work published ancient times)
- Minuchin, S. (2009). *Family and family therapy* (Xie, X., Trans.). Commercial Press. (Original work published 2009)
- Sang, Z., & Huang, H. (2015). A historical study on the spread and development of psychological drama in mainland China. In *30th Anniversary of the Founding of the Chinese Mental Health Association and the 8th National Mental Health Academic Conference* [Conference report].

- Wang, X., & Zheng, Y. (1994). *Stage of the soul: Local experience of psychological drama*. Zhang Laoshi Cultural Enterprise Co., Ltd.
- Zhang, Q. (2008). *Huangdi Neijing*. Guangxi Science and Technology Press.
- Zhong, L. (2017). Application of basic theory of traditional Chinese medicine in practical work of Yishu psychological drama. *Psychologist*, 2017(34), 311-314.