

Psychodrama's Impact on College Students' Empathy and Interpersonal Trust: An Examination Based on Role-Playing Mechanism

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Abstract: Psychodrama, as an experiential group intervention method, holds unique applicative value in college mental health education. From the interdisciplinary perspective of educational psychology and social psychology, this paper systematically explores the impact of psychodrama on college students' empathy and interpersonal trust, as well as its underlying mechanisms. The research finds that psychodrama, with role-playing as its core technique, promotes participants' cognitive perspective transformation and emotional experience deepening through specific means such as role reversal, mirror technique, and doubling. The role-playing mechanism functions primarily through three pathways: role reversal enhances perspective-taking ability, mirror technique deepens self-awareness, and doubling reinforces emotional resonance. Empirical studies show that psychodrama intervention can significantly improve college students' empathy tendency and interpersonal trust level, and also positively affect social development dimensions such as forgiveness ability and mental health. This study provides a theoretical framework for understanding the mechanism of psychodrama and offers empirical evidence for college mental health education practice.

Keywords: Psychodrama; Empathy; Interpersonal Trust; Role-Playing; College Students.

1. Introduction

Empathy and interpersonal trust are core dimensions of individual social development, profoundly influencing college students' interpersonal relationship quality, mental health level, and social adaptation ability. Empathy refers to the ability to understand and share others' emotional states, encompassing both cognitive empathy and affective empathy; interpersonal trust is the psychological state in which individuals hold positive expectations of others' words and actions in interpersonal interactions, serving as a lubricant for establishing and maintaining healthy relationships.

Contemporary college students are in a critical stage of rapid self-awareness development. However, due to the long-term influence of exam-oriented education and digital survival, some students have formed self-centered cognitive patterns, lacking the motivation and ability to think from others' perspectives and understand them empathetically. Research indicates that interpersonal problems among college students are highly prominent among various psychological issues, and insufficient empathy often leads to a lack of interpersonal trust, subsequently triggering a series of interpersonal disturbances such as dormitory conflicts and peer disputes.

Psychodrama, founded by Moreno in the early 20th century, is a group intervention method that combines theatrical performance with psychotherapy. Through core techniques such as role-playing, scene reproduction, and group interaction, psychodrama helps participants explore their inner world, process emotional conflicts, and develop social skills in a safe and supportive environment. In recent years, psychodrama has been increasingly applied in college mental health education in China, with multiple studies confirming its significant effects in enhancing students' mental health and improving interpersonal relationships. Research by Turkish

scholars Parlak and Oksuz [6] shows that psychodrama has rehabilitative effects on participants' forgiveness levels, empathy skills, and family relationships; participants gained awareness and courage to understand their own and others' emotions, increased tolerance for their own and others' mistakes, and strengthened empathy skills.

This paper focuses on the impact of psychodrama on college students' empathy and interpersonal trust, with particular attention to the pathways through which the role-playing mechanism operates, aiming to provide reference for theoretical development and practical innovation in college mental health education.

2. Core Concepts and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Connotation and Technical System of Psychodrama

Psychodrama is an action-based psychotherapy method whose core concept is that "action expresses more than language." Participants externalize their inner conflicts, emotions, and experiences through dramatic forms, gaining new understanding and growth in group interaction. The therapeutic goals of psychodrama include promoting individual mental health through reenactment, cognitive processing, emotional catharsis, and role flexibility training.

The core technical system of psychodrama includes: role-playing, the fundamental technique where participants experience the emotional world and behavioral patterns of specific roles; role reversal, which requires participants to exchange roles and re-examine the same situation from the other's perspective — this is one of psychodrama's most distinctive techniques; mirror technique, where another member imitates the protagonist's behavior, allowing the protagonist to see their own words and actions as if in a mirror,

thereby gaining self-awareness; and doubling, where a member plays the protagonist's inner voice, helping the protagonist express difficult-to-articulate emotions and thoughts.

According to Moreno's role theory, roles are decisive factors in individuals' relationships with others. Through action-oriented psychodrama, individuals can process emotional traces at the bodily level, address emotional and cognitive dimensions of hurtful events on stage, evaluate and adjust fixations in psychodramatic and social roles, and ultimately achieve self-integration and development through processes such as forgiveness [6].

2.2. Connotation and Dimensions of Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand and share others' emotional states, comprising two core dimensions: cognitive empathy and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to recognize and understand others' emotional states—perspective-taking ability; affective empathy refers to the ability to resonate and emotionally respond to others' emotional states.

Research indicates that during psychodrama training, the stronger individuals' cognitive empathy, the clearer their psychological boundaries, but affective empathy cannot be significantly improved in a short time [5]. This suggests that psychodrama's impact on empathy is complex, requiring enhanced cultivation of affective empathy during training. Dogan found in a study of undergraduate counseling students that after 12 weeks of psychodrama group intervention [1], the experimental group's empathy tendency was significantly higher than the control group, and the experimental group's pre-post comparison also showed significant differences.

2.3. Connotation and Measurement of Interpersonal Trust

Interpersonal trust is the psychological state in which individuals hold positive expectations of others' words and actions in interpersonal interactions, serving as a lubricant for interpersonal relationships. Rotter's Interpersonal Trust Scale is widely used to measure individuals' trust in different social roles across various social situations.

Liu Chengdong's master's thesis systematically examined the intervention effect of psychodrama therapy on college students' interpersonal disturbance [3], using the Interpersonal Trust Scale for measurement, and the results showed that psychodrama intervention positively influenced interpersonal trust. Liu Xiao et al. [5] found that participation in "Playback Theatre" experiences served as a protective factor maintaining college students' interpersonal trust level—without training, college students' interpersonal trust significantly decreased as they adapted to college life, while trained students did not show such a decline.

3. Pathways of Role-Playing Mechanism on Empathy

3.1. Role Reversal and Enhancement of Perspective-Taking Ability

Role reversal is one of the core techniques of psychodrama and a key mechanism for enhancing empathy. Through role reversal, participants truly enter another person's role, experiencing their emotional world and cognitive perspective, thereby achieving empathic resonance.

In psychodrama practice, role reversal brings the most authentic emotional experience. When participants authentically reproduce the other's state through body movements, inner monologues, etc., they can tangibly experience the other's feelings, thereby understanding the other and generating empathic resonance. Parlak and Oksuz point out that through role reversal, protagonists play the role of the individual with whom they have conflict [6], experiencing events from that person's perspective, thereby developing the empathy skills necessary for forgiveness. This experiential learning promotes lasting improvement in perspective-taking ability far more than mere didactic instruction.

3.2. Mirror Technique and Deepening of Self-Awareness

The mirror technique involves another member imitating the protagonist's behavior, allowing the protagonist to observe their own words and actions from an outsider's perspective. This technique helps protagonists recognize how others perceive them, indirectly experiencing others' thoughts and feelings.

When participants see their own behavior from an observer's perspective, they can immediately realize that certain expressions may be off-putting, thereby generating motivation for change. Dogan found that psychodrama [1], through techniques such as mirroring, significantly improved undergraduate counseling students' self-awareness and helping skills (where empathy plays a prominent role). This self-awareness is a crucial component of empathy—only by understanding oneself can one truly understand others.

3.3. Doubling and Reinforcement of Emotional Resonance

Doubling involves another member playing the protagonist's inner voice, helping the protagonist express difficult-to-articulate emotions and thoughts. In psychodrama groups, the double allows participants to place themselves in the other's situation, truly empathizing with the other's feelings and expressing the other's emotions.

Through doubling, the empathized person can intuitively feel the other's acceptance and understanding of their emotions, and attempt to provide feedback on this understanding in subsequent interactions. This bidirectional emotional communication process continuously reinforces participants' emotional resonance ability, enabling them to better understand and respond to others' emotional needs in real life. Parlak and Oksuz's qualitative analysis showed that participants gained awareness and courage to understand their own and others' emotions through the psychodrama process [6], and their empathy skills were strengthened.

4. Mechanisms of Psychodrama's Impact on Interpersonal Trust

4.1. Group Atmosphere and Trust Establishment

Psychodrama is conducted in group format, and the group atmosphere itself is crucial for establishing interpersonal trust. Psychodrama groups emphasize a safe, supportive, and accepting atmosphere, which itself serves as a practical field for interpersonal trust.

During psychodrama training, group members gradually

build trust in each other through collaborative creation and performance. Research shows that participation in psychodrama can maintain college students' interpersonal trust levels, preventing significant decline over time [5]. This may be related to the core requirement for participants—they need to enter others' inner worlds, which first requires trusting group members and second requires continuously enhancing their own empathy. Liu Chengdong's intervention study on college students' interpersonal disturbance confirmed that after psychodrama intervention [3], participants' interpersonal trust levels significantly improved.

4.2. The Mediating Role of Psychological Boundaries

Psychological boundaries refer to the psychological distinction individuals make between self and others, and their clarity is closely related to empathy and interpersonal trust. Research has found that psychological boundaries fully mediate the relationship between basic empathy and trust in parents: after psychodrama training, individuals' basic empathy positively predicts psychological boundaries, while psychological boundaries negatively predict trust in parents [5].

This finding reveals the internal mechanism of psychodrama's impact on interpersonal trust—by enhancing empathy, individuals' psychological boundaries become clearer, and this clear boundary sense moderates their trust in others (especially intimate relationship partners). This indicates that psychodrama's effect on interpersonal trust does not occur directly but operates through mediating variables such as empathy and psychological boundaries.

4.3. Forgiveness Ability and Trust Reconstruction

Forgiveness is an important psychological mechanism for establishing and maintaining interpersonal trust. Parlak and Oksuz found that after 16 weeks of psychodrama group intervention [6], the experimental group's scores on "self-forgiveness," "forgiveness of situations," and "total forgiveness" dimensions significantly increased, indicating that psychodrama positively affects the acquisition of "forgiveness flexibility."

Research indicates that forgiveness is an important step in rebuilding trust and intimacy with others. Through psychodrama, hurtful experiences are recreated and enacted in a safe environment, achieving cognitive reprocessing through reenactment and providing new understanding of participants' experiences. Participants' qualitative feedback showed that psychodrama helped them confront their emotions, increased tolerance for their own and others' mistakes, enhanced empathy skills, and generated awareness of the importance of expressing thoughts and emotions [6]. These changes collectively promoted trust reconstruction. Giacomucci et al. also confirmed that psychodrama has significant effects in trauma treatment and relationship repair [2], providing an effective pathway for trust rebuilding.

5. Empirical Evidence

5.1. Intervention Effects on Empathy

Multiple studies confirm that psychodrama can effectively enhance participants' empathy. Dogan used a quasi-experimental design with undergraduate counseling students

[1], with the experimental group receiving 12 weeks of psychodrama intervention (3 hours per week). Results showed that the experimental group's empathy tendency was significantly higher than the control group, and the experimental group's pre-post comparison also showed significant differences. This finding indicates that psychodrama has a positive intervention effect on empathy enhancement.

5.2. Intervention Effects on Interpersonal Trust

The intervention effect of psychodrama on interpersonal trust has also received empirical support. Liu Chengdong's master's thesis systematically examined the effect of psychodrama therapy on college students' interpersonal disturbance [3], using the Interpersonal Trust Scale, and the results showed that psychodrama intervention positively influenced interpersonal trust.

Liu Xiao et al. used a quasi-experimental design and found that vocational college students who participated in "Playback Theatre" training did not show significant decline in interpersonal trust [5], while the control group showed significant decline, indicating that participation in psychodrama is a protective factor maintaining interpersonal trust levels. Giacomucci et al. also found that psychodrama had significant effects in treating PTSD in inpatient substance abuse treatment [2], where trust reconstruction was a key factor in treatment success.

5.3. Promotion of Emotion Regulation and Mental Health

Psychodrama's impact on empathy and trust is also realized through enhanced emotion regulation ability. Psychodrama provides participants with space for emotional catharsis and cognitive restructuring, enabling them to better understand and regulate their own emotions. Liu Chengdong found that psychodrama therapy significantly improved college students' interpersonal disturbance and enhanced mental health levels [3]. Liu Chengdong et al. further confirmed that psychodrama intervention effectively improves college students' interpersonal safety levels [4].

Enhanced emotion regulation ability lays the emotional foundation for the development of empathy and trust. When individuals can effectively regulate their own emotions, they can better attend to and understand others' emotional needs; when individuals experience being understood and accepted in a safe environment, they can establish trust in others.

6. Conclusion and Prospects

Psychodrama, with its unique role-playing technical system, provides an effective intervention pathway for cultivating college students' empathy and interpersonal trust. Core techniques such as role reversal, mirror technique, and doubling promote empathy development through three dimensions — perspective-taking, self-awareness, and emotional resonance, respectively [1]; while a safe and supportive group atmosphere, clear psychological boundaries, and enhanced forgiveness ability create conditions for the establishment and deepening of interpersonal trust [5].

At the theoretical level, this study reveals multiple mechanisms through which psychodrama influences empathy and trust: role reversal enhances perspective-taking ability through cognitive perspective transformation, mirror

technique promotes understanding of others through self-awareness, and doubling reinforces emotional resonance through emotional connection. Psychological boundaries play a mediating role in this process[5], while enhanced forgiveness ability is a key step in trust reconstruction [6].

At the practical level, psychodrama interventions should be systematically designed and implemented in phases. Based on existing empirical evidence, structured group programs of 8-16 weeks are recommended, once weekly, with each session lasting 120-180 minutes. Intervention content should progress gradually from group establishment and basic technique training, to core issue exploration and role-playing practice, and finally to integration and transfer. Creating a supportive group atmosphere is crucial; leaders should help members collectively establish a safe, comfortable, and cohesive atmosphere in the early stages of group formation.

Future research could further explore the differential effects of psychodrama on various groups and types of empathy, as well as comparative effectiveness with other intervention methods. At the same time, the promotion and application of psychodrama in college mental health education should be strengthened, enabling more students to benefit from this experiential and interactive educational approach.

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