

**Exploring the positive and negative experiences of supporting survivors of the Sri Lankan civil war: The 'lived' experiences of Playback Theatre practitioners.**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Clinical

Psychology, University of Newcastle, School of Psychology

December, 2015

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Ethics Reference No: H-2015-0173

## **Declarations**

### **Statement of Originality**

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### **Acknowledgement of Collaboration**

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### **Acknowledgement of Authorship**

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis contains a scholarly work of which I am a joint author. I have included as part of the thesis a written statement, endorsed by my supervisor, attesting to my contribution to the joint scholarly work.

Signed:

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Evelyn Henry

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Date

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Dr Lynne McCormack PhD

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Date

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge and thank those that agreed to be interviewed for this research and the larger Playback Theatre community of Sri Lanka, for putting their trust and opening their world to a group of enthusiastic and generous international Playback Theatre practitioners.

I thank my supervisor, Dr Lynne McCormack, for being so open and supportive of my research topic, for her rich history and experience that has added so much to this work, for her steady positive support that has kept me going, for her honed academic and editing skills and mostly for her dedication to people who put their hand up to be brave in the world and live with the often hidden consequences of posttraumatic stress.

To be believed in is a great thing. I'd like to thank my partner, Kerry, for her ongoing support and love, and to our community of family and friends that just kept saying 'you can do it', and then, along with me, being amazed when I did.

### **Abstract**

#### **Scope:**

This thesis comprises: 1) a critical literature review, and 2) a manuscript prepared for submission to a peer reviewed journal. The literature review provides a historical introduction to Playback Theatre, positions it as a contemporary psychosocial response to communities experiencing war and disaster, reviews research, academic and grey literature, and reviews theories of primary and vicarious trauma, posttraumatic growth, and growth from adversity. The second part of this thesis, the manuscript, is an idiographic phenomenological study that explores the subjective interpretations of western Playback Theatre practitioners using Playback as a psychosocial support in Sri Lanka post-civil war. It seeks both positive and negative interpretations of their 'lived' experiences in this environment supporting local practitioners within the Theatre of Friendship project.

#### **Purpose:**

Playback Theatre, as an audience participatory applied theatre form, is being used increasingly as a psychosocial response to international communities impacted by war, conflict, oppression, and disaster. Though a paucity of research exists on the use of Playback Theatre in these domains, there exists a narrative discourse that offers self-reflective learnings from within the field, with the focus on the aesthetic and audience experience. International Playback Theatre practitioners supporting those impacted by war, conflict, oppression and disaster, are in a unique position to offer their subjective interpretations of this experience. Their perspective brings valuable insight and learning to cross cultural means of engagement with communities facing ongoing challenges in resource poor environments.

### **Methodology:**

Participants were five western adults who taught Playback Theatre as part of the Theatre of Friendship Project in post-civil war Sri Lanka. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) data was collected through semi-structured interviews and transcribed verbatim prior to independent analysis. IPA is an idiographic, hermeneutic, qualitative approach based on phenomenology and interpretative psychology. It aims to capture the idiosyncratic nature of each participant's narrative (Smith, 1996) utilising symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism posits that meaning can only be fully understood through the dynamic process of interpretation generated through the interaction between the researcher and the participant. In this way IPA is described as having a double hermeneutic, as the researcher strives to make sense of the participant striving to make sense of their 'lived' experience (Smith, 1996).

### **Results:**

One superordinate theme, *Humility and hope amongst the rubble*, encompassed five subordinate themes: *Western naivety, the reality stick; The big itch; Expert rejected; A colonial overhang; Humble reciprocity; and Eyes opened/self-reparation*. Actively striving to make sense of and negotiate their expectations versus the reality of teaching Playback Theatre in post war Sri Lanka, these participants interpreted their experiences by oscillating between many pairs of polar positions: war and excitement, good will and naivety, expert and fool, trust and suspicion, giving and receiving, grief and joy. Their initial exuberance which manifested as western naivety and a desire to empathically contribute in the '*rubble of post war*' is juxtaposed by a confrontation with self, for reparation with self. As they rejected their misplaced confidence as the expert, and recognised that altruistic intent was not enough, authenticity, personal integrity and

humility brought reciprocal healing and new ways of communicating. With eyes opened to the possibility of joy, hope, and happiness, improbably reflected in the Sri Lankan response to years of trauma, a new found wisdom, a domain of psychological growth, inspired openness to new ways of relating that continued to unfold, long past their time in Sri Lanka.

**Conclusions:**

In exploring the positive and negative lived experience of teaching Playback in a post-civil war environment, this study identified important aspects from these practitioners' perspective. Importantly, it offered insight into the altruistic intent to help those in need, when that intent is naïve to complex cross culture engagement, the impact of colonial history, the ongoing political environment, and the psychological care and safety of volunteers and recipients. Compelling though humanitarian work can be for some, separating out self needs and others' needs is important to avoid harm. Reflecting on lessons learned and best ways of engaging, then becomes an important post deployment re-evaluation to ensure best practice in supporting those recovering from catastrophic threat.

Although unable to be generalized, these narratives offer a lens into cross cultural use of applied theatre forms. Once these participants were able to overcome early, erroneous expectations, authenticity allowed a coming together of western skills with the perceptiveness of trauma weary Sri Lankans. Playback was the common element but building supportive bridges between cultures necessitated going inwards with self-doubt and finding wisdom, humility and self-reparation for reciprocal healing. The assumption that experiencing war defines one group as needy initially inhibited cohesion. Without redefining altruism and reconnecting with the neutrality of Playback, these practitioners

may not have recognised the reciprocal neediness that became the leveler and ultimately the conduit for healing.

Currently there is no evidence based research that speaks to the efficacy of Playback Theatre for psychosocial healing post war/disaster. Much research is needed, as anecdotally, theatre art forms intersect with diversity irrespective of language, culture, and infrastructure. What this study shows is that western good intent for supporting trauma survivors is not enough alone, when working in diversely different cultures. Despite all practitioners having extensive Playback expertise, their lived experience of teaching in Sri Lanka varied greatly. If it is to be an art form for healing, Playback Theatre is dependent on its teachers, their skill and their ability to reflect on their own process, open to the needs of their students and understand the overarching psychosocial, political and cultural environments operating. Future research, clinical implications, and questions relating to regulation and support within the wider international Playback Theatre community, are discussed.

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