

# Dismantling violent forms of masculinity through developmental transformations

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## Introduction

Violent forms of masculinity have profound and negative influences upon child development, social institutions, and the cultural environment at large. Childhood abuse, domestic violence, crime, imprisonment, and domination in all its appearances are closely linked to violent acts committed by men or in the name of masculinity. In addition to treating victims of such violence, health professionals must develop effective means of treating the perpetrators of violence. Therefore, the creative arts therapies must articulate conceptual and methodological strategies toward this end, based presumably on the antithetical relationship between art and play, on the one hand, and violence and hatred, on the other.

This article is an exploration of the possible moral influences of one form of drama therapy upon violent forms of masculinity. Developmental Transformations is a method of drama therapy that is based on the concept of the “playspace,” in which therapist and client agree to play together in the world of the imagination (Johnson, 1991; Johnson, Forrester, Dintino, James, & Schnee, 1996). The playspace is a condition where cause and effect are represented, not actualized, where the consequences of one’s actions are suffered in pretend, not reality. The playspace is considered to be therapeutic because it involves the embodied enactment of imagined possibilities in relationship to the actions and presences of others and the experiencing of imag-

ined consequences. Because of space constraints, no further explanation of Developmental Transformations will be provided in this paper, but readers not familiar with this method of drama therapy are referred to Johnson (1991; 2000) and Johnson et al. (1996). The playspace in Developmental Transformations may be an ideal therapeutic laboratory for change to occur because the playspace’s “embodied encounter” involves an interaction between subjective and objective experiences of the body. The therapist in Developmental Transformations models the body as both object and agent, offering him or herself as a “playobject” for clients, sometimes being an object of the clients’ actions, other times initiating actions, interpretations, resistance, and transformations (Johnson et al., 1996). The fact that participants in the playspace are agents and objects within an imaginative world heightens the awareness that they are choosing their actions and the meaning of those actions from multiple possibilities in each moment. The playspace is a “moral space” because of the *constraint against harm* that is inherent in playing within the imaginal realm as opposed to acting out in reality (Johnson, 1998). It may be that a male client with a history of violence who actively represents acts of violence within the imaginative conditions of the playspace will experience less of an impulse to commit acts of violence in the real world outside of the playspace. If so, then the therapeutic playspace may offer a way to reduce men’s violent behavior.

## Violence

Departing from transcendent explanations of violence between human beings as originating from an angry or malicious god, Satan, or a Platonic ideal, the

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17th Century philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1677/1994) defined a body as a characteristic relation of the motion and rest of its various parts, and violence as a decomposing of that characteristic relation by another body (Deleuze, 1981/1988). In this immanent perspective, because any act may be said to disrupt some relations while adding to others, whether or not an act is violent depends on one's frame of reference (Deleuze, 1981/1988). Also proposing that morality depends on the perspective of the beholder, Friedrich Nietzsche (1887/1998) in the late 19th Century theorized violence as a manifestation of a universal Will to Power and denounced attempts to moralize or hold individuals responsible for acts of violence. Essentially restating Nietzsche's concept of the Will to Power within the field of psychology, Sigmund Freud (1923/1961a) characterized the ego as having to defend itself from, on one side, the "murderous id" and, on the other, the "punishing conscience," or super-ego, which attacks the ego all the more aggressively the more the ego suppresses the aggressive impulses of the id (p. 53). Echoing Nietzsche, Freud (1923/1961a) noted the "harshly restraining, cruelly prohibiting quality" of morality (p. 54). Freud theorized an "inclination to aggression" that he called Thanatos, a destructive drive that he saw as opposed to a creative drive, Eros (Freud, 1930/1961b, p. 122). In Freud's perspective there is no way to rid the world of violence. The best that can be hoped for is to adjust to the metaphorical equivalent of a military occupation:

Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city (Freud, 1930/1961b, pp. 123–124).

Physical anthropologists also rely on the idea of a drive or instinct in their theory that aggression is a natural product of human evolution (Ardrey, 1961; Lorenz, 1966). This drive has not been shown to exist independently of social conditions or necessarily to be destructive (Adams et al., 1992; Fromm, 1973). Social psychologists bring in the missing social factors (Eron, Walder, & Lefkowitz, 1971), demonstrating people's willingness to obey commands to inflict pain on others, especially when those others are at a distance (Milgram, 1974), and their tendency to behave violently when encouraged to do so by social roles that include power over others (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1984). Social psychologists of the social learning school emphasize that violence is learned by children through imitation (Bandura, 1973) and that the media teaches violent behaviors (Huesmann & Eron, 1986). Yet another theory proposes that violence results from a particular sequence of emotions: Shame is triggered but not acknowl-

edged or resolved, the shame leads to rage, and the rage leads to violence. Considering shame to be destructive only when it is suppressed and the denial of shame to be institutionalized in modern societies, the authors integrate social structure and individual personality in their theory of violence (Retzinger & Scheff, 1991).

Some psychologists have studied the internal mechanisms that allow human beings to engage in collective, rather than individual acts of violence. For example, Jay Lifton (1990) theorizes that "doubling" allows the self to split into a part which may commit violent atrocities and another part which may function as a caring parent and a responsible citizen. According to an explanation proposed by Staub (1989), violence may be an attempt to (1) reduce others to objects and (2) enhance self esteem while diminishing guilt within one's own subjectivity through committing the act of violence. Similarly, within a psychoanalytic context Benjamin (1988) theorizes that "[d]omination begins with attempts to deny dependency" (p. 52) and describes the perpetrator as exaggerating the difference between self and other to imply, "I am not you" (p. 57).

It may be that one commits violence as a result of having suffered violence. Johnson (1998) offers an object relations' explanation of how being mistreated or neglected (experiencing a victim role) may lead to taking on the aggressor or perpetrator role. According to Johnson's model, pain, loss, conflict, or abuse are experienced as a discrepancy between one's inner and outer world. One attempts to minimize this discrepancy by accommodating what one already knows, (i.e., one's schemas), to the force outside oneself that is the cause of the discrepancy, which Johnson calls "the Other." This is a process of internalization because one's own schemas are altered as one takes in aspects of the Other. When one has adequate resources during this process, including time to adapt and a supportive environment, one is able to integrate the discrepant elements into a more complex worldview. However, in a traumatic situation involving a high degree of conflict and fear, one takes in the Other without integration. The aggression is not made meaningful but merely taken in all of a piece, swallowed whole. When the pain, loss, conflict, or abuse is based on a power imbalance between the Self and the Other, this internalization of the Other is called "identification with the aggressor."

Identification with the aggressor, which could also be called taking on the perpetrator's role, may feel like an improvement over being in the victim role because one can, at least temporarily and at the expense of one's inner integrity, distance oneself from the pain by directing the internalized hostility toward others. At great internal expense, one exter-

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