



## Role theory and executive functioning: Constructing cooperative paradigms of drama therapy and cognitive neuropsychology



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 2 July 2015

Received in revised form 28 October 2015

Accepted 17 November 2015

Available online 30 November 2015

#### Keywords:

Drama therapy

Role theory

Neuropsychology

Executive functioning

Creative arts therapy

### ABSTRACT

This theoretical investigation reviews drama therapy theory within the framework of neuropsychology. In order to accomplish such a task, Landy's role theory (Landy, 1993, 2001, 2009) is outlined via its foundational components and re-examined within an executive functioning model. The focus of this work is on those executive functions which contribute to the development, selection, and activation of roles within a social context. They are: working memory, attention, cognitive control (inhibition), and theory of mind. As a result, conceptual groundwork is established for the development of a burgeoning cooperation between paradigms of drama therapy and cognitive neuropsychology.

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### Constructing cooperative paradigms of drama therapy and cognitive neuropsychology

Current trends in drama therapy literature have highlighted a theoretical movement toward the dominant neuroscience paradigm within the field of psychology (Chasen, 2011; Crenshaw, 2006; Frydman & McLellan, 2014; McKenna & Haste, 1999; Wood & Schneider, 2014). While certainly not outmoded as an intervention, the scope of drama therapy theory stands to benefit from a continued and critical dialogue with neuroscientific subfields (cognitive, affective, developmental, behavioral, neuropsychological, etc.); joining in the larger psychological conversation about the impact of therapeutic processing on cognition in the context of psychosocial functioning (Rourke, 2008). In doing so, the field can partake in the contemporary discussion with neuroscience subfields and develop generative models to build upon. This paper provides a structural basis for the link between drama therapy and cognitive neuropsychology, by enlisting *role theory* and *executive functioning* (EF) as cooperative and interchangeable frameworks. In articulating the inherent reciprocity of these two constructs, a relatable and translatable language can be implemented, thereby constructing a new framework of drama therapy processes.

Within cognitive neuropsychology, a synthesizing model has attracted substantial attention: *executive functioning* (EF). Located within the framework of higher order cognitive processing, EF encompasses such tasks as working memory, attention, cognitive control (otherwise known as inhibition), and has an affiliation with theory of mind. These functions serve to promote goal direction, monitor thought and action, and include skills such as self-regulation, cognitive flexibility, and instantaneous reflection in order to serve the present moment (Carlson & Moses, 2001; McCabe, Roediger, McDaniel, Balota, & Hambrick, 2010; Smith, 2002; Suchy, 2009). Such functioning utilizes attentional processes to stimulate schema-based data while engaging in, or preparing for, a planned mode of action. In doing so, EF produces an archived or active role when socially engaged.

The drama therapy conceptualization of role enactment can be found within Landy's role theory (Landy, 1993, 2001, 2009). In his model, Landy (1993, 2001, 2009) explicitly claims role as foundational to personality expression and as a socially triggered function; reflexively responding to the surrounding environment in its conception and presentation.

In order to outline the current state and potential integration of role theory and executive functioning, the following sections will consist of a literature review of the growing interface between the creative arts therapies and neuroscience, an overview of EF, followed by an outline of role theory, and culminating in an investigation of specific EF processes as understood through a role theory lens.

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## Review of literature

### *The creative arts therapies and neuroscience*

Beyond the growing references within drama therapy, other models of creative arts therapy have actively fostered connections with neuroscience subfields. Perhaps most closely related to drama therapy is within the field of psychodrama (Brown, 2013; Fonseca, 2009; Yaniv, 2011) where Yaniv (2012) explores the use of role reversal as an empathy builder, citing Theory of Mind (ToM) to facilitate advanced empathic understanding. Further, Hug (2007), discusses the power of psychodrama on hemispheric integration, outlining neurobiological aspects of brain-body connectivity.

Arts therapists have ventured into the territory of neuroscience for well over a decade, viewing art therapy as an effective tool in responding to hemispheric asymmetry as a result of trauma exposure (Klorer, 2005). Klorer goes on to identify that “. . .the bridge between neuroscience and art therapy is becoming more pronounced” (p. 218), as she outlines the neuroscience based work of art therapists in the early 2000’s. The work indicated therein has been subsequently expanded upon (Belkofer & Konopka, 2008; Buk, 2009; Gantt & Tinnin, 2009; Lusebrink, 2010) with a repertoire that includes a compilation on art therapy and neurobiology (Hass-Cohen & Carr, 2008).

Music therapists have been also been active in their establishing of a critical dialogue with neuroscience. Koelsch (2009) provides an overview of neurologically modulated factors impacted by music therapy, Magee and Stewart (2015) engage in a contemporary discussion on the challenges of integrating practitioner-oriented music therapy and neuroscience, and Kelly and Magee (2013) focus on neural reorganization as an outcome in the treatment of disorders of consciousness (see Rojo, Mengual, Juncadella, Rubio, Camara, Marco-Pallares, & Rodriguez-Fornells, 2011; Sarkamo, Pihko, Laitinen, Forsblom, Soinila, Mikkonen, & Tervaniemi, 2010).

Dance/movement therapists (DMT) have entered the conversation by highlighting the mirror neuron system in inducing affective states based on body posture, positioning, and movement (Berrol, 2006; Homann, 2010; McGarry & Russo, 2011; Winters, 2008). Previous research in DMT focusing on adolescents with mild depression who underwent a 12 week clinical intervention demonstrated a positive modulation in neurotransmitter regulation, suggesting that DMT may help to stabilize the sympathetic nervous system (Jeong, Hong, Lee, Park, Kim, & Su, 2005).

Finally, poetry therapy has fielded its own investigation into the neuroscientific underpinnings of metaphoric processing, inclusive of figurative language and abstraction, outlining language processing by brain region and exploring the potential efficacy with a schizophrenic population (Shafi, 2010).

The contemporary work of creative arts therapies indicates a growing movement toward the neuroscience paradigm. While drama therapists have begun to identify their own contributions, this paper provides a theoretical model to promote understanding and motivate further investigation.

### *Drama therapy and cognition*

Landy (2001) comments that “the dramatic metaphor of life as theatre and people as actors could be applied to an analysis of social and cultural life and inner psychological processes” (p. 29). As such, drama therapy seeks to view the individual from both an internal and external point of view. In doing so, attention to behavior and the analysis of cognitive functioning finds a bridge within the drama therapy process. In borrowing from this dramatic perspective, Landy derives a theoretical construct that serves as the foundational concept for his approach: *role*. By invoking the image of people as actors serving to illuminate reflections of insight and

awareness, Landy sets the stage for the function of theatrical language as a tool for the elucidation of psychological processes.

### *Cognitive correlates*

If we align ourselves with role as both fundamental to internal reflection and social engagement, an exploration into the mechanisms of cognition can afford a greater context for how role is generated and defined. The language of neuropsychology presents a technical aspect of psychological functioning and attempts to systematize mental processing into a structured framework (Giesbrecht, Sy, Bundesen, & Kyllingsbæk, 2014; Meyer & Lieberman, 2012; Suchy, 2009). The reconciling of role and neuropsychological functioning can afford both paradigms a reciprocal mutuality. By invoking the language of neuropsychology, role theory’s position as a theory confined to the archives of drama therapy will be generalized and utilized by a more expansive audience. Moreover, if role theory is to be utilized in service of this mediation, where does the focus lie within cognitive psychology, or, more specifically, within neuroscience? Perhaps the neuropsychological understanding of executive functioning provides the answer.

### *Executive functioning*

As a compilation of mental tools, “EF refers to cognitive or supervisory processes associated with the active maintenance of information in working memory, the appropriate shifting and sustaining of attention among goal relevant aspects of a given task or problem, and the inhibition of prepotent or extraneous information and responding with a given task context” (Blair, Knipe, Cummings, Baker, Gamson, Eslinger, & Thorne, 2007, p. 151). Thus, from a social context, executive functions work to *supervise behavior, healthily incorporate and reconcile incoming information with established data, and regulate attention* in order to generate situation specific functioning. As a descriptor, EF operates as an umbrella term, encompassing a multitude of functions which work to facilitate identity in a social context (Lewis & Carpendale, 2009). This contextual understanding of personality, both from an internal and external perspective, allows the individual to create and recreate themselves according to their ever shifting environmental reality (McConnell, 2010; Suchy, 2009).

In understanding *role* as foundational to social being (Landy, 1991, 1993, 2009), *role’s* function can be identified within the use of EF operations to access and perform congruent, efficacious, and desirable roles. Since EF incorporates a multitude of capabilities (understood here as working memory, attention, cognitive control, and theory of mind), its utility is identifying, classifying, and enacting various roles accrued over the course of the individual’s experience. Since EF organizes the individual’s social and internal processes, its operation parallels that of role theory’s position on role definition: activation is predicated on social environment (Landy, 1993; Lewis & Carpendale, 2009; McConnell, 2010; Meyer & Lieberman, 2012; Ybarra, Burnstein, Winkelman, Keller, Manis, Chan, & Rodriguez, 2008).

In order to properly address these EF functions and how they influence the generation and presentation of role, a comprehensive explication of role theory is in order.

## Role theory

### *Role*

Role theory’s understanding of its eponymous construct is presented by Landy (1993) as “a basic unit of personality containing specific qualities that provide uniqueness and coherence to that unit. . . [it is] the container of all the thoughts and feelings we have about ourselves and others in our social and imaginary worlds”

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