

**Pedagogical Discoveries through Participation in a Devised  
Ethnodrama about Depression**

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## **Abstract**

*This study employs interpretative phenomenological analysis to investigate theatre artists' perceptions and experiences of the phenomenon of devising and performing an ethnodramatic play about depression. Specifically, it explores reflective journal entries the artists wrote after each rehearsal and performance. The analytic process included identifying, coding, and categorizing significant statements in order to develop warranted assertions about the phenomenon. The data suggest that the phenomenon was pedagogical in nature. As such, this article explores seven emergent themes / beliefs participants apperceived throughout the process and discusses the variable veracity of those beliefs.*

**Keywords:** depression; devised theatre; ethnodrama; pedagogy; artist beliefs

# **Pedagogical Discoveries through Participation in a Devised Ethnodrama about Depression**

## **Introduction**

In this phenomenological study we investigate theatre theater artists' perceptions and experiences of devising and performing an ethnodramatic play about depression. Specifically, we employ interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyze reflective journal entries the artists wrote after each rehearsal and performance. We examine this participant-generated empirical evidence in order to describe "the common meaning for several individuals [the artists] of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon [devising a performance about depression]" (Creswell & Poth, 2019, p. 75). The data suggest that the phenomenon was pedagogical in nature. Thus, we explore what participants believe they learned throughout the process and discuss the simultaneous benefits and challenges of the experience and participants' apperceptions.

## **Background and Rationale**

Since its origins, theater has often served at least two purposes: to enlighten and to entertain. The relative weight of each varies widely, but the practice dates to some of the earliest days of theatre, with Horace noting in his first century *The Art of Poetry* that theatre should both "teach and please" (Brockett & Hildy, 2003, p. 52). Throughout history, theatre practitioners have hoped that the pedagogical implications of theatre - its "teaching" - would lead to change, as most famously posited by artists such as Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal. The idea that theatre can precipitate change still resonates; Etheridge Woodson & Underiner (2018) propose that "in one form or another, change is the prerogative of artistic innovation" (2).

To date, much research explores theatre's potential pedagogical impacts on audience members, such that Michalak et. al. (2014) assert that "theatrical traditions clearly hold the potential to impact audience members both at affective and cognitive levels, and to foster insight and deeper understanding" (p. 10). Studies suggest that viewing a single theatre performance can influence audience members' attitudes, values, and beliefs, at least briefly. For example, studies have found significant differences in spectators' levels of empathy (Harvey & Miles, 2009), attitudes regarding others' socioeconomic status (Omasta, 2011), and even their beliefs about hunting (Heide et. al., 2012).

Scholars have also investigated how theatre can impact the individuals involved in creating and performing plays, but such research almost exclusively considers work developed in educational and applied theatre contexts specifically designed to impact artist-participants. Researchers have documented how theatre may impact these artist-participants in elementary schools (e.g., Lehtonen, 2012), secondary schools (e.g., Perry 2011a), colleges/universities (e.g., Watkins, 2016), medical schools, (Hayes, Cantillon, & Hafler, 2014), hospitals (Sextou, 2016), and prisons (Shailor,

2011), among other venues. Programs in schools often focus on developing students' academic and inter/intra-personal skills, while leaders of applied theatre projects may set out to empower or emancipate artist-participants in various contexts, challenge hegemony, or, as Boal (1979) famously articulated, "rehearse revolution" (141). Studies have suggested that applied theatre can contribute to participants' personal and social development (Hughes & Wilson, 2004), promote growth and resilience (Hanrahan & Banerjee, 2007), and even help a single participant better understand his community (Essig, 2018).

In sum, there has been considerable scholarly interest of late in the pedagogical and transformative potential of theatre. Despite this, and despite an abundance of scholarship exploring how educational and applied theatre projects impact participants, almost no empirical studies to date consider how devising theatre might affect the *artists* involved in the creation of devised work that is not explicitly designed to impact the artists involved.

### **Theatre, health education, and depression**

Representations of mental health are ubiquitous in theatre (Johnston, 2008, p. 221), and numerous productions have tackled mental health topics including depression. For example, Johnston (2008) shares the history of the Workman Theatre Project's production of *Joy. The Musical. About Depression.*, which aimed to engage the public in rethinking mental illness. The project "sought to respect the voices of the mentally ill, find new ways to represent illness on stage, and engage the public with mental health issues" (Johnston, 2008, p. 208). Wilson (2012) documents the process of creating *Rainbow Redemption*, a play that addresses multiple forms of mental illness. Michalak et. al. (2014) assessed the impact of a performance about bipolar disorder for audiences of individuals diagnosed with the illness and medical professionals working to treat it. They report the performance had an "immediate impact on stigma in health care providers and enduring qualitative stigma on individuals with the illness" (10). While these studies demonstrate forms productions about depression may take, none consider how these plays may have affected the theatre artists involved. Conversely, this article focuses on how creating an ethnodrama about mental health impacted the devisers. Ethnodramas combine ethnography (and/or other empirical research) and the dramatic form to create plays, as we discuss further later in this article.

Rossiter et al. (2008) reviewed studies that employed theatre to present health-related information. They determined that most studies sought to assess two potential impacts of the performances: whether the audience members enjoyed the piece; and if they learned from it (p. 139). They report that several theatrical interventions benefitted audiences in various ways. Faigin & Stein (2008), for example, found that spectators who viewed a play concerning the stigmatization of mental illness showed a decrease in stigmatizing attitudes and an increase in behavioral intentions

after experiencing the piece. In another study, Roberts et al. (2007) found that a touring theatre program addressing mental health impacted young audience members by "increasing their knowledge and understanding of psychosis, reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues, and improving awareness of avenues of help" (p. 168). But these studies considering the plays' impacts on audience members do not consider impacts on the artists involved.

Daykin et al.'s (2008) literature review identified numerous benefits for young people involved in performing arts programs, including applied theatre projects that focused on public health issues. They noted that the arts have been used to help participants resist drugs, manage stress and difficult emotions, understand appropriate physical contact, experience excitement, satisfaction, and fun, and address social exclusion through community integration (p. 252). The studies reviewed discuss arts interventions that were designed specifically to influence the participants, as opposed to unanticipated impacts on artists working outside of applied theatre frameworks. This article strives to make sense of the devisers' experiences creating original theatre using processes *not* originally or intentionally designed to influence them.

### **Devised theatre and ethnodrama**

Unlike the studies discussed above, this article investigates how an ensemble of undergraduate artists (hereafter, the "devisers"), working together to devise and perform an original play about depression, experienced that theatrical phenomenon. While the artists involved in this research were university students, this study differs from most research in educational contexts, because the devising experience was *not* purposely designed as a pedagogical or transformative experience for the artists. It was not a component of any course or any curricular or co-curricular program. Any impacts were "unintended outcomes" or pedagogical byproducts, as we discuss in detail later.

As Perry (2011a) notes, "Devised Theatre is a sprawling category, with practices and interpretation varying from continent to continent, as well as from theatre company to theatre company" (p. 3). Nevertheless, nearly all devised works differ from more conventional plays, because they are collectively created by an ensemble of artists, as opposed to being composed by a playwright. As Watkins (2016) notes, "Unlike traditional hierarchical theatre productions ... devising begins 'from scratch' - no existing text but a will to invent - with members of an ensemble; instead of a single playwright's vision, there is a collective effort to create the authorial voice" (p. 169). The dismantling of "traditional hierarchies" often empowers actors (as opposed to playwrights and directors), as actors often serve both as devisers during the development phase of devised pieces and as performers in the final work. Perry, Wessels, & Wagner (2013) suggest the form "emerged in response to the aesthetic and political impulses of

communities of artists" (p. 653). We discuss the devising process for this theatrical endeavor in detail below.

The devisers in this study created *ethnodrama*; Saldaña (2005) explains that an ethnodrama "consists of dramatized, significant selections of narrative" collected through various qualitative methods. He summarizes, "Simply put, this is dramatizing the data" (2). Well-known ethnodramas (eventually adapted into films) include *The Laramie Project*, which explores life in the small Wyoming town after the murder of Matthew Shephard, and *The Exonerated*, which documents the experiences of exonerated men and women who were released from prison after, in some cases, decades on death row. Though ethnodramas are research-based, Ackroyd & O'Toole (2010) note (similarly to Horace) that spectators still expect to be "informed *and* entertained" (p. 16, emphasis in original). The data for the play this article explores was drawn from true stories shared by community members who have experienced depression.

### **Devising's impacts**

As with most research exploring theatre's impact on artist-participants, nearly all studies that address how *devised* theatre specifically may affect those involved also consider work in educational or applied theatre contexts deliberately designed to impact participants. Reports from such studies tend to focus on extrinsic (non-arts) outcomes, particularly inter- and intra-personal skills. For example, Hughes & Wilson (2004) assert devising theatre "has a number of important functions for young people [such as] positively contributing to their personal and social development" and helping adolescents' transitions into adulthood (p. 57). Similarly, Watkins (2016) argues that participating in devising processes benefits undergraduate students by providing opportunities for "discovery, problem-solving, embracing uncertainty, [and] self-empowerment" (p. 169). She further asserts devising helps develop students' problem-solving skills and self-confidence (pp. 170-171). McKinnon (2016) similarly posits that "working on devised performance should help students to develop creative and collaboration skills and become self-regulated, autonomous learners" (p. 182). A limited body of literature explores devising in professional theatre contexts (e.g., Perry 2011b), but such work is usually theoretical rather than empirical in nature.

A somewhat similar project to this study was conducted by Twardzicki (2008) who researched college students' experiences collaborating with people with mental illnesses to create and perform a play about mental health. The project measured students' attitudes regarding mental health using pre-/post-project surveys and noted a "marked shift in students' attitude toward mental health issues at the end of the project . . . with considerably more positive, empathic and supportive attitudes expressed by the students in the post-project questionnaire" (p. 69). Our study differs from Twardzicki's in that the devisers did not work directly with people experiencing mental illness, but rather with existing stories, as explained

further later in this piece. Also, while Twardzicki's quantitative study was able to measure the degree of change students experienced, our qualitative approach allows us to more closely examine how artists' experiences might lead to such changes.

While investigating the complexities of how artists think about and engage with devising practices is complex, we concur with McKinnon's (2016) assertion that evaluations of whether devising has enduring impacts on individuals "are not only possible, but vital" (pp. 181-82). Just as many studies have explored how plays impact audience members, the field would benefit from research into how plays affect the individuals who devise them, especially outside of educational and applied theatre contexts. This article articulates how one group of university student artists experienced the phenomenon of devising an original ethnodrama about depression.

### **Research Questions**

Our initial research question was: "What do artists' perceptions and experiences of the phenomenon of devising a play about depression reveal about its phenomenological essence or invariant structure?" As we discuss later, even a preliminary review of the data clearly reveals that the devisers experienced the phenomenon as pedagogical; they frequently remark on learnings, realizations, and affirmations of knowledge in their journal entries. As such, we revised the research question to: "If devising of a play about depression is a pedagogical phenomenon, what did the devisers learn from the process?"

### **Theoretical Framework**

In employing IPA, an empirical, qualitative methodology, we adopted a constructivist / interpretivist standpoint. As Creswell & Poth (2018) note: "In social constructivism, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences – meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple" (p. 24). Further, these contrasting meanings may both be valid interpretations of lived experience.

Just as the devisers experience phenomena subjectively, we as researchers interpret their interpretations subjectively; this is IPA's "double hermeneutic" (see Smith & Eatough, 2011, p. 3). Importantly for this particular study, devisers' experiences of the phenomenon may have led them to develop beliefs contrary to empirical evidence.

### **Methodology and Methods**

#### **Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

We employ IPA, a type of qualitative research (see Smith & Eatough, 2011) to "reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of [its] universal essence" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75) or "invariant structure" (p. 80). We sought to "explore in detail individual personal and

lived experiences and to examine how participants are making sense of their personal and social world" (Smith & Eatough, 2011, p. 2). Consistent with IPA, we attempted

to understand what [the phenomenon] is like from the point of view of the person, to take their side, to stand as far as possible ... in the shoes of the participant. At the same time, a detailed IPA analysis can also involve standing a little back from the participant and asking curious and critical questions of their accounts. (p. 3)

We present multiple perspectives on the phenomenon of devising and performing an ethnodrama about depression – both those of the devisers as well as our own.

We strove to "bracket" our own direct experience with the phenomenon when analyzing it, trying not to let our previous knowledge influence our analysis. This is challenging, particularly given that we were directly involved in the phenomenon as artists. However, as Giorgi recognizes, bracketing is not a process of "forgetting" prior experience, but rather "not letting past knowledge be engaged while determining experiences" (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 77). This article is both idiographic and nomothetic. We began analysis at the level of individual devisers, but our findings focus more broadly on comparing devisers' experiences and identifying recurring themes.

## **Participants**

We purposively selected the participants in this study, inviting all devisers involved with the production to participate. We employed census sampling, inviting all members of the population (the devisers) to participate in the study. All but one opted to participate.

The devisers' ages at the time of data collection ranged from approximately 19 to 25; all were undergraduate theatre majors at Utah State University (USU). Nine devisers (eight females, one male) participated. The number of female performers was disproportionate to the number of females whose stories the play was based on. In some cases, female actors performed the stories shared by males. So as not to create the impression that depression is overwhelmingly experienced by women, we addressed this in the curtain speech.

While the sample is small, as Smith & Eatough (2011) note, "IPA studies are conducted on relatively small sample sizes" (p. 6). As with most qualitative studies, our findings are not generalizable to any larger population. While this article was primarily composed by the first and second authors, the devisers, as co-authors, contributed throughout the research process, including generating and coding data and reviewing article drafts.

## **Data Collection**

The first and second authors collected data in the form of reflective journal entries directly from the devisers after the run of the performance was complete. While most IPA studies employ semi-structured interviews,

Smith & Eatough (2011) note that, "It is important not to be doctrinaire about this," explaining that, "Autobiographical or other personal accounts or ... diaries can serve as data sources" (p. 8), as is the case in this study. We believe the journal entries provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon of devising, because, as Coffey (2013) explains, "Documents and their analyses can be utilized to understand personal lives and experiences, and to place biography within and in relation to social context" (p. 4).

The devisers completed journal entries after each rehearsal and performance. Each time, they journaled in response to the simple prompt, "Please reflect on our work today." As such, the devisers were free to reflect on whatever aspect of the work they felt inclined to comment on without being drawn to specific topics by the researchers, reducing the likelihood of participant compliance / social desirability bias.

### **Data Analysis**

After transcribing the handwritten journal entries, we reviewed them several times in order to identify recurring themes and ideas. We employed open coding, "where the text is read reflectively to identify relevant categories" (Gibbs, 2012, p. 13). While we had pre-existing experiences and thoughts about the phenomenon, we attempted to bracket them and review the data with limited preconceptions to avoid "impos[ing] an interpretation based on pre-existing theory" (Gibbs, 2012, p. 13). Specifically, we primarily used descriptive and in vivo codes (Saldaña, 2016) to get a sense for what the devisers experienced throughout the process of generating and performing the piece, creating codes using their own words when possible. We also identified significant statements that shed light on the devisers' experience of the phenomenon.

### **The Devised Ethnodramatic Project**

The ethnodrama the devisers created and performed was an extension of The Facing Project, a national organization that pairs "citizens who are facing life circumstances that deserve to be shared" with writers who document their stories (Facing Project, 2018, para 1). Each project is focused on people experiencing a particular issue (e.g., depression, addiction, homelessness, racism, or sexual violence). The stories are compiled into a book; an e-book containing all of the stories this piece was based on is available at: <http://utahstate.facingproject.com/our-stories/>. The release of the book is often complemented by a performance in which local actors perform the stories verbatim as monologues.

The impetus for this project came from a staff member in USU's Community Engagement Office, who approached the first author, a USU theatre arts faculty member, and proposed partnering to create a theatrical component for the project that went beyond the traditional reading of stories. The first author proposed devising a play based on the stories, and the project moved forward. All USU theatre students were invited to participate in the project, and all who expressed an interest were included in

the ensemble. Most devisers also served as actors; one served as assistant director.

Ensemble members reviewed the stories collected, identifying material most suited for dramatization either as complete scenes or as elements of composite scenes drawn from multiple stories. All stories shared in the play were verbatim, and excerpts from the script appear throughout this article. After drafting an initial script, ensemble members brainstormed staging ideas (e.g., creating tableaux to illustrate certain moments of a story or developing a movement piece to accompany a monolog). The final piece utilized tableaux, movement, and dialogic scenes in addition to monologs. The ensemble performed the play twice at USU, once at a local community center, and finally at the American Alliance for Theatre and Education conference.

### **Unintended Outcomes**

Critically, the goal of this devising project's leaders and sponsors was to create an evocative and moving ethnodrama to inform audiences about depression in an engaging fashion. As the narrator states at the beginning of the play, the project aimed to "help make [the local community] a safe place to talk openly about depression and mental illness." Neither the leaders nor the sponsors of the project set out to influence the devisers' knowledge, attitudes, values, or beliefs about depression or any other subject. In fact, the idea for a research project analyzing the devisers' experiences originated only after the final performance. As the devisers originally wrote their journal entries as part of the rehearsal process (not for research purposes), they later provided consent for the entries to be analyzed for this study. Importantly, the journal entries were not originally meant to be read; the devisers did not submit them to anyone during the process, which reduces the likelihood of social desirability bias. The journals were collected only after the project and after the devisers had provided informed consent to participate. Fortunately, they had retained nearly all of their journal entries and shared them for the purposes of this research. As such, any impacts devising the ethnodrama had on the devisers were unintended outcomes of the process.

Balfour and Freebody (2018) note that when scholars are focused on predetermined outcomes, they might "miss unintended consequences of an arts experiences" (p. 21). Theatre projects might lead artists and audiences to consider new ideas the facilitators did not foresee. These unintended outcomes can be highly variable and difficult to anticipate (or even recognize). For example, Snyder-Young (2013) recalls a school-based, social justice-oriented applied theatre project she co-facilitated with teenagers. She hoped to help them challenge problematic but dominant discourses. However, the choices the artist-participants made demonstrated that, "The work participants initiate and the choices they make do not automatically orient toward social justice" (p. 40). Snyder-Young admits the work did not "rehearse revolution" or inculcate progressive thinking. The project did,

however, teach playwriting skills and build trusting relationships between the participants and facilitator. These were both positive but unintended outcomes (p. 58).

This example demonstrates Cahill's (2018) observation that projects "may accrue significant secondary outcomes" (p. 177). Snyder-Young (2013) agrees these "unintended byproducts" are often accidental and tangential to the original goals of a project or production, but, nevertheless, they "can have powerful impacts on participants and audience members" (p. 8). While this ethnodramatic project may have achieved its original goals, its unintended outcomes (impacts on devisers) may have been more substantive than the intended outcomes related to audience members.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Overall, the devisers experienced the phenomenon of creating and performing an ethnodrama about depression as pedagogical in nature—specifically, *pedagogical discovery*. Journal entries were steeped in the language of learning, realization, and/or affirmation of ideas. Participants made statements such as: "It's like I saw depression as it truly is for the first time," or they "got a glimpse into" the life of a friend who experienced depression. Phrases such as "I've realized...", "I'm finding out...", "I feel I more clearly understand..." and "a thing I'm learning..." appeared consistently throughout their journal entries. Phenomenology seeks to identify the invariant structure or essence of phenomena. The data suggest that the depression-related devised theatre project's processes were *pedagogical*, though what devisers learned was not necessarily always accurate. While some participants experienced the process as therapeutic, they did not do so universally. While our concept of "pedagogical discovery" bears some semblance to the concept of implicit learning (e.g., Berry & Dienes, 1993), it differs in that the learner/discoverers are able to articulate how they came to know or understand a fact or concept, even though both concepts include learning/discovery that may be unplanned or unintentional.

Based on the analysis of the significant statements in the data that we identified, coded, and categorized, we developed seven warranted assertions and propositions regarding the devisers' experience of the phenomenon. We discuss each below, providing examples of significant statements from the interviews along with brief analysis of each theme that emerged. Each assertion (in bold) is a belief the devisers expressed in their journaling, followed by significant statements supporting the assertion/proposition and our analysis.

#### **1. Depression takes several forms, which don't always conform to stereotypes associated with the term.**

Supporting journal data:

- "Depression is unique and personal. More often than not, a person's experience with depression breaks the stereotype."

- "I've realized how different[ly] everyone experiences depression. Even those who experience it second handedly. Although everyone experiences it differently, there is a certain connection I feel between them all."

Those who have not personally experienced depression can find it difficult to understand the illness, and stereotypes are common. An example of stereotyping appears in an early scene in the play, which depicts an encounter between one of the people with depression who shared his story as part of this project, Tom, and the writer who recorded his story. (All names are pseudonyms.) The writer is surprised by Tom's appearance and writes:

I consider myself to be a well-informed, sensitive type of millennial who notes and refutes stereotypes perpetuated on Facebook. Nonetheless, I am embarrassed to admit that I imagined Tom would be less put together - perhaps having unkempt hair or a cluttered home. Instead, he has a charming, self-contained smile. His clothes are clean, possibly pressed, and he sports a matching leather watch. The face that greets me is not the face of someone who I would assume would be a storyteller for a project about depression.

Just as this writer was surprised to learn that people suffering from depression may not conform to stereotypes about their appearance or the tidiness of their homes, the devisers experienced a similar shift in their beliefs about depression and those it affects. Early in the process, devisers sometimes expressed stereotypical views about individuals with depression; instances of this decreased significantly as the devising process went on. Devising a theatre production about depression seems to have helped shift devisers' perspectives, challenging the idea that all people experience depression in the same way. As such, devised theatre may be an effective tool for countering stereotypes devisers believe.

## **2. Depression is more prevalent than people may be aware.**

Supporting journal data:

- "I think this piece is allowing me to become even further aware of how many people are affected by depression in a multitude of different ways."
- "I am finding out how many of us involved in this production actually have depression."

Some 16.1 million American adults suffer from depression (ADAA, 2018, para. 9), and approximately one in five adults in Cache County, the community where the production was devised, experience it (Macavinta, 2017, para. 1). Despite this, it can seem less common, perhaps because depression may not be physically visible and/or because individuals may keep their condition private, due to the stigmas that surround mental illness or other reasons.

One time, the performance references the prevalence of depression when an ensemble member states:

I am far from the only person in this [place] to struggle with depression, but I'm also far from the only person in this [place] who wants to help. There are so many of us. Please reach out. Please come to us. We can't promise you perfect days. We can't force you to be happy. But we can give you friendship, and kindness, and support, and the knowledge that you're not alone.

Working on the devised piece led devisers to believe that depression was prevalent in their communities (nationally, locally, and even within the group of devisers). While devisers were never asked to share their personal experiences with depression, the project seemed to organically create a safe space in which some felt comfortable sharing on their own accord. While most of the devisers knew each other prior to working on the play, the devising process created a forum in which devisers learned more about each other's experiences.

### **3. Participating in a devised performance about depression empowers devisers to help those suffering from depression.**

Supporting journal data:

- "I feel like through this [process] I was able to understand depression more. I felt like I was able to support those who are suffering with depression, and that was such a good feeling."
- "I can help others just by listening to them and validating what they feel."

Through creating this play, the devisers came to believe that they could serve as resources for those suffering from depression, even if they were not experts in the subject or did not have personal experience with the illness. It is unclear to us, as researchers, to what degree non-experts can effectively assist those experiencing depression. Nevertheless, it is clear that the devisers came to believe that even the simple act of listening and providing a sympathetic ear to people experiencing depression could help those individuals. This may empower the devisers to take on the role of compassionate listener for friends or others experiencing depression; whereas before this experience they may not have believed that they could be helpful.

### **4. Seeking help is an appropriate response to depression.**

Supporting journal data:

- "Asking for help is nothing to be ashamed of."
- Being involved with the production "helped me understand that it is okay to get help and that there is hope and light and healing available."

Unfortunately, mental health disorders are often stigmatized. People sometimes condemn or ostracize individuals they perceive as different or whom they do not understand. The stigma surrounding depression may lead some people suffering from it to be reluctant to reach out for help. Working on this production, however, helped devisers believe that, if they were to

experience depression, it would be appropriate to turn to others for help. In fact, nearly all of the stories included in the production made some reference to getting help in one way or another. As one line reads, "With help, there is hope!" While resources exist to assist individuals suffering from mental illness, these resources are only helpful if people are aware of them and feel that it is acceptable to seek them out. Having participated in the devising process, the devisers may be more likely to reach out for help should they themselves suffer from depression now or in the future.

## **5. Devising a theatre production about a phenomenon can promote understanding of its complexity, as well as how others experience it.**

Supporting journal data:

- The devising process "helped me realize the confusion and chaos someone can feel when they don't understand what is happening inside or they don't know where to go for help."
- "I felt that I learned some new things that broadened my understanding of the topic. I felt the complexities of the subject were able to be seen and understood through the use of stories and performance elements."

The devisers came to believe that participating in the devising process led them to better understand the complexities of depression and how it affects the people around them. The devisers believed the process increased their capacity for empathy, which may affect the way they treat others. If this belief is true, it may point to one of devising's most important potential impacts: providing opportunities for devisers to better understand the circumstances of real people and their stories, better positioning them to potentially act. The devisers believed the insight they gained regarding other people and their situations better equipped them to help those people improve their circumstances. They felt they might be more willing and able to help those affected by depression, even simply as sympathetic listeners, as discussed earlier.

## **6. Devising an ethnodrama about depression can be therapeutic and healing for some members of the ensemble.**

Supporting journal data:

- "Being a part of this process has been very therapeutic for me. Although we are not talking directly about my story, having a cast of people talking about depression freely and analytically is really helping my own symptoms."
- I am "very thankful for the therapeutic aspects of participating in this piece, and it has been instrumental in keeping me from falling apart this semester."

While devisers were never asked if they personally experienced depression, some chose to reveal in their journals that they did; this subset of devisers consistently indicated that they believed participating in the

process was therapeutic for them. Although the devisers' personal experiences with depression were never solicited, they seemed to arise organically throughout the devising process, particularly in moments when devisers felt their experiences were similar to those of the people depicted in the play.

It is important to remember that none of the leaders or sponsors of the piece designed it as any form of therapy. The director ran rehearsals for the play exactly as he would have for a devised piece about any topic. Nevertheless, some of the devisers believed the process created a forum in which they felt free to talk about depression, including their own experiences with it, in meaningful and potentially healing ways. When devisers disclosed their personal experiences, the director listened to their experience and referred them to available mental health resources at the university and in the community.

## **7. People can find and/or create and pursue moments of hope and light in their lives, even if they are experiencing depression.**

Supporting journal data:

- "There are so many people who are stuck in these dark places ... but we all need these reminders that there is hope and light at the end, that the darkness can't / won't win."
- "We should all take in our surroundings and find the joy and beauty in life. We should all avoid comparing ourselves to others, and we should love ourselves for who we are and where we're at in our journey through life."

The production included several scenes in which people with depression found momentary reprieve from their symptoms by focusing on positive elements in their lives. For example, in one scene, a woman who had been abused as a child discusses how she experiences "snapshot moments," which she defines as times "when [she] saw a flutter of bliss in [her] life. They were rare, bookended on both sides with depression, but the more [she] noticed them, the more [she] wrote about them, the more there seemed to be." As the excerpts from the devisers' journals above suggest, these scenes resonated with the devisers. Indeed, the devisers' journal entries were often optimistic, usually ending on positive notes.

This is potentially problematic. The pedagogical discovery that there is necessarily "hope and light at the end" is not, in our view, accurate. In actuality, individuals suffering from depression may not be easily able to shift their mental focus to moments of hope and light. One deviser wrote that people experiencing depression should "love themselves for who they are." While we do not disagree, we believe those experiencing depression may not be able to simply choose to love themselves, but rather that developing the capacity for self-love may require significant effort and may require professional guidance and support.

Finally, and most unfortunately, the belief that, "The darkness can't / won't win" is, in our view, false. Not only *can* this darkness "win," it often

does. Over 50 percent of people who die by suicide suffer from major depression (AFSP, 2018, para. 2). This raises serious questions about the potential efficacy of devising as a pedagogical tool. We assert that the devisers disproportionately focused on positive, uplifting moments from the stories the play explored. In this case, the devisers' uncritical acceptance of their "discoveries" did not necessarily align with facts about the phenomenon the theatrical piece addressed.

### Closure

Many devisers discussed the impacts they believe the play had on audience members in the journal entries they composed after performances. When they contemplated the feedback audience members offered, the devisers generally expressed the belief that issue-oriented devised ethnodramas, such as the one they created, are an effective way to address social issues. Their reflections included:

- "This form of presentation – the theatrical form – displays real and raw data while allowing the experience to feel personal. That for me is what makes this method of research unique and effective."
- This project "did exactly what art is supposed to do: bring people together, allow people to create change together. I want to do this more in the future. Show more people that theatre can be used to promote change and build community around us."
- "Art is meant to better and to improve other's lives, and according to what I've gathered, that is exactly what we are doing."

As these reflections suggest, most of the devisers perceived the project as an effective endeavor that helped audience members understand depression and build a supportive community. These outcomes were among the original goals of the project. In their journals, devisers reflected on testimony from audience members that suggested the production did indeed move audiences and help foster dialog about depression in the community, at least immediately following the performances. As one deviser journaled: "I saw many people leaving the theatre teary-eyed. One person said to me, "It was hard to watch. It ripped my heart out, but it was so beautiful, powerful and moving."

While the devisers discussed their beliefs about audience impact, much of their writing focused on how the devisers believed participating in the devising project influenced themselves in ways both pedagogical and sometimes therapeutic. From better understanding the nature of depression to believing that those affected by depression can and should pursue moments of hope and light, the devisers *learned through discovery* by devising and performing the play, even if not everything they learned was necessarily accurate. As such, we assert that, in addition to being able to positively impact audiences, devised theatre productions can serve as effective tools for informing and influencing those involved in the project as devisers.

Just as Twardzicki (2008) found a quantitative difference in student-artists' attitudes before and after participating in a production about mental health, we found devisers' understandings and beliefs qualitatively evolved as they participated in the phenomenon of devising an ethnodrama about depression. Our primary finding is that the essence or invariant structure of this phenomenon is that it is inherently *pedagogical*, even when it is not intended to be and does not employ explicitly educative strategies, even if devisers adopt beliefs of uncertain veracity.

We suggest that future work investigate the pedagogical potential of ethnodramatic devising about myriad subjects to ascertain whether this pedagogical essence transfers to work about other topics. Future research might also explore *why* devising seems to have pedagogical efficacy; how artists, activists, educators, and others might protect against devisers adopting false beliefs; and what ethical responsibilities directors/leaders of devised theatre projects may have to their ensembles in light of devising's pedagogical potential.

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