

Evaluation of Geese Theatre's Inside Talk Programme

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ABSTRACT

In this study we examined the impact of Geese Theatre Company's *Inside Talk* programme on the individuals who attended it. This programme used theatre performance, experiential exercises, skills practice role-plays and metaphors such as the mask to improve listening and speaking skills for offenders, particularly 'hard to reach' offenders who find more formal courses difficult. Pre and post-programme psychometric tests and interviews were completed to assess the effectiveness of the programme. Significant changes were observed from pre-treatment to post-treatment in terms of self-efficacy, and improved confidence in occupational skills and in dealing with authority. Interviews also revealed the positive impact the programme had on the participants. This provides evidence supporting the short-term effectiveness of the *Inside Talk* programme.

Introduction

Listening and communication skills are key aspects of interacting effectively with others. Research suggests that the occurrence of communication problems is higher in prisons than in the general population (Bryan, Freer, & Furlong, 2007). The Prison Service in England and Wales offers numerous programmes to address individuals' needs in a number of areas such as cognitive skills, substance use problems, anger management and relationship problems. However, Davis and colleagues demonstrated that these programmes require relatively high levels of speaking and listening skills, with 35% of offenders performing at levels below that of a competent 11 year old in these skills (Davis, Lewis, Byatt, Purvis, & Cole, 2004). Therefore, an attempt to increase oral language competence is critically important for offenders to allow them to derive the most benefit from prison programmes addressing their offending behaviour.

The use of theatre and drama provide a unique approach to working in the criminal justice system. The use of theatre and drama in this context is noted to be relatively under researched (Hughes, 2004). Drama-based approaches offer advantages over other approaches in that they are more personally-focused and practical, rely less on literacy and expression skills, and allow for self-reflection and practice of newly learned skills (Baim, Brookes, & Mountford, 2002). The approaches used are also consistent with those found to be essential components of successful rehabilitative programmes for offenders (Antonowicz & Ross, 1994).

Research has provided support for the use of drama-based approaches in prisons and secure settings in terms of reducing anger. One such study examined changes in levels of anger following a therapeutic theatre project with 12 adult male mentally disordered offenders (Reiss, Quayle, Brett, & Meux, 1998). The researchers found that levels of anger (measured in two different ways) were significantly reduced from the week prior to the programme to the week following the programme. This improvement was maintained after 3 months. Another study examined 62 participants who attended a combined drama and cognitive-behavioural programme designed to explore the processes of anger,

aggression, and violence (Blacker, Watson, & Beech, 2008). In this study, the researchers again found significant reductions in anger from pre-course to post-course. A recent study examined the impact of Geese Theatre's *Reconnect* programme, which addresses resettlement issues in prison (Harkins, Pritchard, Haskayne, Watson, & Beech, 2009). Significant changes were observed from pre-treatment to post-treatment in terms of self-efficacy, motivation to change, and improved confidence in skills (i.e., social/friendship, occupational, family/ intimacy, dealing with authority, alternatives to aggression or offending, and self-management/ self-control skills). Improved behaviour and engagement within the programme was also observed over the 3 days of the programme.

It would be expected that prison programmes which hope to translate into improvements in communication would provide individuals with an improved sense of self-efficacy and improved confidence in a number of skills. Bandura (1994) notes that self-efficacy beliefs are said to 'determine how people think, feel and motivate themselves and behave' (p. 71). These self-beliefs of efficacy are central aspects of motivating people, in that they develop ideas about what they are capable of, generally establish plans to achieve these, and anticipate the possible outcomes of these actions/behaviours. Improved confidence in skills ensures that people are better able to face the challenges they may encounter in terms of successfully reintegrating themselves into the community.

This study will examine the impact of the *Inside Talk* programme on the participants who attended it. With only a few exceptions (e.g., Blacker et al., 2008; Harkins, et al., 2009; Reiss et al., 1998), previous studies looking at drama-based interventions have used only qualitative designs (Hughes, 2002). In this study, the impact of the programme will be examined using several psychometric tests and interviews with a sample collected from a number of prisons across the U.K and Wales.

Study objectives

The first objective was to determine whether improvements would be observed on psychometric tests measuring self-efficacy and confidence in a range of skills.

The second objective was to examine individuals' perceptions of the *Inside Talk* programme and the impact the programme had on them.

Method

Setting

Inside Talk was developed by Geese Theatre Company as a theatre and drama group work programme aiming to improve listening and speaking skills for offenders, particularly 'hard to reach' offenders who find more formal courses difficult. It was delivered in 5 prisons in the Midlands area. It was delivered one day per week for five weeks, culminating in a five day block in the 6th week. The course was able to accommodate 10-12 offenders.

Inside Talk uses theatre performance, experiential exercises, skills practice role-plays and metaphors such as the masks to invite the group to consider and explore issues about self-image, communication within relationships, with children, and with people in authority.

Participants

Participants ($N = 34$) who were selected by prison staff as appropriate for the programme, including both men and women. Some of these individuals did not complete the full course so results will be reported for a smaller subset of this sample for the individual analyses.

Measures

Self-efficacy

This was measured using the General Perceived Self Efficacy Scale (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992). This 10-item scale was created to assess a general sense of perceived self-efficacy with the aim in mind to predict coping with daily hassles as well as adaptation after experiencing all kinds of stressful life events. Responses range from not at all true (1) to exactly true (4). Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-efficacy. This scale is available in 27 languages. There is evidence for the reliability and validity of the measure (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992). In samples from 23 nations, Cronbach's alphas ranged from .76

to .90, with the majority in the high .80s. In a recent study examining another of Geese Theatre programmes in prison, Cronbach's alpha was .81 (Harkins et al., 2009).

Confidence in Skills

This was measured using the Skills Rating form in the Geese Theatre Handbook (Baim et al., 2002). This rating sheet measures confidence in social/ friendship skills, occupational skills, family/ intimacy skills, dealing with authority, alternatives to aggression or offending, and self-management/ self-control. Higher scores indicate more confidence in skills. Evidence for the reliability of this measure is not available. The alpha level in a recent sample was .85 (Harkins et al., 2009).

Semi-Structured Interview

Some of the participants were interviewed about their thoughts on the programme having completed it, their thoughts about the methods used and their feelings/ plans for the future (Appendix A).

Procedure

This study was designed to measure the short-term impact of the *Inside Talk* programme, therefore pre and post-programme ratings were examined in terms of self-efficacy and self-reported confidence in terms of social/ friendship skills, occupational skills, family/ intimacy skills, dealing with authority, alternatives to aggression and offending, self-management/ self-control. These measures were introduced and explained by one of the researchers or by one of the Geese practitioners if the researchers were not able to attend. Consent was obtained from those who chose to take part. For individuals who had difficulty reading, one of the researchers or one of the Geese practitioners provided assistance.

Finally, interviews were conducted with a random subset of the participants from HMP Drake Hall on the final day about their thoughts on the programme.

Analyses

Wilcoxon signed ranks tests were used to examine differences in the pre and post-treatment measures due to the small sample size.

Results

Pre-programme and post-programme scores were examined for evidence of improvement over the length of the programme. In particular, self-efficacy and self-reported confidence in skills were examined.

Additionally, interviews were conducted on a subset of participants to ascertain their thoughts on the programme.

Psychometrics

All scores improved from the beginning to the end of the programme. Significant improvements were observed on several of the psychometric measures (Table 1). Specifically, self-efficacy improved significantly ($z = 3.08$, $N\text{-Ties} = 18$, $p = .002$). The overall self-reported confidence in skills did not show significant improvement but several of the individual skills showed significant change (Table 1.).

Specifically, the participants improved significantly in terms of their confidence in their occupational skills ($z = 2.34$, $N\text{-Ties} = 9$, $p = .018$) and their ability to deal with authority ($z = 2.66$, $N\text{-Ties} = 10$, $p = .008$).

Table 1

Pre-treatment and post-treatment mean and Standard Deviation (SD) for each psychometric measure

MEASURE	PRE-TREATMENT (SD)	POST-TREATMENT (SD)	Significance
Self-efficacy (N=21)	32.0 (6.2)	34.0 (4.3)	P=.002
Overall Confidence in Skills (N=6)	142.1 (28.6)	175.4 (23.5)	n.s.
<i>Social/ Friendship Skills (N=13)</i>	21.9 (4.6)	24.5 (3.7)	n.s.
<i>Occupational Skills (N=11)</i>	23.4 (5.1)	29.6 (4.4)	P=.018
<i>Family/ Intimacy Skills (N= 7)</i>	40.0 (8.7)	49.1 (67.4)	n.s.
<i>Dealing with Authority (N= 12)</i>	16.1 (4.3)	20.1 (3.1)	P=.008
<i>Alternatives to Aggression (N= 11)</i>	31.0 (7.5)	35.9 (6.0)	n.s.
<i>Self-management/ Self-control (N=10)</i>	13.8 (3.6)	16.3 (3.0)	n.s.

Interviews

Brief interviews were conducted with 3 participants who attended the course at HMP Drake Hall. Some quotes are provided to illustrate the participants' perceptions of the programme.

Thoughts on the Programme.

“I thought it was an amazing course. It has changed my perspective of myself, my life, and how I look at things. It has made me look much deeper. It also made me see the effect of my actions on my future, whether they be good or bad actions.”

“It was good. It helps a lot. Most help was with confidence. My confidence has grown so much over 3 weeks.”

“It was kind of unusual. I'm used to a classroom method. This was more interesting and fun than a classroom. I lose focus in the classroom. It should be run more often.”

How it was useful

“It made me more at ease with my own emotions. It will help me in the future to no end. I think I will constantly be using the skills I've learned throughout life. Teaches you to think before you act and think about what you do.”

“It's going to help me out a lot. I want to be a hairdresser so it helped my confidence. Now I can talk to my customers instead of just standing there.”

“More confident and I feel better. I'm starting to learn how to trust people.”

Discussion

The present study examined the effectiveness of the *Inside Talk* programme. In terms of the exploratory research questions, significant changes were identified in perceived self-efficacy and confidence in some types of skills before and after participating in a combined CBT and drama-based intervention. Furthermore, based on interviews with a subset of participants, the programme had a positive impact on them.

The level of self-reported self-efficacy of the participants increased significantly from the beginning of the course to the end. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave (Bandura, 1994). Those with high levels of self-efficacy approach difficult tasks as problems for them to master, rather than things to be avoided (Bandura, 1994). They are also able to recover if they encounter failures or setbacks and sustain their efforts when they encounter difficulties, feeling that they can exercise control over them (Bandura, 1994). A strong sense of self-efficacy will clearly prove useful for someone who is about to face the difficulties associated with resettlement into the community. Having completed the programme, it may be that there is an overall positive impact on the individual's self-appraisal of their ability to achieve their goals. To add to this, the findings support Bandura's (1997) suggestion that vicarious experience through modeling and role-play can develop self-efficacy, as such techniques are a key part of the drama-based intervention.

With reference to the role theory (Moreno, 1959), these significant improvements in self-efficacy could be an indication of an increase in an individual's role repertoire. This theory postulates that by increasing an individual's ability to take on different roles, it helps to increase their role repertoire so they are more likely to be able to meet their needs in the future. By participating in a combined CBT and drama-based intervention, participants have had the opportunity to take on different roles. Consequently, they may have expanded their role repertoire and feel more able to meet their needs and function successfully in society without offending. This is demonstrated by an increase in self-efficacy scores after completing the programme.

These positive results for the use of the combined CBT and drama-based intervention are in line with other evaluations of this approach by Reiss et al. (1998) and Blacker et al. (2008). Although these studies focus on anger management rather than self-efficacy, it is consistent with the effectiveness of applying this approach with offenders. Similarly, these studies found significant improvements in participants after participating in the group, therefore bringing together both CBT and drama has shown beneficial results. There may be other pro-social areas that are developed as a consequence of engaging in a combination of CBT and drama, but further research is needed to explore this in more detail.

Participants felt more confident in their skills in a number of areas from pre-program to post-programme. In particular, the participants felt more confident in occupational skills and in dealing with authority. Improved confidence in all these various areas will go a long way to helping the participants tackle the challenges that will come their way when they are released as they try to find employment and avoid or deal appropriately with the situations that have caused them problems in the past.

According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), learning occurs vicariously within an interactive, social context through modeling or imitation. This theory underpins much of the drama-based work with the use of role-play and skills practices to learn and rehearse new skills. In line with social learning theory, drama-based interventions allow participants to learn pro-social behaviours and skills through modeling using interactive techniques. An improvement in interpersonal skills can be understood by successfully incorporating this learning theory into practice. Furthermore, the improvement in interpersonal skills using drama-based techniques with offenders is in line with Antonowicz and Ross' (1994) literature review. They emphasized the importance of role-play and skills practices as key components of offender rehabilitation, as rehearsing pro-social skills increases motivation to apply them in real life. Therefore these findings support the use of such techniques to improve pro-social interpersonal skills in offenders.

Interviews conducted with some of the participants highlighted the positive impact of the programme on them. In particular they how their confidence had improved and they felt better able to examine themselves.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations to this research should be noted. The small sample size is one of the biggest limitations in this study. As *Inside Talk* was offered only to a limited number of prisons, there were relatively few participants to be examined. This limits the power of the statistical tests to detect differences between the groups. It is expected that this is the primary reason more significant differences were not observed for some of the skills ratings.

An additional limitation is the short length of follow-up. It was not possible to examine the same measures after a longer period of time had passed because moves to other prisons are common and it can be difficult to locate prisoners. This is unfortunate because it does not allow it to be determined whether the changes that were observed on the last day of the programme were sustained. This is an area that would be useful to examine in future evaluations.

Another limitation is the lack of a control group who did not attend the programme. This means that we cannot be certain that the observed changes occurred as a result of the *Inside Talk* and not some other factors (e.g., simply being in prison, another intervention occurring simultaneously in the prison). Due to the constraints of Geese Theatre Company within the prison, it was not possible to gain access to a control group of participants. As Geese Theatre provide the programme on a temporary residency within the prison, they are under significant time, financial and staffing restraints. As more research is conducted in this area, it is hoped that this type of intervention will receive more recognition in the criminal justice system and consequently more resources can be put in place to select an appropriate control group for future research. It is unlikely that significant changes (especially in a number of different areas) would occur without some sort of intervention, but this cannot be concluded with absolute certainty without a control group. However, as stated earlier, this was an exploratory study intended to provide preliminary

evidence of the impact of the *Inside Talk* programme. Future work addressing the limitations outlined here would provide confirmatory support of these findings.

Conclusions

Overall, the *Inside Talk* programme had a positive impact on the participants who attended it. The participants' level of self-efficacy improved significantly. They also felt significantly more confident in their occupational skills and in dealing with authority. The comments of the participants provide richer detail highlighting the important impact they thought the programme had on them. This study provides support for the not only the utility of the *Inside Talk* programme but also provides support for the continued use of theatre and drama in the criminal justice system. Future studies should also examine/ focus on long term impacts. Considering the lack of recognition of drama-based interventions, it is hoped that these findings will throw some light on the effectiveness of such treatment amongst offenders. Due to the lack of evidence for drama-based work, there is a need for more research to continue to develop this area and address criminogenic needs.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions (Post-Programme)

What were your expectations before you started?

What did you think were going to get out of the Inside Talk programme?

What are your thoughts on it now that you've completed it?

What did you find the most useful?

What did you find the least useful?

Which part do you think had the biggest impact on you?

What do you think had the least impact on you?

What part(s) did you find boring?

What did you feel was missed out?

How do you feel about your future?

Do you feel prepared to deal with reintegration into the community?

What are your goals for the future?