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# I Will Circle Back: A Literature Review of Witnessing in Developmental Transformations

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I Will Circle Back:

A Literature Review of Witnessing in Developmental Transformations

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Drama Therapy

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### Abstract

Witnessing is a core concept of the therapeutic process of drama therapy (Jones, 2007; Johnson, 2009, Sajnani & Johnson, 2014). Major perspectives on witnessing were gleaned from the broader drama therapy literature, including the roles of the audience, therapist, group, techniques, and the self as witnesses within the therapeutic atmosphere. Within one form of drama therapy, Developmental Transformations (DvT), the witnessing circle is used as a tool to highlight and enhance what is being witnessed in the session (Johnson 1991, 1992, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014; Dintino et al., 1996; Mayor, 2010, 2018). This literature review analyzed the limited DvT writing and finds that the witnessing circle is currently being used to play with power dynamics within relationships, to amplify themes of abandonment and loss, and to notice an individual's natural reaction to distress (Dintino et al., 1996; Johnson, 2009; Mayor, 2010, 2018). A self-reflective arts-based research process of taking photos was used to witness and honor myself as the researcher, and to provide additional analysis to the existing literature. A critique is offered about the limited explanation of how the witnessing circle was developed and its role in DvT. Further, the review finds a lack of empirical research on witnessing in DvT, particularly from the perspectives of clients, and a marked lack of structure for when and how to most effectively use the witnessing circle. Recommendations are made for future research into this therapeutic tool.

Keywords: witness, circle, encounter, drama therapy, developmental transformations

### I Will Circle Back: A Literature Review of Witnessing in Developmental Transformations

“A wise old owl sat on an oak. The more he saw, the less he spoke. The less he spoke, the more he heard. Why aren’t we all like that wise old bird?” (nursery rhyme, author and date unknown). I heard this nursery rhyme back in my early teens and little did I know the important role it would play in my passion for witnessing throughout my life. Witnessing is an aspect of human existence that allows us to interact with and notice the world around us. Witnessing fuels wisdom and knowledge; it creates space for personal growth through understanding others and the world around us. To witness is to open yourself up to new ideas and perspectives outside of your own. Witnessing spawns curiosity, and that curiosity is what drives us as a species to evolve, change, and adapt over time. The ability to witness others is what drew me to therapy, and eventually here to my thesis topic. I have always been curious about what I would discover about others if I only listened hard enough.

The North American Drama Therapy Association (NADTA, 2019) defines drama therapy as the systematic use of theatrical techniques that promote therapeutic wellness, insight, and growth. I have been studying the techniques, modalities, and intricacies of drama therapy for the past two years in the hopes of becoming a registered drama therapist. Our classes spent a great deal of time on the building blocks and core concepts of drama therapy. When learning about these core concepts, witnessing stood out to me on a very personal level and I wanted to learn more. I am what you may call a wallflower, someone who has blended into the background and stood on the sidelines my whole life. I used to think there was something wrong with me because of my affinity to watch rather than to jump in. Learning about the importance of witnessing in school was the first time I ever felt like my ability to notice, track, and see others was a gift, rather than an insecurity.

Witnessing is referred to in the literature as “a receptacle of the client’s images” (Johnson, 1992, p. 114). It can involve a therapist tuning into “what arises from stillness, breathing, weight changes, sensations, feelings, images and possible roles” that emerge within a session (Web III, 2018, p. 200-201). Witnessing is a part of many, if not all, of the drama therapy modalities in various ways (Johnson & Emunah, 2009). This capstone thesis begins with critical review on the role of witnessing in drama therapy more generally. Major perspectives of witnessing were gleaned from the literature, including the roles of the audience, therapist, group, techniques, and the self as witnesses within the therapeutic atmosphere, which are synthesized below.

The second half of my literature review will focus on the role of witnessing in a specific modality of drama therapy, Developmental Transformations (DvT), exploring more deeply the reciprocal relationship of witnessing in the playspace and the role of the witnessing circle. Johnson (2009) defined DvT as “a form of drama psychotherapy that is based on an understanding of the process and dynamics of free play” (p. 89). To be honest, when I first read about DvT before school started, I hoped I would never study this modality because it seemed too outlandish and confusing. Little did I know that a short two years later that it would be my passion within the drama therapy field, and I would spend my final semester on campus focusing a thesis on the intricacies of witnessing within the form. The role of witnessing in DvT is multifaceted and intrigued me as a new student to the field. Clients (called ‘players’) use witnessing in order to gain insights on themselves. Practitioners (called ‘players’) utilize witnessing to identify themes, nonverbal behaviors, and patterns that are emerging within the play.

In my review of existing DvT literature, I found that witnessing is one of the core concepts of DvT, but the literature to support the use of the witnessing circle, one of the techniques players use to witness the player and to heighten this aspect in a therapeutic way, is currently limited. The witnessing circle is a white 40'x40' carpet that is given to newly graduated DvT practitioners by the creator of DvT, David Read Johnson. The literature states what the circle is, but does not expand much upon its use and benefit to the therapeutic space.

Furthermore, the literature on witnessing itself in DvT is also scant. The reason it is important to have a thorough understanding of the impacts of witnessing in DvT is because this process informs the assessments and choices that the player makes within the playspace. DvT is described as an embodied encounter with another in the playspace (Johnson, 2009, p. 89). I believe that to be embodied is to be with and to encounter is to witness. In order to be actively present with another, witnessing must be present in the space. In the writing that follows, I summarize my process of reading the current DvT literature to find the scraps of information about the witnessing circle and the concept of witnessing as a whole, in order to put forward a theoretical argument for the value of the witnessing circle to the play.

### **Methods**

This capstone thesis is comprised of a literature review, which first contextualizes witnessing in the broader drama therapy literature and then specifically focuses on the role of witnessing and the witnessing circle in DvT. For the non-DvT related literature, I went to the textbook *Current Approaches in Dramatherapy* (Johnson & Emunah, 2009) to find short, yet encompassing, summaries of the major modalities of drama therapy currently being practiced. While this is by no means a comprehensive exploration of witnessing in the wider drama therapy

literature, it does provide useful context for how DvT's witnessing principles and interventions compare to the field as a whole.

In order to review the current published DvT literature, I conducted a search within the Lesley University library database. The following key terms were used to search for the articles utilized in this paper: developmental transformations or dvt AND drama therapy or dramatherapy. After this, a hand search was completed in major sources of peer-reviewed drama therapy articles in the following journals: *Drama Therapy Review*, *Dramatherapy*, and *The Arts in Psychotherapy* for articles that reference DvT. Next, the library database available on the DvT website was examined for any missing material that had not been found. I also reached out to colleagues whom work in the field of drama therapy for articles that may be pertinent to this research paper. Textbooks that I had utilized throughout schooling were also searched for relevant articles or quotations that referred to witnessing within the context of drama therapy.

Once all the DvT articles and chapters were gathered, they were searched using the find option in Mendeley desktop application for the key words: witness, circle, and witnessing circle, to see if there were direct references to the witnessing circle within the article itself. Direct quotations were cataloged on a Word document and articles were then categorized into one of three categories: articles with direct references to the witnessing circle, articles that did not have a direct reference to the witnessing circle, and articles that must be read due to an inability to utilize the search feature. Articles were read and analyzed with a focus on the role of witness and the witnessing circle for emerging themes, which are reported in the following sections on this capstone.

Throughout the duration of the crafting of this thesis, I kept a journal by my side to jot down thoughts and feelings that emerged for me throughout the reading and processing of each

of the articles. These thoughts spurred many of the continued questions, shortcomings, and themes that developed throughout the process of information gathering. Further, I chose the topic of witnessing because I noticed the power and role of witnessing within my own life and in my personal development as a counselor throughout my time at Lesley University. I was inspired by Mayor's (2018) comparison of DvT as carnivalesque, as carnivals "functioned as a liminal space between real life and art, festivity and destruction, beauty and ugliness; it is the embodiment of ambivalence" (p. 242). I, too, see the DvT as carnivalesque, and I used this idea to inspire the arts-based research process of taking photos that I used to witness and honor myself throughout my discussion process. The carnival was a place to go to see the obscene, the unique, the striking, the shocking, and the unusual in the world. The carnival was all about witnessing the differences in others; DvT also welcomes this idea of witnessing what typically may hide in the shadows. These photos evoked themes, further insights, and inspired questions that fueled the discussion section of my thesis. As Webb III (2018) said, "my body is such a source of wisdom" (p. 200). I utilized the wisdom that comes from authentic, embodied work to inform my artistic responses and my interpretations of them. This artistic response allowed me to honor my role and experiences as the researcher and provided additional forms of art-based data and analysis of the content on witnessing currently available in the literature.

## **Literature Review**

### **Examples of Witnessing in Drama Therapy**

As I read *Current Approaches to Drama Therapy* (Johnson & Emunah, 2009), a core drama therapy text that contains an encompassing summary of the current modalities of drama therapy most widely practiced in North America, I started to notice witnessing themes appear across these modalities. Similarly, Jones (2007) includes witnessing as one of the core concepts

of drama therapy. Witnessing occurs within therapy from a number of different perspectives. The following are the viewpoints that I found while doing my review.

The most common or apparent type of witnessing within drama therapy is done by the therapist. Psychodrama, Rehearsals for Growth, Role Theory, and Insight Improvisation describe the role of the therapist as a coach or director when working with clients (Garcia & Buchanan, 2009; Insight Improvisation, 2019; Landy, 1993, 2009; Wiener, 2009). In forms like Authentic Sound, Movement, and Drama, the therapist can also enroll as a stationary witness, watching the client without including input (Lewis, 2009). In addition, within Role Theory, clients are able to look at a list of roles, including a witness, and identify roles they may play in their life that are helping or hindering their success (Landy, 1993).

There is also the role of ‘the other’ who can play witness within a therapeutic space. When doing group work, there are methods such as The Five Phase Model, Narradrama, and Theater of the Oppressed that place importance on the view and perspective of the group as witness to other’s story (Dunne, 2009; Emunah, 2009; Sajjani, 2009). In some work, an outside audience is present for the therapeutic process. For example, in Playback Theatre, the audience is able witness the personal stories they have told being enacted out to them by a troupe of actors (Salas, 2009). In Self-Revelatory performance, a person is performing their own story in front of an audience of peers and/or strangers (Bailey, 2009). An outside perspective can shed light on things that may have been overlooked or missed within direct action happening in the therapeutic space.

Lastly, there are tools and techniques that can be used to assist a therapist in creating space for witnessing within the drama. In Psychodrama, tools such as mirroring and doubling can give the client the perspective of seeing their words or actions played out in front of them by

another (Garcia & Buchanan, 2009). Role Theory utilizes a role inventory that allows clients to look at roles they may play in their lives and to see the impact that is having on their being (Landy, 2009). Importantly, included in this list of roles is the role of witness. In addition, modalities like ENACT and Trauma Drama use a tool called replay that allows a chance to role play problems over again in order to practice working through difficult situations (Feldman, Jones, & Ward, 2009; Trauma Center at Justice Resource Institute, 2019). When working with a therapist, a client can also experience self-witnessing in the therapeutic space. In Theater of the Oppressed, there is a form of work called The Rainbow of Desire that allows clients to speak to a time when they personally felt oppressed and are given the chance to explore the emotional spectrum that came up for them in that moment, thus encouraging self-witnessing (Sajnani, 2009).

Butler's (2017) qualitative study looked at the issues surrounding the overlapping of education and therapy within the academic space when training new drama therapists and provided recommendations for institutions providing this training to best support students. Butler worked with three drama therapy graduate programs, conducted a 90-minute focus groups comprised of students at each school, and ran two-hour interviews with the professors to collect data for his research (p. 29). The witnessing circle was not directly discussed in this study, however the concepts of witnessing in the classroom did emerge within the writing. The students noted that it was important for them to participate in drama therapy in order to learn how to facilitate it themselves, meaning that they would at times step into the roles of therapist, client, and audience for assignments in the classroom (p. 30). These roles assisted in the modeling and learning of drama therapy practices (p. 34). It can be said then that witnessing the other may increase individual learning capabilities in an academic space. In addition, students reported that

the cohort group dynamic impacted and heightened learning for them (p. 30). The dynamics of the student cohort were not the sole focus of this paper, so it was only a briefly mentioned by the author, however it also highlights the role of witnessing within a group (rather than just between teacher/therapist and student/client). While not the focus of Butler's (2017) article, his work provokes questions about the differences and similarities that appear within academic and therapeutic groups when thinking about the role of witnessing within the playspace.

### **Witnessing Within the DvT Playspace**

DvT is unique in its ability to utilize witnessing in the playspace. DvT employs techniques and tools, such as the witnessing circle, that emphasize moments of witnessing in the playspace. Johnson (2009) has described the playspace as "a mutual agreement among the participants that everything that goes on between them is a representation or portrayal of real or imagined being" (p. 93). This means that the work done in DvT may or may not look like the specific trauma or issues that the player is working on, but that themes of the trauma still end up in the playspace within the relationships and content of the play. This play creates space for each of these five perspectives of witnessing, therapist, audience, group, techniques and self, to be present in the therapeutic realm. The following articles describe the witnessing that can occur within DvT, without mentioning the specifics of using the witnessing circle.

Pitre, Sajnani, and Johnson's (2015) chapter discussed the practicality of using DvT as a therapeutic treatment for children who have experienced trauma, including theoretical connections between existing trauma treatment principles and DvT play and provide a short vignette to illustrate this method. In this example, the playor was able, through multiple exposure centered DvT sessions with a five-year-old client, to desensitize them to their traumatic memories and decrease the intrusive symptoms they were experiencing in their daily life (p. 51).

Although this chapter does not directly reference the witnessing circle, it does discuss the client's experience to the exposure piece of the therapeutic work. The authors state that in the beginning of treatment therapists are more likely to situate themselves in the role of the perpetrator in the space (p. 43). But as the therapists enact the "victim roles with such enthusiasm and elaboration...the child inevitably becomes interested in having a turn with them as well, and allows themselves to re-play the fearful situation from the vulnerable position" (Pitre et al., 2015, p. 43). In this method of play, the child's ability to witness their therapist model play and demonstrate the capacity to enact more vulnerable roles in service of desensitization is a core part of the therapeutic process. This gradual transition of the child switching from the perpetrator role into victim provides some evidence that witnessing through the playor's modeling may aid in the therapeutic goals of trauma treatment.

Pitre, Mayor, and Johnson (2016) examined the use of brief fifteen minute DvT sessions as a way to reduce children's stress within school day, providing a theoretical justification for DvT short-form as an appropriate stress reduction tool, outlining the method for this form, and providing a case illustration. The authors concluded that these short-form therapeutic sessions might assist students in identifying and working through relational stressors that were impacting their behavior in the classroom (p. 178). Due to the brevity of these one-on-one sessions, the witnessing circle does not appear to be a part of this form of DvT work. That being said, the therapist's ability to witness the client through noticing appearing themes and naming the stressor is that much more apparent due to the time sensitivity of the work at hand. One of the phases of this work, the moment of recognition, "occurs when the student realizes that the source of the stress that the playor is playing is really someone from their lives" (Pitre et al., 2016, p. 174). This realization, which can be described as a form of witnessing the self through the other,

is part of the stress relief for the child (p. 174). This specific form of witnessing contains much of the therapeutic benefit for the client, as this moment of being seen and having their feelings validated by another is the impetus for the stress reduction.

DvT can be conducted both in individual or in group sessions. The witnessing circle is not a part of the structure of group work. However, authors have mentioned the importance of group witnessing through embodiment. Butler (2012) talked about how DvT can assist individuals with schizophrenia to strengthen their ability to recognize facial expression and emotions in others through play (p. 90). Parkinson (2008) noted that when they worked with patients with Alzheimer's that they saw an "observable increase in positive affect and decrease in negative affect, increase in interpersonal interaction and decrease in withdrawal, as well as an increase in emotional expression and sense of community" (p. 215). While working with children in an acute inpatient setting, Reynolds (2011) stated that DvT can build group cohesion and assist in integrating group members who may have difficulties working together (p. 306-308). Through witnessing the group function, each of these mentioned skills are built and fostered. Furthermore, early stages of group play (e.g. entrance structure, unison sound and movement, defining) encourage group members to witness and mirror the actions and sounds of members of the group, working together to build a sense of flow and energy.

### **The Witnessing Circle**

The witnessing circle was first introduced into DvT literature within a transcript of a session in the early 1990s (Johnson, 1992), to the best of this author's knowledge. Before this, there was mention of the therapist leaving to a pre-determined place in the playspace to witness the client, but there was nothing specific to mark this space (Johnson, 1991). Johnson (1992) discussed this form of witnessing as "a distancing maneuver that helps the client become more

aware of projected aspects of him or herself, via the “look” of the therapist” (p. 127). Johnson also mentioned that this use of witnessing by the playor increases the player’s ability to notice the transference that is occurring between them (Johnson, 1991, p. 291). There is no discussion in the literature of the creation process or the integration of the witnessing circle into the playspace, only that it has been informed by DMT and authentic movement (Johnson, 1991, 1992). While the beginnings of the witnessing circle are vague, it is clear that Johnson valued the role of witnessing within the DvT playspace.

Within his text *Current Approaches in Drama Therapy*, Johnson (2009) discussed the basics and building blocks of DvT. This is the first writing of Johnson’s that actually breaks down some of the reasoning behind his usage of the witnessing circle in DvT. When using the witnessing circle in a transcript of a session, Johnson (2009) described his choice by saying that “having evoked the anxiety situation and the internal self-criticism, the therapist heightened the tension by leaving her alone with her “deed”. He wondered what she would do” (p. 101). This sentence informed me that one of the reasons that the witnessing circle is being used in the space was to elicit a reaction from the client.

In his instructional manuals on how to practice DvT specifically written for training clinician, Johnson (2005, 2013) discussed the witnessing circle in more concrete terms. The witnessing circle is placed in the corner of the room along with a few pillows (Johnson, 2005, p. 22). The witnessing circle can be used by the playor “to observe quietly both the player and one’s internal sensations, waiting for the impulse or image to form that will bring one back into the play” (Johnson, 2013, p. 80). The witnessing circle gives space for the player to witness the other and themselves in reaction to the playor leaving the space. There is no discussion or recommendations for when the witnessing circle could or should be used in a DvT session. There

is also no mention of the history behind the witnessing circle, its value to the work, or the impact of use on the player. These documents serve to discuss its physical presence in the space as opposed to its clinical presence.

Critical to understanding the role of witnessing in DvT is exploring the relationship of DvT principles and practices to theatrical traditions. In their theoretical work, Dintino, Forrester, James, Johnson and Schnee (1996) looked at the differences, similarities, and influences that Grotowski's work in theater had on the practice of DvT. Grotowski's work spoke a great deal about the "*encounter* between the actor and the spectator" as the crux of theatrical performance (Dintino et al., 1996, p. 293). DvT, too, values the importance of the encounter as the center of the work within the playspace. Witnessing is a key aspect of an encounter because it hinges on the belief that to authentically and wholly be with another is to see another. The authors used the metaphor that the player in the playspace is like a living marionette, a toy for which the player to engage with that also has the ability to react, respond, and reflect back to the player about the quality and themes within the encounter (p. 297). Not only does the player reflect what they have witnessed back to the client, but they also interpret aspects of what has been put upon them by the player.

In addition to this theoretical exploration of encounter, Dintino et al.'s (1996) direct transcript of a DvT session demonstrates the role of witnessing can be seen in multiple different ways. Some of the specific techniques and tools used within DvT are mirroring "repetition of dramatic elements observed in the player's behavior", repeating "playing previously developed scenes, roles, or images in order for the player to try new variations", transformation-to-the-here-and-now "transforming the scene by becoming oneself as the player and addressing the player as the player and expressing a feeling about the ongoing process of the session", and action

interpretation “transforming the scene into a previously played personal scene in order to illustrate the connection between the two” (Johnson, 2013, p. 72-73). While this article does not describe or analyze the use of the witnessing circle outside of the transcript, the witnessing circle was utilized twice by the therapist within the play. The therapist stepped into the witnessing circle when the player was playing with themes of suicide and in a later discussion of longing and desire (p. 302-303). In both instances, the playor noticed the struggle that the player was having of this idea of leaving and leaned into this discomfort by themselves metaphorically exiting the play and entering the witnessing circle. This intervention appeared to give the player the ability to sit with themselves in the playspace and witness their own reactions and feelings to being left. In my opinion, the witnessing circle was the catalyst for insight and clarity for the client when working on challenging themes emerging in their life.

Another aspect of the witnessing circle that has been discussed in the DvT literature is its ability to emphasize and play with power and privilege. Miller, Vgenopoulou, and Johnson, (2015) discuss how the witnessing circle was used within a relationship between an intern and her supervisor. Within the transcript, the circle was first used when the play circled around abandonment due to a supervisor leaving on vacation (p. 43). When the two were chasing each other around the space the playor used the technique of transformation-to-the-here-and-now to highlight the power he holds as the playor by stating “Oh yes I will...I can go in there if I want to! It's my space, and I have the real power, I am the boss, the supervisor!” (p. 43). The second time the circle was used was when the intern began to challenge the power dynamics between her and her supervisor (p. 47). This article gave the reader an inside look into more than just the words being spoke between the playor and player, but also looked at the internal motivation for the actions taken within the space. This insight allowed me to see that the circle was being used

when the playor noticed that the player was challenging them in some form. This challenge directly reflects the difference in power that they walk into the playspace with, and the playspace's ability to shift that power through the play.

Mayor (2010) conducted a literature review and provided a theoretical article that examines the ethics of power that emerge in the playspace with clients. Mayor argued that we must acknowledge the unavoidable power differences that arise in the playspace in order to interact with the client in a fully authentic way (p. 8). One of the ways that Mayor noticed power within the playspace is through the use of the witnessing circle. Mayor wrote that:

In DvT, the witnessing circle is a literal space in the room in an individual session where the therapist sits outside of the play for a short period to "witness" their client. The inclusion of the witnessing circle as one of the therapist's tools has important implications in terms of power and the gaze. Rather than reinstating the power dynamic, it transparently draws attention to and invites the client to play with this relationship. The circle may stimulate play around issues of authority, hierarchal structures, being seen and abandonment issues. Thus, participants are invited to "play with the unplayable" and taboo topics are made possible through discrepancy, humour and the agreement not to cause real harm. Since DvT relies on the encounter between the client/s and the therapist in an empty room, this act of witnessing becomes more prominent and unavoidable. (p. 5-6)

Mayor showed that the witnessing circle highlights and gives space to explore power dynamics within the playspace. The act of being able to witness the other, and the power that comes with that gaze creates a difference between playor and player. The witnessing circle is being used as a tool for playing with difficult topics.

In another article, Mayor (2018) also translated a live performance and talk that she conducted into a written form so readers could explore the impacts of power and privilege that can be woven into the relationship dynamics of therapy. Throughout her piece, Mayor incorporated several case vignettes to expound upon and to inform her noticing of difference and diversity within the playspace. She spends much of the beginning discussing the power of a look, because as simple and natural as a look can be, it also carries a great deal of power within it (p. 238). In this vignette, Mayor (2018) describes her ability and power as a therapist to read a look and see so much while at the same time missing so much:

*I am looking at them. They are looking at the floor. I wonder if they are dissociating.*

*Softly, I say, 'Where did you go?' They say, 'How did you know?' ...I look at them again, say, 'Because I see you.' They say, 'No, you don't.' We smile at each other, filled with bittersweetness, with loss, with the attempt to see, and failings past and present. (p. 239)*

Mayor showcased the honesty behind what may, and inevitably will, get missed within an encounter with another. While she was able to use her witnessing skills to notice their dissociation from the space, there was also this nod that no matter how much she was able to see, she would never be able to see the whole picture when it comes to someone else's lived perspective. This is one of the few articles that talked about the things that can be missed within the therapeutic relationship and the inevitable power that comes from being in the space as a therapist.

This article by Mayor (2018) dove into a brief summary of some of the theory and reasoning behind the usage of the witnessing circle within DvT. She stated that the witnessing circle at times could be utilized to bring attention to the power differences between the client and therapist (p. 243). She noted that when playing with these power dynamics, clients may "pull the

rug out from under us, occupy the circle, ignore us, shout obscenities” (Mayor, 2018, p. 243).

The witnessing circle does not change the power structure between the therapist and client, but it allows space to challenge it and play with it when power comes up in the playspace, which is not a phenomenon often offered in regular life. This example is the only that I have found that shows how the clients interact with the witnessing circle within DvT.

*Trauma Informed Drama Therapy* (Sajnani & Johnson, 2014) is an edited collection about the effects of drama therapy in the treatment of trauma that was co-created by DvT practitioners, drama therapists, teachers, professors, students, and a nurse. Much of the literature discusses the use of DvT as many of the authors worked for the Post Traumatic Stress Center (a clinic owned by the founder of DvT). To my surprise, of the 415-page book, there are only two brief mentions of utilizing the witnessing circle within this work, both of which are in the same chapter written by Johnson. In the first, the witnessing circle was used for a caretaker when working with children under 12 who had experienced trauma so that they were passively present until it was a good time to transition into a comforting role (Johnson, 2014, p. 77). The other mention of the witnessing circle was in a case study with a young client with a severe trauma history in which the circle was used to give the player the chance to sit in comfort after an intimate and safe moment with the playor (Johnson, 2009; Johnson, 2014). Both of these cases involve children, which makes me wonder if the circle is designed for children as opposed to older clients, but there is no discussion of the developmental differences in witnessing or with the circle within the text.

### **Witnessing in the Greater DvT Community and Literature**

While there was little direct mention of the witnessing circle in *Trauma Informed Drama Therapy* (Sajnani & Johnson, 2014), there are insights into the use of witnessing within the

playspace. In a transcript with a young boy and his soon to be adoptive mother, Pitre (2014) discussed how witnessing his caretaker in a protective role assisted him to bond with her in the playspace, even calling her mom when reaching out for help (p. 253). Omens (2014) wrote about the impact of witnessing on the process of grieving the loss of a loved one. Witnessing is woven throughout the book in various ways, and these two examples highlight ways that witnessing can begin the process of healing for clients.

Importantly, the discussion around DvT is expanding its reach outside of the therapeutic space and into the community. Sajnani's (2012) theoretical article relays the importance for there to be more art-based research within the therapeutic community. She highlights the learning potential and the benefits that improvisation can bring to an academic space (p. 83). This article is not specifically about the utilization of the witnessing circle or even DvT in a therapeutic manner, but the insights the author makes are informed by their training as a DvT practitioner and DvT theory is woven throughout the article (p. 80). When describing the importance in DvT of noticing what is coming through instead of what is visibly coming up in the play and in research, Sajnani (2012) stated that:

By drawing attention to the slippages, leakages and the spaces between carefully created forms, new information is gathered about knowledge itself. Knowledge emerges as a yearning, a desire, as a verb rather than a noun. Knowledge is not cold, hard fact but a process filled with sentiment, tension and temporary investments. (p. 82)

She is stating that new ideas stem from noticing and witnessing what is appearing. Sajnani argues that by using improvisation-based techniques, such as DvT, researchers can see these new ideas for themselves. This concept of using improvisation to witness the self in new ways

highlights the importance that the role of witnessing can play in many realms of life, even outside the therapeutic space, which is where my curiosities lie.

Johnson (2004), in a keynote at a DvT Conference, discussed how the playspace, and life itself, boils down to repetition and proximity, time and space (p. 9). He discussed the way we play with these concepts of the space between one another both in and out of the DvT space. Again, the witnessing circle was not mentioned within this speech, and witnessing itself is only truly found when reading between the lines. Johnson talked about the impact and the processing of being near the other, but does not spend much time talking about what it means to be with the other or to see or be seen by them. Instead, he discussed the reactions humans can have to being close with another, stating, “These responses to proximity: withdrawal, freezing, and transaction, are the challenges we face in our work in the playspace, for these are the ways of leaving the playspace” (Johnson, 2004, p. 6-7). These responses that Johnson noted here are also reactions that one can experience when being seen or witnessed by someone. Being in proximity to another is to be witnessed by another.

Landers’ (2012) literature review and description of a new application of DvT focuses on how Urban Play, an adapted form of DvT used out in the greater community as opposed to within the therapeutic realm, can contribute to change within society. Landers uses vignettes to showcase how people in the community witness the players and how they react or interact with them. This form of witnessing seems to play with changing the power dynamic that typically comes between playor and player because it is the players that have the power and choice to engage in the play. While there is no use of a witnessing circle, as this is a traveling and public form of DvT, witnessing is essential because without it, others would not see the play or engage with it.

## Discussion

### WITHess



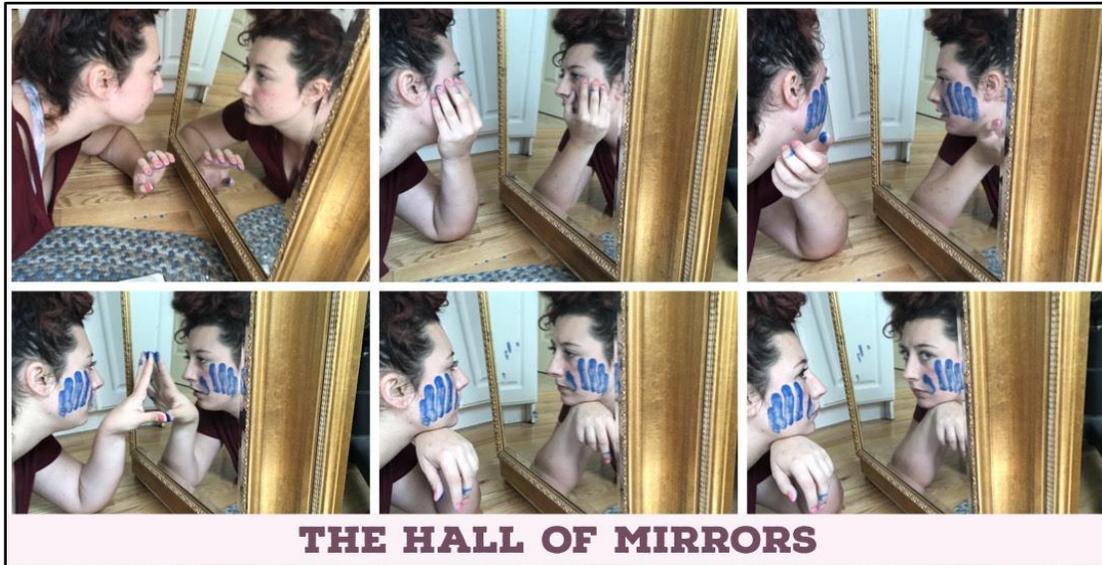
When I was in school, I was in a class with Angelica Pinna-Perez that challenged me to break down the meanings and the smaller words within larger words that inform its definition. This kind of word play is talked about as a form of varielation, finding and creating the slight differences in patterns in play, in the *Text for Practitioners 2* (Johnson, 2013). As I was listening to Pitre's (2018) podcast *This DvT Life*, I was brought to this imagery of the WITH within witness. When I was able to see this WITH in the word, and I was taken aback. I have spent a great deal of time thinking about the encounter and witnessing and how the two intermingle, but then I saw it clear as day within the word itself. Witnessing is about the WITH, it is about the encounter of two or more individuals coming together and noticing one another. DvT creates a space for this WITHess to occur, because as Dintino et al. (1996) stated "developmental transformations highlights whatever allows this encounter to occur and de-emphasizes whatever interferes with it" (p. 296). DvT provides a platform for genuine human interaction, and the result of that honesty is the creation of moments of WITHessing.

When I was creating this image, I wanted to represent how even within WITHessing, there is still a piece of me missing in the space that is obscured from view. Johnson (2013) describes a DvT concept related to this called po'a, calling absence a human fundamental instability of being (p. 62). One of the natural fears that people may experience is the fear of being alone; I myself am working through this fear concurrently with writing this thesis. I had to push off the completion of this thesis due to personal problems that came to a head this past winter. This choice, while healthy for me in the moment, meant that my classmates would continue to work without me, and I would be completing this assignment alone. I have battled this fear head on by engulfing myself in readings and solitary library visits and late nights working in my bedroom. I wanted to encapsulate both this idea of not being seen in connection with another, but also the hiding that comes with this fear of being alone or unseen. I placed the word upon my arm because the arms are what can reach out to others, but at the same time my arm is placed as close to me as possible, showing my own personal resistance that can come from being witnessed by another.

Many of the articles I read discussed the importance of the encounter within witnessing and in the DvT playspace (Butler, 2012; Dintino et al., 1996; Johnson, 2005 & 2013; Johnson & Emunah, 2009; Parkinson, 2008; Reynolds, 2011). The ability to see and encounter the other in an authentic manner creates space for internal growth and change. As Butler (2012) stated, "by utilizing the playspace, DvT allows the client to play with human interaction" (p. 90). This interaction in embodied WITHess creates the chance to learn, fail, succeed, and try again to learn how to be with another. Each player has something individual they are working on, and perhaps group work captures individuals with similar treatment goals. DvT is a unique space that allows for both witnessing and WITHessing to occur through the use of play. I believe WITHessing is

important to informing our clinical work because it highlights the importance of the relationship within the therapeutic realm. To witness is to see someone, and to WITness is to be with someone. Together, this play on words encapsulates the dynamic and heart of the playor/player relationship.

### **The Role of Witnessing in DvT**



As I created this image, I wanted to play with the idea of seeing the self reflected in a mirror. The mirror here is a representation of the ways, tools, and people that we have the ability to see ourselves in. When I was creating this image set, I was filled with this craving to change something about myself and see it reflected back at me, transforming my image of myself into something slightly different, which is where the face paint came into play. I used this space to witness myself make a change and saw how it made me feel, altering my static views and perceptions that I hold of myself. The final image looks to the camera, because the camera is another perspective of witnessing utilized in all of these artistic responses. As Sinner (2011) noted when they explored their own artistic responses through photography, “Photography can be applied to life stories, making photographs a way to trace self in the world” (p. 70). This image showed me how witnessing can leave me feeling vulnerable and curious at the same time.

I was left wanting to look at witnessing as a whole in the DvT literature, seeing as much of what I found in my review encompasses so many views of witnessing in the playspace.

Within the grand scheme of drama therapy, there are the five different perspectives that witnessing can take in the therapeutic realm: witnessing by the playor, group, audience, player, and through applied techniques. DvT is unique in a sense that it can encapsulate all of these forms of witnessing within the playspace. While the audience perspective is not as common in DvT as the perspectives, as a student training in the field I have had several different chances to experience being an audience member through classes, at trainings, and in conference spaces. This is also briefly discussed in Butler's (2017) article, as students reported having strong emotional reactions to witnessing others within the classroom (p. 31). In addition, at DvT conferences there have often been three designated, silent witness throughout the conference who sit in a witnessing circle during each of the workshops without participating verbally or physically. Their job is to be an audience to the work that is done, before having an opportunity to playfully express what they have witnessed during the closing ceremony of the conference. What this multiplicity in perspectives of witnessing means to me and my research is that this is a key role to the work being done in the DvT community.

What I found is that witnessing is important to the work of DvT for many different reasons. Within the literature, there were examples of how witnessing the playor allowed the player to play with difficult topics and roles in their life (Dintino et al., 1996; Pitre et al., 2015; Pitre et al., 2016; Reynolds, 2011; Sajani et al., 2014). Witnessing was also used to assist the players in noticing schemas and the root of difficulties arising in their life (Johnson, 2014; Pitre et al., 2016). There was also mention of how witnessing allows for a beneficial relationship to blossom between playor and player (Dintino et al., 1996; Johnson & Emunah, 2009; Mayor,

2010; Mayor, 2018; Parkinson, 2008; Pitre, 2018; Reynolds, 2011). Witnessing is creating the space for change in the players life in several different manners.

Given that witnessing appears to be an integral part of DvT, it is important to consider why there is a lack of literature addressing this topic and process. One thing I noticed in my readings was that not only are there different kinds of witnessing, but that there are also several ways to describe the process of witnessing. For example, some of the terms or phrases that were used throughout the literature that were synonymous with the word ‘witness’ were: noticing, coming up, paying close attention to, seeing, looking at, alert to, drawing attention to, and focuses on. What I am *seeing* here is a lack of consistent language around the terms of witnessing in the playspace. There are currently a wide variety of academic words used to describe this phenomenon, making it nearly impossible for me to get an idea of exactly what to *look* for. I believe there is value to the diversity of words being used for this subject, however without context for all of the language being used, it is hard to organize the wide variety of ways witnessing is in the DvT space, as it is currently under the guise of multiple different synonyms.

### Witnessing Circle Findings



When I was creating this image, I wanted to encompass my feelings around how the witnessing circle felt like an enigma to me throughout my research. It felt like hunting for a needle in a haystack. I was reading so much literature and I was lucky if I found a sentence in an article even mentioning the circle. Of all the literature I read for this thesis, I found that five articles (Dintino et al., 1996; Johnson, 1992; Mayor, 2010, 2018; Miller et al., 2015), two books (Johnson & Emunah, 2009; Sajnani & Johnson, 2014), and both volumes of the *Text for Practitioners* (Johnson 2005, 2013) mentioned the witnessing circle. Some are as brief as a mention of its usage, and the largest being a paragraph about its use in the playspace. What is striking in all of this is that only two articles mentioned above have not had input from the creator of the witnessing circle, David Read Johnson.

As the witnessing circle stands right now, I believe there is not enough information in circulation to understand its current use, effectiveness, or meaning in the therapeutic playspace. Some authors have briefly mentioned personal usage of the witnessing circle within their practice (Dintino et al., 1996; Johnson, 2009; Mayor, 2010, 2018). Within these specific examples, themes of power, being seen, longing and abandonment could be seen when using the circle (Johnson et al., 1996; Mayor, 2010). There were only two transcripts I came across that explained the playor's internal process in the moment as to why they utilized the witnessing circle in the play (Johnson, 2009; Miller et al., 2015). The question Johnson asked, what would she do, is essential to the process of being seen and witnessed in the playspace. As I talked about the WITHess before, part of witnessing is being together with another. The witnessing circle gives an opportunity to play with the other, the space or separation from the other. The themes circling the witnessing circle, to me, seem relational in nature. The circle, then, is giving the

space to explore what happens in a relationship when someone takes a step back or leaves a situation.

While I found a small amount of discussion around the witnessing circle and its use in the space, I am left wondering if it is something that is essential for the DvT playspace to function fully, or if players could function without it? Is there a way that the players can step out of the play without the distinct delineation of the witnessing circle, or does it aid the play in creating discrepancy for this action? Currently, the majority of the writings about it come from the creator of DvT, Johnson. Johnson is in charge of deciding who is ready to complete level two DvT training and is also responsible for handing out a witnessing circle as a graduation gift to those who graduate. He is one of the few DvT authors who talk about the circle in the space, so it can be assumed that he sees it as an asset to the DvT playspace. I wish to hear more voices on this matter, since there could be issues of power linked to the witnessing circle, as the creator may have a personal connection to the circle's meaning and presentation. Having perspectives on the relative importance of the witnessing circle to other players would be an important part of future research. It is possible that there is a lack of literature surrounding the witnessing circle in DvT because overall there is a scarcity of research within the DvT and greater drama therapy community as a whole.

I propose that a qualitative study would be beneficial to understanding the community's usage of the witnessing circle in the playspace. A qualitative study would be ideal because this would give the participants more space to express their own personal views and to share their experiences. This study could be conducted with active DvT players, students, and retirees to see what their thoughts and opinions are of the use and presence of the witnessing circle in their playspace with clients. Seeing as only one author has written about it without the input of the one

who created it (Mayor, 2010, 2018), more voices and perspectives need to be collected to see if other practitioners utilize it in the space, and if so how and why. An online survey with qualitative questions could be a way of reaching as many people as possible; it could be sent out through email or posted on drama therapy pages and resources. Another way to collect the data could be to conduct in-person interviews or focus groups at a conference, perhaps at the NADTA's annual conference or a DvT conference.

### Witnessing Circle on the Client



When I was completing the literature review for my thesis, my lens for the work was focused in on the playor's use for the witnessing circle. As I dove further into the research, I realized there was another perspective I was not acknowledging, and it is that of the player. I was taken aback to find that there was not a great deal of discussion surrounding the impacts of witnessing and the use of the witnessing circle on the player. While many authors writing about DvT inferred meaning and spoke to the benefits of the witnessing circle's use, only one article directly described a client's reactions to it in the playspace (Mayor, 2018). Even in this description, the client's reaction is filtered through the author's rendering of this moment and

does not draw on a client interview or a survey about this witnessing circle experience or other times in the playspace.

As a student and client of DvT, I have my own multiplicity of perspectives to balance as I write and analyze this section of work. I used this image set that I titled The Dunk Tank to encapsulate the multiplicity of my own views. As I created this set, I imagined the player's multiple attempts at witnessing, throwing out observations and noticings again and again until eventually they hit that lever that sent me into the pool. In these images, we can only see how I fall into the pool and nothing more of my perspective. Was the water warm or was it frigid? Was it a shock to my system or refreshing on a hot summer day? Did I want to fall into the pool or was it a coping mechanism to avoid the witnessing? Currently the body of literature is missing this perspective as well.

Therefore, in addition to the studies I have mentioned above, I would also be curious to conduct a qualitative study to gain insight on clients' perspectives of the witnessing circle. Since the work is in service of them, I think it would be beneficial to the community to get a better understanding of how being witnessed in the space effects clients and, even more specifically, how the player's use of the witnessing circle effects them in the therapeutic space. Without this knowledge, as practitioners we are missing a piece of the therapeutic puzzle. Gaining insight into the players' perspectives could help to generate theory and best practices about the use of the witnessing circle within DvT. This perspective is important to include so that the players' natural hunches for utilizing this tool in the space can be supported by research, as the witnessing circle is currently being utilized without published research behind it.

One of the things that I am taking away from this work that I have spent months gathering, analyzing, and critiquing is that there just needs to be more clarity and discussion

around the topics of witnessing and the witnessing circle in the DvT literature. The field is new, and I must accept that there may be a lack of literature due to the fact that we as a community are really crafting and shaping this work together as I study it. As I witness the growth of our field, I want to honor the perspectives that we and our clients hold in tandem to our growing pains, and to provide a call to action to more deeply examine and study this aspect of our work.

While the discussion around the witnessing circle is currently limited, what I did learn is that witnessing as a whole is essential to the work done within DvT. DvT is uniquely set up so that there are moments where witnessing can occur within the play naturally, and also that there are tools and structures that built into the format of DvT the player can utilize, such as the witnessing circle, that allow for heighten witnessing and insight for the player. I would recommend that practitioners track the differences between natural witnessing and supported witnessing to see the differences within the player in these moments. In order to build the literature around the utilization of the witnessing circle, there must first be evidence that supports it. Gathering insights, or arguments, about the use of the witnessing circle is key to growing our field and the literature base that supports the work that we do.

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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor:** Christine Mayor