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# TaRole Theory: Alchemizing the Drama Therapy Role Sort with the Tarot

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**TaRole Theory: Community Engagement Project**

**Alchemizing the Drama Therapy Role Sort with the Tarot**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Drama Therapy

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**Abstract**

In this mixed-methods qualitative and arts-based research project, the researcher conducted a community engagement workshop infusing role theory into a personalized tarot reading for each participant. The participants considered the types of roles they currently play and have played in their lives, gave themselves a tarot reading with the researcher's guidance, and created individual expressive arts presentations based on their reflections of their readings. Data were extrapolated from the prevalent themes observed in the reflections and the performances, which included protection, self-limitation, openness, trust in self, and connection and collaboration. Lack of a focused population was one limitation of this research. Results were artistic reflections of the data collected and the emergent themes from the group of participants.

*Keywords:* Drama therapy, role theory, role sort, tarot, qualitative research, arts based research.

*Author Identity Statement*: It may come as no surprise to the reader that this author identifies as a white, witchy, bisexual woman from southern New England.

TaRole Theory: Alchemizing the Drama Therapy Role Sort with the Tarot

## Introduction

Imagine you enter your drama therapist's office. It's dimly lit, extremely cozy, and there is an air of incense and patchouli that embraces your senses. Your therapist beckons you to their table where a candle is lit next to a deck of cards. They invite you to shuffle the deck, imbuing it with your energy, and when it feels just right you place the cards on the table. Your therapist flips a few cards over, one at a time, to reveal images on the other side that correspond with different facets of yourself - perhaps in terms of a specific issue you're working through. You both examine the cards' messages together, discussing how these images and archetypal figures might be salient for the types of roles you play in your life or situation. Does this open your eyes to how events have been playing out? Do the cards elucidate certain patterns you carry? Perhaps it affirms your lived experience? In whatever way the conversation transpires, the session ends with a different perspective of your life, through new interventions unlike anything you've experienced before.

This blended theory is what I want my capstone thesis to encapsulate. My research questions were: What would happen if tarot was used as an intervention for a role theory assessment? What does tarot add to drama therapy? My interest in tarot – its symbolism, archetypes, and storytelling found in the traditional Rider Waite Colman Smith illustrations of the tarot deck – have helped me find ways to sort out my inner thoughts in a tangible way. The drama therapy intervention of role theory is used to identify and expand the number of roles that a client embodies in their daily life. I wonder, what if the two practices were combined: plucking the archetypal randomness of tarot with the framework of drama therapy, specifically Robert Landy's role theory (Ramsden et al., 2021)? The working title of this method is TaRole Theory,

which perhaps looks complicated in writing but sounds like the words "tarot" and "role" combined in a portmanteau. I conducted the research for this theory with both a qualitative and an arts-based lens. I believe the mixed-methods approach opened up this rather narrow and niche theory and also deepened my personal relationship to both tarot and drama therapy. The hope is that I can use this approach for my future practice as a drama therapist.

Many researchers have conducted studies with Landy's work at the forefront (Ramsden & Landy, 2021). Playing through different roles, even ones that a client does not normally embody, can help them return to a sense of normalcy when their world is upended, as exemplified in a study in the children's hospital setting (Ofer & Kessari, 2022). Alternatively, tarot can be used as a projective therapeutic intervention (Semetsky, 2010), utilizing the positions of the cards as well as their inherent archetypal imagery to deepen a sense of understanding within the client's own lived experience.

I'm curious what it might feel like for different clients who either have a lot of experience with tarot and drama therapy or no experience with either whatsoever. How might the client respond to the aesthetic distances that both role theory and tarot provide? Is tarot a useful entry point for drama therapy? And, how can I ensure cultural humility is present with this practice?

The goal was to meld the two theories together – role theory and tarot as a projective device – to create a blended therapeutic approach. Using Robert Landy's role theory as the framework, and tarot cards as the content, my curiosity was to discover what could be observed when tarot is used as a projective technique onto clients' role taxonomy.

**Literature Review**

**Role Theory**

It is human nature to take on specific patterns of behavior, or roles, that help individuals interact with the world around them. Many times, these roles are borne of necessity to navigate the individual's environment with the least amount of uncertainty. For several individuals, the number of these roles tend to be finite or not in alignment with their needs. (Ramsden et al., 2021). The purposes of role theory are to first identify the current roles that the client embodies, and then the goal is to enable the client to expand the number and types of roles that they play to allow for better adaptability, social connection, and communication throughout their life.

Robert Landy describes the individual's pool of behaviors and personality as the *role system* (Ramsden et al., 2021, p. 89). This role system holds all of the roles an individual can play. When a role is active in relationship to the roles of others, an individual's sense of self is given meaning (Landy et al., 2003). Not all roles are played out equally, however; it may be that only a few are actively embodied by the individual, while there are several more that lay in repose. This may be due to past or ongoing traumas, unmet needs, or something yet to be discovered. When the right environment is created, these dormant roles are given the space to be activated and the individual can move more fluidly between roles as needed (Landy et al., 2003; Ramsden et al., 2021).

Landy's Role Theory is utilized as a drama therapy technique because of its projective qualities. A client can project their patterns of behavior onto a specific taxonomy of roles, and their relationship to these roles creates certain affect. If a client is too close to their feelings within a role, they are *over-distanced*; if approached too cognitively, they are *under-distanced*. What Role Theory (amongst other drama therapy techniques) aspires for is *aesthetic distance*; a

balance between cognitive and emotional affect (Ramsden et al., 2021, p. 91). By using dramatic projection, into which symbols and archetypes can be tapped, one is able to embody and express aspects of self that may be too unapproachable or unable to be confronted in their everyday lives (Fontana & Valente, 1993). Within a framework of Role Theory, there are typically four structured positions that roles can play, the first being *role* itself, or the client's assumed embodiment. The opposition or obstacle to the client's role is *counter-role*. The *destination* is where, or who the client wants to be, and the *guide* is who or what can assist the client on their journey.

Role Theory and the projective nature of role-playing can be used as assessment tools. Forrester (2000) wrote that it is important for clients to understand which roles they play most often in their systems of living and what purpose each role serves. Clients can then understand the benefits and detriments of each role, their origins, histories, or current dynamics, and how each role may be influenced by another. Role-playing assessment is also beneficial for understanding a client's social dynamics, behaviors, ability to connect and communicate with others, and problem-solving skills. Role-playing also displays these aspects through embodiment and makes the data more tangible for therapists. It also speaks to how the client processes the information and/or embodiment, which is as important as to the content they are creating. Landy (2021) developed a list of assorted types of characters that were extracted from mythology, fairy tales, movies, books, and TV shows, and filtered them down into more generic titles. Landy admitted that his list is not exhaustive and acknowledges that his focus was directed toward Western media, so there is a lack of multicultural diversity among this list of roles. However, role-playing in general can be culturally inclusive as it uses the individual's sense of the world to enact their roles, and therefore acknowledges multiculturalism (Forrester, 2000; Ramsden et al.,

2021). Using this *taxonomy* of roles, a researcher or therapist can work with a client to assess which of them feel the most to least accessible to them. The client will shuffle a deck of cards that each have one role on them, and without much thought will then sort each card into one of four categories. These categories include: "I Am This, I Am Not This, I Am Not Sure If I Am This, and I Want To Be This" (Ramsden et al., 2021, p. 91). Taking note of how each client sorts their cards can be a useful tool in assessing where the client is in terms of their understanding of the roles they currently do or do not play and allows the drama therapist to develop a goal or treatment plan for their client. This Role Sort can be utilized repeatedly throughout the therapeutic process to see how the client's lists of roles have evolved or changed over time.

The goal of working with role theory is to expand a client's role taxonomy beyond what may be placed on them. One qualitative study (Ofer & Kesari, 2022) followed the relationship between a five-year old hospital patient, a physiotherapist, and a medical clown. The medical clown's task was to help the patient "Amira" to cope with her traumatic physical loss. One of the methods used was with the intention to expand the patient's role repertoire in order to help her find her strength and what control she does have over her life. The analysis showcased that through the theme of role expansion, Amira was able to return to an identity where she could play. Additionally, when Amira and the clown switched roles, she was in a leadership role. This progress through role expansion coincided with a positive rehabilitation experience for the patient as well. With this study's analysis, Osef and Kesari demonstrate that expanding one's role repertoire can enable a client to return to a sense of autonomy and control in an environment or after an event that may have taken that away from them.

**Jungian Archetypes**

Carl Jung (1968) defined archetypes as instincts that are alchemized into symbols of desire that transcend time and culture. Their cause is ambiguous, and yet they are repetitive through dreams, fantasies, and thoughts. Through his work Jung bestowed magic and power to the archetypes, alluding to their mysteriously random yet universal appearances throughout humanity's psyche. It is through these archetypes, which Jung dubbed as "collective images", (p. 93) that tales, myths, and stories were born. Jung also acknowledged that there is individual meaning within each archetype; that these images carry different meanings to different cultures and people. There is a balance between universal and individual meanings.

Role Theory was heavily influenced by the concept of Jungian archetypes (Ramsden et al., 2021). Landy looked to Carl Jung's archetypal philosophy of animus and anima and the shadow self. Landy also ventured into Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey* concept of incorporating mythologies and storytelling as universal embodiments of patterned behavior, developed into roles.

Perhaps the cap to all of this quest for knowledge is the fact that Jung understood that meaning-making has always been a human construct derived from a deep desire to find answers when events or behaviors are lacking rationale (Greer, 2018).

**Tarot**

It began with a game of cards. The tarot as we know it was originally a simple deck of playing cards that evolved over time and across cultures to become the version we recognize today. From Egypt, to Italy, France, Germany, and England, the deck varied in use and symbolism; from a game of fun to a divination tool (Farley, 2006; Frost, 2016). Some images, archetypes, and symbols remained the same, while others were dropped or replaced completely.

We can thank Pamela Coleman Smith and Arthur Waite (Frost, 2016) for the traditional tarot deck that you might recognize in our current culture of the occult and divination.

The traditional tarot decks also share an intricate similarity to Jung's notion of the *collective unconscious*, and Jung recognized the archetypal nature of the tarot (Greer, 2008; Semetsky, 2006). The querent's inner thoughts come out through the tarot spread with a balance of archetypal imagery that shares some universality of the collective unconscious, along with the random mystery of how the cards will be shuffled and spread. It is through this seemingly random spread that the querent's unconscious thoughts have room to emerge, and the imagery and symbolism of each card creates a foundation from which interpretation can be evolved and personalized to the querent.  Markéta Muczková (2023) also offered that the Tarot feels magic because the deck's shuffling, randomization, and variably interpretable symbols allow the reader to see what they want to see; that the timing and circumstances of the reading itself open the biases of the reader to interpret the cards' symbols as they see fit. Mike Sosteric (2014) argued that Tarot is a way for the soul to tangibly process its needs through divination - the cards indeed are not random but rather represent what the soul is seeking to express. Coinciding with Jung's individuation, tarot provides tools to help heal the inner child through divination and self-reflection.

But how does one interpret the tarot? There are countless ways to decipher each card's meanings. Sometimes the decks come with a guidebook; or there are several websites that offer interpretations (hello, Biddy Tarot (Esselmont, 2024)). The meaning also changes depending on the placement of the card in relationship with the other cards in the spread, or the type of reading that is being conducted, like one for career or for love. Regardless, there is a common baseline of interpretation across many resources. Erikson (2022) pointed out that once an individual learns

the consensus of meanings for each card from the common nomenclature they can infuse this with their own analysis into their tarot readings. In another vein, Mary K. Greer (2016) expressed that the querent is not shown anything by the tarot that they did not already know. However, the tarot may show them their preconceived knowledge in a new perspective, providing new insight. The tarot is a mirror that reflects our own understanding in a new or different light. Frost (2016) posited a theory based on the use of philosophical hermeneutics from Hans-Georg Gadamer that the symbols within each tarot card are the other fragments of the querent's life, for whose meaning they have been searching. This provides a lot of freedom within a drama therapy context for a client or drama therapist to interpret the cards however they feel best resonates with their own personal experience, regardless of any prior knowledge of the tarot's meanings.

Tarot is a projective device. Like any other projective tool, tarot creates room for unique interpretation in such a way that the querent can sort their thoughts and desires, conscious or not, in ways that they may otherwise not be able to (Semetsky, 2006). Tarot can also be useful in a clinical setting. The way the querent (or client) views their personal readings and considers the projective nature of the images in the cards to refer back to their interpersonal relationships, behavior patterns, emotions, thoughts, and patterns of coping, can all be used as clinical data in a therapeutic relationship. A tarot reading is not just about the querent's thoughts; it is a relationship between the querent and the cards and the reader (Frost, 2016). To explore this theory, Semetsky (2010) worked with a client named "Cathy" to conduct a Celtic Cross tarot reading. With little background information on Cathy's life, Semetsky used the tarot spread to give Cathy the ability to work through her current issues. The archetypes in the tarot images along with the positions of each of the cards within the Celtic Cross spread allowed Cathy to

project her own meanings onto the reading, and therefore answer a few of her own questions and help make her own decisions.

Tarot is a container for the client's unconscious and/or inner psyche to be made manifest and tangible, allows for free association, creates a thread of the therapeutic story, and creates aesthetic distance through an entry point (the cards) instead of the client creating their narrative point-blank from themselves alone. It also enables the client to express what they have been feeling in a way that provides some aesthetic distance, perhaps even in a different way than they originally understood their emotions or wanted to articulate them (Semetsky, 2006).

Bearing this understanding in mind and acknowledging that perhaps the amount of research on tarot as a therapeutic practice is wanting (especially concerning tarot used as a drama therapy intervention) I was met with the delightful challenge of alchemizing these two facets from scratch, as is evidenced in the methodology below.

**Methodology**

In order to gather participants for this capstone project, I reached out to friends who I know have a practice with or, at the very least, an interest in learning more about tarot, as well as friends who have a theater background; bonus points if they placed themselves in the center of that Venn diagram. In total, I had seven friends agree to participate. Four of them identified as women, two as men, and one as nonbinary. My belief was that if they had    a modicum of understanding of tarot, or archetypes at large, and are theatrically-minded, they would enjoy exploring this blended theory.

The data were collected through a workshop during one day. Participants gathered, connected, warmed up as a group, and then began their individual spread with their personal tarot decks. The warmups consisted of spectrograms to gain a sense of the group's relationship to

tarot and drama therapy. I also facilitated a step-in circle (Giacomucci, 2021) to have participants consider what role(s) they played currently or in the past, as well as to create group cohesion and empathy within shared roles. Next we conducted the tarot readings. In the style of a traditional tarot reading, the participants shuffled their decks and then cards were randomly flipped. We agreed on keeping the cards upright for consistency of meaning as well as to focus primarily on the images and roles that emerged from the cards themselves. The tarot practice was folded into drama therapy through the positions of four categories according to the Role Method (Ramsden & Landy, 2021): Who I Am, Who I Want to Be, Who Is Blocking Me, and Who Can Guide Me. After the cards were dealt, participants observed their own role placements, and together we reflected on what stuck out to them. We explored our curiosities, such as: What images and/or archetypes are sticking out to you? What messages are resonating with you? Do these images as their placed roles resonate with you? After some reflection, participants shared their thoughts in pairs and then as a group share. After this, they created a short performance or artistic reflection (a monologue, poem, movement piece, drawing, etc.) based on the cards and their relationship to the specific categories they were placed in. When creation was complete, participants shared their performance with the group. Immediately following each presentation, the audience would mirror back with a sound and movement of their experience witnessing the piece. A written reflection about personal experiences followed, where participants shared what they learned about themselves through this process, what role(s) they choose to embody, and if there were any surprises from the reading or the process. We ended the workshop with sharing a message we wanted to hear from the cards, and the group echoed the messages back to each individual.

Data were collected through a mixture of methods. During the workshop itself, written documentation of the spreads and reflections were taken in order to understand what appears;

audio recordings of the group discussions were taken; and video recordings of the participants'

individual performances were documented as well. I also journaled my embodied experience

throughout the workshop and afterwards. The recordings were used to code recurring themes and

subthemes of qualitative data from the conversations and performances of the participants.

Lastly, I created an arts-based reflection on the coded themes from the entire experience.

One way that I worked to embody cultural competency was by asking participants to

interpret the cards from their viewpoint as the more prominent voice of the therapeutic

relationship. I provided guidance in terms of what the cards may have meant, but it was more

important to my research that the participant found their own meaning through the deck's

images. If a certain element of a card drew their attention, rather than the traditional meaning of

the card as a whole, then that was what I encouraged them to sit with. Much like how tarot

cannot predict the future, my philosophy is that a therapist cannot force their viewpoint on a

client, and therefore the cards, their meanings, and their roles were what the participants made of

them.

## Results

**Table 1**

*Tarot Readings For Participants*

| Participant | Who I Am | Who I Want To Be | Who Is Blocking Me | Who Can Guide Me |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | Hierophant | Fool | Page of Swords | King of Wands |
| B | King of Cups | Strength | The World | Five of Swords |

| C | Six of Swords | Nine of Cups | The Emperor | Two of Swords |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| D | Strength | The Sun | Six of Cups | Five of Pentacles |
| E | Six of Wands | Page of Swords | The Emperor | The Magician |
| F | Two of Pentacles | Six of Pentacles | The Hermit | Ace of Pentacles |
| G | Six of Swords | Five of Swords | Five of Pentacles | Eight of Wands |

I chose to divide and examine the results into two main categories: (1) the warmups and reflections, and (2) the embodied performances. The verbal and written reflections showed a cognitive expression of themes, and the performances offered an embodied articulation instead.

**Reflection Themes**

There are five main themes within the reflection results: Protection, Self-Limitation, Trust in Self, Openness, and Connection and Collaboration. For each theme I created a tarot-based collage that contained specific images of certain cards that I felt reflected these themes. The focus on this arts-based reflection was to select archetypes and images that I felt pertained to each theme and sub-theme. Some of these cards had come up within the participants' readings; while others did not but still, to me, reflected what the participants were experiencing within their personal readings and role taxonomies. I found it massively interesting and intriguing to find a way to alchemize the images of these different cards together in a way that I felt authentically reflected the journey of each participant and as a collective group.

**Figure 1**

*Protection*



**Protection**

Under the theme of protection, the participants reflected on conflicting ideals within themselves. There seemed to be a struggle between protecting one's peace and letting down their guard; finding the balance of being strong and soft. There were also the battles of logic versus emotion; skepticism versus embracing; and of power, choice, and healing.

This collage depicts the balance and battles of these sub-themes: the choices, the conflicts, and protection, and the softness. The cards I utilized were the Seven of Wands, the Four of Cups, The Moon, Ace of Pentacles, Seven of Cups, Two of Pentacles, Strength, and Two of Swords. Protection is prevalent in the Seven of Wands, whose figure I depicted battling the lion of Strength. The angel of Strength is instead holding the wolf from The Moon, as if to protect their own intuition. The Ace of Cups has The Moon's lobster emerging from its brim, to reflect back to the participants that they, too, can emerge from the waters of life's uncertainty to trust their intuition and emotional capacity, instead of always choosing logic like the figure in

the Four of Cups is contemplating while looking at the dog from The Moon. The figure in the lower left corner, normally astonished by seven chalices of wonder and mystery, is presented with the cup of Four. Will they accept it? Will they remain in logic-land, or trust their emotions that may be hidden underneath the shroud? To their right, the Two of Pentacles swirls around the figure from the Two of Swords, symbolizing a hesitation to make a decision (much like what was reflected by the participants) while balancing (or off-balancing?) stability. Above all of this action, the Moon shines its guiding light to all, in the hopes that these figures (and my participants) will trust their abilities to make choices and listen to their emotional intuition when they are ready to.

**Self-Limitation**

Many of the participants felt that they were limiting themselves in one or several capacities; for some, it was a long-term pattern, and for others it was something they hold in their current lives. There was an urgency to carry and fix everyone else's problems; playing the role of People Pleaser so as not to upset anyone; denying and yet yearning to show up for themselves; to find their own sense of self, and lacking their own needs being met. There was a fear of being excluded or excommunicated. The energy for a few participants felt that in order to be safe they must be witnessing and tending to others, and that there was also a fear of being judged.

In this artistic reflection, Judgement heralds over all, announcing to the figures depicted that they are being perceived for their actions, much to the anxiety and fear of the participants.

**Figure 2**

*Self-Limitation*



In the upper left corner, The Devil, also named Baphomet, channeler of the shadow self (the unknown parts of the psyche, the lustful desires, the enabler of the commonly depicted "shameful" taboos) plunges Three Swords into a heart, causing disruption, heartbreak, and a lightning strike (originally pulled from The Tower). This vignette of interconnected images sends the message that typically self-ish desires, if acted upon, cause dire consequences and hurt others who need us. But, like The Tower, sometimes things need to shift in a dramatic and earth-shattering way in order for things to transform and get better (setting boundaries, anyone?). These themes were especially prevalent for one participant who has spent so much of their life focused on pleasing others and being afraid of pleasing themself. Other participants reflected this sub-theme as well. The Queen of Pentacles, throned in the center, nurturer of all, watches as the figures from the Five of Pentacles hobble past, unaware of the help they could receive from the Queen – or perhaps refusing to acknowledge that help is needed and available, as participants mentioned was their own experience. Surrounding them are five cups, and as they walk toward

the empty chalices, they leave behind the perfectly full ones, again ignoring the positive aspects of their situation. In the lower right corner, the five figures, each armed with a wand, are engrossed in conflict of creativity - perhaps depicting an inner battle between pleasing others and pleasing oneself. Above them, the blindfolded figure from the Eight of Swords willingly allows herself to be tied at the stake of the Ten of Wands, burdened by the weight of bearing everyone else's issues and yet refusing to easily remove her binds and free themself. In the upper right corner, the figure from the Eight of Cups has decided once and for all to walk away and leave behind the struggles of caring for others at their own expense.

**Figure 3**

*Trust in Self*
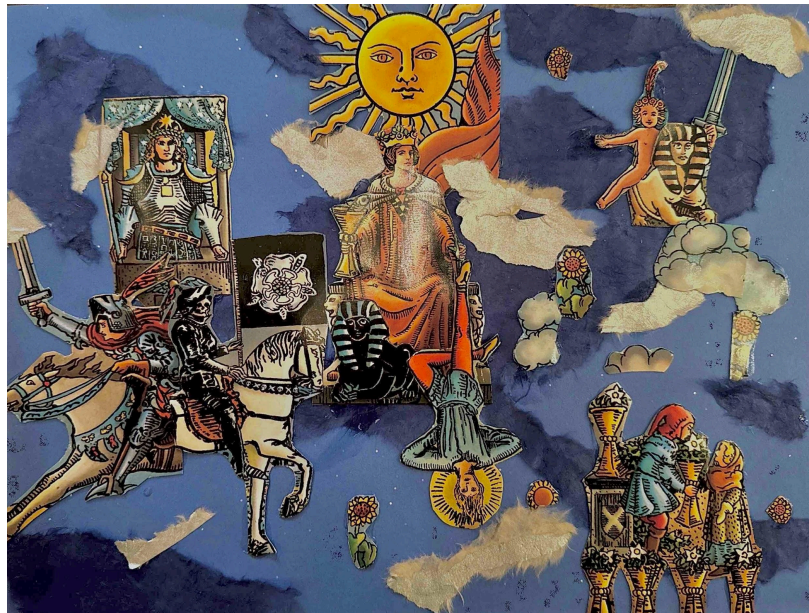


**Trust in Self**

Almost unanimously, upon reflection at the end of the workshop, the participants learned something about themselves. They felt they were given a space to reflect on themselves; to grow; and to take action to reconnect to themselves. The theme of trusting oneself came up several times throughout the process. At the core of this self-discovery was the image of The Sun - the

eternal brightness that is inherent in everyone. This is our reminder to let our true selves shine through. In the upper right area, The Sun's cherub is delightedly riding one of the sphinxes depicted in The Chariot, holding a sword for good measure. If we allow ourselves to think clearly, we may be supported and transported to our childlike core (this is also prevalent in the image of the Six of Cups). Beneath The Sun in the center of this piece is a conglomeration of the Queen of Wands, holding the Page of Cups' fish-filled chalice in one hand, and The Hanged Man's ankle in the other. Beneath her is the other sphinx from The Chariot, a replacement from her usual shadowed feline friend. I melded these images together to respond to my participants with the message that it is their divine right to carry out their fiery passions; that if perhaps they looked at themselves, their environments, or their situations from a different perspective, they might be delightfully surprised at how quickly things can change for their own benefit. On the left, The Chariot's rider is pulled in opposing directions by the Knight of Swords and Death. This, to me, symbolizes that transformation of self requires mental clarity to push through as well as an acknowledgement of grief of losing our old selves, or of bringing our shadow selves to light. This work is not easy, and at times can feel challenging, but it is sometimes inevitable work in order to free ourselves and trust ourselves again, or for the first time. May we be reminded of these messages along the way, perhaps through the sprinkling of The Sun's flowers throughout this image. My hope is that all of these messages seep in through support.

**Figure 4**

*Openness*



**Openness**

An emerging theme of openness occurred during the post-reading reflection. Along with

an opening of ideas and creation, there seemed to be an expansion into roles imbued with magic;

an increase of flexibility, play, and fun-loving roles. The dichotomy of Hermit vs. Jester was also

prevalent - the balance of wisdom and naivete, newness, or willingness to explore. To drive this

message home, I combined elements of The Hermit with that of The Fool; The Hermit emerges

from their cave and stands on the precipice that The Fool has called home for centuries. Instead

of the guiding star in The Hermit's lantern, The Fool's delicate and joyful flower burns brightly.

The Hermit's staff is replaced with The Fool's bindle. While The Hermit carries immense

wisdom and introspection, it is good for them to remember their beginnings as a bright-eyed,

playful Fool. While The Fool may sometimes seem empty-headed and dancing right into danger,

their journey continues; even long after they have become the wise Hermit. This is to reflect and

encourage the notion that roles can be expanded, evolved, and embodied. A similar logic applies

to the Magician, holding the Ace of Wands and impressing The Fool's ever-faithful canine companion. The Magician, an alchemist incarnate, magicks all four elements (water, fire, earth, and air) to create the divine in humanity. As above, so below. The Magician allows us to expand and invites us to see what possibilities we can create, especially those that drive our passion à la the Ace of Wands. A dash of other playful images, such as the buttons and stickers, is my message to remind participants not to take everything so seriously, and to see what playfulness can emerge when we experiment with passion and creation.

**Figure 5**

*Connection and Collaboration*



**Connection and Collaboration**

Lastly, the theme that I sense occurred the most often for the majority of the participants had to do with connection and collaboration. The roles of leadership, or stepping into leadership, were present. So too was the willingness to relinquish sole control and lean into collaborating with others. The sub-theme of flexibility returned here as well. Success, recognition, power, and

accomplishment all emerged from the readings and became known in reflections and presentations. Furthermore, the feeling of peace or ease, balancing with inspiration, led to the synthetization of connection - not only toward fellow collaborators, but also to a sense of spirit or higher power.

Moving through Figure 5, from left to right, I showcased the sense of connection and collaboration with the figure from the Two of Cups trading their chalice for a coin from the high-status figure from the Six of Pentacles. This was my chance to rework the seemingly one-sided power dynamic in the Six. Now, these two figures are trading emotions and intuition with stability and groundedness. Things feel more balanced in this relationship, even if the Six is still sought as a resource and as a leader from their followers below. In the center, the three dancing cup bearers gamble underneath the sturdy cathedral structure depicted in the Three of Pentacles. These two images, to me, perfectly represent and combine connection with collaboration; especially through joy. It is my hope that my participants feel this way as they navigate their world after this workshop. The Emperor, grasping the globe from the Two of Wands, is tapestried by the success and celebration inherent in the Six of Wands. Their dedication as a leader has been laureled and lauded by those in their care. It can be difficult to be a leader, but to lead well – and be billowed by support – is a cause for celebration.

**Discussion**

In summary, my quest was to discover what would happen when Landy's Role Sort (2003) was used as a Tarot card spread. My hope was that the experience would not only be intriguing but enlightening for my participants. I was curious about what themes would emerge, how personal the process would feel to each participant, and what creative expression would be emulated from the reading and reflection of current life roles. There were a handful of themes

that resonated with the participants, including Protection, Self-Limitation, Trust in Self, Openness, and Connection and Collaboration. These themes were reflected in their relationship to the roles they play currently in their lives.

The data reflect that there were many roles present that the participants had, have to, or feel like they need to embody. The group showed that they have a taxonomy of roles (Landy et al., 2003, Ramsden et al., 2021) that display themes of protecting themselves; experiencing self-limitation; finding or doubting trust in themselves; vulnerability, curiosity, and openness; and finding connection and fruitful collaboration with others. This taxonomy was created using a tarot card spread in the style of Landy's Role Sort, where they considered how randomly flipped tarot cards were salient and resonated with their personal roles. By doing so, they were encouraged to project their experiences and life roles through aesthetic distance onto the cards (Fontana & Valente, 1993; Semetsky, 2006) and to create artistic reflections of these discoveries. The archetypes and symbolism of the cards carried through the process; from the card readings themselves, to the performances, to the results (Farley, 2006; Frost, 2016; Greer, 2008; Semetsky, 2006). I believe that by bringing these individuals together, despite not knowing what they'd have in common other than knowing me and being interested in tarot or drama therapy, the emergent themes displayed a universality throughout the collective unconscious (Jung, 1968).

Based on the data, it seems that they found this process therapeutic, that they connected some dots for their individual and collective lived experiences, and that their artistic presentations allowed for expression of their inner thoughts and gave them more to consider and reflect on after the workshop. My wish after concluding the workshop was that my participants could find a way to healthily balance caring for others, nurturing their own needs, and receiving help and care from others.

**Limitations**

I found that there were several limitations to this project. Firstly, because of the thesis structure in and of itself, where there is no IRB, I was met with obstacles pertaining to certain types of data. For example, I could not ask my participants anything about their identities, only what they volunteered. I think it would have been helpful to understand how their identities would have shown up in the tarot readings as well as their roles. Also due to the lack of IRB, I was precluded from asking my participants any survey questions before, during, or after the workshop concluded. I would have loved to ask how the imagery of the tarot cards mis/aligned with the participants' intersecting identities, and any lingering thoughts they had.

Another limitation was that, as I had suspected, the research on tarot as a therapeutic intervention was sorely lacking. It was a challenge to cobble together enough research that seemed relevant to this topic without bleeding too far into other realms of similar yet strayed topics.

I had made a deliberate decision to not work with a specific population for the community engagement project. I felt that it would narrow the data down too much, or there might not be enough of a link between participants, or there was not enough research on any specific populations working with tarot as a therapeutic intervention. Of course, I would have been interested in working with a certain population; I would have been curious how this workshop would have been for participants who have experienced trauma, or loss, or some other prevailing life experience or issue. I think because this workshop was not intended as therapy, but rather as therapeutic, I was hesitant to delve into a specific issue or identity. I will certainly call in a particular population or set of intersecting identities when I do this work in the future. The downside to not filtering my participants in this way created a very vast and varied set of

data; it was difficult to decide what to focus the tarot reading on in particular. There was a moment during a locogram, where the hope was to decide what sector of life we'd focus our role readings on, where the participants were very spread out in their choices (the options were self, family, career, relationships). My original intent was to have a unifying reading, but the energy in the room felt a little too all over the place to narrow it down that finitely. I needed the group to decide, not just me. If there was a specific reason that all the participants were there, this might not have been as big of a hurdle. But we managed, nonetheless.

In regard to the images in the readings themselves, there were a few instances of one or two participants not resonating with their personalized readings. I don't necessarily see that as a limitation, but rather something to take note of; that perhaps there is another way to consider how the tarot readings can be conducted where no matter what cards emerge, the client can see parts of themselves inherent in the images or have more of a choice in what cards they are dealt, rather than leaving it entirely up to fate.

Lastly, I must admit that it was extremely nerve-wracking, and thereby difficult, to play so many roles at the same time. I found myself playing Facilitator, Timekeeper, Student, Researcher, Data Collector, and Supporting Actor throughout the entire workshop. I believe that because of my anxiety and nervousness, I messed up the timing of the workshop and we actually ended over an hour earlier than planned. I wish I had let things breathe a lot more; I felt that my rushing energy seeped into the process in a way that I was not happy about. Next time, I would orchestrate things a bit differently so that timing was not an anxiety. All I can say is thank goodness for my Research Assistant (shoutout to Tim)!

**Contributions**

When it came to deciding on the topic of this research I can't count how many times I went back and forth on its validity. A few thoughts I had during the beginning stages of this process were: Is this *research worth it to anyone but myself? Who is this benefitting? Why should anyone care about this new age woo-woo junk?* But I settled into the comforting notion that this thesis doesn't *have* to be for anyone but myself; and I also began to realize, as I sheepishly shared my topic of interest with others, that I was not the only one who loves tarot and has a desire to integrate it into therapeutic practices. And so, I am bolstered with some supported (albeit shaky) confidence that this research is important for others and is not just serving my own whimsy. This is merely the beginning of my journey with tarot drama therapy, and I'm hopeful that others will be inspired to conduct their own research on how tarot and role theory can be combined successfully. I hope that many publishings about this research happen, so when another graduate student wants to write their thesis on this same subject, they have so much more literature to utilize than I had. I hope that future clients can connect to themselves through the tarot cards, and to see their roles in the archetypal imagery; perhaps to create, transform, or shift their roles through the process of tarot and expressive art therapy. May any client who has experienced loss, trauma, is in need of a role expansion, or has experienced a loss of role be able to use this intervention. May semblance of universality be achieved in the use of imagery and archetypes as a therapeutic practice.

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*THESIS APPROVAL FORM*

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Alchemizing the Drama Therapy Role Sort with the Tarot

**Date of Graduation: _____May 5th, 2024_____**

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

*Angelle Cook*

**Thesis Advisor:_____**