

# Psychodrama and eudaimonic well-being: potentials in playful and aesthetic experiences

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## Abstract

This article explores how psychodrama might contribute to promote well-being and thus support goal nr. 3 in UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The study utilises a case-study design, examining the individual case study of "Fiona" who was a participant in a non-clinical psychodrama group. Fiona's experiences from participating in this group are investigated through a thematic based analysis to address the following question: How might engagement in psychodrama practice promote eudaimonic well-being? In this study we broadly define eudaimonic well-being as human flourishing and as a movement towards growth, self-realization, development of one's best self and meaningful purpose in one's life. Our inquiry uses the theory-guided dimensions of eudaimonic well-being developed by Carol Ryff as an analytical lens. The results reveal that participating in the psychodrama group supported Fiona's eudaimonic well-being mostly according to the following dimensions: autonomy, personal growth, positive relations with others, and self-acceptance. When analysing *how* dimensions of eudaimonic well-being were promoted, we found three main themes: playfulness, visual symbolism and

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psychodramatic role-playing techniques. The study thus shows that engagement in psychodrama is well suited to nurture human growth and development as an element of promoting good health and well-being.

**Keywords:** psychodrama, eudaimonic well-being, embodied role-playing, surplus reality, playfulness, aesthetic doubling, arts and health

## Introduction

In this article we will explore how psychodrama might contribute to the promotion of health and well-being and support goal nr. 3 in UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015). Globally there is growing research evidence to suggest that engagement with psychodrama has a positive effect on mental health and well-being (Katmer et al., 2020; Kaya & Deniz, 2020; Testoni et al., 2015). The research field has been dominated by attempts to produce a robust evidence base for the health effects of this practice (Orkibi & Feniger-Schaal, 2019). Conceptual frameworks for understanding how aesthetic experiences and engagement in the arts are linked to well-being are being developed, but there is, as we see it, a need for more empirical studies that can explicate and clarify the relationship between psychodrama and well-being both with reference to theory and lived experience. The need for a more process-oriented focus and more empirical studies is also addressed by other psychodrama researchers (de Witte et al., 2021; Giacomucci, 2021a). This article attempts to respond to these needs by exploring the following question: *How might engagement in psychodrama practice promote eudaimonic well-being?* In this context we broadly define eudaimonic well-being as human flourishing and as a movement towards growth, self-realization, development of one's best self and meaningful purpose in one's life (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 2017). We will draw on a single case study where a non-clinical psychodrama group was studied to explore what one participant's story and experiences can reveal about the potential for eudaimonic growth in psychodrama engagement. The article revolves around the story of "Fiona". The case of Fiona will be described in detail, following a presentation of the dimensions of well-being as an analytical lens. We then present the methods, analysis and results, followed by a discussion of how the story of Fiona can enhance our understanding of how engagement in psychodrama practice might promote eudaimonic well-being.

### ***Eudaimonic well-being***

In this article we will focus on eudaimonic well-being, which is related to optimal human functioning, self-knowledge, realization of human potential and growth in all human capacities (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 2017). Aristotle's philosophical works have been central to the conceptual understanding of eudaimonia as a scientific field of study (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Ryff, 2017). Aristotle stated in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that "the highest of all goods achievable by human action was 'eudaimonia'" (Ryff & Singer, 2008, p. 14). According to Aristotle, well-being was linked to virtue and to the activities involved in achieving the best that is within us. As such, the essence of eudaimonic well-being is well captured in the two epitaphs on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: "Know thyself" and "become who you are" (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Eudaimonia is thus fundamentally about self-knowledge and growth in all human capacities.

Over the last three decades, eudaimonic well-being has been subject to rigorous development and research. Carol Ryff was one of the first scientists to create a model of psychological well-being or eudaimonic well-being (both terms are alternately used (Ryff, 1989, 2016)). Today this model is perceived as one of the most important instruments for studying and understanding human well-being all over the world (Ryff, 2019). This model is based on the philosophical foundations of Aristotle's eudaimonia, and theories advanced by clinicians and researchers in the field of psychology. Through a systematic analysis of these sources, Ryff identified the recurrence and convergence of themes across the theories and found that these intersections comprised six core dimensions of well-being, namely: (1) autonomy, which includes self-determination, self-regulation and independence; (2) environmental mastery, which relates to an ability to master and manage the contexts of one's life; (3) personal growth, which is concerned with the realisation of one's full potential and openness to new ideas, experiences and contexts; (4) positive relations with others, which relates to having capacity for love, having warm and trusting relations, and an ability to identify with others; (5) purpose in life, relating to feelings of meaningfulness and a sense of directedness; and (6) self-acceptance, which involves having a positive attitude towards the self and an ability to accept and be aware of both personal strengths and weaknesses (Ryff, 1989, 2017). As this model shows, optimal functioning depends on multiple aspects of human existence, psychological needs and includes growth across both individual and relational

dimensions (Ryff, 1989, 2016, 2017). We will return to these dimensions in the analysis.

### ***Eudaimonic well-being, good health and psychodrama***

Eudaimonic well-being is associated with better mental health, indicating that self-knowledge and self-realisation has important implications for numerous health outcomes (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Ryff, 2019). Ryff calls for more research, bringing “greater scientific attention to the role of the arts and humanities in nurturing experiences of purposeful engagement, meaning [sic] living, and self-realization” (2017, p. 174). We will contribute to this by investigating how psychodrama might promote eudaimonic well-being.

The work of Jacob Levy Moreno (1889-1974), the founder of psychodrama, has been associated with developments in positive psychology, and it can be argued that the overall aim of his work was to promote eudaimonic well-being and to support people to the highest possible levels of autonomy, vitality, spontaneity, and creativity (Moreno, 1953/1993; Moreno, 1972/1994; Orkibi, 2019). In Moreno’s words, this development is linked to individual strengths and personal growth: “The patient-actor is like a refugee who suddenly shows new strengths because he has set foot into a freer and broader world” (Moreno, 1972/1994, p. 16). Moreno also wrote about the necessity of action-based engagements for personal growth and development: “It (the psychodrama) produces a healing effect – not in the spectator (secondary catharsis) but in the producer-actors who produce the drama and, at the same time, liberate themselves from it” (Moreno, 1972/1994, p. xiv).

Engagements and co-creation of events in a psychodrama group have aesthetic, psychological and social potential on both individual and interpersonal levels related to eudaimonic well-being, human development and good health. Psychodramatic engagements and the making of psychodrama events can be identified as performative events by the fact that this practice evolved from radical theatrical experiments (Baim, 2017; Moreno, 1972/1994) and historically was an expressionist theatre genre (Rasmussen & Kristoffersen, 2011). These historical facts and theories contribute, as we see it, to frame the events from the psychodrama as performative and relational events and highlight the aesthetic and social potential in psychodramatic engagements related to eudaimonic well-being. Processes and techniques facilitated in a psychodrama practice are founded in Morenos theory and

philosophy. Role-playing is essential in this; “*Playing a role is the personification of other forms of existence through the medium of play*. It is a *specialized* form of play [...]” (Moreno & Moreno, 1959/1975, p. 140, emphasis in original). J.L. Moreno and Z.T. Moreno have described role reversal as “a two-way role-playing” (1959/1975, p. 142), and showed how the inspirations for this activity came from children’s role-playing. Psychodrama can be understood as an embodied and aesthetic role-playing practice. A central aim of participating in such an embodied role-playing is the possibility to expand an individual’s ability to embody and use the inherent creativity and spontaneity in actions and responses in their everyday life.

Both the production and reception aspects of aesthetic experiences are potentially included in engagements in psychodrama practice when a participant in the co-production of a psychodrama inhabits the role as a producer-actor in the surplus reality on the psychodrama stage. This creates an embodied and relational space where a participant can dialectally change between actor and spectator positions related to a personal theme during the creative co-production process. Surplus reality is the dramatic reality where events, persons and objects can appear ‘as-if’ and where the boundary between reality and fiction dissolve. The psychodrama stage and psychodramatic techniques apply ‘as-if’ as a tool and provide the actor “a living space which is multi-dimensional and flexible to the maximum. [...] Reality and fantasy are not in conflict, but both are functions within a wider sphere – the psychodramatic world of objects, persons and events” (Moreno, 1953/1993, p. 53-54). Reality and fiction are functions in a wider sphere in the surplus reality where events, persons and objects can appear ‘as-if’ in an imagined and dramatic reality on the psychodrama stage (Nolte, 2020; Moreno, 1953/1993, p. 54).

Nolte (2020, p. 3) refers to Socrates and the Greek aphorism “Know thyself”, and claims that psychodrama “which involves the whole person physically, mentally, and socially, is the most powerful approach to the task of greater self-understanding” (Nolte, 2020, p. 4-5). Developing interpersonal relations and roles is by Moreno and psychodramatists understood as a central part of human development and good (psychological and social) health, which in Morenos writings are described in his role theory and theory on spontaneity and creativity (Moreno, 1953/1993, 1972/1994; Orkibi, 2019). This resonates with positive relations with others and personal growth, which are two dimensions of eudaimonic well-being. Despite these associations,

psychodrama has never, to our knowledge, been systematically investigated in terms of the potential it holds for promoting eudaimonic well-being.

## Methods

This study utilises a case-study design because this approach is particularly suited to capture the complexity of a real-life event within a contemporary setting, at the same time as it maintains a holistic understanding of the event (Yin, 2014). The exploratory and explanatory nature of our research also made the case-study approach apt (Yin, 2014). Since the primary intent of the case study was to understand how participating in processes in a psychodrama practice might promote eudaimonic well-being, it can be classified as an “instrumental case” (Stake, 1995). At the same time, we have a particular interest in the case, focusing on one unique psychodrama experience, so the approach also has qualities that can be identified as “intrinsic” in relation to case study design (Stake, 1995). This combination of an “instrumental” and “intrinsic” approach is appropriate when the aim of the study is to understand a case in-depth at the same time as the case investigates a particular issue.

For the purpose of this article, we focus on Fiona’s story and her experiences participating in a psychodrama group in 2021. She participated in a group led and planned by a certified psychodrama director who runs a private practice in Norway<sup>3</sup>, which was part of a collaboration with the first author’s research project<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Fiona’s story: Contextualisation***

The case studied was a psychodrama group that lasted for two full days and consisted of three participants, a psychodrama director, a psychodrama assistant, and a researcher-participant (first author). All the participants had minimum 50 hours

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<sup>3</sup> The group focused on working on life themes in a concrete way through group based therapeutic methods such as psychodrama, sociometry and group psychotherapy. It was emphasised by the two psychodrama directors in the announcement of the group, that these methods are action-oriented and resource-oriented and emphasizes the possibility of change and greater freedom in one’s life. One psychodrama director took the role of psychodrama assistant before the group commenced due to unforeseen events.

<sup>4</sup> The first author’s Ph.D. project at University of Agder.

of experience from psychodrama groups, and all were women over 40 years old. A psychodrama group that focuses on protagonist-centred psychodramas normally includes phases such as warm-up, action and sharing from the different participants (Cruz et al., 2018). The dramaturgy of the group process described here also had these different phases. In the beginning of the group on day 1 all participants made a visual and concrete tableau about how they experienced living with Covid-19 in society. The tableaux were made individually with different combinations of textiles, postcards, figures, stones, and drawings, and then afterwards talked about in the group. Fiona described in the group that her tableau evolved around: relief, calm, sadness, joy, a good loneliness (solitude) and a negative loneliness, from living with Covid-19 in society and related to other events that occurred during this period. Towards the end of the psychodrama group on day 2 all the participants were asked to make a tableau of a «Dream flock», representing a group of people that they felt that they had needed, either in the past or in the present. This was followed by an explanation of the tableau and a short improvisation in the group based on elements from the tableau. In Fiona's case, she improvised that she was standing outside a group of people and then joined this group, pretending to sit around a bonfire small talking, laughing, and telling stories.

Between the first and last tableau activity on day 1, Fiona carried out a psychodrama which was co-created together with others in the group. This occurred after warm-ups and after another participant had carried out a psychodrama. Fiona had a minor role as an auxiliary ego in that psychodrama. On day 2 the last psychodrama was co-created where Fiona played the role as an auxiliary ego named "the hammer"<sup>5</sup> and then the last tableau activity related to the "Dream flock" was done.

Moreno identified five basic elements for a psychodrama and the action phase: the stage, the actor/ the protagonist, the psychodrama director, the auxiliary egos, and the audience/group (Moreno, 1953/1993, p. 53). Through a co-creational process between the protagonist, the psychodrama director and the group, different scenes in the psychodrama are created and enacted. Different psychodramatic techniques, for example role reversal and mirroring are applied (Cruz et al., 2018; Moreno & Moreno,

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<sup>5</sup> Described and analysed in Skar (2022).

1959/1975). Role-playing is actively used in *role reversal* which is an essential part of psychodramatic role-playing techniques. This technique is described as a method where “the protagonist is invited by the director to reverse with the other with whom s/he interacts, namely the complementary role (hereby referred to as auxiliary ego)” (Cruz et al., 2018, p. 7). The aim of this reversal is that the protagonist should put “him/herself psychologically in the place of this other person” (Cruz et al., 2018, p. 7). Slettemark (2004) describes a role reversal of inner parts or states, including emotions, as intrapsychic role reversals.

Fiona’s psychodrama lasted for 1 hour and 15 minutes and consisted of different scenes where Fiona explored being in relationships and co-created a staging of a coastal rock slope and relationship balloons as part of this. She also depicted and staged loneliness, sadness, and longing. Different moments from Fiona’s engagement in the psychodrama practice is further described, analysed, and discussed in the following sections.

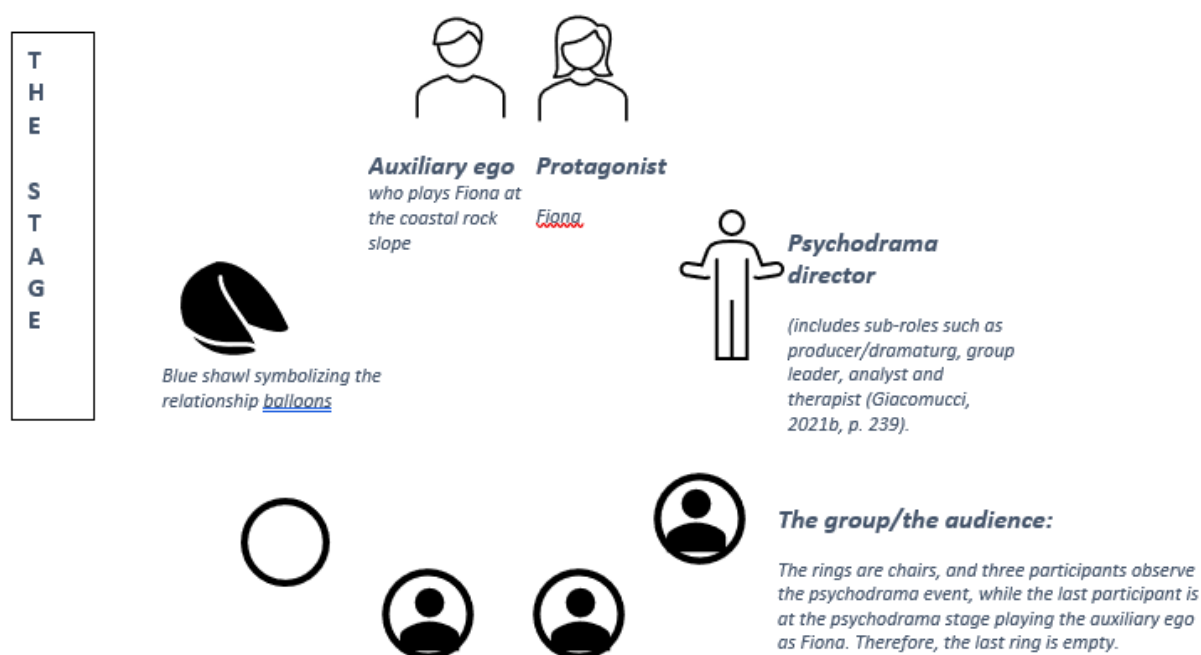


Figure 1: Visualization of a scene from Fiona’s psychodrama. This is a dynamic image as it is a part of the explorations through the psychodramatic engagements through techniques such as staging, role reversals and mirroring.



### ***Ethical considerations***

The research project was assessed and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD)<sup>6</sup>, and all the participants gave informed consent to participate in the research project. Fiona read the article and had the opportunity to comment before submission. The name of the participant is fictional, and the material presented is anonymized.

### ***Data generation***

The first author conducted in-depth data generation, including observations, interviews, questionnaires, audio-visual material, and artefacts, such as drawings and poetry. The first author's researcher position in the observation of the psychodrama group lands between partially participating and fully participating (Fangen, 2004). The psychodrama session was observed in situ and video recorded. Just before the end of the psychodrama group, all the participants were asked to answer a questionnaire where they, among other things, were asked to describe how they had experienced the group, why they had chosen to participate and what they had found most significant in the group process. Participants were also asked to write a poem and draw a picture that illustrated the most significant moment of their experiences. A week after the group, all the participants were interviewed on Zoom, and the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide where the rationale was to gain in-depth and rich descriptions of the experiential and embodied dimensions of participating in a psychodrama group (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; van Manen, 1990). In addition, a follow-up interview was carried out with Fiona approximately four and a half months after the group. All the material was transcribed verbatim by the first author.

### ***Analytic strategy***

The analytical strategy is based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) structured approach to thematic analysis. This comprised a six-phase process including familiarization with data through an iterative cycle of engagement with the various sources (questionnaire, interviews, and video data), coding, thematic search, naming and

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<sup>6</sup> After 1.1.2022 changed to the new name «Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research».

identifying themes, and writing up. During the initial phases of the analytical process, we discovered that it could be productive to introduce eudaimonic well-being as a theoretical frame, and to analyse her experiences through this lens to enhance our understanding of what happened in the case. Fiona's case gave an opportunity to explore eudaimonic well-being, but this was not a theory presented for the participants in the data generation phase. Our inquiry used the theory-guided dimensions of eudaimonic well-being developed by Ryff as an analytical lens (1989, 2016). This meant that we were reading the transcribed data to investigate *how* Fiona's engagement in the psychodrama group might promote well-being according to the following dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance (Ryff, 2017). More specifically, we were identifying moments of eudaimonic growth, seeking to understand how this growth came about in the specific context that we were studying.

We also analysed the data inductively to make sure that we were able to identify potential negative associations between participating in a psychodrama group and well-being. After a process of coding and thematic search done by the two authors separately, the authors discussed their analysis in detail and agreed on themes. These themes were developed further in the writing phase, where the analysis was refined and presented as stories. Here we follow Braun and Clarke in their conceptualisation of qualitative analysis and research as "storytelling", where the researchers are the authors of their "analytic story" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 11). We will thus present the thematic findings as analytic stories.

### **Results: Analytic stories**

After a thorough analysis of all the material we found that Fiona's participation in the psychodrama group promoted eudaimonic well-being mainly along the following dimensions: autonomy, personal growth, positive relations with others, and self-acceptance. The two other dimensions, environmental mastery and purpose in life were less obvious in the case of Fiona, although we can see elements of these dimensions in Fiona's narratives. In the case studied we did not find any negative associations between participating in a psychodrama group and well-being, so we agreed that four analytic stories would represent the overall material well. In these stories we aim to capture *how* psychodrama can nurture eudaimonic well-being with reference to empirical examples from the questionnaire, observations, interviews,

and artefacts. The separate analytic stories overlap, and it is not always possible (or desirable) to separate them in the process of understanding how Fiona's engagement in the psychodrama practice promoted well-being. The different analytical stories can, however, yield in depth knowledge about how psychodrama might promote eudaimonic well-being across the different dimensions and thus give us rich insights into the psychodrama process as it is experienced by one person.

### ***Analytic story 1: Autonomy***

As Fiona explains it, both in her psychodrama and the interview, she is very concerned about how other people perceive and evaluate her. In encounters with other people she, therefore, often experiences that she is losing herself. According to her, this is a recurring pattern in her life: "I think I often do, that I get completely lost. Or it feels like I'm annihilated in the relationship". Much of Fiona's psychodrama is dedicated to working through this problem. In this process, it becomes very important for her to explore how she can visualise her autonomous self and how she can become this self. In this process, she creates a symbolic and embodied image of this self, represented by a coastal rock slope, a place where she argues "I am wholly me". In her drawing, reproduced below, we can see this autonomous self as "me who is sitting steadily on the coastal rock slope". It is this "me" that Fiona wants to harness in her life, and she feels like the psychodrama process is useful in this regard because it helps her to develop and maintain her autonomy. In the follow-up interview she stresses that she has used insights developed during the psychodrama group as a supportive and self-regulating tool in interpersonal relationships outside of the group. As an example, Fiona says in the follow up interview that the image of the coastal rock slope and the "relationship balloons" [symbols of her relationships], has supported her in maintaining her autonomy in relationships. She says it like this: "I am more at home in myself and feel that I can support myself more". This can also be interpreted as an expression of environmental mastery.

Fiona argues that the playful, embodied approach in the psychodrama group enables her to develop more autonomously because it provides an explorative space where she is less critical of herself and less preoccupied with what others might think of her. This space can be understood as the *as-if* space in play and as "surplus reality" in psychodrama. In her everyday life and when she engages in traditional talk therapies, she claims that she often thinks "about how things will be received. Is it

stupid? Not stupid? Can I say it like that? And I am very focused on who I talk to". By comparison, "all that disappears" when she is working through psychodrama methods such as role-playing and tableaux. Working in this way she adamantly stresses that "I become more spontaneous, I don't think so carefully about things in advance, and I don't have the same vigilance as I usually have when it comes to how things might be received".

The main reason why Fiona finds psychodrama so rewarding, is that it enables her to express herself and her feelings in ways that words don't allow. According to her, "I can easily get lost in words, or try to hide myself in words". Working through psychodrama, she has, however, "felt such a relief [...] just being able to make something visually, something symbolic, and let that be a type of language". The *relief*, as Fiona expresses it, is associated with the fact that she can reveal her authentic self through the "new" theatre language. By creating the image of the coastal rock slope, she feels that she has become more visible to herself, and she argues that it makes her feel more autonomous as it helps her to feel "that I exist".

### ***Analytic story 2: Personal growth***

Reflecting on her psychodrama experience, (first a week after and then four and a half months after the session), Fiona is convinced that it has aided her in developing more self-knowledge and positive change in her life. This development is clearly expressed when Fiona reflects on her drawing and poem in the interview, which were made as part of the research questionnaire, before the end of the psychodrama group:

A place  
Where I am not  
There is warmth, friendship, careful  
meetings.  
Where I am exists  
the cramped, the silent and the tears.  
But there are also  
– a coastal rock slope to be found on  
– a heart that is completely mine  
own  
And when I dare it  
– hands and words that support  
And maybe there are  
– balloons that do not disappear  
If I let go  
– a bonfire with friends around  
A place



Figure 2: Fiona's drawing from the questionnaire

Reflecting on this drawing in the interview a week after the group, she says that the intention was to illustrate the poem. What she sees in hindsight, however, is “a dream image” that comprises all the good things she wants her life to be filled with: “It is me on the coastal rock slope, and there is a distinct heart, and there are balloons, which are there without me holding them, and there is a fireplace with friends around”. Even though Fiona describes this as a “dream image”, she is also emphasising how the psychodrama experience, has enabled her to move towards this image in a continuous process of becoming. This can be understood as processes which promotes eudaimonic well-being because it supports her in her self-realization, developing her potential and her functioning. This change is evident in the first interview, but it becomes even stronger in the second interview, where she argues

that she has used the concrete symbols she created and embodied in the psychodrama group to regulate her feelings in ways that has enabled her to see improvements in herself and her behaviour over time. Re-counting this strategy, she, for instance, relates that she asks herself questions like “but where is the coastal rock slope?” when she feels that she disappears. Finding the rock within herself, she describes that she often has a physiological reaction, relieving her of stress and tension.

For Fiona, re-enacting the image of the coastal rock slope is thus aiding her to become the person she wants to become. One of the clearest signs of this, according to Fiona, is that she now manages to let go of relationships that in the past has tended to annihilate her. Speaking about this process in relation to a special friendship relation, she describes it like this: “There she is, she is a balloon (laughter), and now she is drifting over there and that is fine, and maybe she will float back to me again, and then I am right here”. Fiona thus feels that she has developed into a stronger and more confident person as a result of psychodramatic engagements. In her words, this person can focus on “what is important for [her], rather than always thinking about what [she] needs to do in order to avoid losing the friendship with the other”.

On many occasions she says that she is experiencing that life is “changing in a good way”. She feels more open to experience, more open to her own feelings, and more open in relational encounters. Another significant development that Fiona highlights is the fact that she has become more positive after the group. She explains this by the fact that “I have begun to concentrate a little more on the experiences where I feel that I belong; where I feel wanted, in groups and relationships”. And the result, she argues, is that she “believes more in it”; she believes that she is coming closer to her “dream image”.

Throughout the interviews, Fiona repeats that the experiences she has had in the group, are very good for her. Literally translated, she says that the process “does me very good”. When she tries to articulate precisely what it is about the process that “does good”, she finds it difficult to grasp what this is, but she is convinced that it has something to do with “Play. Yes, play and what *it* is”. Fiona argues that play “moves rocks that are in the way and enables things to grow”. In Fiona’s narratives, the playful approach she experiences in the psychodrama sessions, offers a unique

opportunity for growth and development because it provides room for experimentation and exploration in a safe and relational context. For her “play, it is something safe. It is something I can feel my way in. It is something I can meet other people in, something pleasurable, playful, and creative”. The great thing about play, according to Fiona is that it is so open ended and full of possibilities. It is particularly two things that she appreciates about play. Firstly, there are no right and wrong answers, which allows her to explore things without being confined to a particular reality. Secondly, “play takes us on its own journey”, where everything is possible and “no one really knows where we are heading”. In this space, she feels free and uninhibited and daring. As she explains, in play “I dare to be who I am and be where I am”. Moreover, she “dare to feel how it is to be me [in play], instead of trying to figure out what I need to do to act correctly in a given situation”.

### ***Analytic story 3: Positive relations with others***

Loneliness is a strong theme in Fiona’s story, and she expresses that she often feels that her need for rewarding social contact and relationships are unmet. She also reveals that she struggles to maintain satisfying and trusting relationships with people around her, even though she really wants this in her life. This is a source of deep sadness in Fiona’s life and as a central part of her psychodrama she co-creates performative events exploring this theme with the other group members and the psychodrama director. In Fiona’s words, “it is a lot in relationships that are difficult, and being able to work in a group, where the relational is everywhere, [...] I have experienced that this is useful”. Reflecting on her experiences a week after the psychodrama group, Fiona maintains that working through challenging scenarios and feelings with the support of the psychodrama director and the group, has contributed to improve her positive relations with others. She describes it like this: “be in a group, be in a relationship and get help to be with myself at the same time [...] be in contact with me and others and I don’t have to be alone with it”.

Through the scenarios and the interpersonal relations in the psychodrama group, performative and relational events are produced that Fiona can be bodily and affectively present in. This makes her feel good because it provides immediate support: “Being in the challenge and getting support there and then, is something that makes me feel good”. The importance of *being embodied in* challenging performative and relational events, and to be seen and supported from the psychodrama director

*there and then* is shown here. This is also reflected in the “dream flock image” represented in her drawing, which she in the interview says symbolises both the “concrete psychodrama group during the weekend” and “the friends I long to have”.

In the follow up interview Fiona explains that she has experienced positive change in relation to how she experiences her relations with others. Her feelings of sadness and loneliness has by no means disappeared, but Fiona argues that she feels more positive about her social relations because of her experiences in the psychodrama group. That other participants experienced and recognized her feelings and struggles, was significant for Fiona. The participant that played her auxiliary role, for instance, said that she felt very “stiff in her body” when the “relationship balloons” [symbols of her relationships, symbolized by a blue shawl] flew around. Fiona showed how these relationships come and go as a part of her psychodrama. The feeling of being “stiff in the body” that the other participant talked about, says something about freezing (both bodily, emotionally and socially), feeling less free and spontaneous when the relationships come and go. This was a feeling Fiona recognized, stressing that “it was very familiar and good [...] she felt the same as I did”. Fiona explained that she could feel “stiff in what is me, or a bit stiff in the body” when she experienced that it was too many relationships she got confused or touched by.

Fiona also acted as an auxiliary role in the psychodrama of another participant. In this psychodrama she was playing the role of a hammer, representing the inner critic of the protagonist Anna<sup>7</sup>. In this role, as the drama proceeded, she was placed on the outside of the stage, symbolizing that the protagonist wanted to remove this destructive and self-critical element from her life. Playing this role and having to stand on the outside of the group towards the end of the psychodrama made a very strong emotional and bodily impact on Fiona, resulting in tears, difficulties in breathing, and a feeling that she needed physical support. Fiona describes this situation in the interview as both “difficult good and useful” and “difficult uncomfortable”. Importantly, this deeply emotional experience promotes action and Fiona argues that she created the last improvisational exercise, the “Dream flock” activity, as a direct response to

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<sup>7</sup> This event is described and analysed in Skar (2022).



the experiences she had as the hammer. In this activity she created a setting where all the members of the group were sitting around the bonfire. Placing herself on the outside, aiming to relive the painful experience, she asked the assistant to support her and help her to enter the group. Recalling the event, she says that it was less painful to stand on the outside with this support, knowing that others were aware of her presence. After a while Fiona joined the group sitting around the bonfire and improvised small-talk, storytelling, and laughter around the bonfire with all the other participants. This felt like a relief for her, and she felt this physiologically in her body as a “warm, light and good feeling”. She described that the improvised situation with the Dream flock was “in a way like a way out of it [her current situation]”. She interpreted it as having been given “another opportunity, an opportunity for something else”.

#### ***Analytic story 4: Self-acceptance***

According to Fiona, she has had a long history of “self-loathing”. In her words, “angry thoughts” have often tended to overshadow other aspects of her life, giving other emotions less space. When she participated in the psychodrama group, she experienced a prolonged period of sadness, but she did not accept this sadness. “There has been a pattern, for example, becoming very angry with myself, immediately after such feelings emerged”. As a result, sadness has been given very little space in her life before she made it into a central part of her psychodrama. According to Fiona, this process enabled her to get to terms with her feelings and accept them as a natural part of life, which again prompted greater self-acceptance and more positive and accepting attitudes towards herself.

In her psychodrama, Fiona impersonates loneliness and sadness as two central feelings in her life. This was both observed by the first author in the group where Fiona expressed this while co-creating her psychodrama with the director, and Fiona talked about this in the interviews. Fiona has the following to say about the role-playing and role reversals of the sadness:

I remember movements very well [...]. I remember the sadness, where I made a movement with a scarf which..., which sailed around and covered things. One of the participants also came up and, as an auxiliary role, also did it so strong and nice. [...]. Painful and strong to look at, because there were so clear, clear sad waves in it, I think.

Seeing this enacted by another participant made Fiona feel that “that’s exactly how it is”. Reflecting on the situation a week after the group, Fiona is surprised by her reaction. In her reasoning, she expected that playing out such dark and difficult emotional states might have propelled her into a dark hole of depression. Instead, she experiences that the feeling of sadness wants something from her, something that might stimulate change: It is “like something is working in me, [...] then it is perhaps something that can change. [...]. The sadness will open for something”. Reflecting on the event more than four months later, she claims that she understood something significant during the group, and that was that the feeling of sadness needed to be accepted and acknowledged in her life. In other words, the enactment of the sadness through psychodramatic techniques such as role-playing, and role reversals enabled self-acceptance and self-understanding.

Co-creating the image of the coastal rock slope, where another group-member played the rock, also enabled her to see and feel herself clearer. In this scene, another person impersonates her authentic self on the coastal rock slope both in role reversal sequences and through mirroring. In this way, she could explore issues of relationships coming and going as balloons, loneliness, sadness, and longing, whilst always having a physical, embodied space to return to where she is “totally me”. She argues that seeing herself from the outside strengthens the feeling “that I exist”, because her authentic self becomes visible and acknowledged, both by others and by herself.

## **Discussion**

As the analytic stories show, Fiona experiences eudaimonic growth through her engagement in psychodrama practice. Significantly, this case demonstrate that the immersive, co-creative theatre experience provides the foundation for this growth by enabling playful explorations of life stories, relationships, and dreams. In Fiona’s stories, playfulness, psychodramatic role-playing techniques, and visual symbolism were particularly important for her experience of change and growth, and we will therefore discuss how these elements can be understood in relation to eudaimonic well-being in the following.

Playfulness is a particularly strong theme in Fiona’s stories. As we have seen, play, playing and playfulness are themes that Fiona returns to throughout the interviews, and it can be argued that it is when Fiona “lets go” through play and playing in the

psychodrama group, that she experiences the most profound eudaimonic growth. According to Fiona, play enables her to see things anew because “play takes us on its own journey”, and “no one really knows where we are heading”. Describing how this materializes in the concrete psychodrama group, she says: “I could have planned something, and then suddenly I see something else, and then it talks to me, and then it goes in, then I am in a [...] creative process”. According to Fiona this creative process “feels good” and “does good” for a number of reasons: Firstly, it feels good because it helps her to understand herself and her needs better, secondly it feels good because she can develop new insights without external restraint, and thirdly it feels good because she dares to be who she is without pretending to be someone she is not.

When Fiona articulates that it is “something about play” that supports well-being, she expresses lived experience that is supported in research and theory. Like Fiona, many scholars have argued that play holds a potential for well-being precisely because it does not have external goals and because it takes the player on a journey with unforeseeable results (Gadamer, 1986; Schechner, 1993). Schechner describes the play process as “the ongoing, underlying process of off-balancing, loosening, bending, twisting, reconfiguring, and transforming” (Schechner, 1993, p. 43). This process has been linked to health, well-being and change processes. Heine Steinkopf, argues that “[p]lay, or playfulness, is [...] crucial for adults' ability to change” (Steinkopf n.d., p. 1, our translation). What happens when we play or are in the state that is characterized as play or playfulness, is that we become less self-conscious and critical, that it is easier to be absorbed in the moment, get in touch with others and be engaged in an experience or task. The condition of play has been shown to include the experience of well-being and a desire to do unexpected or new things. Several health researchers claim that play and playfulness should be strengthened in people if the goal is positive change (Fredrickson, 2001; Tonkin & Whitaker, 2019). Applied to Fiona’s case we can argue that Fiona experiences positive change because playing in the psychodrama context makes her less self-conscious and critical. As we have seen, being bodily in these playful, creative and explorative processes also enables her to get in touch with others and herself in new ways. In short, Fiona expresses that play enables her to move towards knowing herself and becoming who she is, the essence of eudaimonic well-being. Fiona’s

case thus supports that playfulness in psychodrama practice supports the promotion of eudaimonic well-being.

Playing and playfulness is seen as an important factor in psychodrama, as in other creative art therapies (de Witte et al., 2021). In Fiona's stories, playfulness cannot be separated from the overall psychodrama event, where she is allowed to explore her stories and identities in what Moreno termed surplus reality, where the "as-if" state allow for exploration, experimentation, and concretization (symbolic or realistic) of the inner drama (Orkibi, 2019; Kushnir & Orkibi, 2021). As we have seen, Fiona's psychodrama and other psychodramatic engagements is co-created between the protagonist (Fiona), the psychodrama director, and the auxiliary egos in surplus reality. It can thus be argued that Fiona is the actor-producer of her drama that evolves in a continuous process where those involved are mutually and emotionally exposed to each other's actions and where everyone act as both subjects and objects at various times. In other words, Fiona oscillates between playing herself and observing herself in the continuous role-reversals, through the mirroring technique and role-playing in her psychodrama.

The significance of role-playing and role-reversal in surplus reality is that it opens for a different expressive space with other "rules" where anything is possible. This also opens the space to act out and show how things could have been in the past or how things might be in the future. In the process of role reversals between Fiona as herself and her inner states, she is able to explore both how things are at the moment and how things can become in the future. As the case of Fiona shows, these "fictitious" explorations of inner states and future scenarios through role-reversal have real significance for her because they contribute to reconstruct how she sees herself and the world she lives in. As an example, she is able to come to terms with and accept the sadness in her life by playing it out through role reversal with herself (played by an auxiliary ego). Moreover, she feels that she is moving towards healthier relationships by playing out scenarios in the group and by improvising how she wants her relationships with others to be in the future. As these examples show, role-play and role reversal in surplus reality has the potential to support eudaimonic growth both because it enables Fiona to connect with others in positive ways and because it helps her to develop kinder and more accepting attitudes towards herself. It can thus be argued that Fiona's explorations in surplus reality is performative in that it produces realities that were not there before. This blending of reality and fiction, (and

the ensuing production of new realities), is often perceived to be the reason why drama is so well suited to develop insight both in relation to self and society (Szatkowski, 1985; Sæbø, 1998). Szatkowski calls this process “aesthetic doubling”, and he argues that it is the fact that we simultaneously have an experience *in* fiction as the character, and an experience *of* the fiction as a spectator, that creates the possibility for insight and new understanding (Szatkowski, 1985). In the case of Fiona, she has an experience in fiction, as she plays herself and an experience of the fiction, as a spectator of herself, at the same time. As Fiona’s stories demonstrate, the significance of this for eudaimonic growth is that she is able to explore who she is and who she can become within the safety of surplus reality. Paradoxically, she even experiences that she can be more “real” in surplus reality than in real life because here she does not have to pretend to be someone she is not. The potential that surplus reality and aesthetic doubling has for eudaimonia is therefore the realisation that fiction and drama can open spaces where it is possible to explore who we are and who we might become as a means of developing our inner potentials and best selves.

Finally, the analytic stories suggest that the ability to work through visual symbolism supports eudaimonic well-being. By utilising visual symbolism in the tableaux, role-playing and improvisations Fiona feels that she can express herself in creative and spontaneous ways, freeing herself from what she perceives as the constraints of words. In the psychodrama practice, Fiona has an opportunity for communicating and expressing herself through drama as a symbolic medium, which includes symbolic and dramatic actions in the surplus reality (Kushnir & Orkibi, 2021; Sæbø, 1998). As the analytic stories show, Fiona uses several symbols to express herself and to explain her inner world. The two most important symbols in her stories are the coastal rock slope, which is the symbol of her authentic self, and the (relationship) balloons, which is the symbol of her relationships. Fiona returns to these symbols throughout her psychodrama, and it can be argued that she uses them to produce a bridge between the inner world of herself and the surrounding, external world. This bridge enables her to communicate complex states and feelings to the others in the group and to herself in ways that support her well-being. In terms of promoting eudaimonic growth we can identify two different functions of the symbols in Fiona’s stories. First, conjuring up the symbol of the coastal rock slope, as she goes about in her day-to-day life, enables her to return to herself when she feels that she is losing

herself. As such it protects her autonomy. Secondly, the symbol of the coastal rock slope enables her to develop new and more positive perspectives on relationships and the function of relationships in her life. Significantly, seeing her symbolic self being played by an auxiliary ego strengthens her feeling of belonging to a group because she feels acknowledged by the others. This sense of acknowledgement and support from the group is important in Fiona's narrative and she expresses that seeing others impersonate her inner self through symbols make her feel less lonely and more included in the community. In this way we see that role reversal enables the development of inter-personal understanding and community in ways that support eudaimonic growth.

Overall, it can be argued that Fiona's eudaimonic growth is supported by the performative immersion in the psychodrama event. This eudaimonic growth can be explained as a form of action-insight developed through playfulness, visual symbolism and psychodramatic role-playing techniques. Action-insight is understood as an important aspect for change in psychodrama and is described as "the results of various kinds of action learning" that results in "the process of self-discovery" (Kellermann, 1992, p. 86). As we have seen in Fiona's case, engagement in surplus reality results in this process of self-discovery. Based on the analytic stories it can be argued that the psychodrama stage here function as a place for destabilization where aesthetic doubling provides possibilities for new perspectives and new meaning-making. In Moreno's theory, catharsis is associated with personal growth and a person's ability to transcend reality in order to "set foot into a freer and broader world" (Moreno, 1972/1994, p. 16). As we have seen, Fiona shows that she is moving towards a broader and freer world through her psychodrama experience. The analytic stories show that Fiona's experiences during the psychodrama group have an important impact on Fiona's eudaimonic well-being over time, and we can see that Fiona identifies improvements in eudaimonic well-being over four months after the psychodrama group commenced. This is an important finding because it shows how engagement in psychodrama practice can promote eudaimonic well-being that reverberates long after the experience takes place. As the case shows, the psychodrama experience enables Fiona to understand herself, her relationships, and her experiences more clearly after four months. In short, this demonstrates how psychodrama can promote insight, growth, and change.

## **Conclusion**

As the case study of Fiona shows, the immersive and highly performative psychodrama experience can contribute to promote well-being. In this case we have captured the rich potential that lies in psychodrama practice for promoting eudaimonic well-being. The strength of this approach lies precisely in the in-depth insights we get into Fiona's perspectives and the ways in which she describes her eudaimonic growth. Significantly, the case of Fiona suggests that it is in play, surplus reality, role-play and role-reversal that the potential of eudaimonic growth is greatest. This is perhaps not surprising given that Moreno himself stressed the inherent relationship between spontaneity, creativity, play and surplus reality on the one hand, and a self-actualised and healthy self on the other (Moreno, 1953/1993). Despite this connection, Moreno is rarely mentioned in discussions of how eudaimonic well-being can be promoted. By using eudaimonic well-being as a theoretical framework in this article we thus hope to contribute to make the connection between psychodrama and eudaimonia more visible so that the potentials that lie in this practice can be utilised on a greater scale. Because, as the case of Fiona has shown, the immersive psychodrama experience can provide people with tools to reach the pivotal goal of "knowing thyself" and "becoming who you are" (Ryff & Singer, 2008). As such, the study supports the growing evidence that arts engagement and aesthetic experiences are well suited to nurture human growth, self-realisation, and development, which is the essence of eudaimonia (Ryff, 2019; Torrissen & Løvoll, 2022). In this way, Fiona's case can be framed as an example of how active and creative engagement in drama and theatre processes and activities can support good health and well-being by building on people's strengths in ways that produce hope, meaning, connection, belonging, self-efficacy and empowerment (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Torrissen & Stickley, 2018). In a world where the mental health problems of the population are growing fast on a global scale and loneliness is one of the greatest public health challenges, psychodrama thus holds a valuable potential in supporting goal nr. 3 in UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Good health & well-being.

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