

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Psychodrama and eco-anxiety—A case study

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ABSTRACT

A case study is used to illustrate the treatment of a patient with eco-anxiety in a psychodramatic session. The subject is a 26-year-old male, suffering from a severe form of eco-anxiety. Through psychodrama, patients can better understand themselves and repressed psychological content, learn, and find new creative ways to cope with eco-anxiety. The case study shows that psychodrama helps to view anxiety in an externalized subject in a more detached way, to gain new insights into how to deal with it. Psychodrama improved the patient's quality of life and helped him to cope in everyday life again.

Keywords: eco-anxiety; psychodrama; coping; creativity; case study

1. Introduction

The current anthropogenic climate crisis is an existential threat to humanity and the planet. It has direct and indirect effects on physical and mental health, for example through an increase in extreme weather events, crop failures, drinking water shortages, migration, and wars^[1,2]. Such facts, which have now become part of the general knowledge of the population worldwide due to countless media reports, arouse strong fears. Anxiety in connection to the climate crisis has various names, for example, eco-anxiety, eco-fear, climate anxiety, climate angst, environmental anxiety, etc. These terms are used synonymously by some authors, while others such as Pihkala^[3] consider them in a more differentiated way. He claims that climate anxiety is a special case of eco-anxiety, especially one that defines the field too narrowly and does not fit the life situation of those affected.

In this paper, the term eco-anxiety will be used. The author of this paper define eco-anxiety based on the prior work of several authors in this field like Clayton^[4], Clayton and Karazsia^[5], Hickman^[6], Hickman et al.^[7], Orange^[8], Pihkala^[3,9], Raile and Rieken^[10], Raile^[11], Taylor^[12] etc., as follows: eco-anxiety is the long-term fear of the uncertain consequences of the climate crisis and other relevant environmental impacts that have a clearly negative effect on the global and/or regional ecological system as well as on the living and non-living environment. It is closely related to eco-fear, the fear of concrete impacts of the same causes, as well as to eco-worry, which denotes a comparable feeling, but weaker in intensity. Eco-anxiety does not usually occur singularly, but often in combination with other eco-emotions like sadness, despair, powerlessness, anger, guilt, shame, and others directed at the same triggers. Eco-anxiety is usually an adequate and thus non-pathological reaction to a real threat. But it can, if it becomes too intense, significantly limit quality of life as well as

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everyday functionality. In such cases, psychotherapeutic treatment may be indicated. In the psychotherapeutic literature, however, eco-anxiety has been discussed to a limited extent, although the number of scientific texts that consider the phenomenon from different perspectives such as psychology, sociology or psychotherapy has increased considerably in recent years^[3,7]. Scientific texts on eco-anxiety related to psychodrama do not exist. Therefore, a case study of a psychodramatic session with a protagonist suffering from eco anxiety is presented. The aim is to give psychotherapists who have not yet had experience with psychodrama an insight into its treatment possibilities using the example of eco anxiety. Practitioners with patients suffering from severe forms of eco anxiety can take away new ideas from this paper. Before presenting the case study, the approach will be introduced.

2. The approach—Psychodrama

Psychodrama was founded by Jacob Moreno. Moreno fundamentally distinguishes three therapeutic approaches: sociometric treatment, sociodrama, and psychodrama. The sociometric treatment is the treatment of a person amidst their lifeworld, with the knowledge and possible participation of the respective social environment. Moreno refers to this as open treatment. In contrast, closed treatment involves removing the patients from their lifeworld and treating them in a world specially constructed to meet their needs. Such treatment includes sociodrama, which deals with group themes within a group or community, and psychodrama, where individual issues are addressed within a group. The therapeutic theater where the psychodrama, on which we will now focus, takes place is such a place for closed treatment. It is a miniature world in which all conceivable situations and roles can be produced and played. They can be tried out in a protected area without the lifeworld knowing anything about it. Only the other participants, as well as the psychotherapist (and any assistants), participate in it. The patient is at the center of this and decides for themselves which role they want to play and with whom they want to play the scene as a helper ego, with the latter decision dependent on the so-called tele. Here, three core concepts from Moreno's theory are united, which we will now look at in more detail.

Moreno defines role in his main work psychodrama as a synthetic unit of experience in which private, social, and cultural elements are fused. A role is, to some extent, the Platonic idea of a socio-cultural action scheme. For illustration, the father role is a general construct that becomes connected to one's personality through manifest actions and becomes part of one's self. However, if you play your own father, you are not taking on a role, but the perspective of another individual who also had a father role. We can take on different roles, for example, the father role, the salesman role, the role as a doctor, as an eater, as a sleeper, as a pet owner, as a daughter, or as a grandchild. According to Moreno, the role is not just an action pattern, but actual action in concrete situations within the context of a social interaction. It is also the manifestation of personality in action, the parts of the self that are perceivable by other people. Ideally, they must meet environmental requirements, be situationally appropriate, and fit the individual. One of the goals of psychodrama is to expand and make role possibilities more flexible, to work on dysfunctional roles, and to resolve role conflicts^[13–15].

Moreno's concept of roles is relatively complex, as he emphasizes different aspects in different texts. A systematic elaboration that was developed later describes four dimensions of Moreno's concept of roles, which complement each other: the role as collective socio-cultural stereotypes, as pre-determined individual action patterns, as individually designed and retrievable action patterns, and as actual action in a situation^[16]. Besides the concept of roles, the term tele was also mentioned above. For Moreno, an individual can only be thought and understood in relationships with other people. In this context, he uses the word tele, which can also be translated as bi- or multi-feeling, to denote mutual perception and the resulting relationship. Tele is the atomic unit of feelings of attraction and repulsion between individuals. Moreno cites empathy and transference, for

example, as incomplete sub-forms of tele. The concept of tele itself is not clearly defined and is relatively comprehensive. It is an immediate mutual awareness of the personality and its current state^[17]. Tele is also closely linked with the central psychodramatic term encounter.

Encounter means meeting, touching of bodies, mutual confrontation, to fight and to argue, to see and to recognize, to touch and to interact, to share and to love, to communicate with each other in an original, intuitive way, through language or gesture, kiss and embrace, unity. It is a meeting at the most intense possible level of communication. It is an intuitive exchange of roles, a realization of the self through the other; it is identity, the rare, unforgettable experience of complete reciprocity^[18].

The third psychodramatic term is the auxiliary ego. Moreno uses this term to refer to the other participants in a scene who take on roles from the patients—these can be people, but also objects, emotions, and the like—and act accordingly^[13]. Two more basic concepts of psychodrama are creativity and spontaneity. According to Moreno, humans are not only individuals and part of a community, but also part of the cosmos. The most important component of the cosmos, the primordial substance underlying creation, is creativity. Spontaneity is necessary to harness the creative potential of the cosmos. The ideal image of the creative spontaneous human is the child. When stuck in patterns or in misdirected spontaneity, or whenever something shields a person from these forces, psychological and social problems can arise. Through psychodrama, access to and use of spontaneity and creativity are to be strengthened^[13].

A means to stimulate creativity is theatrical play, from which psychodrama emerged. Analogously, psychodramatists have five tools at their disposal for their work on unfolding spontaneity and creativity: the stage, the leading person, the protagonists, the auxiliary ego, and the group. The stage, of course, does not mean (only) the place in a theater. A stage can emerge anywhere and at any time. What is important is simply that it is clearly recognizable as a delimited area for all group members and offers sufficient space for the actions. However, the stage can be more if used accordingly. A stage set can be creatively designed, a variety of objects can be incorporated into the game. In addition to the stage, the leading person also plays a central role. As a psychodramatic expert, her main tasks are to orchestrate the techniques and applications appropriately, to observe and analyze the actions, and to support the patients' change processes^[19]. The latter are the third tool: the protagonists. Especially in a group setting, different people take on such a position.

The protagonist is the person whose life story, problem, or desires are represented on the psychodrama stage, she is the focus of attention for a limited period of time^[19].

That person decides what is staged, how the stage is set up, or who their auxiliary egos are. They are the fourth instrument, the co-players. They are chosen by the protagonists and are called auxiliary egos because they embody parts of their environment, personality traits or feelings. But not only that, but they can also temporarily take on the role of the protagonists and thus help them to view the scene from a different perspective. In some concepts, there are professional auxiliary egos, but in most cases, they are members of the group. And these people represent the fifth instrument. The group and especially the group cohesion are decisive factors in the treatment and optimal unfolding of psychodramatic techniques. The group members also bring in different views and worldviews that can additionally help the patients to take on new perspectives. There is no correct size; in practice, it can range from small groups of five people to large groups of over 100 people^[19].

The elements mentioned here are central to protagonist-centered psychodrama, which will be further discussed. Besides, there are other forms such as the group play, in which all people are equally on stage and participate in an impromptu play, or the role play, which can be described as problem-oriented learning and exploration through successes and failures in trying out new roles. Here, fully predetermined roles can be taken

on (role-taking), roughly predetermined roles, where a certain degree of creative freedom is available (role-playing), or new roles can be created without restrictions (role-creating). Frequent taking on of certain roles within the game contributes to also taking on those roles outside of the setting. Furthermore, there is the aforementioned sociodrama or the playback theater, which is described as a protagonist-centered working form in which the protagonists do not participate but act as screenwriters and directors^[19].

The protagonist-centered psychodrama consists of three phases: the warming-up, the action, and the integration phase. The goals of warming up are manifold. On the one hand, the individual group participants are to be activated and freed from spontaneity or play inhibitions, and curiosity and experimentation are also increased. On the group level, it is about strengthening cohesion, recognizing the topic, and determining the protagonist. And the leadership has the tasks of tuning into the group, forming diagnoses, and preparing for the activation phase. In addition to a round of feelings and the presentation of possible topics, warming-up techniques can be used here—such as physical exercises, expressing mental images, or the presentation of participants via symbols or auxiliary objects. Even at the beginning, what applies to the entire method is applicable: there are no limits to creativity in shaping warming-up techniques. Subsequently, it transitions into the action phase, where again different techniques can be used^[19].

The first partial goal of the action phase is to grasp, concretize, and formulate a work order from the actual topic of the protagonist and the associated problem. Only from this, it becomes apparent which part of the ‘inner stage’ should be transferred to the visible, psychodramatic stage. By making this experienceable, the protagonist is enabled to view the topic from a different perspective. But it also allows deep emotional immersion, through which the problem of the protagonist can be explored. The main task of the leader during the action phase of a protagonist-centered game is to accompany and support the protagonist with the help of psychodramatic techniques to the extent that they recognize ways out of the situation and are willing to test solution options^[19].

After capturing the topic and formulating the task, the planning of the interventions follows, setting up the stage, and selecting the auxiliary egos. After the action phase is concluded, it transitions into the final phase, the integration phase. The goal of this is not only the conclusion of the previously started processes but also the transfer of insights into life outside of therapy. The role feedback, i.e., the feedback of the participants on how they felt in the respective roles, the identification feedback, where also the spectators who have not actively participated, report their thoughts and feelings, or the sharing, where other participants report on similar life experiences or feelings, can help in this. At the end, there is the process analysis, in which the group events are finally viewed and summarized from a professional psychodramatic perspective^[19].

The authors describe some specific techniques of psychodrama such as doubling, mirroring, role reversal, and much more. It can be emphasized that psychodrama is characterized by the fact that creativity can unfold freely, leading to a tremendous variety of concrete designs.

There is no professional text (yet) dealing with eco-anxiety from a psychodramatic point of view. However, some websites of practitioners exist that make such a connection. One example is the British Prügel-Bennett, who offers psychophysical therapy and has psychodrama in her repertoire. On her website, she lists the climate crisis and eco-anxiety, as well as solastalgia, as explicit foci that she treats in her practice^[20]. Another example is Ramsay, who practices in Spain and offers art therapy, Gestalt therapy, and psychodrama. In the context of eco-anxiety, she writes about art therapy by means of which patients can explore and express their feelings. She links such an approach to nature-focused therapy, suggesting that making or strengthening connections to the rhythms of nature strengthens one’s resources and provides hope^[21].

Few other connections exist and, in any case, none that provide evidence for a treatment modality for eco-anxiety. A text on the application of psychodrama to anxiety disorders in the major psychodrama practice book is hardly useful as an alternative because it consists of only one page of theory and one case example, and furthermore uses anxiety disorders as a single diagnosis without differentiations^[22]. Other texts unquestionably exist but are not always fully compatible with Stadler and Kern's^[19] psychodrama concept, focus on specific anxiety disorders such as social phobias, or integrate other psychotherapeutic concepts such as hypnotherapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, or others in their treatment. Due to the lack of literature on the treatment of eco-anxiety using psychodrama, this text is a novelty that presents a treatment session.

3. Case study—Eco-anxiety and psychodrama

In this article, the question which possibilities the psychotherapeutic approach psychodrama can offer for the treatment of eco-anxiety, will now be answered using a psychotherapeutic single case study^[23]. The case study is based on a single psychodramatic (double) session, which is described in detail so that the processes and interpretation are as comprehensible as possible. The case study is interpreted with the scientific method of hermeneutics^[24]. The protagonist of the case study is Sven O, a 26-year-old sociology doctoral student and university lecturer living alone, who has been participating in a psychodrama group for several months. In the twelfth session, the group leader starts again with some body loosening exercises and begins to identify topics. She asks the group about their feelings and whether there are any current issues that should be addressed in today's session. Three participants report on current issues, including Sven. He says that the major climate conference in Glasgow is currently taking place and that the countless media reports about the climate crisis in the past week have greatly intensified his fears of the consequences. He would like to get to know and deal with them better. After introducing the topics, the leader asks the three presenters to choose a symbol or an object that represents their topic, and to position it in the center of the room about three meters apart from each other in a triangle. She points with her hand at three points in the room for clarification. Sven then takes his switched-off smartphone out of his pocket and places it on one of the three points. When everyone is back in their seats, the leader asks all group members to stand behind the object that they would also like to examine in more detail and make it the subject of the session. Of the 18 people present, eleven stand behind Sven's smartphone. The leader declares the topic accepted and the stage open.

She invites Sven to join her on stage and then asks him when and how fear specifically manifests itself in him. He replies that it often sneaks up on him from behind and insidiously attacks him when he is reading the news or browsing Facebook and Instagram, seeing reports on the climate crisis or currently the climate conference. She continues to ask if there are other participants or feelings involved in the scene, to which he replies that sometimes a strong sorrow joins in, but otherwise, he is usually alone in such situations. She then asks Sven about his relationship with fear and how it manifests itself in his daily life. He responds that he has a poor relationship with fear. It often occupies his body and mind, blocks his ability to concentrate and prevents him from lecturing or working on his dissertation project. Before they start constructing the scene, the leader wants to know what Sven's goal is, to which he responds very clearly that he does not want to be afraid anymore or at least not to be so paralyzed and blocked by it.

During the conversation, the leader already forms some working hypotheses for herself—for example, that fear is blocking Sven's creativity and that role reversal with fear can help him better understand his feelings. Also, there could be a connection to past life events that should be uncovered and depicted in the psychodramatic work. The leader now asks Sven to take on the protagonist role and set up a scene. He then explains that he needs a stage set, preferably his kitchen table where he reads the news with his morning coffee and pushes a table with a chair into the center of the stage area. He takes a seat on the chair but immediately

gets up again and takes a step towards the assembled group members. He points at a rather stern-looking 48-year-old participant and asks him to take on the role of the smartphone with the bad news. The leader steps in here and instructs Sven to temporarily take on the role of bad news himself, while the other player, Paul, briefly portrays him. The purpose of the exercise is for Paul to get a feel for the role he is supposed to take on. Paul takes a seat at the table and Sven sits directly in front of him on the table. Then he starts reciting disaster news without pause—always a headline with a few details. An example is: “Australian mass extinction. Already a million animals have perished due to the devastating fires as a result of the climate crisis. This has serious consequences for biodiversity.” Then Sven steps down from the table again and signals to Paul that he is now himself again and Paul embodies the bad news.

Then the first scene begins. Sven sits down at the table, reaches for a (non-existent) coffee cup and is briefly startled because Paul suddenly starts reciting negative news in the same style as Sven did before. However, Paul becomes increasingly faster and louder. Cut. The protagonist says he knows it’s not real, but already feels the fear sneaking up on him. The leader suggests bringing the fear onto the stage, after which Sven asks a young, wiry participant, Julia, if she could be the fear. Once again, a role reversal should help Julia find her new role. Julia sits down at the table. While Paul announces negative news, Sven sneaks up on her, suddenly jumps at her with a loud scream, holds her two crossed hands on the table with one hand and grabs her by the neck with the other, so that she has hardly any room to move. Then he lets her go and slips back into his own role, while Julia now plays the fear. The scene begins again. Sven sits at the table, reaches for the coffee cup and is startled again by the even harsher and louder onset of Paul’s voice, who recites disaster news at a rapid pace. Suddenly, Julia jumps at him from behind, pushes his head down with one hand and against his back with the other, so that Sven is pressed against the table. Scene stops.

Continued: Sven tells the leader again that it feels so real. He couldn’t breathe, the fear was overwhelming. The leader then asks him if he knows the feeling from his past and what he associates with it. Sven is silent for a while and then says a little quieter that he now, he doesn’t know why, had the situation in front of his eyes when his mother told him back then that his sister had died. The leader encourages him to find out why this scene is running in front of his inner eye and to reenact it. Sven then pushes the table aside again and chooses 37-year-old Tamara from the audience to play his mother. He says that his mother, when he had just turned eleven, had come home with tears smeared on her face and told him that his sister, who was 14 years old at the time, would never come home again. She now lives with God. They reenact the scene, and he feels strong fear again. He feels left alone and can’t breathe. After he has left the role and has somewhat recovered, the leader asks Sven what he thought and felt. He says that he would have been hopelessly overwhelmed by the situation. Strong grief mingled with enormous fear. His family and especially his mother were no support to him because of their own overwhelming situation. The father started drinking a lot of alcohol later, while the mother seemed joyless for a long time and lived the daily routine mechanically. He could not talk to them about his feelings and has hardly spoken about them to this day. In the family, the dead daughter has become a taboo topic that is not to be addressed or even thought about. When asked about his relationship to his sister, he answers that she was two years older than him and was always his role model. He looked up to her and they were often outside together. More than once she rescued him from a jam. He always had the feeling that he could do anything when she was there. Then she was suddenly gone. He still does not know exactly what she died of today. He thinks it was a brain hemorrhage after a bicycle accident but doesn’t know how he came to that conclusion. He does not dare to ask his parents about it.

The leader, who is originally trained in psychodynamic psychotherapies and includes free association and childhood memories into the psychodramatic sessions, suggests a new scene that only he plays in both roles: the last encounter with his sister at the deathbed. Sven agrees and takes a white sheet from the props. He stands

at the deathbed and speaks to the sister, who lies in front of him under the sheet in the form of a stuffed teddy bear. He expresses his pain over her death, tells her how important she is to him, and how much strength she has always given him. He tells her about an encounter with an 8-year-old boy who pushed him around, and that he can remember her facial expression well when she stood in front of him and pushed the boy away herself. As soon as she was there, he felt strong and fearless. He could only climb trees when she was there. Since her death, he has never tried to climb a tree again. He concludes the monologue in tears by saying that he misses her very much. After a period of silence in the group, he takes the sheet off the bear, puts it back in the box and himself on the table under the white cloth. Then he speaks to Sven, who is imagined in the play standing in front of the deathbed. He (as a sister, therefore she in the following) knows that she is very important to Sven. He is to her too. She protected him because she was the big sister. But she also saw his strength. He could climb the tree all by himself—she often sat next to him or on the swing and admired his agility and strength. Also, the boy didn't leave because she pushed him, but because he got up again and his gaze became more and more furious. She was afraid that he could really hurt the boy, and that's why she pushed him away. She also never felt that he would really need her, as he always mastered everything himself. She often just stood by. And she doesn't want to take his courage and strength with her, she wants him to be aware of his strength. The concluding sentence is: "Reflect on it, rediscover it in you, it is there, it was always there", then he falls silent. The group is silent again for a longer time.

Then the facilitator takes the floor and asks Sven how he's doing. He responds that his sister's last words triggered something in him. He had never been able to see it from her perspective, indeed, he had never even tried. He needs to digest this. Otherwise, he feels exhausted, as if he has just run a marathon. The facilitator confirms that it was very intense and asks him if his concern, which he had formulated at the beginning, has been answered with this. Sven replies that he does not know, but he feels like something has just changed. He cannot put it into words yet, but he feels a strength in him that was not there before. He affirms the question of whether he wants to close the stage and dismiss the auxiliary ego, and dismisses the participating players Paul, Julia, and Tamara from their roles. He then puts the utensils aside and hands over to the facilitator.

She immediately continues and asks the auxiliary ego how they have fared and how they felt in their respective roles. Paul first reports that he felt very powerful from the start. He shouted out all his power and strength. Everyone should hear what he has to say, no one should overlook or ignore him. He was the center of attention and didn't want to be pushed away. "But then fear came and stole my show. But that's ok. I kind of like it, it binds people to me." Julia then says that she felt different. She didn't feel any connection to the news but was completely focused on Sven. However, she felt good in the process, not destructive, but constructive. She didn't want to sneak up on him to scare him but to startle him before he could run away. She didn't want to unsettle and paralyze him, but rather focus on the threat and activate him so that he would do something against it. She was very sad that her effect was not as she had hoped. And Tamara reports that she could not see and perceive Sven because she herself was so preoccupied with her loss of her daughter. She knew that he needed something different and wanted to give it to him but couldn't. The facilitator then asks Sven how he felt in his role and whether he could take something from the feedback. He replies that through the role exchange he understood that his mother couldn't give him more, although she wanted to. He feels a bit better because of that. But the biggest surprise for him was the feedback from fear. He never saw that it wanted to activate him because the issue with his sister was in the way. But now he sees it. And as for the news, he will probably cut back their power and pay less attention to them. Maybe a temporary media abstinence will help him.

In the end, the facilitator asks who in the group felt particularly addressed or experienced something similar, whereupon two participants report. One also experienced a familial loss and has a strong fear of dogs,

in which she has never seen a connection so far but experienced an “aha” moment in the dramatic representation. And another participant says that she also suffers from climate fears but has never been able to see the constructive aspect of fear. The role feedback opened her eyes.

In the end, the facilitator concludes that Sven, by taking on the roles, was not only able to look at the situation from a different perspective but also to experience it up close in action, which has an even stronger effect. The role feedback additionally helped to see underlying thoughts and feelings. And based on the feedback from the audience, it becomes clear again that the dramatic processing has not only helped Sven but also others in the sense of a group catharsis. In the end, she repeats the motto of her group: The correct second time corrects the first.

4. Conclusion and discussion

Sven came to the psychodramatic session with his eco anxiety affecting the quality of life. His goal was to understand himself and get a tool to manage his anxiety. Within the sessions, he did creative exercises and reflected on them in the therapy sessions with the other role players he chooses, who also gave him feedback, interpretations, and their own perspectives on the scenes. In the scenes he not only experienced feelings like eco anxiety, gave them a form, externalized, and reflected them, but also discovered partly unconscious psychological contents such as the significance of the death of his sister. At this point it is important to point out that eco-anxiety has many faces, and that often underlying conflicts or traumas also come to light when working on eco-anxiety psychotherapeutically. This does not mean that eco-anxiety is not a real problem, but that the impact on everyday life may be caused by the underlying problem. Since eco anxiety is the (fear-) response to a real threat, namely that of the climate crisis, treatment cannot and should not aim at making the anxiety disappear completely. The goal was therefore to reduce the anxiety back to a level with which he could live his everyday life. This was achieved by creatively working through the issues and getting feedback by the other role players.

Psychodrama is a therapy approach that uses the creative expression of thoughts and feelings via acting. It is strengthening not only the connection between feelings, action, and the body, but also the creative potential of the person, which is an important resource in dealing with issues and challenges.

The psychodrama session shown is an example of countless sessions that are similar or completely different. The core element of psychodrama is creativity and the spontaneous creation of new sets, scenes, and interactions. It is therefore not possible to transfer this case study to another patient. In addition, the psychodrama session shown here is normally held in a group setting. Of course, it is also possible to implement individual therapy, a so-called monodrama. Here the elements will be different, the feedback from the other roles possibly less enlightening. Nevertheless, this form of therapy can also be effective. It is worthwhile to consider psychodrama as a possible form of treatment for eco-anxiety, or to gain experience with it to broaden one's own therapeutic horizons.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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