

“LET’S WATCH”:

THE EXPERIENCE OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED PEOPLE

WITH PLAYBACK THEATRE

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*“The best and most beautiful things in the
world cannot be seen or even touched -
they must be felt with the heart.”*

- Helen Keller

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Resumo

A presente dissertação pretende explorar as experiências de pessoas com deficiência visual (DV) com o Teatro Playback (TP), que é uma forma de teatro de improviso em que atores e músicos reencenam histórias compartilhadas pelo público. Apesar do interesse crescente no uso do TP com pessoas com DV, pouca investigação tem sido realizada para compreender as experiências desta população com o TP. Este estudo visa preencher essa lacuna, procurando obter uma maior compreensão de como o TP poderá ser usado para promover a inclusão social e o *empowerment* das pessoas com DV. Os participantes foram recrutados através de diversos meios, foram realizadas entrevistas semi-estruturadas via vídeo-conferência a fim de recolher informação mais detalhada sobre as experiências dos participantes. Foi usada a Análise Temática e os temas que emergiram incluíram: TP como uma pessoa com DV; Técnica em TP; Benefícios sentidos do TP e Outros/Temas Específicos. O estudo seguiu as diretrizes estabelecidas pela comissão de ética da instituição e o consentimento informado de todos os participantes foi obtido.

Palavras-chave: Teatro Playback; Deficiência Visual; Necessidades Especiais; Análise Temática

Abstract

This dissertation explores the experiences of visually impaired (VI) individuals with Playback Theatre (PT), a form of improvisational theatre in which actors and musicians reenact stories shared by audience members. Despite the growing interest in the use of PT with VI people, little research has been conducted to understand their experiences with this form of theatre. This study aims to fill that gap by gaining a deeper understanding of how PT can be used to promote social inclusion and empowerment for VI individuals. Participants were recruited through various channels, and semi-structured interviews were conducted via video call to gather detailed information about the participants' experiences. Thematic analysis was used, and the themes that emerged included: PT as VI Person; Technique in PT; Felt Benefits of PT and Other/Specific Themes. The study adhered to guidelines set by the institutional review board, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Keywords: Playback Theatre; Visual Impairment; Special Needs; Thematic Analyses

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Introduction

The genesis of the present dissertation sprouted during an exciting discussion about a previously undertaken project by *dISPAr Teatro's Playback Theatre troupe*. The project consisted of a 12-week intervention program where participants took part in weekly Playback Theatre sessions (Amarante et al., 2020). While reviewing follow-up interviews and talking about the experiences of various participants, one stood out in particular, that of a woman with acquired blindness, who had participated enthusiastically in all the Playback sessions, becoming very involved in the process and delivering a rich, heartfelt follow-up interview.

In recent years, the field of inclusive theatre has gained some attention as a means of promoting social inclusion and empowerment for the disabled community (Bradbury et al., 2019; Cook, 2020). One form of inclusive theatre that has been used to support the visually impaired population is Playback Theatre, an improvisational form of theatre in which audience members share personal stories and the actors enact them on the spot (Fox, 1999). Several groundbreaking projects, such as StoryBox, First Drop Theatre, Inklusion Buhnenreif and Mabat, are leading the way in making Playback Theatre more accessible to the disabled community, particularly the visually impaired community. These projects are promoting greater inclusivity and working towards a more equitable future for all, whilst simultaneously paving the way for others to follow in their footsteps and expand the reach of Playback Theatre beyond traditional boundaries. By actively working to break down barriers and create welcoming spaces for individuals with varying abilities, these groups are helping to foster a more empathetic and compassionate society.

Despite the growing interest in the use of Playback Theatre for the visually impaired population along with the projects previously mentioned, little research has been conducted

to understand visually impaired people's experiences with this form of theatre. The aim of the dissertation is to bridge this gap by exploring the experiences of visually impaired individuals with playback theatre to better understand how this form of theatre can be used to promote well-being, social inclusion and empowerment for the visually impaired population.

Moreover, it is also crucial for psychologists to have a comprehensive understanding of vision impairment and its impact on daily life, as well as the ability to utilize appropriate communication methods that cater to the unique needs of visually impaired clients. Through the identification of effective therapeutic and non-therapeutic tools, this study seeks to enhance the well-being of this population and reinforce its purpose in gaining profound insights into the specific needs and challenges faced by individuals living with vision impairment.

Participants were recruited through various channels such as online platforms and playback communities. The inclusion criteria comprised participants aged 18 years and above who must have self-reported vision impairment. The exclusion criteria included participants with cognitive impairment or language barriers that may prevent them from participating in the study, as well as inaccessibility to the technological equipment necessary for conducting the interview.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via video call with participants to gather detailed information about the participants' experiences with Playback Theatre. Thematic analysis was applied to the data collected. The themes that emerged from the analysis were used to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences with Playback Theatre, including the benefits and challenges faced by visually impaired individuals in this context.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before participating in the study. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were maintained, and the study was conducted in compliance with the guidelines set by the institutional review board.

Literature Review

What is Vision Impairment

Vision Impairment refers to a reduction in an individual's ability to see and perceive the visual world. According to The International Classification of Diseases (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018), vision impairment results from an eye condition affecting the visual system and one or more vision functions, in other words, vision impairment is a constraint on the visual function which is inferior to typical visual perception. There are two types of vision impairment: visual acuity impairment, which is a reduction in the sharpness or clarity of vision, and visual field impairment, which is a reduction in the area of vision that can be seen (WHO, 2018, 2022). Simultaneously, eye health can be described as “maximized vision, ocular health, and functional ability, thereby contributing to overall health, wellbeing, social inclusion, and quality of life” (Burton et al., 2021).

For the purpose of clarity for the remainder of the thesis the term “visual impairment” will be used to refer to people that meet the criteria for either low vision or full blindness.

The causes of visual impairment are numerous and vary between and within countries, however, the leading causes globally are age-related macular degeneration, cataracts, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, uncorrected refractive errors (such as myopia or nearsightedness, hypermetropia or farsightedness and Astigmatism), as well as other medical conditions, injuries, or inherited disorders. Certain lifestyle factors, such as smoking, sun exposure, and poor diet, can also contribute to vision impairment (WHO, 2022).

Visual impairment can range from mild to severe and can affect one or both eyes. It can also be temporary or permanent, and in some cases lead to blindness. Visual impairment can be classified into two groups: distance vision impairment which includes mild visual acuity

worse than 6/12 to 6/18, moderate visual acuity worse than 6/18 to 6/60, severe visual acuity worse than 6/60 to 3/60, blindness that is visual acuity worse than 3/60; and Near vision impairment that is near visual acuity worse than N6 or M.08 at 40cm. Low vision refers to an individual with a loss of normal vision that is typically irreversible, likely affecting the individual's ability to maintain a normal lifestyle (WHO, 2018).

Visual impairment is usually assessed by visual acuity, however, a person's field of vision, contrast sensitivity and colour vision may also be used to evaluate other visual functions (WHO, 2018). Regular eye exams and early detection can help to slow or prevent the progression of visual impairment, and appropriate treatment and rehabilitation can help individuals manage the effects of vision impairment and maintain independence and quality of life.

It's important to note that vision impairment can significantly impact an individual's daily life, affecting their physical, emotional and psychological well-being, and decreasing their quality of life in general (Hassell et al., 2006, as cited in Naylor & Labbé, 2017).

Current Data on Vision Impairment

It is estimated that globally at least 2.2 billion people have a near or distance vision impairment (WHO, 2022), being that around 285 million individuals with visual impairments are classified as either fully blind or low vision (WHO, 2013). Women, rural populations, and ethnic minority groups are more likely to have a visual impairment, being that the prevalence of visual impairment is higher in low and middle-income countries, where access to eye care and rehabilitation services is often limited. In these countries, the majority of visual

impairments are caused by cataracts and refractive errors, while in high-income countries, age-related macular degeneration and glaucoma are more common causes (Burton et al., 2021; WHO, 2013). The World Health Organization (2013), estimates that 80% of all visual impairments can be prevented or treated. However, a lack of access to eye care services, particularly in low and middle-income countries, means that many people do not receive the care they need.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of addressing visual impairment and blindness as public health priorities, and many organizations and governments are working to improve access to eye care and rehabilitation services. If not addressed it is estimated that by 2050, factors such as population ageing, growth, and urbanization may result in an estimated 895 million people with distance visual impairment, with 61 million of them being blind (Burton et al., 2021).

Consequences of Living with Visual Impairment

When vision is impaired, it can negatively impact mobility, and mental health, increase the risk of dementia, raise the likelihood of accidents such as falls and traffic collisions, and necessitate more social care, ultimately resulting in higher mortality rates (Burton et al., 2021).

When occurring in children with early onset and severe visual impairment, the child can experience delayed motor, language, emotional, social, and cognitive development. In later childhood, children with visual impairments may also experience lower levels of educational achievement. Visual impairment may also severely impact the quality of life among adults, these often demonstrate lower rates of workforce participation and productivity, also showing

higher rates of depression and anxiety. In older adults, visual impairment can contribute to social isolation, difficulty walking, a higher risk of falls and a greater likelihood of early entry into nursing homes (WHO, 2022).

A study by Crews et al. (2016) looked at working-age adults from the United States of America, finding that people with visual impairment reported higher levels of fair/poor health, life dissatisfaction, disability, frequent physically unhealthy days, frequent mentally unhealthy days, and frequent activity limitation days. These scores were subsequently associated with an increased prevalence of chronic conditions like stroke, heart disease, and diabetes, as well as poorer health behaviours, like increased smoking, decreased physical activity, overweight and obesity. Poorer outcomes were also associated with an increase in visual impairment (Crews et al., 2016).

It's important to note that the consequences of vision impairment can vary depending on the type and severity of the impairment and the individual's circumstances. However, early diagnosis and treatment, as well as access to rehabilitation and support services, can help individuals manage the effects of visual impairment and maintain independence and quality of life (WHO, 2022).

Psychological and Emotional Aspects of Living with Vision Impairment.

Living with visual impairment can have a significant impact on an individual's psychological and emotional well-being. Vision loss has been linked to negative mental health outcomes, such as loneliness, social isolation, and feelings of worry, anxiety and fear. Adults of working age who have visual impairments may experience a decrease in mental health, social functioning, and overall quality of life. While visual impairments may not

always lead to an uptick in depressive symptoms, a lack of perceived social support or a perceived sense of overprotection can contribute to depression and anxiety. According to a study by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), 25% of adults with vision loss reported experiencing anxiety or depression (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021; Nyman et al., 2010).

Younger adults with vision loss were found to have a significantly higher risk for serious anxiety or depression compared to older adults, potentially due to a lack of established coping mechanisms. It is important to screen for depression and anxiety in individuals with vision loss, as untreated anxiety can increase the likelihood of developing depression. Early treatment can greatly improve the overall quality of life (CDC, 2021).

Psychotherapy and Visual Impairment

It's important for people living with visual impairment to have access to support and resources, such as counselling, therapy, and support groups, to help them manage the psychological and emotional aspects of living with visual impairment. However, few attempts have been made to create programs to better support people with vision impairments.

An example of psychological intervention created specifically for the needs of people with visual impairments is the 8-week stress management group, developed by Naylor and Labbé (2017) after which participants showed decreased stress and an increase in well-being.

In another study by Ueda and Tsuda (2013), a 6 months skill training program was combined with group counselling whilst also optionally offering individual cognitive therapy.

Their results showed individuals with high levels of distress who attended group counselling showed an improvement in attitudes towards others. Moreover, the people who combined group counselling with individual cognitive therapy showed decreased tension-anxiety, depression, and fatigue whilst also significantly improving acceptance of disability.

Although some early evidence involving group treatment showed higher effectiveness than individual ones (Toseland & Siporin, 1986, as cited in Ueda, & Tsuda, 2013), a more recent systematic review and meta-analysis by Van Der Aa et al., (2016) that focused on psychosocial interventions to improve mental health in adults with vision impairment, showed no significant difference in group-based and individually offered interventions, concluding that there is only limited evidence about the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions with low vision people. However, the presence of the group can not be overlooked, as the presence of a group lessens isolation, letting people know they are not alone in a space where they can share experiences and gain social skills (McCulloh et al., 1994, as cited in Naylor & Labbé, 2017).

Outside the more traditional scope of therapy, some artistic activities have been shown to promote some aspects of well-being. Creative art therapies involve the intentional use of artistic mediums such as visual arts, music, dance, drama, and theatre to promote psychological growth. These mediums can serve as an alternative form of expression to help individuals process and cope with their emotional distress (Uttley et al., 2015). As acting recruits both processes of emotional and cognitive empathy, participation in theatre exercises and plays has been shown to be an effective method for developing psychological tools, as well as linked to eliciting a feeling of fulfilment, joy, pride and self-affirmation, these, in turn, contribute to the increase of self-esteem and the improvement of self-perception (Emunah &

Johnson, 1983; Goldstein et al., 2009 as cited in Lewandowska & Węziak-Białowolska, 2020; Smith, 2006; Snow et al., 2003).

What is Playback Theatre?

Playback Theatre (PT) is a form of theatre in which the audience members share stories from their own lives, and then watch as those stories are reenacted on stage by a group of actors and musician(s). The actors and musician(s) improvise the scenes and music based on the storyteller's words, without any prior rehearsal. PT is often used as a way to explore and better understand social and personal issues, and it can be a powerful tool for fostering communication and connection within a community (Fox, 1999).

The History of Playback Theatre

PT as a technique was first developed in the 1970s by Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas, in Beacon New York, inspired by a personal vision, Japanese Traditional Theatre, the work of Moreno in Psychodrama and the work of Augusto Boal in the Theatre of the Oppressed (Fox, 2015). The basic idea is that every person has a story worth sharing and that through the process of sharing and enacting these stories, individuals and communities can gain insight, build connections, and facilitate personal and social transformation. Fox (2015) describes the meaning behind the name Playback Theatre, it came from the idea that “we play your story back to you. Any story, big or small. From long ago or the present” (p. 35).

In 1990, the International Playback Theatre Network was founded to support Playback activity throughout the world, followed by the School of Playback Theatre to provide beginning, intermediate and advanced levels of training in PT, later being renamed Centre for

Playback Theatre in 2006, while also expanding its focus to the worldwide development of PT (Fox, 2015).

Currently, there are hundreds of Playback companies, that perform in over 60 countries, acting in a variety of settings, including education, therapy, community building, and conflict resolution (Barak, 2013; Bornmann & Crossman, 2011; Fox, 2007). PT has gained popularity around the world for its ability to create a safe and sacred space in which people can share their stories whilst also having them reflected and affirmed, regardless of their content or how ordinary or extraordinary they may seem. In this way, PT helps to build connections and facilitate personal and social transformation (Fox, 2007).

What Does a Playback Theatre Session Look Like?

A PT performance typically utilizes an empty stage with minimal props. Two chairs are placed on one side for the *Conductor* and *Teller*, while actors and a musician are positioned on the opposite side. Props traditionally include a set of coloured fabrics used to represent emotions, objects, and characters as needed. The Conductor, who is the leader of the performance, after a short warm-up, begins by inviting audience members to share a personal story. The Teller then shares the story, which may be about any subject, such as a moment experienced during the day, a dream, or a memory from childhood. The story is then played back to the teller and the audience by actors and musicians working together to improvise a scene based on their interpretation of the story (Moran & Alon, 2011; Sajjani & Johnson 2016). The process will repeat itself throughout the session, one story inspiring the next.

The storyteller is encouraged by the conductor to speak in as much detail as possible, including sensory details about the setting, characters and emotions. The actors and musicians

listen carefully and use the storyteller's words and emotions as a starting point for creating the scene. The actors may improvise dialogue, movement, and gestures, and the musician may add music or sound effects to help set the mood and enhance the storytelling. After the scene is complete, the group may invite the storyteller to share any additional reflections or thoughts they have about the experience (Fox, 2015; Salas, 1999).

The goal is to create a shared experience that helps the audience better understand and connect, as well as a way to explore and understand social and personal issues. Often in performance, one story links to another and there is the emergence of a "Red Thread", a term that refers to the connections binding the stories, like the recurring themes or issues but also to the connection that is created between audience members through the telling of their stories (Ellinger & Ellinger, 2018; Fox, 2015; Sajjani, & Johnson, 2016).

The Technique of Playback Theatre

The technique used in PT is based on active listening, improvisation, and the use of physical action, movement, and dialogue to bring the story to life. Actors in PT are trained to listen deeply to the storyteller and use their intuition and creativity to bring the story to life in an authentic and meaningful way. One important aptitude in PT is empathy or deep listening, to help understand the storyteller's perspective and emotions (Salas, 1999; Swallow, 1994). Other techniques used in PT include mirroring, fluid sculptures, physicalizing and "offering" which is when actors offer elements of the story back to the storyteller in a way that brings deeper understanding or insight (Ellinger & Ellinger, 2018).

According to Fox (1999), successful PT involves the convergence of three elements: aesthetics, social interactions, and ritual. The aesthetic aspect refers to the use of artistic form to engage the audience and facilitate identification with the story. The social element involves sensitivity to the group's current context and interactions. The ritual aspect involves the use of a structured framework to guide the improvisation and provide a sense of safety for the audience, allowing them to cross a metaphorical threshold and experience transformation. The conductor and the actors play an essential role in facilitating this transformation through the use of ritual elements (Fox, 2007). To help further ensure the ritualist feel, Playback sessions usually follow a fixed structure that includes, an opening, a warm-up with short improvisations, a progressive evolution to longer stories and improvisations, and a finale. Offering a fixed, repetitive and secure structure helps build stability and familiarity while stimulating and contemplating the unpredictable (Fox, 1994; Salas, 2013).

The Benefits of Playback Theatre

While not being therapy, PT can also have therapeutic benefits, as the act of telling one's story and seeing it enacted on stage can be cathartic and healing (Fox, 2015). PT has also proven an effective tool in promoting many well-being aspects such as empathy and understanding, the active listening and empathy techniques used in PT promote understanding and validation of different perspectives and experiences, hence enhancing empathic abilities (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Ng & Graydon, 2016).

The sharing of personal stories and being heard and seen in PT can also help to boost confidence and self-esteem. In a study conducted with older adults, Keisari et al. (2022), found that the transformative process inherent to PT can lead to improvements in various

mental health measures, including an increased sense of meaning in life, greater self-acceptance, stronger positive relationships with others, higher self-esteem, and personal growth.

Another benefit of PT is that it brings people together and fosters a sense of connection and community among participants, as acting out the life stories of others can lead to a sense of having a purpose in life and contributing to one's community, both of which are crucial for mental health (Keisari & Palgi, 2017; Keisari et al., 2018; WHO, 2019 as cited in Keisari, et al., 2022).

The creation of a space that encourages creativity and self-expression is another benefit of PT. A study by Moran and Alon (2011) looked at people recovering from mental health problems who took part in PT courses and reported some of the personal benefits of PT as fun and relaxation, creativity and self-expression, self-esteem and self-knowledge. The artistic component of PT facilitates emotional expression, as it provides a safe and supportive space for individuals to share their personal stories and emotions, allowing them to express and process feelings that may be difficult to talk about in other settings (Moran & Alon, 2011).

The experience of PT may also promote healing and personal growth, by sharing and witnessing personal stories, individuals may experience a sense of healing and personal growth. As Metz (2006) articulates, "Healing occurs when an individual personal experience is shared, accepted, transformed into art and brought into dialogue"(p.13).

As noted earlier, several projects are actively working towards making PT more inclusive for visually impaired (VI) individuals. One such project is StoryBox (2021), an inclusive PT group based in Hong Kong that offers a platform for VI people, deaf people, and students from Hong Kong Baptist University to connect through the art of storytelling. The group's

mission is to promote social dialogue and community building through PT. StoryBox's coordinator, Ng (2022), has written extensively about the importance of creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for people with disabilities, particularly those who are deaf or VI. Ng's work highlights the transformative potential of PT in fostering empathy and understanding across diverse communities.

First Drop Theatre (2023) is another example of an inclusive PT group with members from various parts of India, comprising individuals with different disabilities as well as those without any disabilities. The group primarily meets via Zoom and is committed to making PT accessible to everyone, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. First Drop Theatre's emphasis on inclusivity and diversity is reflected in its vision to create a space where people from all walks of life can come together and share their stories, by breaking down barriers and promoting dialogue.

Similarly, Inklusion Buhnenreif (2023) a PT group based in Germany aims to promote inclusivity by working with individuals from diverse backgrounds. The group collaborates with cancer patients, refugees, people with stuttering, and VI individuals, all under the overarching theme of inclusion. Through their work, Inklusion Buhnenreif seeks to facilitate new interpersonal connections, foster empathy, and encourage participants to open up to new perspectives and ways of life. By providing a safe space for individuals to share their stories, the group helps build courage and self-esteem, ultimately empowering them to become more active participants in their communities.

Mabat is a project in Israel that combines both sighted and VI people in a PT performance group. Mabat's focus is on delivering performances that showcase both the seen and unseen, striving to promote accessibility and diversity while also offering a platform for expression

and empowerment (M. Mairovich, personal communication, at Playback Theatre Reflects, June 2023).

Overall, the experience of PT has the potential to be a transformative and empowering experience for individuals of all abilities. Through the sharing and witnessing of personal stories, individuals may find healing, growth, and a sense of community. These inclusive PT groups, such as StoryBox, First Drop Theatre, Inklusion Buhnenreif, and Mabat, are breaking down barriers and creating safe spaces for individuals with diverse backgrounds and abilities to come together and participate in the art of storytelling. As we continue to explore the potential of PT, it is important to prioritize inclusivity and accessibility, so that all individuals can benefit from this powerful form of artistic expression.

Method

Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experience of VI people with PT. The qualitative approach is suitable for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of VI individuals' experiences, perspectives, and feelings. The study used semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection, as it allows the participants to share their experiences in their own words, providing rich data that can be analyzed thematically.

Participants

Participants in this study were VI individuals who had attended at least one PT session. Recruitment was carried out through online platforms, social media groups and playback communities. A total of 6 participants (2 females and 4 males) with ages ranging from 22 to 70 years old were recruited. Participants were from diverse backgrounds and had varying degrees of visual impairment, 2 participants were born fully blind, 1 was born with severe vision impairment, and 3 participants had progressive vision loss throughout their lives (see Appendix 1). Inclusion criteria included participants that were aged 18 years and above, participated or engaged with some form of PT and must have self-reported vision impairment. Exclusion criteria for participants were the presence of cognitive impairment, inaccessibility to use a computer with internet (ability to partake in a video conference) or language barriers that may prevent them from participating in the study.

Materials

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via video conference with participants to collect detailed information about their experiences with PT. The interview guide consisted of

open-ended questions designed to explore the experiences of VI individuals with PT (see Appendix 2). The questions were developed based on the literature review and previous experience of the researcher and mainly focused on the participants' perceptions of PT, their emotional responses, and any challenges they may have faced. All the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Procedure

Participants were contacted through social media groups and local communities and were invited to participate in the study. People interested in participating and who met the inclusion criteria were scheduled for an interview at a time convenient for them, informed consent (see Appendix 3) was also provided at this time. The interviews were conducted via video conference, mainly through the Zoom platform, preferably in a quiet and private location chosen by the participant, which minimized distractions and ensured confidentiality.

Before the interview, participants were informed that the interview would be audio-recorded and that the data would be kept anonymous and only used for research purposes. The researcher read the informed consent aloud, and oral consent was obtained from all participants, followed by a quick socio-demographic questionnaire (see Appendix 4) also verbally answered. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted by the primary investigator in Portuguese and English.

Data Analysis

Each interview was individually transcribed and thoroughly reviewed multiple times by the researcher. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke,

2006). The transcripts of the interviews were read and re-read by the primary investigator to become familiar with the data. The data was then coded manually, identifying the most salient and recurrent themes that emerged. The codes were organized into broader categories, and they were then organized into themes. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the data. The coding and theme development were done iteratively, with a constant comparison between the data and the emerging themes.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, an independent researcher with expertise in qualitative research methodology reviewed the codes and themes developed by the primary investigator. The independent researcher also reviewed a sample of the transcripts to assess the reliability of the coding process. The feedback from the independent researcher was incorporated into the analysis to ensure the credibility of the findings. The themes that emerged from the analysis will be used to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences with PT, including the benefits and challenges faced by VI individuals in this context.

In addition to the thematic analysis, a novel sociodemographic category titled "Visual Status at Birth" was introduced and incorporated into the participant profiles. This addition stemmed from the noteworthy emphasis placed by every interviewee during the interview phase. This distinction emerged as a salient factor influencing the participants' experiences with PT.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Board at ISPA. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and that their participation was voluntary. The data collected was kept confidential and stored securely. The audio recordings and transcripts were only accessible to the primary investigator and the independent researcher. The participants' identities were kept anonymous in the analysis and reporting of the results.

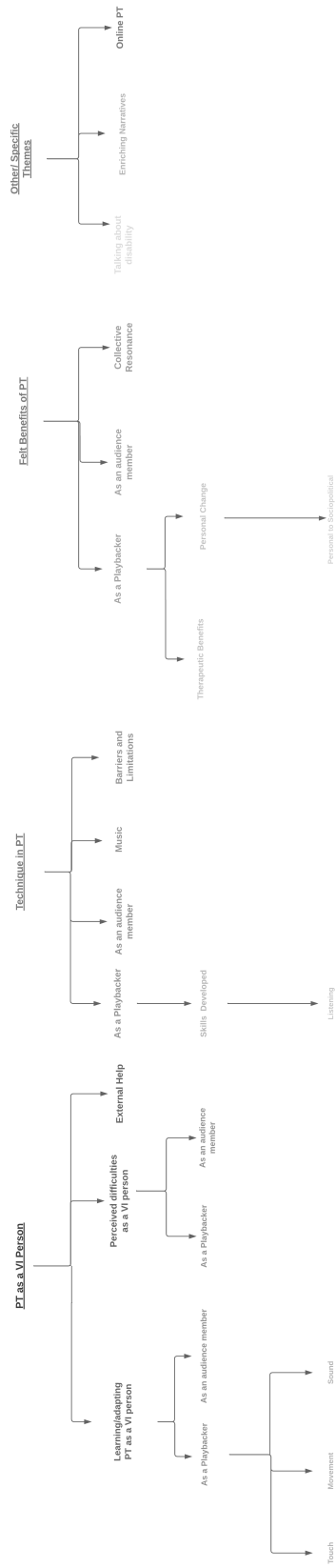
Findings

This thematic analysis explores the experiences of VI individuals with PT and reveals several key themes shedding light on various aspects of this unique form of theatre.

The first theme, “Playback Theatre as a Visually Impaired Person” delves into the specific challenges, adaptations and opportunities that VI individuals encounter in their participation in PT, comprising 48 segments of coded data. The second theme, “Technique in Playback Theatre” focuses on the various techniques employed by playbackers and perceived by the audience, discussing what skills were developed through PT, while also addressing some barriers and limitations in PT, with a total of 49 segments. The third theme, “Felt Benefits of Playback Theatre” explores the personal and therapeutic benefits reported by playbackers, including emotional balance, personal growth, therapeutic effects, and the creation of a safe and inclusive space, incorporating 59 segments of coded data. Lastly, the “Other/Specific Themes” category encompasses themes of “Online Playback Theatre” highlighting the challenges and unique experiences of engaging in PT through online platforms, the other sub-themes “Enriching Narratives” and “Talking about Disability” delve into the transformative power of PT in storytelling and fostering dialogue around disability, totalling 30 segments.

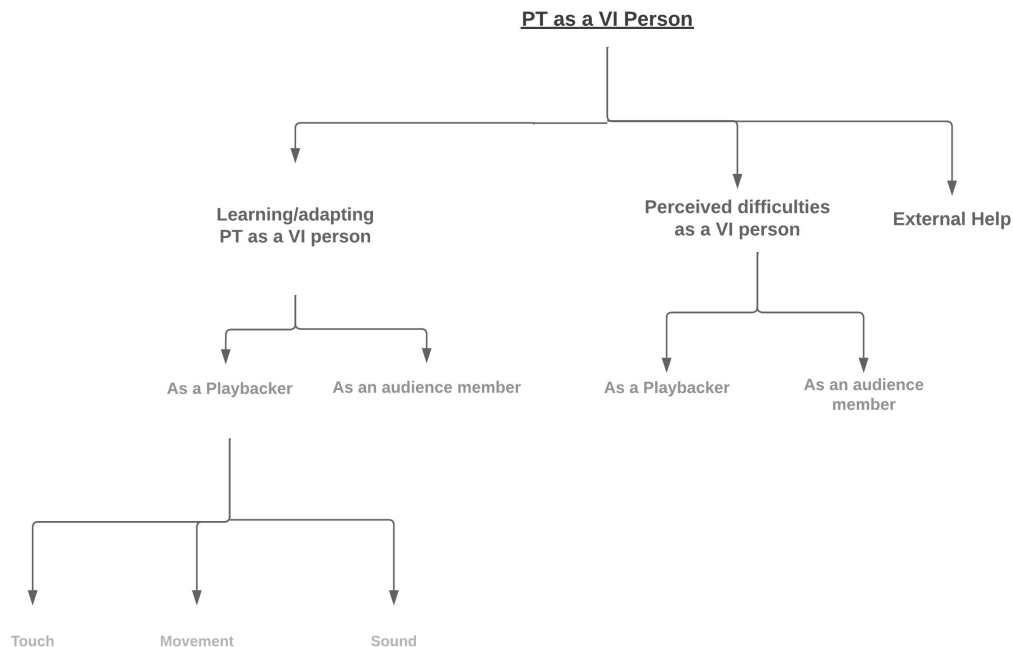
Together, these themes, have a total of 186 coded segments throughout the 6 interviews, with 4 main groups of themes: “Playback Theatre as a Visually Impaired Person”; “Technique in Playback Theatre” and “Felt Benefits of Playback Theatre” and one group of separate but relevant themes “Other/Specific Themes”. This data provides valuable insights into the experiences, techniques, and benefits of PT for VI individuals, shedding light on the transformative potential of this form of creative expression in promoting personal growth, inclusivity, and social change.

Diagram 1. Thematic Map



1. Playback Theatre as a Visually Impaired Person

Diagram 2. Theme PT as a VI Person



The theme “Playback Theatre as a Visually Impaired Person” uncovers the specific challenges, adaptations, and opportunities that VI participants encounter within the realm of PT. This theme delves into the multifaceted aspects of their participation, including the navigation of physical space, communication with fellow actors, accessing visual cues, and experiencing performance through alternative senses. The theme is made up of several sub-themes that include: “Learning/Adapting Playback Theatre as a Visually Impaired Person”, “Perceived Difficulties as a Visually Impaired Person” and “External Help”.

By examining the experiences of VI individuals, this theme aims to provide valuable insights into the ways in which PT can be tailored to accommodate diverse sensory needs and foster inclusive participation. The analysis of this data aims to shed light on the strategies, challenges, and adaptations employed by VI participants, highlighting their unique

perspectives and contributions to the PT process. Understanding the nuances and intricacies of engaging in PT as a VI person is crucial in not only recognizing the unique perspectives they bring to the theatrical experience but also in identifying potential areas for improvement and further enhancing accessibility within the PT community.

1.1. Learning/Adapting Playback Theatre as a Visually Impaired Person

This sub-theme focuses on the learning and adapting experiences of VI individuals within the context of PT. The theme is further divided into two categories: “Learning/adapting Playback Theatre as a Visually Impaired Playback” and “Learning/adapting Playback Theatre as a Visually Impaired Audience Member”, underscoring the unique challenges and transformative learning processes encountered by VI people who actively participated as playbackers in theatre performances. These individuals navigated the intricacies of non-visual cues, improvisation, and collaborative storytelling, adapting their techniques and honing their skills to effectively engage in the PT process. On the other hand, the experiences of VI audience members highlighted their active involvement in the theatre productions, as they observed, listened, and interacted with the performances, contributing their own perspectives and interpretations. Both playbackers and audience members demonstrated a capacity for learning, adapting, and actively engaging in PT despite their visual impairments. These findings emphasize the inclusive and empowering nature of PT for VI individuals, providing a platform for personal growth, creativity, and a sense of belonging within the theatre community.

1.1.1. Learning/adapting Playback Theatre as a Visually Impaired Playback.

Participants talked about their insights on acquiring and modifying PT techniques to ensure they were usable for VI individuals. They stressed the significance of feedback, flexibility, and personalized strategies in crafting inclusive performances. One specific example comes from Participant 3, who recounted using an accessible format known as “voicemail on the telephone.” This format served as an alternative playback method that all group members could engage with effectively. Participant 5 pointed out how their facilitator helped the group learn: “They gave us a format, they said, this is how it’s done usually. How can we make it accessible for you so that you can, you can perform it to your visually impaired and hearing impaired friends?”. Another important insight was brought up by Participant 5, nuancing the different experiences between people with acquired blindness and people born blind, being blind from birth themselves, “So body movement is always a big question for us. How do we portray something? How do I drink water in a cup? I don’t know. How do I portray smoking cigarettes? How do I portray just running, cycling, taking something, giving something? These are the things, I don’t know. Because I just do them, but I don’t know how to show them. When I don’t have that object in my hand, how do I show writing without a pen, without paper? How do I mime all of this? So miming and gestures and all of this is a big question mark for us, especially with people who are born blind. So we definitely need special support on that”. This remark further reveals the significant roles that touch, sound, and movement played in enhancing the participation and learning experiences of VI individuals in PT. In light of these findings, the theme is further subdivided into “Touch”, “Movement” and “Sound”.

1.1.1.1. Touch.

Touch was employed as a means to establish spatial awareness, allowing VI playbackers to recognize the stage boundaries. Mats were used as tangible indicators of stage edges, ensuring that VI individuals could perform without fear of being out of frame, “The facilitator used these mats to indicate the edges of the stages” (Participant 5). Touch also facilitated the learning process, as actors would freeze in specific positions, enabling VI actors to physically touch and feel their movements and expressions. This tactile interaction provided valuable information and cues for incorporation into their performances, “For every level an emotion, they would freeze in a position to show us so that we could touch them, feel them, see, okay, this is one. So for everything, basically, we need to feel, we need to be fed with that kind of information so that we know and next time we can incorporate that” (Participant 5).

1.1.1.2. Movement.

Movement took on a new dimension in this context. Participants emphasized their dedication to learning different types of movements, as they conveyed distinct meanings and emotions within performances: “We would do that religiously, we would dedicate a rehearsal just to learn movements, different kinds of movements, slow movement and sometimes fast movements and they both convey absolutely different things” (Participant 1). This highlights the significance of movement as a communicative tool and the efforts made to ensure VI actors could effectively express themselves and contribute to the overall theatrical experience.

1.1.1.3. Sound.

Sound emerged as another important sensory element, serving various purposes within PT. It helped VI actors mentally locate other actors on stage, as freezing was accompanied by specific sounds, “During the performance when people freeze, they make a sound, and then they freeze with it so I can mentally place them as to where they are” (Participant 1). Additionally, incorporating sound into physical gestures and movements made the scenes more inclusive and accessible for both VI actors and audience members. This practice ensured that actions and events were conveyed effectively to all, “They always ask you to do a physical gesture or a body movement, then give it a sound” (Participant 5). Furthermore, verbal cues from the conductor served as important signals for VI actors to return to their normal positions after freezing: “When the act is done, the conductor comes back and says, thank you actors. So, being visually impaired, that was a sign for me to come back to my normal position if I was frozen” (Participant 5).

1.1.2. Learning/Adapting Playback Theatre as a Visually Impaired Audience Member.

In terms of learning and adapting as audience members, VI individuals reported relying on various sensory cues during performances. Sound played a crucial role in understanding the plot as Participant 2 stated “I know the voices, I had been familiarizing myself with the voices”, this familiarization helped the participant engage their imagination: “So you can imagine the images I created in my head of them all, in squares” (Participant 2).

1.2. Perceived Difficulties as a Visually Impaired Person

This theme sheds light on the challenges faced by VI individuals when engaging in PT. It delves into their subjective experiences, perceptions, and reflections on the specific difficulties they encounter in this context. It is further subdivided into “Perceived Difficulties as a Visually Impaired Playback” and “Perceived Difficulties as a Visually Impaired audience member”.

By examining these perceived difficulties, this theme aims to deepen our understanding of the barriers that VI individuals navigate, such as accessing visual cues, interpreting nonverbal communication, or effectively utilizing physical space. The findings from this theme provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of VI participants, highlighting areas for potential intervention and adaptation within the PT community.

1.2.1. Perceived Difficulties as a Visually Impaired Playback.

Participants in this study identified various perceived difficulties when engaging in PT as VI individuals. As Playbackers, some participants expressed challenges related to certain formats that were not accessible despite their efforts, “So there are a few formats that we cannot do, no matter how hard we try. In terms of that there’s still, it’s still work in progress, I would say” (Participant 5). Additionally, Participant 5 also highlighted their struggle with rigid practices in playback, using as an example when a Conductor in a workshop said it was disrespectful not to make eye contact with the teller at the end of the performance, “But I cannot, no matter how hard I try I cannot look into the eyes of the teller. So do you think I am disrespecting, do you think it’ll be portrayed as a disrespect, a disrespected gesture?”.

1.2.2. Perceived Difficulties as a Visually Impaired Audience Member.

As audience members, VI individuals encountered difficulties in fully experiencing and understanding the performances, highlighting the need for a sighted companion to describe the scenes in order to fully be able to appreciate them, as participant 2 put it “Because those who do not have the support of someone who is sighted watching the scenes do not enjoy it in the same way”.

Even with the assistance of audio description, the effectiveness of scene descriptions remained limited for VI individuals. Participant 4, who was born almost fully blind, shed light on this issue. They expressed that visual descriptions, such as colours, did not offer meaningful information because they had no prior knowledge or experience of colours. Instead, this participant emphasized the value of tactile descriptions, which allowed them to imagine and comprehend the scene more effectively, “Everything I can visualize with touch makes sense to me to be described. If you talk about it in terms of colours, you may talk about it, but it’s not information that I’ll listen to, it doesn’t add anything”.

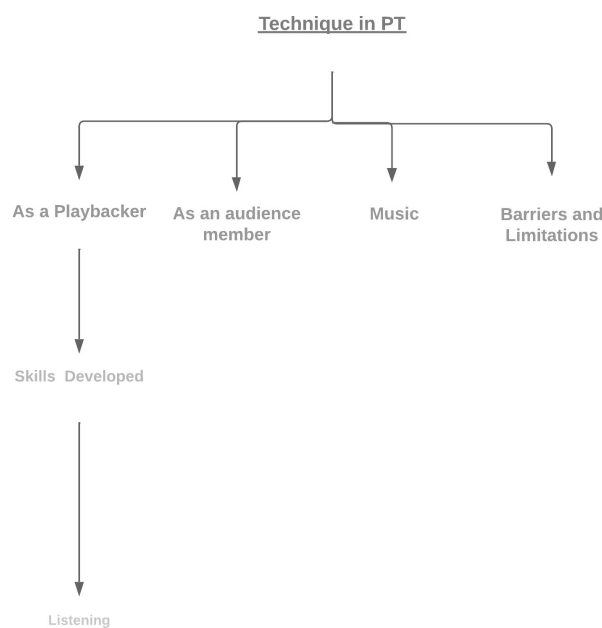
1.3. External Help

Participants highlighted the importance of receiving assistance from others to navigate and understand the theatrical context. Participant 1 expressed the reliance on others by stating, “People take me around and they show me, which is where”, this statement emphasizes the need for sighted individuals to provide guidance and support, ensuring VI people can effectively navigate the performance space and engage with the content. Furthermore, participants highlighted the significance of audio description in helping them comprehend the unfolding events. Specifically, Participant 1 mentioned the use of audio description as a valuable tool for understanding the actions and scenes in PT saying, “Audio description to

understand what was happening”, this statement highlights the importance of providing auditory descriptions that offer additional information about the visual aspects of the performance, enabling VI individuals to fully grasp and appreciate the content. The reliance on external assistance and the utilization of multi-sensory audio description emerged as crucial elements in facilitating the engagement and understanding of VI individuals in the context of PT.

2. Technique in Playback Theatre

Diagram 3. Theme Technique in PT



One of the other central themes explored is “Technique in Playback Theatre”, this theme focuses on the specific techniques employed in PT and examines how VI individuals perceived technique in PT both as playbackers and audience members, what skills they felt were developed through PT, what impact did the musical aspect have, as well as some

Barriers and Limitations in the practice of PT. This theme is subdivided into further sub-themes such as: “Technique as a Playback”; “Technique as an Audience Member”; “Music” and “Barriers and limitations”.

By exploring the techniques used in PT, this theme aims to provide a deeper understanding of how VI individuals perceive and navigate the creative and performative aspects of this art form.

2.1. Technique in Playback Theatre as a Playback

This sub-theme revealed the participants’ perspectives on the importance and challenges associated with effectively employing techniques in PT.

Participant 6 emphasized the significance of integrating verbal and physical elements to capture the essence of the story, stating, “That desperation of performing the story without missing the core aspects of it can be really projected in a very beautiful manner when both verbal, your verbal, oral act, words and those actions come into the picture”. This participant’s comment underscores the importance of combining spoken words and physical actions to convey the emotional depth and richness of the narrative.

Participant 5 raised the question of how to maintain a balance between honouring the storyteller’s experience and holding a safe space even in the most intimate stories, questioning, “But at the same time, when that person is sitting in the teller seat, how do you really hold them and the space together?”. This remark highlights the complex challenge faced by playbackers in maintaining a delicate balance between honouring the authenticity of the storyteller’s experience whilst also maintaining an emotional balance. Often in PT, the personal stories shared are very emotionally charged, actors must be very skilled when representing such stories and not let the teller “fall apart”.

These findings shed light on the complexities and considerations involved in utilizing techniques effectively as a playback in order to capture the essence of the story while maintaining the integrity of both the performance and the teller's space.

2.1.1. Skills Developed.

The sub-theme "Skills Developed" illuminated the participants' insights into the skills honed through engaging in PT.

Participant 6 emphasized the unique aspect of PT, which involves the immediate challenge of spontaneously reacting with empathy to the shared stories. They stated, "That instant challenge of reacting spontaneously to what these stories have been sharing, again with an empathetic approach, is really something that keeps theatre, playback theatre, especially distinct from other forms". This highlights the capacity of PT to foster a unique skill set that enables performers to respond authentically and empathetically to the narratives presented.

Another participant emphasized the importance of embodying the stories through physical expression, stating "Because we should be able to show that in our body, we should be able to give a gesture to our thousand words so that it is communicated well" (Participant 5). This statement underscores the significance of utilizing body movements and gestures to effectively convey the depth and meaning of the stories. Additionally, Participant 5 emphasized the essential aspects of presence, body movement, and gestures, particularly when not speaking, as these elements reveal an actor's acting skills, by saying, "If you don't have a dialogue at that particular moment, never think that you are invisible. You are visible always. And especially when you're not saying anything that is when your acting skills come out".

These findings highlight the valuable skills developed in PT, including spontaneous empathetic reactions, a physical embodiment of stories, and the ability to convey meaning non-verbally.

2.1.1.1. Listening.

Whilst analyzing the data, one skill stood out consistently as a skill that PT helped develop, being mentioned by 3 separate participants various times throughout the interviews, the skill of “Listening”. This sub-theme revealed the participants’ observations regarding the significance of attentive listening in PT, as Participant 6 highlighted the transformative impact of joining PT on their listening skills, stating, “This is one thing that I’ve, again, learned after joining with the playback, a pure listening skill where you should not just listen to it, but hear it, understand it, bring out the core aspects of it in a very empathetic manner that is very distinct”. This emphasizes the importance of going beyond passive listening and actively engaging with the stories shared during playback performances. It involves understanding the nuances and underlying emotions of the narratives to authentically convey them. By developing enhanced listening abilities, playbackers can extract the essence of the stories and express them in a compassionate and distinct manner. These findings underscore the critical role of deep listening skills in PT, allowing performers to connect empathetically with the storytellers and effectively communicate their experiences to the audience.

2.2. Technique in Playback Theatre as an Audience Member.

The sub-theme of “Technique in Playback Theatre as an Audience Member” explores the experiences and perceptions of VI individuals who experienced PT performances. One participant expressed their appreciation for the way in which the playback actors engaged

with the stories, describing them as fantastic and highly skilled individuals with a deep emotional understanding. This participant specifically highlighted the profound and professional approach taken by the playback actors in their reading and interpretation of the stories, mentioning “I liked the way they grasped it, I think they were fantastic, they really did an in-depth reading of my stories, it had to be done by people with a fantastic emotional IQ, they were very professional” (Participant 2).

This finding suggests that PT when experienced as an audience member, can elicit a strong emotional response and create a meaningful connection between the performers and the audience. The participant’s positive evaluation of the playback actors’ technique emphasizes the effectiveness of PT as a medium for emotional expression and connection, providing VI individuals with a rich and engaging theatrical experience.

2.3. Music

The sub-theme of “Music” highlighted the significant role of music in enhancing the PT experience. Participant 6 described how music adds a new dimension to the performances, by sharing, “It adds a new dimension to it, if you’re listening plain and then listening with music, it’s something that has a beautiful exposure to be witnessing and it brings out a new perspective in terms of understanding or watching the story as well”. This suggests that music enriches the storytelling process, allowing for a deeper connection between the audience and the narratives being portrayed. Additionally, Participant 1 emphasized the practical function of music in pacing the performances, stating, “Music helps us to pace ourselves”. Music serves as a guiding element, facilitating the flow and rhythm of the Playback performance, and ensuring that the stories unfold in a coherent and engaging manner.

These findings highlight the transformative power of music in PT, offering an enhanced sensory experience and contributing to the overall effectiveness and artistic quality of the performances.

2.4. Barriers and Limitations

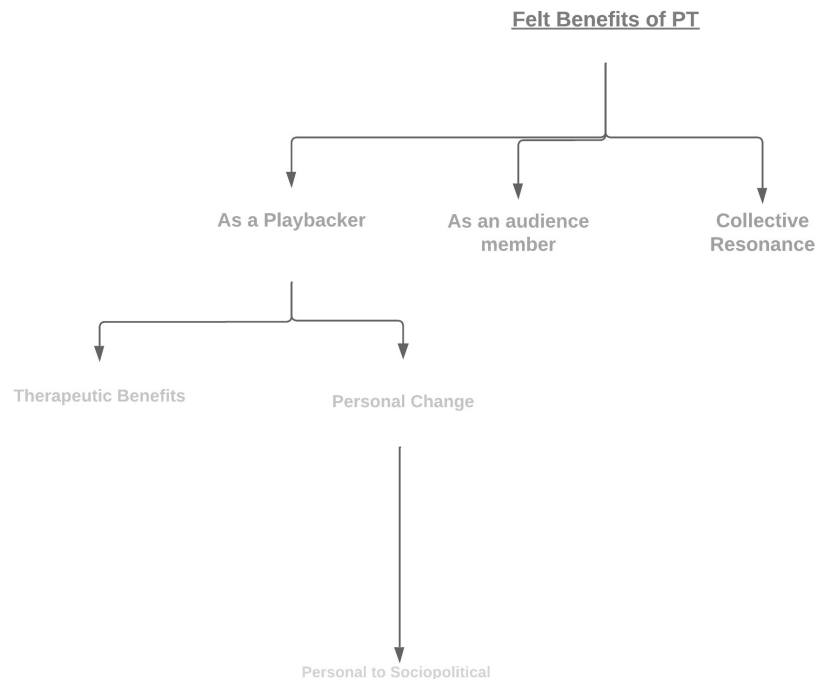
The sub-theme of “Barriers and Limitations” sheds light on the challenges and potential pitfalls associated with the PT technique. One of the playbackers voiced concerns regarding the possibility of emotional harm, expressing, “I was afraid of snapping someone’s emotions” (Participant 5). The same participant also brought up an essential point, “The harm is that people tend to be unconsciously biased about particular things, and they don’t even notice that”. These statements highlight the profound impact of PT and the potential to evoke intense emotional responses that could overwhelm or distress participants, while simultaneously underscoring the vital importance for playbackers to possess exceptional skills and self-awareness to ensure performances do not inadvertently cause harm.

Furthermore, Participant 1 highlighted the importance of creating a safe space within PT, emphasizing that it is the responsibility of individuals involved to ensure that the environment remains supportive and respectful, stating “So I don’t think playback itself has any harmful things, but I think it’s harmful when people don’t hold the safe space”.

These findings highlight the need for practitioners and facilitators to be mindful of the importance of good technique and of the emotional impact and well-being of participants, actively working to maintain a safe and nurturing atmosphere. By addressing these barriers and limitations, PT can be more effectively utilized as a therapeutic and transformative technique, fostering personal growth and emotional well-being.

3. Felt Benefits of Playback Theatre

Diagram 4. Theme Felt Benefits of PT



Another prominent theme examined is the “Felt Benefits of Playback Theatre”, this theme focuses on the subjective experiences and perceived benefits reported by VI individuals who engage in PT. It explores the emotional, psychological, and social impacts of participating in PT as reported by the participants themselves. It is made up of the following sub-themes: “Felt benefits of Playback Theatre as a Playbacker”; “Felt benefits of Playback Theatre as an Audience Member” and “Collective Resonance”. Participants highlighted the development of skills such as active listening, emotional expression, and creative communication. PT also fostered a sense of belonging and social connection within the group.

The findings from this theme provide insights into the ways in which PT positively influences the well-being, personal growth, and sense of belonging of VI individuals. The benefits encompass a range of aspects, including emotional expression, self-reflection,

empowerment, increased empathy, personal change, therapeutic effects, and social connectedness. By highlighting the felt benefits, we are able to understand how PT serves as a meaningful and transformative experience for VI individuals, fostering their psychological and emotional well-being, enhancing their sense of agency, and promoting a sense of community and belonging within the PT context.

3.1. Felt Benefits of Playback Theatre as a Playback

This sub-theme explores the subjective experiences and perceived advantages of participating in PT as a playback. Participants expressed various positive aspects of their involvement in PT. Participant 1 described PT as a place where they could mentally escape and disconnect from their physical surroundings, finding it rejuvenating and re-regenerating, sharing “There was a place that I could go to (...) and totally disconnect from my presence, surroundings and people. And it was a shared learning. We were learning something absolutely interesting. Rejuvenating, re-regenerating. It was a very good thing at that point”.

Participant 3 described their experience as “enlightening”, suggesting that engaging in PT provided valuable insights and personal growth. The same participant went on to emphasize the mutual benefits derived from PT, noting its positive impact on themselves, the audience, and the topics addressed, stating “It’s beneficial to us and to the audience and to the topic”.

Importantly, participants highlighted that PT does not impose or preach any specific message, allowing for open exploration and interpretation, stating “Playback doesn’t really preach anything” (Participant 5). These findings underscore the emotional, intellectual, and social benefits that VI individuals can derive from engaging in PT, emphasizing its therapeutic and transformative potential.

3.1.1. Therapeutic Benefits.

The sub-theme “Therapeutic Benefits” highlights the therapeutic value experienced by VI individuals through their engagement in PT. Participant 6 described PT as a form of art that served as a companion and a means of personal healing, reflecting that “It becomes like a great art in which I can heal myself. That’s the kind of companion that I, myself and playback share”.

Participant 5 emphasized the personal and therapeutic nature of PT regardless of the role one played in the performance, stating “There’s something very personal about playback and myself, it’s always very therapeutic to be involved, as an audience, as a playback, as a musician, even as a trainee, as a student, it’s always very healthy”. Participant 5 further emphasized the healing aspect of PT, noting that seeing one’s own story reflected back during the playback process had a profound healing effect, expressing “When you see the story played back to you, reflected back to you, that heals you”. These findings underscore the therapeutic benefits of PT for VI individuals, providing a space for self-expression, personal growth, and emotional healing.

3.1.2. Personal Change.

The sub-theme “Personal Change” reveals the transformative impact of engaging in PT. Participant 6 highlighted how PT contributes to personal growth by exposing individuals to various stories and expanding their understanding of the world, stating “It helps you in terms of growing yourself because you get to know many stories. That way you get to know the world better. That’s one way you grow yourself on your personality and you know your creativity and thinking everything on the other way”. This exposure fosters personal development, enhances creativity, and deepens one’s thinking.

Moreover, Participant 6 discussed how PT challenged their perfectionistic tendencies, teaching them to embrace imperfections and act spontaneously in the moment, mentioning “I used to feel that a human being should not commit mistakes. If you commit a mistake, there is no way. But playback taught me because it’s all instantly, you should do”.

Participant 1 shared that the experience of PT extended beyond the performance setting, leading to improved listening skills in everyday interactions, stating “This experience has gone outside the playback setting also. When generally people speak to me, I find myself listening more deeply. So I value that as a very important part of my learning”. This increased depth of listening was considered a valuable aspect of personal learning.

Additionally, Participant 5 expressed that PT helped them achieve emotional balance, highlighting its positive influence on their emotional well-being, mentioning that “Playback made me balance in terms of emotions”.

These findings demonstrate that participation in PT can bring about personal change, including personal growth, increased spontaneity, enhanced listening skills, and improved emotional balance. PT acted as a catalyst for self-development and personal transformation for the participants.

3.1.2.1. Personal to Sociopolitical.

The sub-theme “Personal to Sociopolitical” reveals how engaging in PT goes beyond personal growth and extends into the realm of sociopolitical impact. Participant 5 emphasized that PT offers a unique avenue for fostering understanding and dialogue that cannot be achieved through traditional research papers or discussions, stating “This is not going to be possible by a research paper. This is not going to be possible by a panel discussion. This is definitely not going to be possible by a heated discussion. This is only possible by playback”.

PT allows for the exploration of diverse cultures, beliefs, and backgrounds, facilitating the recognition of cultural overlaps and shared experiences, as Participant 1 noted, “But very interestingly, we found that a lot of cultures, a lot of beliefs and backgrounds, the past, the history, not the history, but the way we look at it culturally, how our culture has lots of overlaps”. This highlights the potential for PT to bridge societal divisions and promote empathy and connection among participants.

Participant 6 emphasized that engaging in different playback formats provides a new perspective on the world, indicating the potential for personal growth to influence one’s perception of larger social and political issues, mentioning “Day by day you grow and you perform different, the playback format, and that gives you a new perception of looking into the world”.

These findings demonstrate that PT has the capacity to foster personal development while simultaneously addressing sociopolitical dimensions by promoting understanding, cultural exchange, and a broader perspective on societal issues. PT serves as a powerful tool for personal and sociopolitical transformation.

3.2. Felt Benefits of Playback Theatre as an Audience Member

“Felt Benefits of Playback Theatre as an Audience Member” explores the subjective experiences and perceived advantages of individuals who observed PT performances. PT was found to offer benefits to VI audience members, such as personal growth and exploration, as well as expand their understanding of others’ stories.

Participant 4 expressed their perspective on the benefits of being an audience member, stating that PT stimulates memory and encourages interaction among people, sharing that “I think that PT stimulates memory and stimulates interaction between people.”

This finding suggests that VI individuals when engaging as audience members, experience cognitive stimulation and social engagement. PT performances serve as a platform for enhancing memory processes and fostering meaningful connections among audience members.

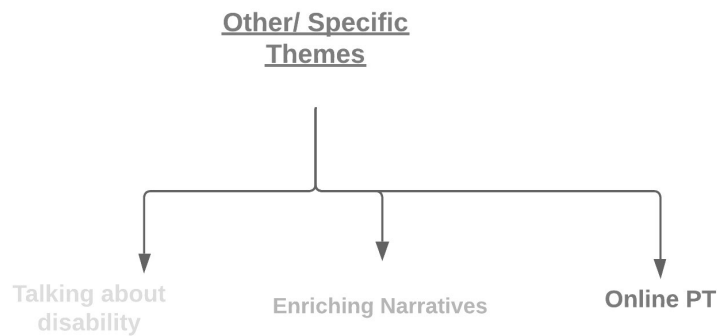
3.3. Collective Resonance

The sub-theme “Collective Resonance” explores the sense of connection and belonging experienced by VI people through their participation in PT. Participant 3 expressed the desire to establish a harmonious connection with others in the group, allowing for mutual feedback and support, expressing “To be connected with them in a way that we are connected harmoniously, and I can also give them some feedback”.

Participant 6 emphasized their desire to be seen as an equal member of the group, emphasizing the acceptance and freedom to interact that PT provided, saying that “I always wanted to be only a person in the group” further highlighting the acceptance they felt in the group, “But having those people around, those kinds of a people, accepting me, letting me move my way, letting me interact as anybody, that’s a new world. I felt that a new world opened to me”. Through collective resonance, VI participants were able to experience a deep sense of connection, engagement, and empowerment within the PT community. These findings highlight the transformative nature of PT, offering a sense of belonging and a newfound world of connection and acceptance.

4. Other/Specific Themes

Diagram 5. Other/Specific Themes



Several themes emerged during the data analysis that did not explicitly fit within the previously identified themes. These themes, collectively referred to as “Other/Specific Themes” encompass important aspects of the participants’ experiences in PT. This section of the findings explores three specific themes: “Online Playback Theatre”; “Talking about Disability” and “Enriching Narratives”. Although these themes may not align directly with the previously identified themes, they are essential in providing a comprehensive understanding of the VI individuals’ experiences in PT. Together, these specific themes contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the overall experiences and impacts of PT on VI individuals, shedding light on important aspects that warrant attention and further exploration in future research.

4.1. Talking about Disability

The theme “Talking about disability” examines the impact of PT in facilitating discussions and changing perceptions related to disability. Participant 3 described PT as “Enlightening

and encouraging for both normal people and disabled people. So, it's really good for the society".

Another significant finding is the transformative effect of PT on audience members who initially held personal assumptions or prejudices about disability. After witnessing the performances, these individuals approached the VI playbackers and engaged in conversations, resulting in a shift in their perceptions of disability, as mentioned by Participant 5 "There were people who could not share in the public. But after the show, they would come to us and talk to us about their personal assumptions, and we see them going as a different person, as different persons altogether, their perceptions of disability changed".

Participant 5 further mentioned that "Playback doesn't really shout down the values or the societal aspects down your throat, but it creates that dialogue. So, with playback, we were very effective in creating a dialogue about disability". This statement highlights the ability of PT to foster dialogue about disability allowing for open and constructive discussions.

In regards to performances and other aspects of PT, participants emphasized the importance of making it accessible to all, ensuring inclusivity by stating "The general thumb rule is to make it as accessible as possible" (Participant 5).

In the rehearsal space, there is also space for disability discussions, such as mentioned by Participant 6 "We discuss inclusivity, inclusive society and disability, the role of the so-called normal world and making the world inclusive".

Overall, PT serves as a powerful platform for addressing and challenging societal attitudes towards disability, promoting understanding, and fostering dialogue for a more inclusive society, ultimately, contributing to the broader discourse on inclusive and accessible theatrical practices, emphasizing the importance of accommodating diverse sensory experiences within the PT community.

4.2. Enriching Narratives

The theme “Enriching Narratives” explores the novice experiences that PT enables by enriching personal narratives and providing participants with a unique and transformative experience. One relevant finding is Participant 4’s description of being both a spectator and a protagonist in the PT process, “In addition to being a spectator, I was also a protagonist, that is, the one who made the story. So that was something I didn’t find anywhere else”. This dual role allowed them to not only observe the stories being performed but also actively contribute to the creation of narratives. This aspect of active participation was highlighted as something unprecedented and unparalleled in their experiences elsewhere.

Another participant emphasized the transformative nature of sharing personal stories and witnessing them being brought to life by the collaborative efforts, “It was nothing but a new experiment in life for me until I started sharing the stories. Once I started sharing my own stories and watched them being performed by the co-actors and co-musicians. It was magical” (Participant 5), suggesting that PT had the power to bring narratives to life in a deeply meaningful way.

Additionally, participants highlighted the inherent challenge of reacting spontaneously to shared stories with empathy, which they believed distinguished PT from other forms of theatre, “That instant challenge of reacting spontaneously to what these stories have been shared, again with an empathetic approach, is really something, that keeps theatre, playback theatre, especially distinct from other forms” (Participant 6).

The enriching nature of PT lies in its ability to provide a platform for personal narratives to be shared, interpreted, and transformed into a collective experience that is both empowering and distinct.

4.3. Online Playback Theatre

The theme “Online Playback Theatre” explores the experiences of VI individuals engaging in PT through online platforms, a modality that in recent years has gained more popularity within the PT community. One notable finding is the challenge faced by participants in adjusting to the camera frame during online performances. Participant 1 highlights the struggle of maintaining their position within the camera frame, which is crucial for VI individuals who rely on physical cues for orientation and movement, stating that “When we are doing online, adjusting to the camera frame is something that I still struggle with because that is where I lose my shape. I lose my camera frame, I move somewhere while performing, that is a real challenge, where I sighted, I would not feel that I guess.”.

This challenge presents a unique aspect of online PT that may not be apparent to sighted individuals. The same participant added “Since I only use the upper part of my body, it really hampers my actions, and that has a huge impact on my verbal action I lack that intent, that desperation to perform the stories in my actions”, further, highlight the impact that the spacial limitations can have on the overall playback experience.

Despite these difficulties, another significant finding is the sense of escape and detachment from the physical limitations that online PT offers. Participants expressed that despite being unable to physically go anywhere (whilst in lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic), they found solace in the online platform, disconnecting from their immediate surroundings and immersing themselves in the virtual space of the performance, as Participant 1 shared “There was a place that I could go to, even though I couldn’t go anywhere physically”. This suggests that online PT provides VI individuals with a means to transcend their physical constraints and engage in a creative and transformative experience.

Discussion

Drawing from a rich and diverse data set, this discussion section presents a collection of key interpretations and synthesized understandings regarding the experiences of VI individuals with PT. By examining the data within the broader context of clinical psychology, incorporating relevant theoretical frameworks, and reviewing pertinent literature, valuable insights emerge. These interpretations shed light on the multifaceted dimensions of the VI participant's engagement with PT, exploring the challenges they navigate, their benefits, and the transformative potential of this unique form of creative expression. Through this comprehensive analysis, a deeper understanding of the interplay between visual impairment and PT emerges, providing a foundation for future research and therapeutic interventions aimed at promoting the well-being and empowerment of VI individuals.

Inclusive Theatre and Accessibility

The data reveals a compelling emphasis on the imperative for inclusive theatre practices that prioritize the accessibility requirements of VI individuals. Participants underscore the significance of fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment for all audience members and performers alike, as one of the participants mentioned reflected “Enlightening and encouraging for both the normal people and disabled people. So it's really good for the society”.

This resonates with the broader context of disability rights and the pursuit of inclusivity within the arts, advocating for equal access and opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Theoretical frameworks, such as the social model of disability as proposed by Oliver (2013), further inform our understanding by asserting that people with impairments are not inherently

disabled, but rather, it is the disabling barriers and attitudes prevalent in society that hinder their full participation.

Applying this lens to comprehend the challenges experienced by VI individuals in engaging with and experiencing theatre illuminates the impact of societal barriers and attitudes in shaping their experience in PT. Embracing this approach empowers the playback community to cultivate an environment that is less disabling and more accommodating.

Encouragingly, the data suggests that strides have already been taken in this direction, with conductors facilitating spaces where VI playbackers can comfortably explore the PT experience, thus tailoring it to their specific needs. Creating a stimulating environment that engages other senses besides sight serves to bridge the gap between the VI individual and the theatrical setting. For instance, incorporating rich audio descriptions for both playbackers and audience members, integrating elements of sound through music or voice, and prioritizing tactile information in performances, all exemplify steps taken towards greater accessibility. Additionally, allowing extra time for movement and tactile explorations contributes to enhancing the overall experience for VI individuals in PT settings. By adopting these inclusive practices and striving for greater accessibility, PT can emerge as an enriching and transformative platform that celebrates the diverse experiences and contributions of VI individuals in the realm of creative expression.

Embodied Experience and Multi-sensory Engagement

In recognizing the importance of integrating multiple sensory modalities to effectively engage VI individuals in PT, participants illuminate the significance of various senses, mainly movement, touch, and sound, in enriching the theatrical experience. The incorporation of these sensory dimensions becomes evident as participants discuss their creative approaches,

such as expressing emotions through a combination of sound and action: “We trained to vocalize as we were acting”, or employing distinct movements to convey the same word as the participants also mentioned: “Some of the times we just met so we could practice movements, we could practice different movements for the same word” and even skillfully freezing their gestures with accompanying sounds: “Whenever an actor ends, they end with a sound so that we know that they ended”. Moreover, PT sessions dedicated entirely to the art of movement, perceived and communicated through touch and sound, emerge as powerful examples of how sensory-rich experiences can transcend visual limitations and foster a deeper connection between participants and their narratives. This data highlights the importance of a multi-sensory approach to storytelling, where auditory, tactile, and verbal elements are utilized to create a rich and immersive experience.

The concept of “embodied cognition” can be relevant here, which suggests that cognition and understanding are not solely based on visual perception but are influenced by the integration of various bodily sensations and experiences. Embodied cognition theory says that cognitive processes, such as perception, memory, and reasoning, are deeply influenced by the body and its interactions with the environment. Embodied cognition posits that the mind is intricately interconnected with the body and that our sensory and motor experiences play a significant role in shaping how we think, learn, and understand the world. According to this theory, the body’s sensory experiences and motor actions are not just passive inputs or outputs to the mind but are integral to the cognitive process itself. For example, when we interact with the world through touch, movement, and other physical experiences, it can influence how we perceive and interpret information. Similarly, our motor actions, such as gestures, can impact our thought processes and aid in problem-solving and communication (Iani, 2021; Varela et al., 2017; Wilson, 2002)

This theory holds significant relevance to PT, particularly in the context of engaging VI individuals. PT's emphasis on improvisation, storytelling, and emotional connection, inherently involves the integration of bodily movements, gestures, and sensory experiences. For VI participants, this aspect becomes even more critical, as their non-visual sensory modalities play a central role in their interactions with the world. Embracing the principles of embodied cognition in PT allows for a more inclusive and enriched experience, as VI individuals can fully engage their sensorimotor capacities to communicate, emote, and connect with their stories and those of others. By recognizing the interconnectedness of mind, body, and environment, PT facilitators can create a supportive and accessible space that nurtures the expressive potential of VI participants. This integration of embodied cognition in PT not only fosters a more profound sense of self-awareness and emotional catharsis but also contributes to breaking down barriers and promoting empathy and understanding among all participants, regardless of visual abilities. Ultimately, the theory's emphasis on embodied experiences aligns seamlessly with the core essence of PT, enhancing its transformative power and facilitating a more inclusive and enriching creative process for VI individuals.

Empathy, Personal Growth and Therapeutic Benefits

PT has been associated with various benefits, such as increased empathy, personal growth, and therapeutic advantages, which align with existing literature on the transformative power of theatre (Aygan, 2023; Feniger-Schaal & Orkibi, 2020). The emphasis on sharing personal stories and witnessing their enactment in PT facilitates empathetic connections among participants (Amarante et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2022; Ng & Graydon, 2016), resonating with theories of perspective-taking that propose engaging in theatrical experiences promote understanding and empathy (Dogan, 2018; Rathje et al., 2021), as one participant

stated: “I’ve learned after joining playback pure listening skills, you should not just listen to it, but hear it, understand it, bring out the core aspects of it in a very empathetic manner”.

Furthermore, PT and drama therapy share therapeutic aspects, indicating that engaging in theatrical practices can lead to emotional healing and personal development (Snow et al., 2003). According to one of the participants, “It had a huge impact in terms of my emotions and personality management, everything”. Another participant also said, “Talking about all the emotional balance, playback made me balance in terms of emotions”.

Although PT is not therapy, it still provides therapeutic benefits as participants express cathartic and healing experiences through sharing their stories and seeing them come to life on stage (Fox, 2015). When looking at the data statements such as “It becomes a great art in which I can heal myself” and “When you see the story played back to you, reflected back to you, that heals you”, the same participant also added “I think it’s very therapeutic” demonstrate that therapeutic benefits of PT are also felt by participants, including those with visual impairments.

Previous studies have also demonstrated the therapeutic benefits of PT, as supported by research from Munjuluri et al. (2020), Gonzalez et al. (2022), Keisari et al. (2020) and Keisari et al. (2018). Moreover, certain branches of PT have evolved to embrace a more psychotherapeutic approach. For instance, Barak’s (2013) model integrates PT with Narrative Therapy, while Psychotherapeutic Playback Theatre (PPT), as explored by Kowalsky et al. (2019), represents a form of group psychotherapy where the PT ritual serves as the foundation for therapeutic group processes. Overall, the transformative nature of PT encompasses empathy-building, personal growth, and therapeutic benefits, underscoring its potential to foster emotional well-being and self-development for all participants.

Community Building and Social Connection

The significance of community and social connection emerges as a prominent and recurring theme in the data. Participants express a profound sense of belonging and highlight the supportive and accepting nature of the PT community. This is evident in the statements of Participant 6 “But having those people around, those kinds of people, accepting me, letting me move my way, letting me interact as anybody, that’s a new world. I felt that a new world opened to me” and “I always wanted to be only a person in the group”. This emphasis on social connection aligns with the broader literature on the social benefits of theatre participation, where theatre serves as a platform for fostering collaboration, building relationships, and creating a sense of belonging (Meeks et al., 2018; Lewandowska & Węziak-Białowolska, 2022).

The data further highlights the role of feedback and mutual support within the PT community, underscoring the importance of creating safe spaces for expression and personal growth. As expressed by one of the participants, “So we know what each person is going to do, their strengths, their weaknesses, how they portray certain things. We slowly learn them, we get to know better about them as actors”, another participant adds, “These are the few things that we discovered later with each one of us. When we keep giving each other feedback”. The importance of social connection and group cohesion in PT is also evident in other research, Keisari et al. (2020) in the theme “Expansion of Social Engagement”, found that PT enhanced participant’s sense of connectedness and engagement within the group. Similarly, Gonzalez et al. (2022) identified the significance of group factors, such as heterogeneity, interpersonal learning, and empathic listening, in fostering a cohesive and supportive environment.

A powerful illustration of the therapeutic potential of the group setting is reflected in a participant's statement about their past experiences, "I always felt a lot of nervousness. I did not move my body. I did not speak much. But that's how I've been because all through these years, 10, 20 years I've been in the world, I've been in situations where I would restrict myself, and restrain my words, thoughts, and actions. That's the kind of restrictive environment in which I've socialized. Coming there, expressing ourselves is something... it looked like a challenge for me because people around me were sharing everything freely, cracking jokes". In this intriguing context, we delve into the realms of an Emotional Corrective Experience (ECE). An ECE refers to a powerful therapeutic process wherein a group member's longstanding interpersonal issues, often rooted in past experiences, are addressed and resolved through new and positive interactions within the therapeutic group setting. During an ECE, individuals may have the opportunity to experience the emotions they were unable to experience in past relationships, leading to personal growth and healing. This process occurs when the group provides a supportive and accepting environment, allowing members to confront and reevaluate deeply ingrained patterns and beliefs, ultimately leading to transformative changes in their emotional responses and interpersonal interactions (Brown, 2016; Vinogradov & Yalom, 1989).

This data highlights the essential role of community and social connection in PT, where emotional corrective experiences can play a pivotal role in fostering personal growth, healing, and a sense of belonging within the group setting.

Challenging Perceptions and Shifting Paradigms

The data strongly suggest that PT has the potential to challenge societal perceptions of disability and contribute to a broader dialogue about inclusion and diversity. A participant

shared their personal experience, stating, “But very interestingly we found that a lot of cultures, a lot of beliefs and backgrounds, the past, the way we look at it culturally, how our culture had lots of overlaps”. This reflection highlights how PT facilitated an understanding of diversity and its significance for the participants. Another participant emphasized the power of open dialogue in challenging perceptions, saying, “We discuss inclusivity, inclusive society, the role of the so-called normal world, and making the world inclusive”. It is evident that PT creates a platform for meaningful conversations that lead to questioning societal norms and fostering inclusivity. The participant’s comment that “Playback doesn’t really shout down the values or the societal aspects down your throat, but it creates that dialogue. So with playback, we were very effective in creating a dialogue about disability”, further underscores the role of PT in initiating discussions about disability. By highlighting the experiences of VI individuals and facilitating open discussions, PT encourages the audience to reconsider their assumptions and stereotypes related to disability. This aligns with the transformative power of the arts in challenging dominant narratives and promoting social change (Atkins et al., 2011; Murray, 2012).

The principles proposed by Augusto Boal, the founder of Theatre of the Oppressed, also resonate with the objectives of PT. Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed seeks to empower participants to analyze and challenge social inequalities and oppressive systems (Sajjani et al., 2021). Similarly, PT’s emphasis on personal storytelling and enactment creates a space for participants and audiences to challenge prevailing stereotypes and prejudices related to disability. Witnessing authentic and diverse experiences of people with disabilities prompts audience members to reflect on their own assumptions and potentially change their perspectives. One participant’s comment encapsulates this transformative aspect of PT, “There were people who could not share in the public. But after the show, they would come

to us and talk to us about their personal assumptions, and we see them going as a different person, as different persons altogether, their perceptions of disability changed”. This demonstrates the power of PT in fostering empathy and understanding, leading to positive changes in perceptions of disability, serving as a catalyst for challenging societal perceptions, promoting inclusivity, and encouraging transformative dialogue about disability. The combination of personal storytelling, enactment, and open discussions allows PT to contribute to meaningful social change and foster a more inclusive society.

Empowerment and Minority Stress

The data set indicates that PT has played a significant role in empowering participants. For instance, one playbacker, expressed their transformation in the performing arts, saying, “I thought theatre was something that I couldn’t do... I had closed my mind to performing arts... but this whole thing about interacting with the audience and listening to something on the spot... this is something like a live wire, you don’t know what story will come up next, so I find this extremely exciting when I go in for a show... it gives me a different kind of a high to do it”. Empowerment refers to the process through which individuals gain control, influence, and a sense of self-efficacy in their lives. With populations such as the VI population, this can be achieved through PT, offering VI people a platform for self-expression, personal growth, and the assertion of their unique perspectives. This approach allows VI individuals to share their stories, challenge societal stereotypes, and strengthen their sense of agency (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Guddingsmo, 2022).

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the presence of minority stress within the VI population. Minority stress theory explains that individuals from stigmatized minority groups may experience stressors related to their marginalized status (Frost & Meyer, 2023). In the

case of VI individuals, these stressors may result from societal prejudices, discrimination, and accessibility barriers. Such stressors can negatively impact psychological well-being and hinder the experience of empowerment (Mohd Harimi et al., 2020; Steffi et al., 2022).

Therefore, it is essential to consider both the empowering aspects of PT and the potential challenges arising from minority stress when examining the experiences of VI individuals with PT. By recognizing and addressing the barriers and stressors that VI individuals face, PT interventions can be tailored to foster empowerment and resilience while mitigating the negative impact of minority stress.

Conclusion

This dissertation has delved into the unique and enriching experiences of VI individuals engaging with PT as both playbackers and spectators. By employing qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study sheds light on the significance of PT as a powerful medium of expression and connection for this particular population.

The findings of this research have unveiled several key themes that shape the experiences of VI participants in the realm of PT, “Playback Theatre as a Visually Impaired Person” provided insights into the challenges and adaptations of engaging with this form of art. “Technique in Playback Theatre” explored the various strategies employed by VI participants to navigate and participate in the performance, as well as some barriers identified in PT for VI people. The “Felt Benefits of Playback Theatre” category highlighted the emotional, psychological, and social advantages experienced by VI individuals through their involvement with PT. Additionally, the “Other/Specific Themes” category elucidated how online playback performances, enriching narratives, and discussions about disability added further dimensions to their experiences.

By integrating the findings with relevant literature, this study has contributed to the existing knowledge in several critical areas. Inclusive theatre and accessibility were emphasized as crucial considerations in creating spaces that accommodate individuals with visual impairments and foster their active participation in the performing arts. Embodied experience and multi-sensory engagement emerged as powerful tools for enhancing emotional connections and empathy in the PT setting. The therapeutic benefits of PT were underscored, with personal and emotional growth and a sense of community being vital outcomes for VI individuals. Revealing that the benefits of PT extend to this specific

population. PT also provided a unique avenue for VI people to navigate and transcend the challenges posed by their visual impairment, fostering multi-sensory engagement and embodied experiences. The study also explored how PT played a pivotal role in challenging societal perceptions of disability and shifting paradigms towards a more inclusive society. Furthermore, the notion of empowerment was highlighted as a significant factor for VI participants engaging with PT. The implications of these findings can inform theatre practitioners, educators, and policymakers in creating more inclusive and accessible theatre experiences for all.

The study's insights have crucial implications for the field of psychology, highlighting the potential of PT as an effective therapeutic tool for VI individuals, promoting emotional well-being and enhancing social connections. Furthermore, the recognition of the significance of this art form for the VI community contributes to the broader discourse on disability inclusion and diversity in the performing arts, ultimately paving the way for more accessible and empowering experiences for individuals with visual impairments. The insights resulting from this research also hold benefits for the academic field, as it adds to the growing literature on art-based interventions and their impact on marginalized populations. This is valid as well for the PT community, as it helps gain a greater understanding of the challenges faced by VI participants and can use this knowledge to foster more inclusive environments and practices.

Capturing the lived experiences and perspectives of VI playbackers and spectators, amplifying their voices, and dispelling misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding disability, can lead to a broader societal appreciation of VI individuals' unique talents, insights, and contributions.

However, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations encountered during the research process. The relatively small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Future studies could include larger and more diverse samples to further explore the nuances and variations in the experiences of VI individuals in PT. Additionally, the study focused primarily on qualitative methods, which provided rich narrative data. However, including quantitative measures may help triangulate the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of PT on VI individuals. A longitudinal study could also be interesting to explore PT participation's long-term effects and outcomes for VI individuals.

In conclusion, this dissertation has illuminated the transformative potential of PT for VI individuals. Through an in-depth exploration of their experiences, this study has highlighted the therapeutic, social, and empowering aspects of their engagement with this art form. As a contribution to research, psychology and the playback community, this dissertation paves the way for further exploration and appreciation of the invaluable role of PT in fostering inclusivity, empathy, and personal growth for VI individuals. By recognizing and embracing the diversity of voices and experiences, society can progress towards a more inclusive and equitable world for all.

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