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Changing Lives Through Art: A Book Review of Stephen Snow's Ethnodramatherapy

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Abstract

This book review introduces qualitative researchers to a specialized art form: ethnodramatherapy, the production of a play based on the study of the actions and thoughts of a group of people which aims to have a therapeutic effect on the individuals in the group. Stephen Snow's *Ethnodramatherapy: Integrating Research, Therapy, Theatre and Social Activism into One Method* documents his decades-long work and expertise as a Registered Drama Therapist. Ethnodramatherapy is a multidisciplinary blend of qualitative research, mixed methods evaluation, arts-based research, dramatic improvisation for devised theatrical production, autoethnographic introspection, and—most notably—strategic therapeutic goals with selected participants from various populations. Ethnodramatherapy is a genre of applied theatre that utilizes the art form for individual, community, and social change.

Keywords

ethnodramatherapy, theatre, social activism

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Changing Lives Through Art: A Book Review of Stephen Snow's *Ethnodramatherapy*

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This book review introduces qualitative researchers to a specialized art form: ethnodramatherapy, the production of a play based on the study of the actions and thoughts of a group of people which aims to have a therapeutic effect on the individuals in the group. Stephen Snow's *Ethnodramatherapy: Integrating Research, Therapy, Theatre and Social Activism into One Method* documents his decades-long work and expertise as a Registered Drama Therapist. Ethnodramatherapy is a multidisciplinary blend of qualitative research, mixed methods evaluation, arts-based research, dramatic improvisation for devised theatrical production, autoethnographic introspection, and—most notably—strategic therapeutic goals with selected participants from various populations. Ethnodramatherapy is a genre of applied theatre that utilizes the art form for individual, community, and social change.

Keywords: ethnodramatherapy, theatre, social activism

Ethnodramatherapy is “the preparation and performance of a play based on the study of the actions and thoughts of a group of people, with deeply shared common experience, which aims to have a therapeutic effect on the individuals in the group” (Snow, 2022, p. 4). Stephen Snow, PhD, is professor emeritus from Concordia University in Montreal, and credentialed as an RDT-BCT (Registered Drama Therapist – Board Certified Trainer) by the North American Drama Therapy Association. His new book documents his decades of scholarly and artistic work as one of drama therapy's most respected figures.

Ethnodramatherapy is a multidisciplinary blend of qualitative research (primarily ethnographic methods such as interviews, participant observation, data analysis), mixed methods evaluation (surveys, assessment instruments), arts-based research, dramatic improvisation for devised theatrical production, autoethnographic introspection, and—most notably—strategic therapeutic goals with selected participants from various populations. Ethnodramatherapy is a genre of applied theatre, an action-oriented approach by, for, and with selected groups that utilizes the art form for individual, community, and social change.

Snow's *Ethnodramatherapy* is an exceptionally well-detailed resource that profiles its principles and practices through compelling descriptive, confessional, and analytic prose. The first two chapters of this rigorous work present the historic origins of ethnodramatherapy, along with its conceptual principles and therapeutic goals. He references key contributors to the practice such as Jacob Moreno and Jim Mienczakowski, and related applied theatre forms such as Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. These chapters lay the essential foundation for readers new to ethnodrama and drama therapy. Snow provides extensive references to the literature, and outlines how the ethnographic methods of qualitative research are important facets of the production development and evaluation processes.

Ethnodramatherapy then documents Snow's production projects through compellingly written case study profiles with accompanying color photographs. The diverse populations with whom he has worked include female adolescents in youth protection; caregivers for loved ones

with mental illness; adults with developmental disabilities; and Chinese students exploring freedom of expression through the arts therapies. Each chapter includes a description of the dramatic text and its development, the rehearsal process, play script excerpts, performance documentation with photos, and audience/participant assessment. Throughout each chapter, Snow provides background context and reflexive commentary on his work as a director, facilitator, and drama therapist with the production's participants.

Chapter 5, for example, outlines the process of creating an ethnodrama about caregivers for loved ones with mental illnesses. Snow begins with the origins and rationale for the project, including recommendations for how practitioners may benefit from the chapter. He cites the related literature throughout in both psychotherapy and ethnotheatre, and highlights the salient features of the particular production experience. Initial data collection processes included phenomenological interviews and the modalities of psychodrama and playback theatre—two unique improvisational approaches that dramatize significant moments from a participant's actual life experiences.

The chapter includes both extended interview excerpts and samples of how the data were adapted into monologic form. One of the more compelling scenes is a mother's story of her mentally ill adult son. An excerpt reads:

By 19, he became very sick. He would get angry and hit the wall with a baseball bat. He was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, and he was also addicted to drugs. For 12 years, I tried to help him. I would rent him places to live, shop for furniture, set it up, clean his house and bring him food, too. I tried to give him some structure. . . . I felt helpless. All he was doing, all day, was smoking in bed. The nice table I got for him, next to the bed, was filthy with sticky drinks, sodas, empty bags for chips, cigarette butts, everywhere. It was so damn filthy. It was disgusting. (Snow, 2022, p. 149)

Snow concludes with qualitative and quantitative assessment of the performance's impact on the audiences and the participants. This represents the general content and structure of the five case study chapters in the book. The final three chapters discuss the ethical necessities and challenges of therapeutic interventions, the philosophical domains of the art form (e.g., phenomenological, emancipatory, psychodramatic), and future directions and possibilities for ethnodramatherapy to initiate personal and social change.

Recommended readers for this book are qualitative researchers engaged with community-based projects and participatory action research, plus professionals in psychology, counseling, social work, sociology, health care, applied theatre, creative therapies, and arts-based research. The World Health Organization estimates that "one in four people on this planet will be affected by mental illness at some point in their lifetime" (Snow, 2022, pp. 160-161). Based on my own ethnographic research experiences, it is very likely that some of the participants we interview and observe in the field will experience depression, anorexia, bipolarity, suicidal tendencies, and other disorders which may be undetectable or deliberately hidden from others. It is necessary that qualitative researchers bring a working knowledge, heightened awareness, and an empathetic understanding of the mental illnesses we may encounter when we work with participants of all ages and from diverse backgrounds.

Ethnodramatherapy documents Snow's distinguished professional career as a theatrical artist and drama therapist, and demonstrates the power of the art form to create transformative healing and change. This book is an essential companion to related works in the genre by Baim (2020), Frese and Brownell (2020), Norris (2009), and Saldaña (2011).

For more information on the field of drama therapy and its professional organizations, access The North American Drama Therapy Association website at nadta.org; The British

Association of Dramatherapists at badth.org.uk; and, for international organizations, The World Alliance of Dramatherapy at worldallianceofdramatherapy.com.

Book Information

Stephen Snow, *Ethnodramatherapy: Integrating Research, Therapy, Theatre and Social Activism into One Method*. London & New York: Routledge, 2022. Ebook ISBN: 9781003083818, £26.99; Paperback ISBN: 9780367539474, £29.99; Hardback ISBN: 9780367539481, £120.00.

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Author Note

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