



An Intercultural Journey of Becoming a Drama Therapist: An Autophenomenographic Exploration of Self-Development within a Forest-Dwelling Community

Marija Maijere & Anita Pipere

This presentation explores how empathy emerges and is co-created through non-verbal, embodied relationality in a cross-cultural encounter – beyond the limits of shared language or cognitive understanding. Using an autophenomenographic methodology, I reflect on my experience as a Latvian drama therapist in training, participating in field-based learning within a forest-dwelling Temiar community in Malaysia while studying Neuro-Dramatic Play with Sue Jennings.

Rather than approaching the community as an observer, I entered as a guest – without a shared spoken language. Communication unfolded through play, rhythm, mirroring, and attentive presence. What began as uncertainty and disorientation gradually transformed into a deeper awareness of embodied empathy as a mutual and fragile act of attunement. This shift challenged my Western assumptions about therapeutic agency and invited a more humble, relational understanding of what it means to ‘meet the Other’.

Through daily reflexive journaling and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the research revealed moments where empathy was not ‘extended’ from therapist to child but co-created in the space between bodies. In this presentation, I will share examples of silent reciprocity, resistance, and unexpected repair – not as data, but as lived moments that reshaped my understanding of therapeutic presence.

This inquiry suggests that empathy, in intercultural contexts, is not a skill one possesses but a practice one enters – through vulnerability, curiosity, and embodied listening. I propose that becoming a drama therapist requires not mastery, but the courage to be transformed in encounter.



To ensure rigour and reflexivity, the analysis included expert triangulation with a qualitative research specialist (Prof. Dr. Anita Pipere), providing an external interpretative lens and supporting analytical depth.

This self-reflective journey became an encounter with the unknown – where transformation emerged not from reaching a destination, but through travelling across difference, facing challenge and allowing new growth to unfold.

Biography

Marija Maijere is a drama therapy master's student at Rīga Stradiņš University, Latvia, and a diplomate in psychodrama, sociometry and group psychotherapy (Moreno Institute, 2023). She holds prior degrees in journalism and communication sciences (University of Latvia) and international business management (RISEBA). With over 20 years of experience in communication, digital innovation and international education, she currently works as a lecturer, business trainer and creative learning facilitator. Her research explores intercultural empathy, embodiment and identity formation in drama therapy. She has co-created educational games and learning programs across Europe, combining creative arts, applied improvisation and experiential transformation in adult education.

Anita Pipere, PhD, is a professor and senior researcher at Daugavpils University and an acting professor at Rīga Stradiņš University. She holds a PhD in psychology from the University of Latvia and has extensive international experience as a scholar, editor, evaluator and project leader. She serves on editorial boards of several SCOPUS journals and has authored over 150 scientific publications, including major works on qualitative research methodology. Her academic interests include dialogical self, health psychology, sustainability education and philosophy of science. She is an active member of international research networks, including the International Society for Dialogical Science.

Recent publications and presentations

Maijere, M., Pipere, A. (2025). **From Guest to Professional Identity: A Cross-Cultural Communication Experience of a Drama Therapist in Training**. Conference presentation at the *20th International Conference "Social Sciences for Regional Development"*, Daugavpils University, Latvia.