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# Therapy & Dragons: A look into the Possible Applications of Table Top Role Playing Games in Therapy with Adolescents

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THERAPY & DRAGONS: A LOOK INTO THE  
POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS OF TABLE  
TOP ROLE PLAYING GAMES  
IN THERAPY WITH  
ADOLESCENTS

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Masters of Social Work

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by  
Raul Gutierrez  
June 2017

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June 2017

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding on the use of Table Top Role Playing Games (TRPGs) in therapy with adolescents. This qualitative study utilized individual interviews as a means to extract themes from mental health practitioners who have provided this intervention with their clients in an individual/group therapy setting. Results were transcribed to written form. Qualitative analysis procedures were followed to identify themes and subthemes. Areas of particular interest to the social work profession were: applicability to clients of any age, the client-tailored narrative, use of TRPGs in a group setting, TRPGs as a form of exposure therapy. Possible risks of utilizing this intervention and limitations of the study were also introduced.

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all of my peers and supervisors that have helped me grow immensely throughout these past few years in the social work BSW and MSW program. I could never repay you for everything you have all done for me.

Thank you to my family for always encouraging me and supporting me throughout my entire life. Gracias por todo. I am blessed to have such a supportive family and I hope to give back in any way I am able.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Statement

Mental health practitioners often use a wide array of intervention methods in order to better fit their client's specific needs. Clients often differ greatly in terms of what approach is better suited for them depending on many factors such as age, gender, background, ethnicity, and culture to name a few. Adolescents in particular require additional engagement than most adults do, simply because they can be more focused on themselves and the formation of their role or status (Hatano, 2015). Approximately 20% of adolescents live with some level of mental health disorder, which makes the need for a proper intervention clear (Duckworth, 2013). It is a particularly vulnerable population due to the formation of identity and other changes that happen in this stage of life (Mann, 2014). These life changes can potentially make this population difficult to work with. This difficulty in working with adolescent clients requires practitioners to be knowledgeable about different techniques, interventions, and approaches they can keep in their metaphorical "tool-belt" allowing them to effectively switch to a different approach if one is not working.

A serious issue practitioners may face in the field is not being able to effectively engage their adolescent clients using common therapeutic techniques. Engagement of an adolescent must be reached in order for them to be an active

participant in the therapeutic process and for recovery to be more easily reached (Abdel-Salam, 2014). The use of board games is something used quite often in play therapy sessions with adolescents, but the use of a different type of table-top game has begun to emerge in the mental health field. Table top Role-Playing Games (RPGs) are now being used, mainly in the non-profit setting, to assist adolescent clients deal with a variety of trauma and abuse. The issue with it being a relatively new intervention is that there is little to no information regarding how to effectively implement the intervention nor is there any evidence regarding its effectiveness in practice. The reason this is an issue is because some practitioners are already implementing this intervention with clients without knowing how this will affect clients in long term practice. This intervention could prove to be problematic for certain types of clients or it could be a strong undiscovered intervention that could only benefit the social work field overall. Either way, the current use of this intervention calls for more information on its implementation with clients.

Table top RPGs involve taking on the role of another person. This person, or “character” as they are called in game, is often a made up person living in an imaginary world. This character can take on similar attributes that the player has, or it can take on attributes that the player wishes they had in real life. The goal of these games is often to fulfill their “quest” or goal in the game and that is typically decided by the Game Master (GM). The GM often decides what direction the story takes, what the player’s objective is, what they will encounter, and who they

will come across. Mental health practitioners take advantage of this story telling power to put the client's character through similar experiences and situations that the client is going through (Lawrence, 2007). A player's character can act as a buffer for the client. It is a method in which a client can learn to maneuver through or deal with difficult situations while essentially feeling like they are safe and away from the situation since it is the character going through the experience. These games offer adolescents the opportunity to work on their personal identity, functioning, and awareness of social rules through the use of these buffer characters (Rosselet, 2013). More sensitive topics that must be approached with adolescents such as history of abuse or trauma are often more difficult to bring up and address in individual "talk therapy" sessions. The utilization of a character that is far enough detached from the client, yet still putting them in control could prove to be an effective method of getting clients to address their specific issues and teaching them the skills they need to address the issue in their real life.

Being a relatively new method of intervention, there is very little research or evidence that supports or goes against its application to adolescent clients, or any other client type. Taking into account that there is little in terms of studies and research that has gone into the practical application of this intervention, the experts on this subject are essentially those that have worked directly with the population in question, using this intervention. That is why this research study seeks to gain the perspective of these experts on the intervention's application

with adolescents. Their input could help determine the extent to which this intervention is effective, how to implement it effectively, and to whom it is most easily applied. This would in turn help guide practice for future practitioners that wish to implement similar play therapies with their clients. It would also help bring to light some of the intervention's strengths and weaknesses that those in the field can either improve on or modify to best suit the needs of the client receiving treatment.

The primary question that this study will address is: How do mental health practitioners view the engagement of table-top role playing games as an intervention and its benefits in implementation with adolescent clients who have suffered trauma or abuse.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research study is to assess how effective mental health practitioners believe this new RPG intervention is with adolescent clients, if it has any major benefits they see other interventions do not have, and if it easily able to connect to existing evidenced based models or theories to help ground it in some existing practices. Their input on the intervention will help determine whether or not RPGs are worth implementing and how beneficial they are for adolescents dealing with trauma. Results from this study could potentially identify the need for further research into this intervention, may add some credence to the implementation of RPGs in therapy, and open up a new avenue for the practice of play therapy. Perhaps it could paint a better picture as to what

population benefits the most from this intervention and what type of clients would not benefit from its application. Adolescents dealing with past trauma are the primary focus, but the responses of the practitioners could potentially reveal some application with different populations such as children, adults, and older adults. This study could also do the opposite and expose major barriers in the application of this intervention which would discourage further implementation of this intervention in the field of social work.

One of the major reasons why an exploratory study like this is necessary is because some interventions could potentially be harmful for some clients. Holding Therapy for example, was implemented by practitioners because they believed it could potentially help children and adolescents better deal with their autism, but further research showed that it was ineffective and was actually doing more harm than good (Mercer, 2013). This shows that interventions being implemented with clients are not always beneficial. The wrong intervention could always be used and could have some potentially long lasting consequences on clients. So for that reason, this research study sees the importance of evaluating new interventions, such as the use of RPGs, as crucial and of great priority.

This study also serves to bring more attention to the intervention itself. Although this intervention has yet to be thoroughly studied, it has great potential to be highly customizable and tailored to specific clients. This makes the input from the practitioners using this intervention crucial. This study can reveal how practitioners use this intervention in their practice, how they tailor it to their

clients, and if they are able to incorporate other theoretical or evidence based approaches into this intervention.

### Significance of the Project for Social Work

One of the greatest reasons why this study is important to social work has to do with social work's ethical practice. As a profession, we must always have the client's best interest in mind and absolutely do no harm to the client (Massat, 2009). As mentioned earlier, there have been times when interventions that proved to be potentially harmful were implemented in therapeutic use anyway. By conducting exploratory research into the interventions social workers seek to utilize with clients, a better idea of whether or not the intervention is potentially harmful to clients can be formed. By identifying its potential harm, the social work field can discourage further use and can better protect the integrity of social work practitioners in the mental health field.

Another factor to consider is the benefit the intervention could have with clients. Aside from ensuring that social workers are not using interventions that could prove to be potentially harmful, the study could find some value in its application and use. This intervention could potentially fulfill a need for a client that was not being met before through another type of therapeutic intervention. Clients, at times, have "poor outcomes" when it comes to psychological therapy, and a majority of this could sometimes be attributed to certain characteristics the client has that makes them more resistant to therapy (Delgadillo, 2016). Perhaps what makes the clients more "resistant" to therapy is the mental health



practitioner not using the correct means of approaching therapy. Exploring new interventions such as this could help bridge the gap for some clients and could potentially make them more cooperative or willing to go through the therapeutic process.

This study could also open new doors that lead to the further exploration of other intervention methods that involve similar treatment approaches. None of the theoretical approaches and evidence based practices in the social work field sprung up overnight. Each one was researched, evaluated, and improved upon in time. Making this type of intervention more widely recognized by the social work field could potentially lead to a more open minded approach to interventions and could lead to the establishment of further interventions along the same lines, much like Dialectic Behavioral Therapy becoming a more refined and specific version of the general Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Expanding and adding new treatment approaches can help build a pool of interventions from which practicing social workers in the mental health field can easily pull from and implement in practice.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Application of Role Playing Games and Their Engagement with Adolescents

Adolescents are unique due to the fact that they are exposed to multiple types of risk factors for psychosocial distress such as bullying and the ever growing risk of cyberbullying (Arat, 2015). In the United States, 11.4% of adolescents have suffered from a major depressive episode alone, this does not include any of the other major mental disorders individuals can sometimes face at this age (National Institute of Mental Health, 2014). This makes it clear that adolescents require mental health services just as adults would. Although both populations require mental health intervention, adolescents often require higher levels of engagement due to their development stage and their possible inability to form their thoughts and feelings into words (Crenshaw, 2015). In order to help them better engage in therapy sessions with practitioners, play therapy interventions are often integrated into the client's recovery to better fit the adolescent's recovery. However, if the adolescent client is resistant or not engaged in their treatment, then they are less likely to make any real progress (Abdel-Salam, 2014). The need for specialized interventions that meet their need is clear, but there is very little in terms of research when it comes to this intervention method. This next section would have gone further into previous research studies concerning this intervention, but because of the lack of research into this intervention, the main focus of this next section will instead be

adolescents in therapy and how implementation of RPGs could possibly support them through their specific learning and engagement needs. It will also go into how another exploratory research study that sought to look into the application of an intervention with a specific population was structured and how the researcher collected data.

### Group Setting

Rosset and Stauffer conducted a case study that sought to look at the practical uses of role playing games with gifted children and adolescents (2013). The youth that were being put through the case study were cognitively ahead of their peers, but were somewhat delayed in their interpersonal skills. This study sought to evaluate if there were any positive changes to their intra/inter-personal skills. The study implemented Goffman's social role identification and distance, an Adlerian play therapy approach, and a psychosocial model of interaction to encourage the participants to experiment with new character identities and roles. The result of the study found that the role playing games were actually beneficial in improving the participant's social and emotional development (Rosset & Stauffer, 2013). The study itself would have benefited from having a control group that could have compared the benefits of more traditional interventions to RPG interventions. By comparing the two, researchers could have a better idea of whether or not RPG intervention benefits outweigh or compare to that of more traditional interventions and if RPGs are an intervention worth looking further into. A follow-up on the participant's behaviors would have also been beneficial to

see if the changed behaviors were persistent or if they were a more temporary effect of the intervention.

### Thinking Process

Tsui-shan Chung conducted a research study that sought to look into the cognitive processes, primarily thinking and creativity, of those who engaged in table top RPGs as compared to those who engaged in electronic RPGs and non-players (2013). Two methods of measurement were used during this study, first of which was the Wallach-Krogan Creativity Tests and the McCrea and Costa Big Five Personality Inventory. Out of the 170 participants, 52 were gamers that actively participated in table top RPGs, 54 were players of electronic RPGs, and 64 were non-players. The group of gamer that regularly participated in electronic RPGs were the lowest scoring out of the three groups in terms of creativity and thinking processes, while the table top RPG players scored much higher (Chung, 2013). The results lend credence to the power of engagement that traditional RPGs have, which could possibly make it an ideal fit for adolescents that require a higher level of engagement. One of the major things this study was lacking was some level of pre- and post-test evaluation of their creativity and thinking process. Random participants that were evaluated before and after they engaged in some level of RPG would have been ideal considering individuals that have higher levels of creativity could naturally be drawn to table top RPGs and their engagement in those games may not necessarily be a contributor to their increased/decreased cognitive functioning. However, the information as it is

presented, adds to the argument for further research into traditional table top RPGs.

### Communication and Social Needs

A study conducted by Aubrie S. Adams was conducted in order to look deeper into the communication aspect of RPGs and their ability to meet the social needs of players (2013). The study utilized Bormann's fantasy theme analysis in order to identify and examine major themes that emerged through the player's communication throughout the game. The major themes that emerged were democratic ideologies, friendship maintenance, extraordinary experiences, and good versus evil (Adams, 2013). The results of the study found that the player's real world needs were able to be satisfied through in game interaction. If the results of the study are to be believed, then the application of RPGs have use for multiple aspects of a person's life including encouraging social interaction and further developing communication skills. The study itself was able to effectively draw out major themes of communication and relate those to the social needs of a person. However, the study could have done a better job at explaining how they were evaluating whether a person's social needs were actually met or not. The results were somewhat vague in this aspect, but nonetheless this study effectively shows how important communication and social interaction is in playing RPG campaigns and the benefits of interacting to practice group or individual problem solving methods.

## Identity Implications

A major source of information about the importance of RPGs in the counseling field comes from research conducted by Shay that looked into the importance of identity in RPGs (2014). Based on participant-observations of a gaming group, twenty in-depth interviews with players themselves, and archival data, a clear picture of the method players use to form their own identities was seen. Players used their characters to explore choices and decisions that reflected their own personalities and moral compass. Players formed a moral identity using multiple qualities which included dedication, cooperation, selflessness, creativity, intelligence, and authenticity (Shay, 2014). For the most part the actions and decisions in-game that the research observed seemed to not just reflect the identity of the player's characters, they reflected the players themselves. The use of RPGs as an intervention seemed to be a safe place in which participants in the research could explore their own identity and develop a moral compass in game they could use in the real world as well. Although this piece of research study did go in depth into the idea of refining and further developing a person's own identity through the use of RPGs, it failed to take into account or discuss players that play characters completely different from themselves. It is possible that most players play a version of themselves that is stronger, faster, or smarter than they are in real life. However, it is also possible that there are players that would rather play characters that have a completely different personality than their own. It is possible that a player could choose to

play a backstabbing character despite not being that way in real life, simply because in RPGs, anyone can be anything they choose to be. What does this mean for players in terms of identity formation if they play a character so different from themselves?

### Implementation of Role Playing Games in Practice

One of the classic examples of RPG use as an intervention comes from Blackmon and his implementation of the intervention with a client (1994). Although this is a somewhat older case study that looked primarily into a practitioner's work with his client, this is one of the best examples regarding the effective application of RPGs in practice and the potential it has for therapeutic practice. This case study looked into Blackmon's work with a client that possessed a schizoid personality type. The client had recently attempted suicide and displayed a lack of object attachment in his life that led to his isolation. Blackmon concluded that conventional therapy was not a safe method to help the client address his feelings and instead decided to use the client's familiarity with the Dungeons and Dragons RPG. Through the use of the table top RPG, the client was able to use his character as a buffer and use his experiences in game to help him safely address and develop a better sense attachment that improved his life outlook and course of life (Blackmon, 1994). RPGs allow for a safe and guided method of exploring feelings and the qualities of the game itself lends itself nicely to its application in the therapy setting. The practitioner can take on the role of the game master that weaves the story around the player, which can

be the client. The player's character is the one that is technically going through the experience instead of the client, so the client is far enough detached from the character that it makes them feel safe enough to face feelings and situations directly. The situations the client is currently facing in their real life could be woven into the narrative of the game. This case study was able to fully explain the method in which RPGs can be implemented in practice for therapists.

### Modification of Role Playing Games

A more recent example of the implementation of RPGs as an intervention comes from Rubin and Enfield (2007). This study sought to look into the application of a Dungeons and Dragons-like RPG with a group of 11-13 year olds. Although Dungeons and Dragons deals mainly with fantasy settings and concepts, the application in this study slightly modified it towards the interests of the participants. It was modified to focus more on superheroes rather than knights and dragons. This study also looked into the application of RPGs in individual counseling as well. The individual application sought to implement RPGs in their work with a client that had problems with his impulsivity and boundary issues. In both settings, the study found that the participants had a change in their behavior both at home and at school directly related to the implementation of the RPG (Rubin & Enfield, 2007). This study, more than anything, shows the practical modification of RPGs in the use with different types of clients and participants. This shows another major benefit that RPGs can have over more traditional interventions. That being said, this study is missing a



control group that would help identify its benefits compared to other interventions or the lack of intervention.

### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

One of the major theories that consistently came up in a majority of articles regarding RPGs and their implementation in practice, even if not fully stated, was the Adlerian Play Therapy Approach. This theory assumes that an adolescent or child cannot fully realize or show their emotions due to them not being mature enough to understand the way they feel. It also assumes that children misbehave due to their environment and something that causes them to not feel like they completely belong (Withers, 2013). In this theory, the main issue causing the child or adolescent's misbehavior must first be identified before work can truly begin. This theory fits well with the implementation of RPGs as an intervention considering the process of weaving a story or situation will be much more effective if the practitioner knows what is causing the client distress. Once that is identified, the practitioner can then place the client's character in a similar situation and provide a safe place for the client to explore the situation and emotions they are dealing with in real life.

The other major theory identified in the research was the use of social role identification and its application with player's and their characters. Many of the research studies show that the adolescents that played and participated in RPGs developed a sense of self that connected to their in game characters. Their characters seemed to be an extension or an ideal version of themselves and who

they wanted to be. This aligns with the stage in which adolescents find themselves during that time in their lives. Adolescents often seek who they are and what their role is according to Identity Vs Role Confusion. Adolescents seek out an identity and personality that is individual to themselves and risk having some level of role confusion meaning they do not know exactly who they are or who they are to become (Holdaway, 1995).

Both theories relate directly to the application of RPGs with adolescent clients in a therapeutic setting. These theories will help guide this study and help emphasize the importance of further research and the application of this intervention. Table top RPGs as a form of intervention are incredibly practical and easily customizable to meet the specific needs of the client. Further research into this topic has been stated as necessary by the practitioners that have worked with the intervention directly through case and research studies. It is a useful intervention that the field of social work may benefit from and could possibly be missing out on due to lack of research and awareness.

### Structure of the Study

A similar research study that sought to gain a better understanding of how music therapy could be applied to the elderly was analyzed. This study implemented qualitative research methods and utilized in-depth interviews with practitioners that had experience with music therapy interventions. The interviews were seen as the best method of collecting the most in-depth material as one could considering the little information regarding the intervention with the

elderly population. The study analyzed the possible benefits to social work practice such as spirituality, emotional response, and analyzed the possible barriers to the study. An identified barrier to the collection of data involved the difficulty finding practitioners implementing this method of intervention in practice, which was a barrier for this study as well.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This study seeks to explore how mental health practitioners view the application of table top RPGs in therapy and whether they see it as an effective intervention strategy. This chapter contains details on how this study was carried out. The sections discussed will include: study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

#### Study Design

The purpose of this study was primarily to explore what the perceptions of practicing mental health practitioners are in regards to the application of table top role playing games in therapy with adolescents. This research study was primarily qualitative and dependent on the input of mental health practitioners currently implementing this new approach in their therapy. Interviews were utilized in order to get in-depth information regarding the practitioner's experiences using this intervention. Considering their stories and experiences cannot be analyzed in detail using a quantitative approach, a qualitative approach was determined to be the best approach. Considering there is currently very little research about the application of this intervention in therapy, these mental health practitioners are the closest thing to experts on the subject in this field. However, one of the major barriers this study faced was the fact that

there are not many practitioners actually utilizing this intervention method in practice, so finding participants for the study proved to be somewhat difficult.

Unfortunately, the application of this intervention is not common in therapeutic practice. Thus, one of the biggest initial issues for collecting data was the difficulty finding practitioners to interview about their application of the intervention. The primary question that this study sought to address was: How do mental health practitioners view the engagement of table top role playing games as an intervention and its benefits in implementation with adolescent clients who have suffered trauma or abuse?

### Sampling

The purpose of this study was to identify the possible benefits or drawbacks that implantation of table top RPGs has on therapeutic practices with adolescents. Conclusions were determined by the perspectives of mental health practitioners utilizing this intervention in practice. This study sought to obtain between five to ten different participants for the sample in order to get the most information possible. This study focused on using a snowball sampling method to help identify people who utilize this technique in their current therapeutic practices. Practitioners that utilize similar practices tend to stick together and build their own network of like-minded professionals, which was why the snowballing sampling method proved to be effective in obtaining participants. Participants that were initially interviewed came from multiple organizations including: The Bodhana Group, The Wheelhouse Workshop, and The RPG

Research Community. Approval was sought and given by the directors of the programs. However, no specific identifying information was collected regarding the participants and the focus was primarily placed on their experience with the intervention.

### Data Collection and Instruments

Qualitative data was collected through in person and over the phone interviews which took place between January 2017 and March 2017. The questions asked during the interviews were meant to determine what the benefits to therapy practicing practitioners saw in utilizing these interventions.

### Procedures

An email was sent to each of the organizations/participants a month before data collection was scheduled to begin. The emails contained information regarding the purpose of the study and gauged the willingness of participation from each of the organizations. If emails were not responded to, a phone call was issued to the organizations or individuals in order to follow-up on participation. In total, three mental health practitioners showed interest in participating in the interview process. Utilizing snowballing sampling method, practitioners that initially showed interest were able to refer two other practitioners that eventually participated in the study. Out of the five interviews that were conducted, only one was in person, one was conducted over the phone, and 3 had to be conducted via email strictly out of necessity considering the participant's busy schedules.

Fortunately, those answering over email were able to answer follow-up questions. Data was gathered between mid-January 2017 and continued until March 2017.

### Protection of Human Subjects

All interviews were conducted separately in order to protect the identities of the participants. Each participant was provided with either a physical or electronic version of the informed consent form in which they agreed to participate in the interview process. The informed consent contained no identifying information about either the participant or the agency they belonged to in order to completely protect the identity of the participants. The informed consents were marked with a "X" to signify that the participant was interested in participating in the study and they were then be assigned an ID number to help identify them within the context of the study without collecting actual identifying information. Information regarding the institution the participant was affiliated with was not collected and was up to the participant whether or not they would voluntarily divulge that information.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This chapter presents the results from the transcribed one-on-one qualitative interviews conducted with the mental health practitioners utilizing RPGs in therapy. Although each interview was conducted separately and the participant's answers were all unique, there were several major themes that arose. Direct quotes from this study's participants are used to further describe the presented themes and to highlight participant's emphasized points. The major themes identified throughout the interviews were the applicability to clients of any age, the client-tailored narrative, use of TRPGs in a group setting, TRPGs as a form of exposure therapy, and the possible risks of implementing TRPGs with the wrong clients. Table 1 below shows the specific demographic information of the participants who were interviewed regarding the effectiveness of this intervention and its application to therapy with adolescents. Each participant identified different aspects of the intervention as being valuable to therapeutic practice with not only adolescents, but individuals of different age group as well.

#### Study Sample

The characteristics of the participants is described in Table 1. The ages of the participants ranged from 28-42 years old with a mean of 33.8 years of age



between all five participants. The sample for the study was primarily male which composed 80% of the total sample (N=4). Females made up 20% of the sample (N=1). The sample was composed primarily of Caucasians which made up 60% of the sample (N=3), Latino/Hispanics made up 20% of the sample (N=1), and Asian/Pacific Islanders made up 20% of the sample as well (N=1). In terms of the educational background of the participants, 60% of the sample came from a background in Masters of Human Services (N=3), 20% of the sample came from a social work background (N=1), and 20% of the sample came from a Masters in Education background (N=1).

Table 1. Study Sample Characteristics

	N (%)	Mean
Age		33.8
Sex		
Male	4 (80%)	
Female	1 (20%)	
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian	3 (60%)	
Latino/Hispanic	1 (20%)	
Asian/Pacific Islander	1 (20%)	
Education		
ACSW	1 (20%)	
MHS	3 (60%)	
MEd	1 (20%)	

## Major Themes Identified in Interviews

### Applicability to Clients of Any Age

In an effort to gauge exactly who could benefit from this intervention, participants were asked if they could identify an age group that could benefit the most out of this intervention. The common theme that appeared in all interviews was that this intervention could be applied to all age groups, but the effectiveness of the intervention typically depended on the client's willingness to participate. Participant #2 expressed his opinion on the matter of age: "Children are so active and playful; their mind set is very open so they benefit a lot with these kinds of games. Adolescents are also engaging, and so far, I see these games appealing the most to this age group. Adults and elderly individuals are somewhat hesitant to play at first. However, once this older age group starts, I feel like they enjoy themselves as well. The intervention overall supports each age group depending on their willingness to participate" (Participant 2).

Another participant also spoke out about the age groups that could benefit from this intervention. The participant placed the effectiveness of the intervention mainly on the client's willingness to participate and even spoke out about his youngest clients that have used TRPGs: "I would say that as long as the person can embrace that spirit of play, they stand to gain something from this as a therapeutic approach. I've worked with kids as young as 5 years old. It's just important to adjust things to the person you are working with" (Participant 5).

It's hard to believe that a game that can be complex and challenging to adults could still be appealing to children. One of the participants goes into further detail on why he believes that this intervention works with all age groups and how it manages to appeal to adolescents in particular: "I think it can be applied to any age group honestly. There aren't many restrictions in terms of what can be done and the complexity can be adjusted depending on what age group you are dealing with. Obviously, you can't use a lot of complex actions/language when you're applying this to kids. The age group I've found that really respond to this intervention is adolescents typically ages 13-17" (Participant 4).

#### Client-Tailored Narrative

One of the major themes touched on during the interviews was the ability to write and tailor a narrative around the client and the client's specific situation. TRPGs rely on the story telling abilities of the Game Master and the effectiveness of the therapeutic benefit relies on the narrative they can craft for the client. "The narrative and the collaborative storytelling aspect of this approach is probably the most advantageous aspect of this intervention" (Participant 5). The collaborative storytelling mentioned above is an integral part of forming the narrative. By having the client actively participate in the game, the GM/therapist can alter the story in any way they must for the benefit of the client.

"The narrative is an infinite entity, I can use any narrative, I can use any trope, I can implement any kind of method to try and convey the story I want to

these participants. I can simply tell them ‘someone comes up to you and punches you in the face, what do you do?’” (Participant 5). Since the story and narrative of the game is literally only limited by one’s own imagination, the story could literally go anywhere and be about anything. This infinite narrative can be used to help the client process certain things they may not be able to in real life or evaluate the consequences of the actions they take.

### Use of Tabletop Role Playing Games in the Group Setting

Based on the interviews conducted, the intervention has been found to not just be effective in an individual setting, but a group setting as well. According to one of the participants: “I think where this intervention shines the most is when it is applied in groups to build social skills. One of my favorite examples of this intervention going well is a teenager that had issues acting out in class. He would be disruptive, hit others, steal from classmates, and so on. Some of this behavior translated into his game character as well. In game, his character would tick off the wrong people, steal from guards, and intentionally sabotage his fellow players. Whenever he would act out of impulse or do something that affected the other players, I always tried to give some kind of immediate outcome in order for him to be able to see the consequences of his actions. This caused him to regulate his actions a little more and address some of the things that caused him to act out in the first place” (Participant 4). Implementing this intervention with groups adds a layer of interdependence that can help build an individual’s skills based on their commitment to create a functional party. Much like the example

mentioned above, the client could learn appropriate skills faster if they were to practice those skills around other clients or individuals that will be directly affected by their actions. For this reason, group implementation of the intervention could prove to be extremely effective.

Although the group setting can be beneficial, the individual's needs need to be taken into consideration as well. Since this intervention has the infinite narrative aspect mentioned earlier, minor situations could be created to help the clients further grow while teaching the entire party how to deal with and manage situations. Some of these situations could even be similar to situations they may encounter in their day to day lives. As one of the participants explains:

“Obviously, it caters to a group dynamic but you always cater to the individuals in your group. And the fact that you're dealing with a group can make it ideal to deal with problems that come from dealing with people in everyday situations (stress, conflict, etc.)” (Participant 3).

#### Tabletop Role Playing Games as a Method of Exposure Therapy

This intervention introduces the concept of the character that acts as a “buffer” for the client. They use this buffer to help go through situations or process feelings they may not feel entirely comfortable doing in real life yet. By using these characters, clients have a safe space in which they can test how things could go if they behaved a certain way. Whether these behaviors are positive or negative, the client will be able to see the direct consequences of their actions. As one of the participants described: “So, you allow that person to play,

like the safe space play therapy concept, then once you have these moments, you go back to that like you would any individual session and ask the participant “well what happened in there? What did your character experience? Does that relate to your goals? Would you have handled that differently?” (Participant 5). Once the client has been able to test how a particular action went, this then opens up the possibility of processing with the client and identifying what their perspective on the situation is.

According to two of the participants, the intervention could potentially lend itself to work with trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in particular. If the client has unresolved trauma “It could be closely compared to exposure therapy. [It] could also be used to help with unresolved issues regarding the trauma. Like being able to talk to an abusive parent through their character to tell them how what they did affected them and get some kind of empowerment they couldn’t have received elsewhere.” (Participant 4).

#### Risks Associated with the Implementation of Tabletop Role Playing Games

There were two potential risks identified during the interviews that come from the utilization of TRPGs as a therapy intervention. The first risk of the intervention is believing that because you may come from a background in playing TRPGs, you can implement it therapeutically. One of the participants explained that wasn’t the case: “Coming home from a long day’s work and playing a game because for 30 minutes I want to unwind. That’s something of therapeutic benefit because I’m relaxing, I’m engaging in play, I’m letting my

guard down, but it's not of clinical benefit. Some people are going to think "Oh, well I'm going to address my kid's anxiety with D&D!" Stop, you aren't a trained therapist, you don't have experience dealing with this. There is space for people to implement at a simple safe therapeutic level, but if you want to use this to deal with real mental health issues, you need treatment plans, goal statements, and all the trappings of the rest of the profession." (Participant 5). Differentiating the therapeutic benefits of TRPGs and the clinical benefits of the intervention in a therapy setting must be distinguished. The participant explained that things can be therapeutic much like self-care can be therapeutic, but to actually address issues such as anxiety, depression, trauma, etc., the GM needs some level of clinical skills with the appropriate treatment goals going into the sessions.

Another potential risk identified with this intervention is the risk of de-realization. Individuals with a loose grip on reality is unfortunately a part of what mental health practitioners see in their practices. Participants explained that this intervention should be avoided in order to not loosen that grip on reality any further. One participant stated: "I've turned away clients who have challenges discerning reality from fantasy, out of concern for their ability to handle the experience in a TRPG." (Participant 1). In this way, this intervention could prove to have multiple unknown negative consequences with individuals who find it difficult to determine what exactly is reality and what is fantasy.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine how beneficial TRPGs could be in therapy with adolescents based on the perspectives of mental health practitioners that actually implement these interventions in their practice. This was an exploratory research project due to the minimal amount of research available that addresses the effectiveness of this intervention as a therapeutic tool. This research project was a qualitative study since the perspectives of the mental health practitioners utilizing this intervention method in their practice was collected via interviews with multiple open-ended questions that facilitated discussion on the topic.

#### Discussion

Through the interviews conducted with the participants, multiple themes stood out: applicability to clients of any age, the client-tailored narrative, use of TRPGs in a group setting, TRPGs as a form of exposure therapy, and the possible risks of implementing TRPGs with the wrong clients. These themes provided some insight into the intervention and how it could be effectively used in a clinically therapeutic setting with adolescents. Despite the interview questions purposely not pushing the participant's in answering questions solely about



adolescents, the participants identified adolescents as an age group that responds well to this intervention.

The findings of this research study align well with previous literature that briefly discussed some information on the utilization of TRPGs.

Despite the participant's interviews yielding some positive data regarding the implementation of TRPGs in therapy, there are a few limitations that need to be taken into consideration. First of all, the sample that represents the mental health practitioners utilizing this intervention is very small in the grand scheme of things. Despite the difficulty involved in finding these mental health practitioners, a study utilizing a bigger sample size may bring in perspectives and views on the intervention that were not brought up during this study. Secondly, the participants of this study actually implement this intervention in their practice because they see some level of worth in it. This means that participants came into the study with the mindset of it being useful, but does not present the other side of the argument in which practitioners may not see it as useful. In a sense, this study is limited by not evaluating the perspective of someone who thinks TRPGs should not be used as an intervention at all.

### Recommendations

Based on the information collected from the participants, it seems that there could be many potential benefits and few risks to the implementation of TRPGs in therapeutic practice. This could prove to be a very beneficial intervention for mental health practitioners. The findings of this exploratory

research study may warrant further research into this intervention for the field of social work. Further research could include having mental health practitioners implement this intervention for the first time with adolescent teens in order to address specific issues (depression, anxiety, trauma, etc.) and monitor the progress made. This could gather details on how the mental health practitioner felt implementing the intervention and how effective the intervention was for the client.

### Conclusion

This study sought to explore the perspectives of mental health practitioners currently utilizing table top RPGs in therapy with adolescents. The interviews that were conducted for the research study provided some insight into the mental health practitioner's views on the effectiveness of this intervention in therapy with adolescents. Participants identified this intervention working particularly well with adolescents, but could be applied to clients of any age group. Participants identified the client tailored narrative as the most unique and beneficial aspect this intervention does well that other interventions do not. This intervention was found to be useful in the individual setting, but was truly at its best in the group setting. This intervention has also been found to be very similar to exposure therapy, but minimizes risks for clients. Useful interventions can be difficult to find for use in therapy with adolescents. This intervention could prove to be very beneficial for clients in this age group and for social workers in the mental/behavioral health setting as well.

APPENDIX A  
INSTRUMENT

Demographic Information:

What is your Age?

What is your Ethnicity/Nationality?

What do you identify as your gender?

What are some of your degrees/credentials?

Do you believe Table Top Role Playing Games (TRPGs) can be applied to individual/group therapy?

What are some possible benefits and risks that come from implementing TRPGs in therapy?

Is there any age group that would benefit/not benefit from this kind of intervention (children, adolescence, adults, elderly, etc.)?

Is there something that this intervention method does well that other evidenced based practices lack?

Is there any mental health issue (depression, anxiety, etc.) that you believe could be appropriately addressed by using a TRPG in therapy?

Has there ever been a specific time when this intervention has worked particularly well or has gone particularly badly?

What are some barriers or drawbacks that you have run into when implementing this intervention?

Developed by: Raul Gutierrez

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT



California State University, San Bernardino  
Social Work Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee  
APPROVED 2/16/2017 REVOKED AFTER 2/5/2018  
IRB# SW1735 CHAIR [Signature]

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences  
School of Social Work

**INFORMED CONSENT**

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine how mental health practitioners view the application of role playing games in therapy with adolescents. The study is being conducted by Raul Gutierrez, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Herb Shon, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-committee at CSUSB.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of the study is to examine how mental health practitioners view the application of table top role playing games in therapy with adolescent youth that have experienced some level of trauma.

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be asked their opinions on the application of this intervention, how they apply it in therapy, and possible barriers they see with its application.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time.

**CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY:** No individual identifying information will be collected during the study, all disclosure will be voluntary. Interviews will be given an identification number and recordings will be erased once they are transcribed.

**DURATION:** Interviews can range from 30 minutes to 90 minutes.

**RISKS:** There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

**BENEFITS:** There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Shon at (909) 537- 5532.

**RESULTS:** Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library Scholar Works database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2017.

I have read the above information and agree to participate in the study

\_\_\_\_\_ Date

**I hereby agree to be audio recorded during the interview**

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ (Mark with an X here)

909.537.5501

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The California State University • Bakersfield • Channel Islands • Chico • Dominguez Hills • East Bay • Fresno • Fullerton • Humboldt • Long Beach • Los Angeles  
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