We Need to Talk: A Literature Review of Debrief

Popular abstract: This literature review consults the diverse academic definitions of debriefing to give context to larp debriefs. Among the many concepts for debriefing, simulation learning and psychological debriefing are explored to show lessons and precedents. Simulation debriefs emphasize learning and a transition from the affective to the cognitive, which can inform how larp debriefs engage with content. The concepts of fidelity and authenticity, along with tripartite learning within simulations, are invoked to show similarities and potential growth for larp debriefs. Psychological debriefing has mixed results, but reviewing the literature shows that psychological debrief practice within research has been functionally dissimilar to larp debrief. Discourse already surrounding psychological debrief has questioned the research methods and results of previous studies, making generalization to larp debriefs inappropriate. Larp-specific debriefs are considered non-therapeutic transitional tools for moving between perspectives and reinstalling the social reality suspended during play. Its counterpart, workshopping, is considered important to creating the necessary context for debriefing. Larp debriefs have the potential to become a vector for the therapeutic work through larping. The article advocates for responsible content creation despite using debrief as a transitional tool, as no evidence suggests that debriefing makes larping safer.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a review of contemporary literature on *debriefing*, a reflective practice that follows live-action roleplay (larp). Its methods, purpose, and even effectiveness have become topics of concern among those interested in progressing the discipline of live-action into one that produces intense content and leaves its participants unharmed. Discourse on debriefing extends beyond larp. Its foundational theories exist in psychodrama (Browne 2005), disaster intervention (O'Brien, Mill, Fraser, and Anderssen 2011), simulation learning (Garris, Ahlers, Driskell 2002), trauma recovery (Littleton and Breitkopf 2006), group therapy (Yalom and Leszcz 2005), play therapy (Higgins-Klein 2013), psychology research (Human Sciences Research Council 1997), and military operations (Adler, Castro, and McGurk 2009). Psychological debriefing and simulation literature hold specific insights. The sources reviewed in this work span several fields of study in order to clarify the terms, form, and purpose of debriefing in larp.

2. RESOURCES CONSULTED

Collecting resources for this review included online larp publications, like the Nordiclarp.org website and larp theorists' personal websites, as well as the works of larp scholars included in the catalog of Knutepunkt and *WyrdCon Companion Book* literature. Research extended to the EBSCO and JSTOR databases for relevant works on debrief, role-play, psychological first aid, trauma processing, psychodrama, and simulation. Though lessons exist in all literature within the scope of the search, the inclusion criteria sought practices that create a period of review, reflection, and processing immediately following an event in order to focus on the precedents and prospects of established larp debriefing procedure. The literature reviewed is English-only and fruitful resources in other languages may have been excluded.

3. DIVERSE DEFINITIONS

Peripheral literature concerns debriefing as a tool with diverse intentions. Singularly, debrief is a period of clarification following a complex event. Its various incarnations are used to consolidate learning, reflect on automatic thinking, express emotions, address behavioral patterns, identify consequences, share social reality, reduce psychological symptoms, build community, and reinstate a previously-suspended social reality.

Relevant fields of study begin with Jacob Moreno. Moreno has been recognized in larp studies as creating the term "role-playing" (Fatland 2014). His methods of psychodrama and sociodrama are ritual practices of spontaneous interaction that are incomplete without facilitated reflection on the origins and outcomes of events within the ritual (Browne 2005). Sociodrama specifically addresses how the reality contextualizing a sociodramatic ritual can be changed from the lessons articulated through role-play. Larp stands to take influence from the simulated social realities of sociodrama. Acknowledging the integrated reflection of Moreno's toolkit, in which a conventional sense of reality is reimposed and lessons are forged in review, shows the precedent for debrief within role-play.

Simulation learning, like Moreno's work, imposes a temporary reality to inspire authentic reactions. These spaces can recreate events unsafe or uncommon,

like disaster scenarios or medical emergencies, in order to practice critical behaviors and induce situational learning. Debriefing is foundational to simulation learning as a period of information construction (Garris, Ahlers, and Driskell 2002). Facilitated debriefs bring an expert opinion to participant experiences in order to evaluate reactions; address inconsistencies between the simulated diegesis and larger reality; and create expectations for situations outside of a classroom (Dreifurst 2009).

Critical incident stress management (CISM) uses a debriefing practice following simulated catastrophic events to share information, identify support, normalize reactions, and screen individuals at risk of psychological trauma (O'Brien, Mill, Fraser, and Anderssen 2009). Psychological first aid is a practice developed from WWII military debriefing procedures that the American Red Cross uses to address victims of natural disasters (Snider, Van Ommeren, and Schafer 2011). Group and play therapies, which rely on spontaneous enactment to analyze behavior, use reflection techniques outside of spontaneous content in order to address patterns (Higgins-Klein 2013; Yalom and Leszcz 2005). Psychological experiments use debriefing techniques to disclose the intention of a research scenario and return subjects to a state of comfort and trust (Human Sciences Research Council 1997). These procedures offer precedents to current debrief techniques, alternatives for developing larp-specific debriefing, and critical literature on the effectiveness and purpose of debriefing a period of liminal disruption.

4. RELEVANCE TO SIMULATION DEBRIEF

Simulation debriefing is similar to larp debriefs in form, although has the purpose of constructive learning rather than affective processing. Simulation learning aims to recreate a situation that feels real to the participant. These situations have reduced consequences compared to non-simulated events, allowing the learner to see the effects of their actions and engage a scenario with literal thinking and presence. The tripartite domains of learning featured in simulation learning -- cognitive, affective, and psychomotor – are both integral to Moreno's work and substantiated in larp research (Sternberg & Garcia 2000; Bowman 2013a).

Two concepts exist in simulation literature that are beneficial for larp discourse. *Fidelity* is a feature of simulations meant to mirror a real-world setting (Standiford 2014). The degree of fidelity a simulation

has is a reflection of the literal scenario it mirrors, with greater fidelity meaning a more lifelike enactment. For example, in a firefighting demonstration, actual fire would be a high fidelity element. Complementing fidelity is *authenticity*, the discussed feeling on the part of the participant that the situation is real. Nursing scenarios that use actors for patients have the aim of authentic feeling.

Simulation debriefing reviews the automatic enactment of participants in order to create experiential learning. Kolb's theory of knowledge states that it emerges from doing an action, reflecting on the action, creating an idea about how it happened, and then testing the idea against diverse conditions (Kolb & Whishaw 2014). Conceptually, reflection encourages self-correction, objective feedback, genealogies of automatic thought, and correlation with theory (Dreifuerst 2009). Dreifuerst attributes these six phases to the model educational debrief:

- The procedure and rules of the debrief are acknowledged outright;

- Discussion begins with open-ended questions about participants' emotions;

- Discussion turns to questions about quality and improvement;

- Individual events are reviewed with a conceptual framework;

- Participants are presented with a summary of key points;

- A hypothetical scenario with different premises is presented to anticipate new challenges and test learned material. (2009)

Simulation debrief procedure is mediated by an expert teacher. The simulation is prefaced with learning goals. Reflection in simulation is coached by the facilitator to yield learning in three steps: awareness, critical analysis, and then a new perspective. This procedure is constructivist, as knowledge is constructed by an individual as they learn. Creating knowledge is achieved through *framing*, an attribution of knowledge to information. Executive thinking, as an aspect of dual-process theory, contextualizes behavior and encourages corrective action following from the stimulation that engages automatic thinking (Baimel, Severson, Baron and Birch 2015). Simulation debriefing creates the safety and separation to think on the actions one has taken in order to anticipate later reactions.

5. SIMILARITY TO PSYCHOLOGICAL DEBRIEF

Psychological debriefing and practices sharing similar effects hold expectations between educational and emotional review. Largely, research findings on emotionally-focused debriefing have not shown it positively. Bastos, Furuta, Small, McKenzie-McHarg, and Bick's study of postpartum debriefing (2015) have shown no evidence for or against the practice. Alexander, Bannister, Bisson, and Jenkins' 1997 study results showed that individual debriefing for burn victims lead to poorer outcomes. Rose, Bisson, Churchill, and Wessely (2009) also showed results that individual debriefing with trauma victims within a month of exposure lead to poorer resilience for PTSD.

The burn victim study is often held as an example of improper procedure, as the latency of treatment was greater than traditional debriefing and the treatment was conducted individually (Tuckey 2007). Adler, Castro, and McGurk (2009) claim that poorly conducted studies have skewed the perceived effectiveness of psychological debrief and halted practice due to cautious obligation against potential harm. Small-sample studies have sustained psychological debriefing as standard practice in the American military (Adler, Castro, and McGurk 2009). Tuckey cites this contention and advocates for reformed debrief research methods (2007). The discourse places psychological debriefing and similar practices, like psychological first aid, seeming at a standstill for research. Efficacy research is uncommon due to the associated risks, although debriefing is still practiced due to peer-reviewed expert advocacy (Tuckey 2007; Snider, Van Ommeren, and Schafer 2011).

The observed negative effects of psychological debriefing are not appropriate for generalizing to larp debriefing. The studies involving Bisson (Alexander, Bisson, Bannister, and Jenkins 1997; Rose, Bisson, Churchill and Wessely 2002) are respectively a study with burn victims and a literature review. These are the studies that show a harmful potential to debriefing. Both concern individual debriefing processed in the days after a traumatic event. This is unlike larp debrief, which takes places in a group immediately following an enactment. Larp debrief more closely resembles group therapy, an effective practice with a precedent for peer leadership (Yalom & Leszcz 2005), than the debriefing techniques analyzed in these studies. Torner and Bowman suggest that the events within role-play are more likely triggering previous traumatic experiences rather than creating fresh trauma (2014).

6. DEBRIEFING IN LARP

Larping is primarily concerned with players' feelings (Burns 2014). Larp debrief shares this focus. Aligned with tripartite domains of learning, larp combines cognitive skills (maintaining diegetic reality) with psychomotor capabilities (individual embodiment) in order to elicit affective engagement (Bowman 2014b). Dual-process theory considers the first to be an executive skill and the second and third to be automatic, intuitive processes (Baimel, Severson, Baron, and Birch 2015). The executive maintains a coherent narrative of a fictional world while automatic processes engage with sensory material. Though subject to critique, these theoretical models offer an explanation of how a larp scenario can result in a fictional reality that creates authentic feelings in a participant.

As larp is social, the constructs and content of a diegetic world are reified by each participant's executive intention and automatic reactions collaborating to form a separate social reality. The effects of these scenarios can feel very real, especially when an event lasts for multiple days or includes intense content (Torner and Bowman 2014). Debriefing is a measure taken to ensure that the consequences of life-like behavior do not spill into life.

Larp-specific debrief discourse holds that discussion following an event is beneficial, even necessary, primarily for thorough emotional processing. This concept of *bleed*, emotional spillover between character and player, is the paramount concern of the discourse (Montola 2010). Bleed is not always negative, but an effect of intense content. Intensity often means effort to a degree uncommon or unpleasant outside of the safe space of play. The conditions of safety necessary for play are weakened in play involving heavy bleed (Montola 2010). Addressing bleed by recontextualizing a player following intense content is the apparent purpose of debrief within the reviewed literature.

Methods of conducting debriefing all share a component of instilling social support in exchange for the original safety involved in allowing oneself to experience intense content (Fatland 2013, Stark 2013, Bowman 2014b). Debriefing and *workshopping* -- a pre-event companion activity in which roles and mechanics are enacted at an independent event in order to create safety and trust --are considered mandatory inclusions for larp design by some authors within the research literature (Bruun 2011). Recent literature on labor in larp considers debriefing first order emotional labor that is essential to running a larp (Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016).

7. CONCLUSION

Understanding the implications of debriefing is necessary as the practice continues. As educational and psychologically-intense larps become popularized, the implications of a transitional debrief should be understood by those theorists seeking to responsibly contextualize their play. For the sake of context in both educationally-minded and psychologically-triggering larps (Brown 2014), workshopping is also necessary to setting goals and instilling trust. Larp debriefing is not therapy. Further research may find theoretical grounds to substantiate debrief as a healing process following intense content, but its purpose does not require such a thorough defense. Larp debriefing is a transitional period between a game and its contextual reality that lets players reinforce the social bonds that allow play and reflect on their own actions. CISD studies maintain that debriefing is not a time for treatment, but an opportunity to identify psychological issues arising from an incident (O'Brien, Mill, Fraser, and Anderssen 2011). Larp debriefing has the same theoretical capacity to identify lasting emotions triggered by play that can be dealt with in more than a single session of peer support. Until that development, debrief is best considered as a transitional tool rather than a salve when designing post-game events.

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BIO

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