

Body maps storytelling and psychodrama: an experience on body, historical time, and freedom

Mapas corporales narración y psicodrama: una experiencia sobre cuerpo, tiempo histórico y libertad

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ABSTRACT

This is a group experience that combined the methodology of body map storytelling and the theoretical-methodological framework of psychodrama, filling a gap in the literature. The aim was to explore collective bodies and the boundaries between determination and freedom through artistic expressions. The experience took place in the context of a psychodramatic workshop at a scientific event with a group of 23 participants. After the instruction to construct the body map, participants, divided into three subgroups, confronted the constraints imposed by historical context and sought ways to exercise freedom. There was an intense expression of exhaustion in the face of the demands of neoliberalism and female oppression, fostering solidarity and a quest for empowerment. A strong desire emerged to break free from conservatism and oppressive ideologies, alongside a reparative function of the group that challenged the unattainable goals of performance optimization, especially for women.

Keywords: Body map storytelling; Psychodrama; Body; Neoliberalism.

RESUMEN

Se trata de una experiencia grupal que combinó la metodología de la narración de mapas corporales y el marco teórico-metodológico del psicodrama, llenando un vacío en la literatura. El objetivo era explorar los cuerpos colectivos y los límites entre determinación y libertad a través de expresiones artísticas. La experiencia tuvo lugar en el contexto de un taller psicodramático en un evento científico con un grupo de 23 participantes. Tras la instrucción para construir el mapa los participantes, divididos en tres subgrupos, se enfrentaron a las limitaciones impuestas por el contexto histórico y buscaron formas de ejercer la libertad. Hubo una intensa expresión de agotamiento frente a las exigencias del neoliberalismo y la opresión femenina, fomentando la solidaridad y la búsqueda de empoderamiento. Surgió un fuerte deseo de liberarse del conservadurismo y de las ideologías opresoras, junto a una función reparadora del grupo que desafiaba los inalcanzables de la optimización del rendimiento, especialmente para las mujeres.

Palabras clave: Narración de mapas corporales; Psicodrama; Cuerpo; Neoliberalismo.

Introduction

This is an experience involving the methodology of body map storytelling integrated with the psychodramatic method. The work was carried out at Fronteiras: Arte, Psicodrama e Filosofia event, held in Fortaleza (CE, Brazil) in 2023. The event is characterized by experimentation and dialogue with open knowledge. The first two authors led the activity and planning, mentored by the third author. The writing and reflection process were accompanied by all the three authors.

Body map storytelling represents an innovative methodology consisting of life-sized drawings of the human body, i.e., the creation process represents, through images and words, the life stories of people inserted into the world they live in (Gastaldo et al., 2019). It was developed in South Africa in the 2000s as a health intervention tool. Later, it was adapted as a qualitative research methodology to investigate topics such as health, migration, work, and gender issues (Conceição et al., 2021).

This visual methodology emphasizes the body, stimulating deep reflections. The narratives reveal individual trajectories connected to political and social contexts. Prioritizing oppressed groups, body map storytelling materializes experiences of

marginalization. This participatory approach promotes collective and critical expression, seeking concrete alternatives to understand reality. The diversity of perspectives and power dynamics present in interpersonal relationships and in our own bodies is highlighted (Moreira & Conceição, 2020). The creation of the body map storytelling is also linked to health promotion and empowerment of individuals, who attribute meanings while exploring their history and, in this process, can recreate it (Moreira et al., 2021).

The body serves as the starting point for understanding and expressing an individual journey, reflecting a creative synthesis of personal history. Various systems of oppression converge through body control. However, it is possible to challenge these hegemonic systems through corporeality, refusing to be subjugated. For this reason, we chose to use this method to explore body storytelling in the *Fronteiras* activity with participants. We asked: what stories do our bodies tell? How is history expressed through them? The aims were to experience and understand how neoliberalism, patriarchy, and racism manifest in participants' bodies.

We sought to integrate the body mapping method with the methodology of psychodrama, highlighting the authentic expression of bodies as a form of resistance to society's imposed discipline (Merengué, 2020; Nery, 2020). The objectives included: encouraging the group to create body map storytelling to be dramatized, and analyzing these expressions using the theoretical framework of psychodrama.

Psychodrama, conceived by Jacob Levy Moreno in Vienna, Austria, in the early 20th century, emerged as a response to the alienating culture that stifled people's creative expression. Moreno grounded his concepts through practical experiments with marginalized groups, including war refugees, sex workers, and people with mental health problems, highlighting the intrinsic political dimension of psychodrama in its origin. Aligned with body map, psychodrama focuses on working with oppressed groups. Moreno incorporated theatrical elements, such as the dramatization of everyday situations, with the purpose of stimulating creative and spontaneous actions (Moreno, 1975).

The integration between psychodrama and body mapping arose from the shared emphasis on the importance of the body in the face of social pressures. This union promised to be powerful, as each approach would complement the gaps of the other one. Psychodrama, lacking visual exploration like that offered by body map, would find in this perspective a source of creativity. On the other hand, body map, which does not address neither the action nor the movement of the body like psychodrama, would benefit from this dimension. Thus, the research-intervention team proposed this experimentation to harness the combined potential of the two approaches.

Preambles and warm-ups of the dramatized body mapping activity in the context of *Fronteiras*

Our aim was integrating body map with psychodrama, as both highlight the importance of the body, art, and politics. For the specific *Fronteiras* event, we chose to address the themes of ethics and freedom. The activity with body map storytelling took place on the last day of the event, allowing the coordinators, also the first author, to experience the proposed activities. The sensations, discomforts, and reflections that ensued enriched our planning and contributed to the dynamics of the activity.

The event's program included representatives from the fields of philosophy, dance, theology, and psychodrama, as well as artists from popular culture and performing arts. Speaking moments were interspersed with group reflections, aiming to create spaces not only for reflection, but also for the exploration of sensations and feelings, from an integrated perspective of these dimensions. The growing importance given to corporeality was an aspect that stood out for the authors. Throughout the event, before the realization of the activity with body map, the body was a constantly present theme, both in discussions led by the coordinators and in contributions from participants.

During group interactions throughout the event, impasses and conflicts between different groups were observed, such as between white and black participants, northeasterners and southeasterners, and between experienced psychodramatists and university students. The rush to rationally resolve these conflicts seemed only superficially to mitigate them. Some participants demanded visibility and recognition, while northeasterners expressed dissatisfaction with the perception of their region as backward and underdeveloped by the rest of Brazil. Younger psychodramatists questioned power dynamics in the psychodramatic community, in which they felt their group had less voice. A black participant expressed deep discomfort with a reported incident, in which a young black man was tortured by the police. However, the group did not seem to fully empathize with this distress, demonstrating limited mobilization in the face of this horrific image.

During one of the activities, there was a disagreement regarding the outcomes of the scenes: should conciliatory solutions be sought, or could this compromise the questioning nature that psychodrama seeks to build? Based on these

reflections, we realized the importance of maintaining flexibility during the implementation of body mapping, accompanying the participants and avoiding smoothing over the conflicts that arise.

Our goals during the experience were to provide a space for expression and explore how issues of historical time are reflected in the bodies. Essentially, we sought to understand the creative syntheses and possible openings that bodies can offer in the face of these forms of subjugation. As this was a qualitative study, we formulated an open and reflective question, adaptable to the emerging issues in the context of the encounter. The purposes were to experience and understand how systems of subjugation and oppression, such as neoliberalism, patriarchy, and racism, manifest in the bodies of the participants.

Experience report: dramatized body map

The beginning of the activity was marked by a detailed explanation of the proposal, aiming to ensure the participants' safety. The facilitators shared their personal history with the body map storytelling, originating from their participation in a study group led by the third author of this article. Some historical aspects of the methodology were also presented, along with the opportunity for participants to record their experiences, if everyone consented. It was clarified that refusal would not entail any disadvantages in the activity, and a Free and Informed Consent Form would be provided for those who agreed.

Next, the questions were posed: what stories does our body tell? How is history (historical time) told through our body? Along with them, there was the possibility of reformulating or expanding it by the group after the warm-ups. Twenty-three people participated in the activity, the majority women, white, and northeasterners, of various age groups, psychodramatists, or psychodrama students.

The warm-up began with the reading of the chronicle "I Know But I Shouldn't," by Marina Colasanti, which poetically addresses the progressive acceptance of various situations in life, from uninteresting jobs to naturalized injustices. The text suggests a gradual desensitization towards the world, in which revolt and amazement dissipate over time, becoming accustomed to indignity. After the reading, some emotions began to manifest in the group, including among the directors. Given the focus on the body, we introduced some theatrical games from Augusto Boal's (1998) "Games for Actors and Non-Actors," aiming to promote bodily fluidity and demechanization. These games were incorporated into the warm-up for their political perspective, questioning social oppressions, and for seeking a bodily connection that distances itself from social pressures that robotize movements. These reflections align with our goals of exploring the body in the face of social subjugations and reflecting on it.

Next, we conducted a brief parade with two posters, each containing a significant quote. One poster displayed Sartre's phrase: "Every person carries within them an era, just as every wave of the sea carries within it the entire sea." On the other poster, we shared the following quote by Eduardo Galeano: "The Church says: the body is a sin. Science says: the body is a machine. Advertising says: the body is a business. And the body says: I am a celebration." We also discussed the concept of the neoliberalism's body-performance and the challenges in nurturing a healthy relationship with our bodies in times of haste and productivity. After this, we revisited the initial question and invited each participant to create an individual sculpture expressing the body's blockages and possibilities in the face of these issues. At this point, people were already quite involved and engaged.

In Fronteiras, the group experienced a journey in which the body called for a more attentive listening and a space for more sensitive expression, distant from mere rationality. This prior process seemed to prepare the participants for a state of readiness that awaited only a conducive context to manifest. We opened space for the group to also formulate other questions about the body. This more collaborative approach seemed to foster an environment of horizontality, in which people felt comfortable engaging and appropriating the proposal.

The directors demonstrated an understanding of the need for a more horizontal approach and adopted a subtle direction, offering light guidance to the activity and following the group's movements. In addition to the initial questions, two other intriguing questions arose: what stories do they talk about my body?; and how far does my body handle? The first question addresses the heteronomy faced daily by women, whose bodies are often subjugated and shaped by others. Notably, two of the three body maps were created by exclusively female subgroups, highlighting issues of domination and female empowerment. The second question seemed to echo the directors' inquiries, exploring the overload of female bodies in one group and celebrating the bodily experience in another. The third group identified with the metaphor of the body as an arrow.

The first instruction involved choosing a position that represented the body to be constructed by each group, with one participant lying on the paper to be outlined. Inspired by the systematized script by Gastaldo et al. (2019), we prepared some guidelines:

- Create a slogan and a symbol representing this body;
- Identify the marks above and below the skin: what marks does the world imprint and pass through this body?;

- Explore support structures: what sustains the existence of this body?;
- Project the future: how do we imagine this body in the future?

At the end, after these reflections, we asked each group to write a testimony, a short text condensing all the content of the map images, akin to a caption in an art museum.

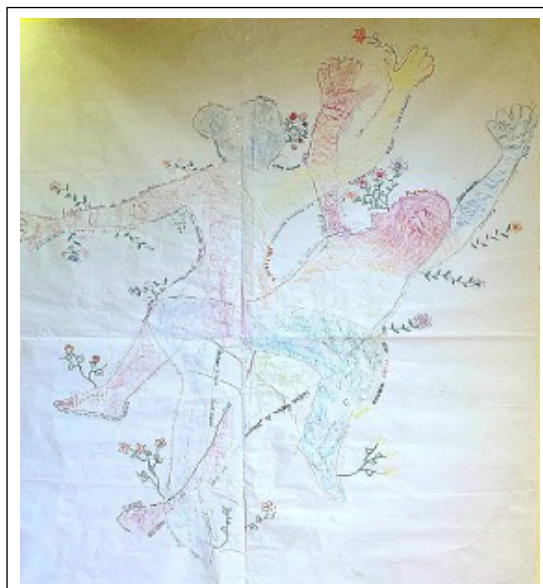
The directors were surprised that two groups horizontally joined two sheets of paper, perhaps indicating a need for space or fewer prescriptions that could limit the creative process. In another group, two people were chosen to draw an outline that encompassed two bodies simultaneously. The groups became so intensely involved in the task that they began to create their own collective bodies autonomously. When the directors approached to offer additional guidance, they found that the participants had already made the insertions. This autonomy was valued by the directors, who recognized the importance and need for this space, offering support only, when necessary, without trying to direct the experience.

Following the plan, each group chose a participant to dramatically represent the role of the body, bringing it to the stage as a character to be interviewed, integrating psychodrama into the performance of the body maps. However, as the groups developed their testimonies, they also devised ways to present to the rest of the participants what they had built. They chose to present the body map through psychodrama dramatizations, rather than verbally reporting the work. The directors flexibilized the original plan, allowing each subgroup to present the body in the chosen way. A fair was organized, in which attendees visited each body map. The creations were summarized as: “Body Celebration: ActionLife,” “Tired Body, But I Keep Going!,” and “Arrow Body”.

Body celebration: ActionLife

This group, composed exclusively of women, contested the directors’ initial idea of conceiving and experiencing the historical body as universal. They highlighted how women’s bodies are shaped by others, questioning how this heteronomy influences their trajectories. This reflection denoted a desire to break free from these conditioning factors. The group rallied around the idea of corporality as celebration. Throughout the process, they demonstrated engagement and integration, requesting the directors to take photos. They expressed the need for a more autonomous space for joint creation, in contrast to the initial guidelines.

Two participants were selected to outline the contours of the bodies, which overlapped, forming a multifaceted image with two heads, four legs, and four arms. From the “skin” of the bodies, leaves and flowers sprouted, while one of the mouths seemed to emit a cry. The interior was colored with crayons of various colors, and around the outlines were phrases from bell hooks, Grada Kilomba, and phrases such as “planting,” “grounding to root,” “ancestry,” “strength,” “nature,” “firmness,” “drums,” “light,” “peace,” “potency,” “dance,” “music,” “lightness,” “friendship,” “body,” “action,” “poetry,” “power,” “energy,” “sex,” “happiness,” “encounter,” “love,” “possibilities,” “movement,” “life,” “cry,” “pain,” “color,” “people,” “mother,” among others. The participants included their own names, as well as those of other women they considered important in their trajectories, such as Maria Célia Malaquias, Conceição Evaristo, bell hooks, Grada Kilomba, Cora Coralina, Clarice Lispector, and Simone de Beauvoir (Figs. 1 and 2).



Source: authors’ archive.

Figure 1. ActionLife body map.



Source: photo by Ligia Freitas.

Figure 2. The making of ActionLife body map.

As noted, ideas and forms of expression reflecting the strength and power of women were incorporated, possibly as a celebration and reaffirmation of the vital energies that have been suppressed over centuries of patriarchy. Dance, music, and art flourish in the collective body, nurturing hope, love, power, and life in a festive celebration that seeks to bring women’s creativity to the forefront and into the light. During the presentation of the map, the group chose to record the testimony in audio to ensure accessibility. A scene was created in which the audience listened to the poetry recited by a group member, engaging in a state of contemplation and enchantment:

*“The body lives, the body vibrates.
 What does it need?
 It needs impulse, drum, movement. The classic: our body is our home.
 Our body is hip, is womb, is embrace.
 It’s remembering the past.
 It’s forgetting
 It’s remembering
 It’s dreaming the impossible. And the possible too.
 It’s transcending history, relationships, movements, it’s choreographing together the possibilities to reproduce life.
 And what has passed? The past is history with pain, with learning, with sisterhood, with gratitude. Our body is gratitude.
 Gratitude for what? For solitude, for the collective, for suffering, for managing to learn.
 To fall and mainly to find auxiliary egos that help me in suffering to live.
 What does it all come down to?
 The possibilities of being worthy of freedom, choices, solidarity, and lots of ActionLife”.*

In this beautiful poetry, we can perceive the sensitive movement of colorful bodies, in an intertwined dance, with flowers coming out of legs, arms, and mouths that generate lively expressions of freedom and solidarity and refuse to live solely on preserves.

Tired body, but I keep going!

This exclusively female group formed from the shared experience of physical exhaustion. They adopted the prone position, symbolizing movement, while lines delineated the bodies, interspersed with arrows indicating interactions between body and world. At the base of the map, there were evocative geometric figures of stones harbored words and phrases cut from magazines, such as “madness,” “punishment,” “stop the machines,” “suddenly everything changed” (with the word *suddenly* crossed out), among other expressions related to adverse experiences.

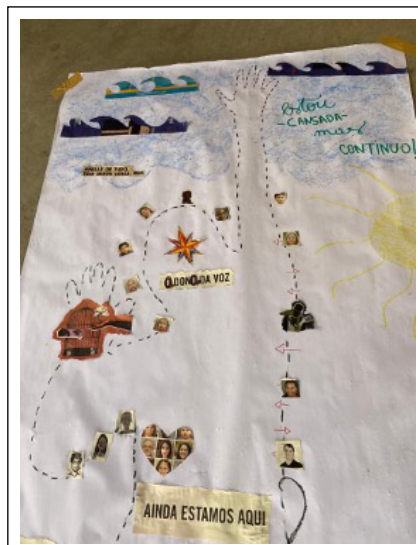
At knee level, “courage” and “strength” stood out in red. Magazine collages added layers of meaning, with phrases like “the long exile of ourselves,” “are we still here?,” and “the owner of the voice,” contrasting with messages of hope, like “despite everything, there is a lot of good stuff.” Images of people, of approximately 3 × 4-size photos, were arranged around the outlined body.

Details such as the engraving of an empty cage on the back of a hand and a compass rose near the head added complexity to the map. The slogan “I’m tired, but I keep going!” resonated as the group’s mantra, while the symbol of the sea, positioned near the hands, suggested a persistent journey despite fatigue (Figs. 3 and 4).



Source: authors' archive.

Figure 3. Tired body, but I keep going! body map.



Source: photo by Ligia Freitas

Figure 4. Tired body, but I keep going! body map (closer).

The group also seemed to take ownership of the map and be deeply engaged and committed to its construction. They had already chosen the phrase to represent the body even before the assignment. Presenting the maps, a member of the group read the testimony:

*“A tired body
that doesn’t shy away from the fight
that doesn’t give up
tired of the demands
Of the ups and downs
Of the inexorable passage of time
Of life’s demands
Of the world’s pains
But that feels the vibrant energy
And wants life!
Climbing, sweating,
felt
tired, I keep going
I am the sea
Infinite.”*

When they shared their map with the expanded group, the participants created a scene involving an imaginary museum, where the body map was displayed as a work of art. Using the psychodrama dramatization technique, they immersed themselves in a supplementary reality, moving through the space as if they were in this fictitious museum. This approach significantly expanded the expressive and creative possibilities of the group.

As they recognized the visual elements and phrases inscribed on the body map, the women present in the scene began to identify with each other, sharing similar feelings and experiencing the common sufferings. This sharing strengthened the collective bond and offered a source of support for facing challenges together.

The choice of the song “Triste, Louca ou Má” (“Sad, Crazy, or Bad”), by the band Francisco, el Hombre (2016), as the soundtrack perfectly complemented the emotional content of the dramatization. The lyrics, which emphasize the importance of defining oneself, resonated deeply with the experiences shared by the participants. It’s no surprise that several people in the audience were moved by this powerful expression.

Thus, the group managed to express not only the exhaustion and sense of disappearance imposed on women, but also the determination to reclaim their voices and identities. This was a poetic and touching representation of a collective struggle against objectification and other forms of oppression, highlighting the search for strength, courage, and vibrant energy to move forward.

Arrow body

This group gathered around the metaphor of a body as an arrow, representing a clear and defined direction. Sitting in a circle around two glued sheets of paper, the participants engaged in deep dialogues throughout the activity, highlighting the need for exchange through conversation that mobilized the group. In the center of the sheets, an arch was drawn, with the body positioned in the arrow’s stance, belly down and arms extended beside the head. Its outline was dashed and dotted on the legs and head, while the rest remained solid. Next to the body, the question “Did I shoot what I saw?” was written, involving a wordplay with “Did I tire?,” which refers to the duality between reaching and tiring, also suggesting the uncertainty represented by the phrase “I don’t know”.

In the belly region, a target with a question mark in the center was drawn, while next to the body an @ symbol was graphically represented. In the head region, a cut-out image of a face with a feather over the eyes was added. At the opposite end of the arrow’s tip, a glued paper contained two messages: when folded, it displayed the word better; when unfolded, it revealed the question: What is the New Equation?

A peculiar feature of this map was the experience of occupying the place of the arrow, with the body tense and stretched beside the head, integrating as a sculpture in the body map itself. During the dramatization, one of the participants took on the director’s role, inviting the audience to experience this position, leading scenes, requesting soliloquies, and presenting doubles. Participants from other groups interacted with the map by adopting the arrow position with their bodies. These dramatizations, based on the visceral experience of occupying the place of the arrow, expanded the understanding of

the body map, going beyond mere contemplation of the images and providing a visceral and concrete immersion in the created work.

The testimony of the group served as a guiding thread for the director to explore and expand the perceptions and sensations experienced:

*“MIRAGE
What do you aim at?
Chance is everything!”*

This group created an open, unstructured map, with provocative and philosophical questions: cultivating an attitude of uncertainty, non-planning, and openness to the unknown. In the dramatization, people could experience the arrow as a place of determination and indetermination at the same time, allowing themselves to be carried away by what the body experienced in that non-human character. The abstraction of the arrow gave way to sensitive reflections on our existential journeys so full of chance. Figures 5 and 6 are images of the body map.



Source: photo by Ligia Freitas.

Figure 5. Arrow body map 1.



Source: authors' archive

Figure 6. Arrow body map 2.

Discussion

The closure of the Fronteiras event provided a deep reflection on the experience with body maps and the entire context of the event. It became evident the importance of assigning a central role to the body in the process, something that resonated

with the underlying needs throughout the journey. One participant shared how the activity revitalized her, involving her own body in movement and bringing meaning to it. Another person observed that creating body maps promoted an integration between feeling, thinking, and acting through the body, resulting in a liberating ethics.

Participants embraced the body map and intertwined them with psychodramatic resources, transcending the initial expectations. The groups demonstrated autonomy in constructing the maps, including images and visual elements, also taking charge of the presentations. This evoked the notion of freedom discussed by Preciado (2021), who argues that revealing the numerous forms of imprisonment can lead to some form of choice. Furthermore, the director's role, as highlighted by Milan (1976), not only elucidated the relational project of the group, but also revealed power mechanisms, considering the position of the director himself.

The groups were protagonists of their processes, denouncing subjugations imposed by neoliberalism and patriarchy, while celebrating the vitality of the body. The body map storytelling revealed points of historical and social convergence, challenging dominant ideologies. The intersections between patriarchy and neoliberalism indicated a desire to denounce the effects of capitalist acceleration and women's subordination (Vieira, 2017).

In addition to assuming direction, the groups were protagonists of their own processes (Alves, 1994), whether to denounce the subjugations imposed by the acceleration of time and the overload experienced by women, or to celebrate the vitality of the body. While the image of body maps on paper can be seen as a cultural conservation, representing a finished and two-dimensional product, the bodies took the stage and opened to the indeterminacy of the scenes, allowing the expression of anxieties, political positions, and delicate sensations. Massaro (1996) explores the scene as an open space for processes of subjectivation, in which it is possible to conceive and experience other forms of existence.

The body map storytelling tangibly reveals points of convergence of historical and social discourses related to expectations of a body geared towards productivity, treated as a machine destined to perform tasks mechanically and serially, as well as being objects laden with meanings imposed on women. Vomero (2022) expands Moreno's concept of cultural conservation, addressing how discourses of dominant ideologies, such as neoliberalism, patriarchy, and racism, impact bodies and subjectivities, causing suffering. She introduces the concept of colonial cultural conservation, highlighting how psychodramatists may inadvertently contribute to colonizing practices by ignoring these intersections, promoting medicalization or silencing of bodies. The text also addresses the intersection between patriarchy and neoliberalism, emphasizing the group's quest to denounce the effects of capitalist acceleration and women's subordination. The group's empowerment promotes women's claiming of power, emphasizing their strength and beauty. The group's spontaneous processes allowed for the emergence of relationships of affinity and creativity towards affirming women's potential.

Moreno (2008) termed the group and community forces that question subjective and relational paths prescribed by the current order as productive popular spontaneity, in a movement of creation. Spontaneity as a political category that produces deviations and resistance from active participation. Participants questioned power structures and sought new forms of existence, aiming to break with colonial cultural conservations and neoliberal ideologies. Poetic expression affirmed art as a political space of transformation. Tele as a group sensitivity promoted collective creativity, establishing a creative flow of rupture with the planned. This suggests the need to investigate in other group interventions the effects of these processes of liberation from scripts prescribed by the coordinators.

Final considerations

The study presented an integration between body map storytelling and psychodrama led by two researcher-participants under the supervision of a mentor. This involved a constant exercise of reflexivity, with the coordinators also acting as group members. After the activity, there was a reflexive analysis of the group's movements and the involvement of the researchers. The third author, who did not directly participate in the workshop, contributed as an external analytical perspective.

The integration of these methods proved promising, combining an innovative approach to body map storytelling, which promotes the visibility and emancipation of minority groups, with the principles of psychodrama, which values the potency of collective encounters and the creative expression of the body. During the experience, the group autonomously appropriated the process, conducting dramatizations and using psychodrama resources to expand expressive possibilities.

This approach represents a methodological innovation, offering new perspectives for professionals working in both psychodrama and body map storytelling. The integration of these practices can significantly broaden the possibilities of perception, expression, action, and creation in different contexts, such as therapy, education, and research.

Conflicts of interest

Nothing to declare.

Authors' contributions

Conceptualization: Vieira ED, Cunha MTA, Conceição MIG; **Investigation:** Vieira ED, Cunha MTA; **Methodology:** Vieira ED, Cunha MTA, Conceição MIG; **Supervision:** Conceição MIG; **Project administration:** Vieira ED, Cunha MTA; **Writing – Original Draft:** Vieira ED, Cunha MTA, Conceição MIG; **Writing – Review & Editing:** Vieira ED, Cunha MTA, Conceição MIG; **Final approval:** Conceição MIG.

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