

James Madison University

JMU Scholarly Commons

Educational Specialist, 2020-current

The Graduate School

5-11-2023

Dealing with your dragons: Counseling through Dungeons and Dragons

Devon Howell

James Madison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/edspec202029>



Part of the [Clinical Psychology Commons](#), [Counseling Psychology Commons](#), and the [Other Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Howell, Devon, "Dealing with your dragons: Counseling through Dungeons and Dragons" (2023). *Educational Specialist, 2020-current*. 76.
<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/edspec202029/76>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the The Graduate School at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Specialist, 2020-current by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

Dealing with your Dragons: Counseling Through *Dungeons and Dragons*

Devon Howell

A research project submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Clinical Mental Health Counseling, M.A., Ed.S

Department of Graduate Psychology

May 2023

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Committee Chair:

A. Renee Staton, Ph.D., LPC

Committee Members/ Readers:

Amanda Evans, Ph.D., LPC

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Dealing with your Dragons: Counseling Through Dungeons and Dragons.....	1
Negative Ideas About Dungeons and Dragons.....	3
Positive Ideas About Dungeons and Dragons	5
Strengths of Group Counseling	5
Specific Possibilities for <i>Dungeons and Dragons</i> as Group Counseling.....	7
Counseling Theories and Gameplay.....	7
Jungian Therapy.....	8
Psychodrama.....	9
Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT).....	9
Narrative Therapy.....	10
Play Therapy.....	10
Client Benefits	11
Interpersonal Benefits	11
Mental and Emotional Benefits	12
Participant Testimonials.....	14
Counselor Benefits.....	17
Considerations and Limitations	18
Cultural Considerations	18
D&D and Racial/Ethnic Identity.....	18
D&D and Gender Identity.....	20
D&D and Sexual Orientation.....	21
Client and Counselor Considerations	22
Client Considerations.....	22
Counselor Considerations	24
Applications for Individual Work.....	25

Recommendations for Future Exploration	26
Appendix A.....	28
References.....	29

Abstract

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the idea of using the game of *Dungeons and Dragons* as a form of group counseling in a therapeutic setting. A search of relevant literature was conducted to discover potential therapeutic utility and cultural aspects of this prospective methodology. It was hypothesized that while the topic might not be well researched, it will yield potential possibilities for therapeutic use. The research presents possibilities for different theoretical underpinnings; in particular, it offers a unique range of benefits to both the client (improvements to social skills, sense of community, and overall mental health), and the counselor (co-facilitation, opportunity to design a unique intervention). Research also explored racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, and sexual orientation relevance and considerations. The therapeutic use of tabletop role-playing games has recently become more researched and will hopefully continue to see growth.

Keywords: *Dungeons and Dragons*, group counseling, skill-building, mental health

Dealing with your Dragons: Counseling Through Dungeons and Dragons

In the city of Neverwinter, a dwarf named Gundren Rockseeker asked you to bring a wagon load of provisions to the rough-and-tumble settlement of Phandalin, a couple of days' travel southeast of the city. Gundren was clearly excited and more than a little secretive about his reasons for the trip, saying only that he and his brothers had found 'something big,' and that he'd pay you ten gold pieces each for escorting his supplies safely to Barthen's Provisions, a trading post in Phandalin. He then set out ahead of you on horse, along with a warrior escort named Sildar Haliwinter, claiming he needed to arrive early to 'take care of business.' You've spent the last few days following the High Road south from Neverwinter, and you've just recently veered east along the Triboar Trail. You've encountered no trouble so far, but this territory can be dangerous. (Wizards RPG Team, 2014).

This is an example of a passage from the *Lost Mines of Phandelver*, a *Dungeons and Dragons* adventure. *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*) is a type of tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) where players are encouraged to create and participate in a fantasy world to solve puzzles, overcome odds, recover lost artifacts, and much more. *D&D* was created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974 and has been owned by Wizards of the Coast since 1997 (Kennedy, 2022). Since its creation, *D&D* is now in its fifth edition and continues to receive content updates for players, such as new campaigns, items, and character creation options.

The game consists of several player characters (PCs) who create their character based on a desired race, usually human— demi-human, or “monster” (i.e. humans, orcs, dragonborn, satyrs)— a class, what role they wish to play (i.e. fighter, wizard, cleric,

rogue), and a constructed personality of their choosing. These PCs participate in a world run by a dungeon master (DM) who acts similarly to a narrator, building the world through storytelling and non-player characters (NPCs). The game also relies on random chance through dice rolling. PCs and DMs use a set of seven dice for actions such as attacking, investigating, casting spells, lying, healing, and even dying. The PCs and DM work together to create a story, with the DM providing the world and central adventure while the PCs' choices and rolls determine the outcomes of the game. A glossary of common *D&D* terms can be found in Appendix A. *D&D* can be played either in-person, usually at a table, hence the name tabletop roleplaying game, or using a combination of digital communication apps like *Zoom* and online tabletop services like *Roll 20* or *D&D Beyond*.

One of the core strengths of *Dungeons and Dragons* is its wide player base. A survey conducted in 2021 by Wizards of the Coast shared that over 50 million people have played or are currently playing *D&D*. Out of those total players, 88% are adults (20 years or older) with 60% being self-identified male players, 40% self-identified female players, and less than 1% self-identified non-binary or gender non-conforming players (Wizards of the Coast, 2021). With the COVID-19 pandemic, *D&D* has seen a spike in playership with millions participating in online campaigns. Thanks to the variety of players and playing options, *D&D* has never been more accessible.

That said, COVID is far from the only contributing factor in *D&D*'s recent popularity. *Stranger Things*, a Netflix show created by the Duffer Brothers, showcases a variety of *D&D* aspects. Key characters play *D&D* in the show and many of the show's villains— such as the Demogorgon, Mind Flayer, and Vecna— are all based on creatures

from *D&D* lore. *D&D* podcasts have also increased in popularity over the years, such as *Critical Role*, *Dungeons and Daddies*, and *The Adventure Zone*. A *D&D* movie, *Dungeons and Dragons: Honor Among Thieves*, starring Chris Pine, Regé-Jean Page, and Michelle Rodriguez, released in March 2023. Both audience members and critics responded well to the film, giving it 91% on *Rotten Tomatoes*, displaying that there is clear interest in *D&D* (Rotten Tomatoes, 2023).

Negative Ideas About Dungeons and Dragons

Not all press is good press though; there has been controversy about *D&D* over the years. Stereotypically, most people believe *D&D* is a game for nerds and grown men that live in their parents' basement. Even in *Stranger Things*, the main characters are depicted as social outcasts. Some describe players as antisocial, cold, negative, and violent. For these reasons, many studies have been published that cast a negative light on players and role-playing games, citing that players have the potential to become violent (Wright et. al, 2020).

Many believe that the game pushes a demonic agenda through its creation of a fantasy world with demons and multiple gods. The *Satanic Panic* started in the 1970s as serial murderers and horror films and books were on the rise. During this period, the Manson Family murders occurred, *The Exorcist* book and movie were published, and the Ted Bundy trial became the first murder trial to ever be televised. All of this information and media about demons and serial killers stirred up feelings of paranoia in many American citizens (Kennedy, 2022).

In 1979, a 16-year-old boy named James Dallas Egbert III went missing from his college dormitory. A private investigator was hired to find him and return him to his

family. During the investigation, private investigator William Deer unearthed that Egbert engaged in *Dungeon and Dragons*. Specifically, Deer reported that Egbert has been playing *D&D* in the steam tunnels under the school. Egbert struggled with mental health issues and saw the tunnels as an escape for him. Those who had been keeping up with the case, still keyed up from other satanic depictions in the media, weaponized the idea that he was playing *D&D*. This brought about the idea that *D&D* was a "bizarre and secretive cult" which players could only join "by invitation," based on Egbert's time in the steam tunnels playing the game. In 1980, Egbert completed suicide, which the media blamed on *D&D* and its ties to the occult (Kennedy, 2022). A book and a movie, *Mazes and Monsters*, was written to capture the "satanic" nature of *D&D* (Jaffe, 1983).

This was just the first of many deaths that the media blamed on *Dungeons and Dragons*. One of the more well-known examples is Irving Lee Pulling. Pulling was struggling in school and eventually completed suicide. His mother, Patricia Pulling, blamed *Dungeons and Dragons*, suing both the company publishing *D&D* and the principal for placing a curse on Irving's PC. She started a campaign called Bothered About *Dungeons & Dragons* (BADD) and described *D&D* as "a fantasy roleplaying game which uses demonology, witchcraft, murder, satanic type rituals, demon summoning." (Kennedy, 2022, para. 21). BADD and other campaigns' main concern was that *D&D* blurred the line for fantasy and reality for people. Since more people began playing as the game grew in popularity, there were some isolated incidents of crime and murder where the assailant played *D&D*. Some people were drawing conclusions based on a correlation between these deaths and *D&D*, believing that *D&D* was a causative factor. Since then, although some still believe it is satanic in nature, *D&D* has largely

moved beyond these conspiracy theories and accusations. As mentioned previously, *D&D* is becoming popular in mainstream media in addition to already being a popular TTRPG, which has resulted in its normalization and dismissal of satanism claims.

Positive Ideas About Dungeons and Dragons

Despite the negative impact of the *Satanic Panic*, *D&D* has had a positive experience on many people's lives. *D&D* is a personalized setting where players have the chance to create the story and the path they take. It also can create a safe space with lots of creative freedom for people to be a character they want to play, such as a character of another personality type, gender, or sexual orientation.

In contrast to the studies above, there have also been many studies that fail to find a connection between violence and role-playing games (Wright et. al, 2020). Baker et. al (2022) found that there was no correlation between *D&D* players and signs of psychopathology. In fact, players of *D&D* tend to have increased empathy, more refined social skills, and more willingness to take risks, as is explored later in the paper. This leads to the idea of bringing accessible and personalized *Dungeons and Dragons* experiences into a therapeutic setting. Creating a safe space to connect with others and try out ideas or take risks in a low stakes setting like *D&D* is consistent exactly like some of the perks of group counseling. This literature review seeks to identify possibilities of using *Dungeons and Dragons* as a form of group counseling by connecting *D&D* characteristics to techniques and theories of group counseling.

Strengths of Group Counseling

Group counseling is a modality of counseling where clients collaborate with other clients towards a common theme or goal. Group sizes and number of counselors can

vary; some groups tend to be smaller with only one facilitator, while others tend to be a little larger with two or three counselors co-facilitating. Topics for groups can also vary, such as substance use, life transitions, anxiety, or gender issues.

Frank (2020) identifies seven benefits of group therapy: camaraderie, different perspectives, accountability, confidence, self-discovery, transitions, and confidentiality. First, group counseling can create a supportive environment built on mutual respect and trust among facilitators and group members. Certain issues and disorders can spur feelings of isolation and alienation, but having a space with others going through similar situations can show the members that they are not alone. Second is the ability to hear different perspectives. Different people have different lived experiences, which presents an opportunity for group members to hear others' insights and strategies that they might not have considered before. Third is accountability through the idea of positive peer pressure. Positive feedback and advice from other group members can inspire a member to push forward towards their goals (Frank, 2020).

Fourth is confidence, which is related to camaraderie. Groups can create a safety net where members can try out new skills, talk openly about feelings, and share their experiences without fear of rejection or negativity. This can encourage self-confidence in the members' own abilities and thoughts. Fifth is self-discovery. Groups welcome different perspectives from others while also allowing individual members to reflect on their own perspectives. Reflection is a strong part of the therapeutic process. The sixth benefit is transitions because groups can help members through challenging times and adjust to various transitions, such as divorce, moving, getting a new job, and other life changes. Lastly is confidentiality. Facilitators and members are required to maintain the

privacy of other members and what they share. This creates a safe space where members may feel more inclined to share their thoughts and feelings. Confidentiality also encourages mutual trust and respect, like camaraderie (Frank, 2020).

Group counseling can also be a time efficient and cost-effective modality. Group counseling allows for multiple clients to be seen at the same time while lowering the cost. Especially with the rise of people seeking counseling after COVID-19, group counseling can be an effective way to provide help to clients without making it inaccessible or creating counselor burnout.

Specific Possibilities for *Dungeons and Dragons* as Group Counseling

Dungeons and Dragons can seem like group counseling but with fantasy aspects and dice rolling. A majority of the seven benefits Frank (2020) outlines can be seen in *D&D*. For example, the game requires participants to create and go on a journey together. They form an adventuring group, or party, to conquer whatever awaits them. Different party members might have different ideas, or perspectives, on how to tackle a particular problem, something that a player might not have considered before. On the flip side, if a player shares an idea with the party and that idea is well-received by the other members, that may boost the player's self-confidence.

Counseling Theories and Gameplay

With group counseling, theories can be used like a road map to help guide discussion and accomplish group goals. Roots in different theories spawn different techniques to adapt to the group, creating an integrated approach to group counseling to facilitate growth (Corey et. al, 2013). Because of its fantastical and story-telling nature, *D&D* can encompass traits from a variety of counseling theories, like the variety of

theories that can be used in a group setting. While these theories and techniques might not seem readily apparent, *D&D* takes an integrated approach using theories such as Jungian, psychodrama, cognitive-behavior therapy, narrative, and play therapy (Arenas et. al, 2022).

Jungian Therapy

Through character creation, *D&D* can highlight aspects of Jungian archetypes, such as the persona, shadow, and self. Kilmer et. al (2023), for instance, describe characters falling in related categories. First is the “looking glass” character, named after the concept from *Alice in Wonderland*, where a client might play the character as if it were them, but in a fantasy world (Kilmer et. al, 2023). This aligns with Jung’s idea of the general self. Another character type is the shadow character where a client can explore parts of themselves that they otherwise would not in the real world (Kilmer et. al, 2023). In Jungian therapy, this would be the shadow, or the instinctual part of our identity. Third is the amplified self-character, where the character is like the lived experiences of the client, but some characteristics are amplified (Kilmer et. al, 2023). For example, the client might be a talented singer, but their PC might be the best singer in the world. This relates to Jung’s idea of the persona in how it acts like a shield for the ego. In general, people make themselves elevated in certain areas to eliminate negative feelings. Lastly is the aspirational character, a PC that is representative of what the client wants to be. This type of character has the most therapeutic utility by revealing goals, strengths, and areas of improvement in the client (Kilmer et. al, 2023). If the client describes themselves as lacking self-confidence and being highly intelligent, but describes their PC as confident and intelligent, the conclusion can be drawn that the client believes they’re

intelligent (a strength) and would like to be more confident (goal and area of improvement). This is another example of Jungian archetype of self by showing the clients intentions and what they would need to feel like they achieved a solid sense of self.

Psychodrama

Psychodrama is an action approach to group counseling where clients work through personal problems and issues through role-playing. Using this technique, clients can gain insight into the situation, practice for future ones, and explore thoughts and feelings within the safety of the group (Corey et. al, 2013). *D&D* can be used to recreate those situations in a fantastical way. For example, a client might have a fear of public speaking or social situations that require interacting with strangers. The DM can create a scenario where the client's PC needs to distract a large crowd while their allies move stealthily past them. This gives the client a chance to practice social skills through the game.

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) incorporates the idea that psychological distress is a function of distorted cognitions and maladaptive behaviors, and therefore, these cognitions and behaviors can be relearned into healthier and more positive thoughts, behaviors, and feelings. In groups, CBT can be used to practice new behaviors in a safe space and gain an unfamiliar perspective on a problem, issue, or conflict (Corey et. al, 2013). In *D&D*, the world creates an opportunity to try out new skills and work through distorted thinking with play. For example, a client might have trouble making friends. Through *D&D*, the PC might try to make friends to get transportation to the next

town, something typically low stakes, by trying several different approaches to make friends. They can try different ways of approaching the situation.

Narrative Therapy

Narrative therapy explores how clients tell their personal stories and experiences, even giving them a chance to reauthor things about themselves. Through group facilitation, narrative therapy can create a sense of agency in clients by exploring societal standards and expectations that might restrict personal growth (Corey et. al, 2013).

Narrative therapy is all about storytelling, which is one of the core tenets of *D&D*. PCs have the power to help author the story they are playing through dice rolls, character creation, actions, and motivation just to name a few. Clients have agency over their PCs and how they act in this world that they have created. This can boost self-confidence, autonomy, creativity, and discovery as the client tells their story through their PC.

Play Therapy

Play therapy is the idea that clients can work out issues through play, giving space for clients to learn and practice new skills. While play therapy is typically conducted on an individual level with children, play is core across the lifespan and can include others. Play, specifically role-playing, is even used in professional settings, such as the government, military, corporations, education, and healthcare (Bowman, 2010). The adventure or campaign in *D&D* can be used to help clients explore issues of power, control, identity, perceived importance, and popularity (Enfield, 2006). Clients play as their PCs to work through problems and utilize new skills. Role-playing can increase enjoyment while decreasing risk (Bowman, 2010).

Client Benefits

Given *D&D*'s integrated approach in terms of theoretical underpinnings, it makes logical sense that clients as players would see similar benefits in *D&D* as group counseling. As with counseling, therapeutic benefits can range from interpersonal (improved communication skills), to cognitive (enhanced problem-solving capabilities), to emotional (increased self-confidence). Each of these benefits contribute to one's overall mental health while decreasing feelings of stress, depression, anxiety, and loneliness.

Interpersonal Benefits

Social skills and supports can greatly benefit outcomes in counseling. Kilmer et al (2023) found that lower social skills equate to more stress, increased feelings of loneliness, and decreased mental wellbeing. Building connections with others can foster growth and dismiss feelings of alienation and isolation. One way this can be done is through social play, or collaborative interactions between players while they are playing. Buyukozturk and Shay (2022) explore the idea of symbolic interactionism, the process of people being interactants in everything that they do, and how that relates to social play. Social play is vital to *D&D* as the game itself serves as the medium for interactions (Buyukozturk & Shay, 2022). Through rolling dice, creating characters, and storytelling, players interact with each other and share experiences, thus building connections and camaraderie. They also identified gaming as a way to build interpersonal connections by sharing the game with others, creating a space for players to develop social skills and overcome social anxieties, and to pass down knowledge between players (Buyutozturk & Shay, 2022).

Most of the articles highlighted the interpersonal idea of empathy, the ability to share and understand another's feelings. Empathy can be an important channel in making decisions, building connections, developing social skills, and expressing feelings. Rivers et. al (2016) explored topics of fantasy empathy, empathic concern, perspective taking, and personal distress by interviewing 128 fantasy gamers. The researchers hypothesized that since role-playing requires the player to become another self, they are more likely to be better at perspective taking compared to those that do not participate in RPGs. They found a significant correlation ($r= 0.43, p< 0.001$) between empathy and absorption, or how engrossed in the game they were. In fact, fantasy gamers had significant results in all four areas of investigation at the $p<0.05$ alpha level. They also found that, overall, fantasy gamers score higher in empathy than the general population (Rivers et. al, 2016).

Wright et. al (2020) takes the idea of empathy and *D&D* one step further by looking at moral development. They measured both gamers and non-gamers on personal interests, maintaining norms, and post-conventional reasoning, the idea that individuals will make moral decisions based on their own personal beliefs rather than the beliefs of others or authorities. Gamers showed a greater decrease in personal interest reasoning, or selfishness, than non-gamers, and showed higher scores for maintaining norms and rules after playing *D&D* than non-gamers. *D&D* can also facilitate stronger post-conventional reasoning, especially in those who are developmentally delayed.

Mental and Emotional Benefits

Arenas et. al (2022) conducted a review of articles about mental health and TTRPGs. They found that 90.9% of studies they reviewed reported objective or subjective improvement in mental health outcomes after using an RPG-based

intervention. Fine (1983) explained the use of fantasies to externalize internalized dialogue. For some people, it can be difficult to express thoughts, emotions, and behaviors out of fear, guilt, or shame. Fantasy creates a bridge for participants to share those thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in a healthy space rather than keeping them hidden or bottled up. Sidhu and Carter (2021) stated that *D&D* uses agency and immersion to heighten the emotional play experience through the story as told by the players, DM, and the rules system. Through these emotional experiences, players may discover things about themselves or ways to change their thoughts and behaviors in different situations. *D&D* is also a flexible game, as shown in Enfield's (2006) work. By being flexible, *D&D* creates a practice space that can adapt to individual and group needs. For example, if players want to focus on solving problems without magic, since magic does not exist in the real world, the DM can take away magic from the world to fit the group's wants and needs. This further establishes the *D&D* game as a safe place for players and encourages their autonomy.

If empathy was the most reported interpersonal benefit, self-confidence is the most reported mental and emotional benefit. With high self-confidence, players are more likely to take risks, share feelings, practice self-care, and form bonds with others. Kilmer et. al (2023) stated that role-playing can boost feelings of self-confidence and foster skill-building through creation of a safe and explorative space. Bowman (2010) reports that role-playing can increase enjoyment by lowering risk. Through the safe space, players can practice skills, learn new ones, and build their self-confidence.

Henrich and Worthington's (2021) study showed that along with the interpersonal benefits they found, they also found that participants who play *D&D* generally show

higher levels of creativity, increased strategic thinking, and self-expression. They also found that there was no correlation between playing *D&D* and developing maladaptive coping skills. *D&D* players had inverse ratings on a psychoticism scale, meaning they often did not display any aggression, impulsivity, aloofness, or antisocial behavior (Henrich & Worthington, 2021). Even with mention of death and dying in *D&D*, Sidhu and Carter (2021) described death, dying, and the potential to die for a PC as a “positive negative experience” (p. 1047). While distressing, the concept creates new experiences and inspires reflection for players. It can make them more bold or more cautious or encourage them to overcome their fears.

Participant Testimonials

There is value in numbers and findings but hearing straight from the participants about their experiences with *D&D* takes these numbers and findings to a whole new level. In Abbott et al. (2022), a team of counselors developed a role-playing skills group and recruited seven members to play *D&D* in a therapeutic setting. Throughout the project, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and collected lessons participants had learned from their time in the group. Through *D&D*, participants had the opportunity to practice being a stronger version of themselves. Specifically, participants shared that the *D&D* group gave them a chance to find their voice and increase their self-confidence. Participants also had a chance to practice confrontation by having their character confront something in the game and work through the process. This gave them the opportunity to practice the skill in a secure environment. With *D&D*'s chance system of using dice to accomplish objectives, participants had to become more comfortable with the things outside of their control, such as the roll of a dice. After getting comfortable

with that concept, the participants reported feeling freer and more understanding that mistakes can happen. Ultimately, the *D&D* group gave participants the ability to transfer the skills they had learned by playing, like self-confidence, confrontation, and embracing mistakes, into the real world (Abbott et. al, 2022).

Another example comes from Enfield's (2006) work with children. Enfield reported that after two school semesters, participants from his *D&D* group had a decrease in detentions, an increase in communication skills, and an increase in critical thinking skills. Individually, Enfield shared that some of the participants showed an increase in leadership skills and focus while seeing a decrease in fighting. Others had increases in the ability to express themselves and decreases in negative self-talk (Enfield, 2006). Some of the benefits of the role-playing group were consistent across members, but there were also individual differences in how each participant absorbed and used the information and skills they had learned. This further shows that *D&D* can assist people in diverse ways, much like different types of therapy do.

While Abbott et. al and Enfield focused more on reactions of fresh players, Causo and Quinlan (2021) recruited active *D&D* players to share their experiences with *D&D* and their recovery journey with mental health. These participants ranged from players who had been playing *D&D* for only 3 months to 39 years, and from those who had been working on their mental health recovery from 1.5 years to 19 years. This variety of participants spurred many different topics of discussion about how *D&D* has been beneficial for them, such as working through traumas and building social skills and supports (Causo & Quinlan, 2021).

For example, one of their participants, Brian, shared how they dealt with trauma they had been through their PC. Brian was discovered by the rest of the party to be an incubus, a “monster” race in *D&D* terms, and shared that the experience:

Culminated in basically me more or less reliving my actual coming out trauma, because I had to go through it again. And I was pretty much crying and explaining to the group, in character, my story...it was weirdly therapeutic to have such a similar experience and it went well (Causo & Quinlan, 2021, p. 261).

Most participants, like Brian, acknowledged that *D&D* was a safe space to share vulnerable topics, either directly or through their PC. Plus, Brian experienced something that had previously had a poor reaction and was now well-received.

Another participant, Steven, shared that *D&D* gave him a chance to work through thoughts and feelings through their character. Specifically, Steven reported that he enjoyed playing melee classes, such as fighter or barbarian, to work through anger problems, and that he had developed more effective social skills while playing. Steven said:

You’ve got a wide range of emotions that you can experience and get comfortable with before stepping out into the real world and trying new things for yourself. When you’re out in the world and you’re trying to have conversations with people, it feels much more natural to know what these emotions feel like in a safe environment. (Causo & Quinlan, 2021, p. 262).

Again, *D&D* provides a secure place for players to try out and build skills. Mary shared that during her time at an inpatient facility, patients created their own *D&D* group as a group activity. She explained that “*D&D* really filled that void [lack of activities at

the facility] and gave us a sense of community, and we continued that when we left.” (Causo & Quinlan, 2021, p. 262). Back to Frank’s (2020) idea of camaraderie as a benefit of group counseling, *D&D* can build a sense of community and connection. The widely varying nature of these various testimonies further solidifies the widespread applicability *D&D* offers as a means of addressing mental health issues.

Counselor Benefits

The client findings above highlight the therapeutic power that *D&D* could potentially have, but there are also benefits for the counselor/facilitator as well. From a group counseling perspective, counselors can see more clients at once. Especially with the current mental health climate, counselor time and resources are valuable and limited. By creating a space where more people can be seen, counselors can interact with and help more clients in less time. Abbott et. al (2022) explores the idea of having a co-facilitator as well, suggesting that one facilitator plays as the DM, narrating the events and guiding the PCs through the world, while the other plays as a PC, aiding clients as they adventure. Co-facilitation can create a different group dynamic and take the pressure off of having to conduct a *D&D* therapy group alone. As the saying goes, two heads are better than one.

Speaking from experience, *D&D* can be really enjoyable. While there is a learning curve to the mechanics, it is exciting to be in a fantasy world where there are very few rules and limits. The level of whimsy feels freeing. Incorporating it into counseling might make for more entertaining counseling sessions to make it feel less like work. Plus, counselors have the chance to play alongside the clients through NPCs and world building. Personally, I would love to get paid to roll some dice.

Considerations and Limitations

Cultural Considerations

In their review, Henrich and Worthington (2021) explained that there is no single, overarching type of *D&D* player. *D&D* attracts a variety of people from a variety of diverse backgrounds. For this reason, it is important to examine cultural aspects, considerations, and limitations as they relate to *Dungeons and Dragons*, specifically in areas of racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. *D&D* focuses on the idea that the PCs are heroes and that good will always triumph over evil. This can be difficult for some given media ideas of what it means to be a hero, to be perfect and courageous, and what it means to be a villain, lacking something. Marginalized groups may often feel like villains or outcasts in society. Enfield (2006) defines a hero as “one who must overcome the odds and remain true to their beliefs and values.” (Enfield, 2006, p. 232). There is no strict mention of good or bad, or right or wrong. A hero overcomes some kind of odds, whether it be public speaking, dealing with trauma, or saving the day, while staying authentic. It is important to establish that anyone can be a hero and clarify that in *D&D*, there is no right or wrong. Characters can be the hero by being authentically themselves and overcoming odds.

D&D and Racial/Ethnic Identity

It is important to separate the idea of race in society and race in *D&D*. In *D&D*, race refers to the PC being either human, demi-human or half human, or some other fantasy character (orc, dragonborn, triton, etc.). Races in *D&D* change the skills and stats available for the players. For example, an elf character would be more acrobatic while a dragonborn character would be physically stronger.

Dungeons and Dragons has a tumultuous history with racial and ethnic identity. In 1974, *D&D* only had two races: human or non-human (dwarf, elf, or halfling). Non-human races had level caps, meaning that while a human character's abilities could grow exponentially over the course of the game, non-human characters could only increase their abilities by so much before they had to stop. To create a character that would "win," players often chose human characters (Garcia, 2017). In newer editions of *D&D*, all characters of any race can reach maximum level. Buyukozturk and Shay (2022) also acknowledge that characters of color are often exoticized and minimized in *D&D*. Even older versions of *D&D* gave lower stats to certain races that could impact gameplay. Players would choose "superior" races to "win."

Each race in *D&D* also has a background that perpetuates stereotypes for that character race like racial stereotypes real world culture. For example, an orc character could have remarkably high intelligent stats, but the *D&D* handbook shares that they are often dimwitted and only rely on brute force. *D&D* players are often encouraged to play characters as they are defined in the game's handbook, so not many players would want to play a dumb orc if they wanted to "win". (Ferguson, 2021). This creates a stereotyping cycle where the player might feel the need to conform and play into the stereotype rather than playing the character the way they truly want to.

Despite its history, Ferguson's (2021) study revealed that playing *D&D* does not equate to racism. Garcia (2017) shared that while the history and current state of *D&D* is not inherently inclusive, people and systems change, as shown with how *D&D* has adjusted its rules overtime. As facilitators, it is important to break down racial and ethnic stereotypes by creating characters for the world from a variety of different races and by

not falling into racial stereotypes set by the *D&D* handbook. Facilitators should encourage members to defy stereotypes through their characters.

D&D and Gender Identity

Much like with race/ethnicity, D&D has a rough history with gender as well. The first several books of *D&D* after its conception in 1974 were titled *Men and Magic* and refer to players using he/him pronouns. In 1978, Arneson and Gygax reported that even women were starting to play, which made their game unique, but in doing so stated that female players were rare and therefore exoticized (Garcia, 2017). Similarly, Buyukozturk and Shay (2022) acknowledge that female characters in D&D are often sexualized and objectified. Also in 1978, if a player made their PC female, they had lower stats and were physically weaker compared to male PCs, so players often did not play as female PCs to “win” (Garcia, 2017). Since then, *D&D* has progressively gotten more inclusive. With the release of D&D’s third edition in 2000, Wizards of the Coast removed the he/him specific player pronouns from the third edition of *D&D*. Gender no longer changes a player’s stats. They have also started including more photos of female characters in their handbooks, increasing the number of women present in photos by 15% since 1974 (Garcia, 2017).

Stang and Trammell (2020) explore misogyny in the *Monster Manual*, a catalog of *D&D* monsters and their stats. Specifically, they do a deep dive into the *D&D* description of the hag “monster,” stating that “murdering monstrous women is a violent and cathartic reestablishment of normal, dominant, and patriarchal order” (Stang & Trammell, 2020, p. 732). The *Monster Manual* enforces the idea that powerful women are considered wicked and evil, and therefore should be stopped (Stang & Trammell,

2020). This idea further pushes an unjust order. Facilitators should be mindful of how they present D&D “monsters” of any gender identity. It may be beneficial to use “enemies” as opposed to “monsters” since “enemy” could refer to anyone or anything. However, some players prefer playing “monster” characters. In Salija (2022), they stated that transgender individuals enjoy playing as “monstrous” characters to embrace their “monstrous” selves as labeled by society.

While *D&D* might be slowly becoming more inclusive, facilitators of *D&D* in a counseling setting can include more opportunity for players to express gender identity by letting them play characters that aren't their assigned gender, acknowledge a variety of different gender identity rather than just a male/female binary, creating NPCs that challenge gender stereotypes or identify outside of the gender binary, or adding a space on their character sheets for the character to share their preferred pronouns. For example, Matt Mercer, the DM for the podcast *Critical Role*, created inclusions for nonbinary characters in the adventure. Again, creating these spaces where people can be themselves allows for freedom of expression, authenticity, and self-exploration.

D&D and Sexual Orientation

Kawitzky (2020) examined a queer perspective of TTRPGs. They define *D&D* as being a type of magic circle, a safe space separate from reality that has a distinct set of rules than the real world or no rules at all. Magic circles can allow for freedom of expression without feeling suffocated by societal norms. Specifically, *D&D* gives players “agency over the narrative,” allowing them an inclusive world in which to participate (Kawitzky, 2020, p. 131).

Similar to magic circles, Salija (2022) referred to the *D&D* game as a landscape of possibilities. A landscape of possibilities is the idea that there are areas in the world that are not tied to reality where anything is possible. Using these in a therapeutic context can ease issues that oppressed or marginalized groups deal with and create a safe space for those who do not “fit in” with the norms.

Facilitators should allow character and world customization that creates a safe space for all players. Agency and customization can function as a queer survival skill where players take on a hostile system and make it habitable (Kawitzky, 2020). Group counseling focuses on creating a safe space for expression, and the *D&D* environment should be no different.

Client and Counselor Considerations

Along with individual cultural considerations, it is important to understand other individual differences in both clients/players and counselors. Much like with various modalities and theories of counseling, there is no “one size fits all.” What might work for one client might not work for another; what feels logical to one counselor might feel ridiculous to another. Using *D&D* as group counseling functions in the same way. Some clients and counselors may respond more positively to this approach than others, so it is important to be mindful.

Client Considerations

In general, facilitators should assess clients to see if they would be a viable candidate for group therapy. Some clients thrive better on an individual level than a group level. Clients that do not do well in a group setting may not be a good fit to try *D&D* in a therapeutic group setting. Fine (1983) mentioned that some clients can get

overly attached or over-identify with their PCs. This can cause distress, anxiety, and fear, making it different for the client to reap the therapeutic benefits of the game. It is important to check in with clients through all stages of the process.

Kilmer et. al (2023) identified that therapeutic role-playing games tend to work well with those who have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or other trauma, and depression. It should be noted that trauma work in this setting can vary. Counselors should not intentionally replicate traumatic content, but rather invite clients to share how trauma impacts their lives and how they have been working on recovery. Using a card system would be useful in the situation; players are given a distinctly colored card that they can hold up at any time if the subject of the scene or gameplay is too uncomfortable or triggering for them, at which point the scene is skipped over without question. Kilmer et. al (2023) also suggested ways to accommodate clients and increase accessibility, such as large print character sheets, Braille dice, fidget devices, and shared session notes.

Counselors can also present customization options for their client's PC that are not mentioned in *Dungeons and Dragons* through a process called homebrewing. Homebrewing is the term used when a player or DM is creating something for the world that is not outlined in *D&D* rules. For example, if a client has a service animal or emotional support animal they want to include in the game, the DM/counselor might homebrew one by tweaking *D&D* rules about familiars, or spirits in service of a given character, to give that client's PC an animal companion too. Homebrewing can be complicated but adds more opportunities for inclusivity and flexibility in the game.

Counselor Considerations

Henrich and Worthington (2021) explained that it can be a struggle to deliver a modality like this. Counselors are likely to play DMs in *D&D*, meaning that they are tasked with the job of creating the outline of the world and story, and playing all the NPCs. Baker et. al (2022) recommends that counselors have prior *D&D* or TTRPG knowledge before pursuing *D&D* as a form of group counseling. Lack of training and knowledge on this topic can lead to lack of confidence and an increase in anxiety and negative beliefs (Henrich & Worthington, 2021). An experienced *D&D* player like me would likely find it easier to transition into using *D&D* as a form of group therapy over a counselor who is just learning about *D&D* by reading this literature review. The benefits and outcomes mentioned above are achievable when the setting for them to flourish is right. Also, some counselors might not want to pursue an approach that is not yet an evidence-based practice or something that can potentially soften the divide between the counselor role and the client role.

While group counseling in general can be time and resource efficient, *D&D* can be time consuming and costly depending on how it is played. Premade campaigns and one-shots exist, but counselors that want to tailor the experience to their participant more might find themselves spending a lot of time world-building and writing the narrative for the adventure. Depending on the counselor and players, *D&D* can also get expensive. Most dice sets are reasonably priced, but adding handbooks, maps, and minifigures to help further immersion can become costly. Some counselors might find that the costs outweigh the outcomes in their practices. Luckily, there has been a rise in therapeutically applied role-playing games (TA-RPGs) that consist of premade adventures and characters

specifically designed to be used in therapeutic settings. These can help with time and resources and offer a more structured approach for counselors interested in trying role-playing with their groups.

Applications for Individual Work

With clients who might not be good candidates for group counseling or for counselors who might not feel equipped to run something like this, there are *D&D* applications for individual work with clients. *D&D* is usually played in a group and can be difficult to play solo (one DM and one PC). However, clients who already have experiences with *D&D* may want to share those experiences with the counselor. While the therapeutic utility might not readily be apparent, talking about *D&D* with a client who shares that can prove beneficial. Arenas et. al (2022) reported that TTRPGS work well as complements to psychotherapies (Arenas et. al, 2022). They do not have to be done in session but can be discussed in session to discover more about the client and their lived experiences.

One real world example of *D&D* and individual work comes from Blackmon (1994). Fred, a 19-year-old, single, white, male, college student sought treatment for suicide attempts and schizoid personality disorder. Blackmon explained that there was a lot of resistance from Fred towards Blackmon and that Fred had little social support outside of the therapeutic relationship. Fred came into session after six months of visits and mentioned that he had been socializing outside of counseling by playing *Dungeons and Dragons*. Blackmon reported being skeptical at first but invited an eager Fred to share his experiences in the game during sessions. After six months of this, Fred was able to verbalize feelings towards Blackmon and feel comfortable enough to talk openly with

Blackmon. Specifically, Blackmon claimed that *D&D* provided a safe space for Fred to share his feelings through the fantasy of the game and make presenting these feelings in the real world more comfortable for him. Specifically, Blackmon stated that “the game served as an organized vehicle to become familiar with his own unconscious.”

(Blackmon, 1974, p. 629).

Blackmon’s case study identifies several benefits of bringing *D&D* into individual work: rapport building, self-expression, and client insight. First is rapport building, a technique that strengthens the therapeutic relationship through connection. Blackmon showed Fred that he cared about and was interested in what Fred does outside of the therapeutic relationship. As a result, Fred began talking with and trusting Blackmon more. Self-expression was an additional benefit, as *D&D* gave Fred an opportunity to share the things that he enjoys in a comfortable space. Having a space to share can boost self-confidence when the client feels heard and understood. Third, *D&D* allowed for client insight, both for the counselor and the client. What Fred shared about *D&D* revealed parts of himself through his *D&D* adventure, such as his motivations, wants, needs, and feelings. Counselors can use what comes up in their clients’ *D&D* games to explain their lived experiences. Clients can also gain insight through self-reflection about how they create their character, their actions, and their motivations to reveal things they might want in real life. Having this medium of expression for clients who play can be therapeutically beneficial for both parties.

Recommendations for Future Exploration

Abbott et. al (2022) said it best: “there is a necessity for creative interventions to enhance and maintain social connectedness” (p. 29). As the field of mental health

involves, it is important that mental health professionals evolve with it by discovering new interventions and refining current ones to best support clients. Currently, there is limited research on using *D&D*, or any TTRPG, in a therapeutic setting. Baker et. al (2022) suggests that RPGS could be used as an intervention to reduce levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. Based on the current research, it is likely that there will be a continued trend in improved mental health through playing RPGs. Henrich and Worthington (2021) report that there is currently a lack of manualized approaches for using *D&D* in a therapeutic setting.

There is also emerging research, specifically within the past three years, as showcased by many of the studies mentioned in this review. Kilmer et. al's (2023) book is dedicated to the idea of TA-RPGs and how they can be used in a therapeutic setting. These TA-RPGs, such as *Game to Grow*, create a manualized approach to using TTRPGs in counseling. As research expands around using creative interventions in counseling, specifically the use of TTRPGs and TA-RPGS, the therapeutic utility will likely become more evident based on current research.

Appendix A

Glossary of Dungeons and Dragons Terms

Campaign: An adventure or collection of adventures usually lasting over a long period of time.

Dungeon Master (DM): The narrator of the game; they create the world and roleplay as other characters and enemies.

Homebrew: Any content within a *Dungeons and Dragons* game that cannot be found in an official rulebook.

Monster Manual: The primary bestiary sourcebook for monsters in the *Dungeons & Dragons* world.

Non-Player Character (NPC): Other characters that are played usually by the Dungeon Master; these can include enemies, townspeople, guards, royalty, etc.

One-Shot: An adventure that typically lasts one session; a quicker version of the game.

Player Character (PC): A participant's character in the game; a character that the participant is role-playing as.

Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TTRPG): A type of game genre usually played on a tabletop where participants roleplay as characters in a created environment.

Therapeutic-Applied Role-Playing Game (TA-RPG): A type of role-playing game constructed specifically for therapeutic use.

References

- Abbott, M. S., Stauss, K. A., & Burnett, A. F. (2022). Table-top role-playing games as a therapeutic intervention with adults to increase social connectedness. *Social Work with Groups, 45*(1), 16–31.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2021.1932014>
- Adams, A. (2013). Needs Met Through Role-Playing Games: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of Dungeons & Dragons. *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research, 12*, 69–86.
- Arenas, D. L., Viduani, A., & Araujo, R. B. (2022). Therapeutic Use of Role-Playing Game (RPG) in Mental Health: A Scoping Review. *Simulation & Gaming, 53*(3), 285–311. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10468781211073720>
- Baker, I. S., Turner, I. J., & Kotera, Y. (2022). Role-play Games (RPGs) for Mental Health (Why Not?): Roll for Initiative. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction, 11*(4), 395–412. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-022-00832-y>
- Blackmon, W. D. (1994). Dungeons and Dragons: The use of a fantasy game in the psychotherapeutic treatment of a young adult. *American Journal of Psychotherapy, 48*(4), 624–632.
<https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.1994.48.4.624>
- Bowman, S. (2010). Role-Playing as Scenario Building and Problem Solving. In *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (pp. 80–103). McFarland.

- Buyukozturk, B., & Shay, H. (2022). Social Play? The Critical Role of Social Interaction in Geeky Games. *Leisure Sciences*, 1–20.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2022.2036274>
- Causo, F., & Quinlan, E. (2021). Defeating dragons and demons: Consumers' perspectives on mental health recovery in role-playing games. *Australian Psychologist*, 56(3), 256–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2021.1890983>
- Corey, G., & Corey, C. (2013). *Groups: Process and Practice* (9th ed.). Brooks/Cole.
- Enfield, G. (2007). Becoming the hero: The use of role-playing games in psychotherapy. *Using Superheroes in Counseling and Play Therapy.*, 227–241.
- Ferguson, C. J. (2022). Are orcs racist? Dungeons and Dragons, ethnocentrism, anxiety, and the depiction of “evil” monsters. *Current Psychology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02551-4>
- Fine, G. A. (1983a). Role-Playing and Self-Playing. In *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (pp. 205–228). The University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, G. A. (1983b). The Reality of Fantasy. In *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (pp. 229–242). The University of Chicago Press.
- Frank, J. (2020, August 20). 7 benefits of group therapy. *Citizen Advocates*.
<https://citizenadvocates.net/blog/7-benefits-of-group-therapy/>
- Garcia, A. (2017). Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 24(3), 232–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2017.1293691>

- Henrich, S., & Worthington, R. (2021). Let Your Clients Fight Dragons: A Rapid Evidence Assessment regarding the Therapeutic Utility of ‘Dungeons & Dragons.’ *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 1–19.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2021.1987367>
- Jaffe, R. (1981). *Mazes and monsters: a novel*. New York, Delacorte Press.
- Kawitzky, F. R. (2020). Magic Circles. *Performance Research*, 25(8), 129–136.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2020.1930786>
- Kennedy, O. (2022, June 9). How Dungeons & Dragons became a part of the 1980s Satanic Panic. *Dicebreaker*. <https://www.dicebreaker.com/games/dungeons-and-dragons-5e/feature/dnd-satanic-panic>
- Kilmer, E. D., Davis, A. D., Kilmer, J. N., & Johns, A. R. (2023). Case Conceptualization and Treatment Planning in Therapeutically Applied Role-Playing Games. In *Therapeutically Applied Role-Playing Games: The Game to Grow Method* (1st ed., pp. 113–138). Taylor Francis.
- Kilmer, E. D., Davis, A. D., Kilmer, J. N., & Johns, A. R. (2023). Common Aspects of Tabletop Role-Playing Games That Support Growth. In *Therapeutically Applied Role-Playing Games: The Game to Grow Method* (1st ed., pp. 27–34). Taylor Francis.
- Kilmer, E. D., Davis, A. D., Kilmer, J. N., & Johns, A. R. (2023). Population Considerations in Therapeutically Applied Role-Playing Games. In *Therapeutically Applied Role-Playing Games: The Game to Grow Method* (1st ed., pp. 95–110). Taylor Francis.

- Rotten Tomatoes (2023). *Dungeons & dragons: Honor among thieves*. Rotten Tomatoes. Retrieved from [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/dungeons and dragons honor among thieves](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/dungeons_and_dragons_honor_among_thieves)
- Rivers, A., Wickramasekera, I. E., Pekala, R. J., & Rivers, J. A. (2016). Empathic Features and Absorption in Fantasy Role-Playing. *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis*, 58(3), 286–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00029157.2015.1103696>
- Salija, E. (2022). Landscapes of possibility: An introduction to fantasy in 2SLGBTQIA+ and disabled therapeutic contexts. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 1, 17–25.
- Sidhu, P., & Carter, M. (2021). Pivotal Play: Rethinking Meaningful Play in Games Through Death in Dungeons & Dragons. *Games and Culture*, 16(8), 1044–1064. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211005231>
- Stang, S., & Trammell, A. (2020). The Ludic Bestiary: Misogynistic Tropes of Female Monstrosity in Dungeons & Dragons. *Games and Culture*, 15(6), 730–747. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019850059>
- Wizards of the Coast. (2021). *2020 was again D&D's Best Year Ever!* [Infographic]. <https://static0.gamerantimages.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/dungeons-and-dragons-2021-infographic-1.jpg?q=50&fit=crop&dpr=1.5>
- Wizards RPG Team. (2014). Lost Mines of Phandelver. In *Lost Mines of Phandelver* (p. 6). Wizards of the Coast.

Wright, J. C., Weissglass, D. E., & Casey, V. (2020). Imaginative Role-Playing as a Medium for Moral Development: Dungeons & Dragons Provides Moral Training. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 60*(1), 99–129.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167816686263>