

## **A Scholarly Investigation on Psychodynamic, Humanistic, and Postmodern Theoretical Frameworks in Art and Play Therapy Context**

Silas Njagi\*, Adhiambo Josephine Ogutu<sup>1</sup>  
Pan Africa Christian University, Kenya

\*Corresponding email: [muthamiasilas2@gmail.com](mailto:muthamiasilas2@gmail.com)

**Accepted: 12 June 2026 || Published: 22 June 2026**

### **Abstract**

Art and Play Therapy have become important therapeutic approaches for supporting the emotional, psychological, and developmental well-being of children and families. The effectiveness of these approaches is largely influenced by the theoretical framework guiding therapeutic practice. This paper examines three major theoretical orientations that inform Art and Play Therapy: psychodynamic, humanistic, and postmodern frameworks. Through a scholarly review of contemporary literature, the study explores the philosophical foundations, assumptions about child development, mechanisms of therapeutic change, and practical applications of each framework. The psychodynamic perspective emphasizes unconscious processes, attachment relationships, symbolic expression, and relational repair. The humanistic framework highlights empathy, authenticity, unconditional positive regard, and the child's inherent capacity for growth and self-actualization. The postmodern perspective focuses on narrative construction, social context, power dynamics, and the co-creation of meaning through collaborative therapeutic relationships. The paper further evaluates the empirical evidence supporting each approach and critically examines the cultural and ethical implications of each across diverse family and community contexts. Findings indicate that each framework offers unique strengths while also presenting certain limitations when applied independently. Contemporary scholarship increasingly advocates for integrative and pluralistic approaches that combine the depth of psychodynamic understanding, the relational safety of humanistic practice, and the cultural responsiveness of postmodern therapies. The study concludes that theoretical flexibility, supported by empirical evidence, trauma-informed principles, and cultural humility, enhances the effectiveness of Art and Play Therapy. Integrative practice provides a comprehensive framework for addressing the complex emotional, relational, and developmental needs of children in contemporary therapeutic settings.

**Keywords:** *Art Therapy, Play Therapy, Psychodynamic Theory, Humanistic Therapy, Postmodern Therapy, Child Psychotherapy, Attachment Theory, Narrative Therapy, Therapeutic Relationship, Integrative Practice.*

**How to Cite:** Njagi, S., & Ogutu, A. J. (2026). A Scholarly Investigation on Psychodynamic, Humanistic, and Postmodern Theoretical Frameworks in Art and Play Therapy Context. *Journal of Sociology, Psychology and Religious Studies*, 6(5), 32-37.

## **1. Psychodynamic, Humanistic, and Postmodern Frameworks in Art and Play Therapy**

Art and Play Therapy occupy a distinctive and evolving position within contemporary child and family mental health practice. The meaning attributed to play, drawing, storytelling, and symbolic enactment depends fundamentally on the theoretical framework guiding the practitioner (Xie & Sun, 2025). Psychodynamic, humanistic, and postmodern traditions represent three influential paradigms that continue to shape contemporary practice (Xie & Sun, 2025). Each offers a distinct understanding of child development, relational processes, identity formation, and therapeutic change, as well as philosophical assumptions about knowledge, power, and the nature of psychological distress (Xie & Sun, 2025). Recent scholarship demonstrates renewed interest in theoretical integration within child psychotherapy (Cooper & McLeod, 2021; Midgley et al., 2021). This paper examines the historical and philosophical foundations of psychodynamic, humanistic, and postmodern frameworks as they inform Art and Play Therapy. It analyses their assumptions about child development and family systems, explores their mechanisms of change, evaluates empirical support from contemporary research, and critically interrogates their cultural and ethical implications. Rather than privileging one model over another, the discussion situates these paradigms within current debates regarding pluralism, trauma-informed practice, and cultural responsiveness.

### **1.1 The Psychodynamic Framework: Depth, Attachment, and Symbolic Meaning**

The psychodynamic framework in child therapy originates from classical psychoanalysis but has undergone substantial revision. Freud's early work conceptualized play as a symbolic expression of unconscious conflict, though contemporary psychodynamic child psychotherapy has shifted from instinctual drive theory towards relational and attachment-based models (Xie & Sun, 2025). Attachment theory, particularly as developed within mentalization-based frameworks, now plays a central role in modern psychodynamic practice (Fonagy et al., 2022). Philosophically, psychodynamic theory assumes that behaviour is shaped by unconscious processes formed within early relationships (Xie & Sun, 2025). The child's internal working models of attachment influence affect regulation, relational expectations, and identity development. Contemporary research supports the enduring influence of attachment patterns on socio-emotional functioning (Campbell et al., 2023; Midgley et al., 2021). Psychodynamic Art and Play Therapy, therefore, interprets symbolic expression as an externalization of internal relational narratives. In art therapy contexts, Malchiodi (2022) describes the creative process as a transitional space in which children can symbolically represent complex affective states. The artwork becomes both container and communicator. A child who repeatedly depicts abandonment themes may be expressing internalised attachment insecurity. The therapist's role is to provide containment, attunement, and carefully timed interpretation that facilitates integration. Mentalization-based approaches have strengthened the empirical credibility of psychodynamic work with children. Fonagy et al. (2022) demonstrate that enhancing a child's capacity to reflect on mental states improves emotional regulation and relational functioning. This aligns with Yates and Grey's (2021) findings that relational repair in therapy can foster resilience even in contexts of early adversity. Thus, therapeutic change within psychodynamic frameworks occurs not merely through interpretation but through relational experience that reshapes internal representations.

Psychodynamic practice has, however, faced criticism over time. Ribeiro et al. (2023) argue that early psychoanalytic theories were shaped by Western individualistic assumptions and may inadequately account for cultural variability in caregiving practices. Furthermore, there is an ongoing debate regarding the extent to which symbolic interpretation risks projecting the therapist's meaning. Gerge and Pedersen (2022) note that trauma-informed creative arts therapies require careful regulation of interpretation to avoid re-traumatization.

Another theoretical tension concerns the balance between intrapsychic and systemic explanations. While attachment theory foregrounds relational contexts, critics suggest that psychodynamic models may insufficiently address structural inequalities such as poverty, racism, or collective trauma (Xie & Sun, 2025). Contemporary psychodynamic scholars increasingly advocate for relational and culturally reflective adaptations, integrating systemic awareness into depth-oriented work. Despite these critiques, psychodynamic frameworks contribute a profound understanding of unconscious processes, symbolic meaning, and relational repair (Xie & Sun, 2025). Their integration with developmental neuroscience and attachment research strengthens their contemporary relevance.

### **1.2 The Humanistic Framework: Relational Presence and the Actualising Tendency**

Humanistic therapy emerged as a critique of both psychoanalytic determinism and behavioural reductionism. Rooted in phenomenology and existential philosophy, the humanistic tradition emphasises subjective experience, agency, and the inherent capacity for growth (Springer, 2023). Carl Rogers' person-centered approach and Virginia Axline's child-centered play therapy form the foundation of this paradigm. Humanistic philosophy posits that individuals possess an actualizing tendency that flourishes under conditions of empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard (Springer, 2023). In Art and Play Therapy, this translates into a non-directive stance in which the child leads the session and meaning is co-constructed rather than imposed. Sweeney and Landreth (2022) reaffirm that the therapeutic relationship remains the primary mechanism of change within child-centred play therapy.

Empirical support for humanistic approaches remains strong. Bratton et al. (2021) report significant positive outcomes in behavioural and emotional functioning across diverse populations. Ray et al. (2022) further highlight the centrality of relational attunement in promoting therapeutic progress. These findings align with Rose and Johnson's (2022) argument that humanistic principles remain relevant in contemporary child therapy, particularly for fostering emotional safety. In art therapy, the humanistic approach prioritises process over product. Malchiodi (2022) emphasises that the creative act itself can facilitate emotional integration without interpretive intrusion. The therapist reflects feelings and validates experience rather than assigning symbolic meaning. This stance protects child agency and reduces the risk of misinterpretation (Springer, 2023).

Nevertheless, theoretical debate persists regarding the sufficiency of non-directive approaches. Dionne and Martini (2022) suggest that children with severe trauma histories may benefit from more structured interventions that incorporate regulation strategies. Furthermore, critics argue that the humanistic emphasis on individual autonomy may reflect Western individualistic values. Therapists must thus adapt person-centered principles to align with cultural norms. Another tension concerns the potential minimisation of pathology. While humanistic frameworks resist deficit-based labels, there is a risk that severe psychopathology may require more directive or integrative approaches. Contemporary practice increasingly blends

humanistic attunement with attachment-informed or trauma-informed strategies. Despite these debates, the humanistic framework offers a deeply respectful and empowering model of child engagement. Its emphasis on empathy and relational presence remains foundational across theoretical orientations.

### **1.3. The Postmodern Framework: Narrative, Power, and Social Construction**

Postmodern therapy arises from social constructionism and critical theory. It challenges universal truths and emphasises that identity and meaning are shaped through language and discourse (Alter-Muri & Klein, 2024). Narrative therapy, associated with White and Epston, conceptualises problems as separate from persons and invites re-authoring of preferred stories. Within Art and Play Therapy, postmodern approaches use creative mediums to externalize and reconstruct narratives. Drawing the “problem monster” or creating resilience maps enables children to position themselves as agents rather than victims. White and Morgan (2022) describe evolving narrative practices that emphasise collaboration and cultural responsiveness. Denborough (2021) argues that collective narrative practices are particularly powerful in communities affected by trauma or marginalisation. By challenging dominant deficit narratives, children and families can reclaim identity and agency. This orientation aligns with contemporary concerns regarding stigma and social injustice.

The postmodern framework shifts the locus of distress from intrapsychic conflict to relational and societal discourse. It foregrounds power dynamics and invites therapists to examine their own positionality. In diverse family contexts, this stance can prevent pathologization of culturally normative behaviors. However, critics question whether postmodern approaches sufficiently address biological and developmental processes. Some argue that an exclusive focus on narrative may overlook neurobiological constraints or attachment disruptions. Gerge and Pedersen (2022) note that trauma-informed creative therapies must integrate embodied and relational dimensions alongside narrative reconstruction. While externalizing conversations empowers children, therapists must remain attentive to risk and protective responsibilities. Relativism cannot supersede child protection obligations. Nonetheless, postmodern frameworks contribute significantly to culturally responsive and anti-oppressive practice. By emphasizing collaboration and contextual meaning, they expand the scope of child therapy beyond intrapsychic models.

### **1.4 Integrative and Pluralistic Debates**

Contemporary psychotherapy increasingly advocates pluralistic integration. Cooper and McLeod (2021) argue that no single theoretical model can fully capture the complexity of human experience. Instead, therapists should draw flexibly from multiple frameworks while remaining theoretically coherent. In practice, integration may involve beginning with humanistic attunement to establish safety, incorporating psychodynamic exploration of attachment themes, and utilising narrative techniques to reconstruct identity. Yates and Grey (2021) demonstrate that integrating attachment and narrative approaches can enhance resilience outcomes. Adlerian play therapy developments further illustrate integrative possibilities. Kottman and Meany-Walen (2023) show how social interest and relational belonging can be fostered through structured play techniques that blend humanistic encouragement with systemic awareness. Trauma-informed creative arts therapies represent another integrative direction. Malchiodi (2022) and Gerge and Pedersen (2022) emphasise safety, embodiment, and relational repair across theoretical orientations. Such approaches draw

simultaneously on attachment theory, humanistic empathy, and narrative empowerment. The theoretical debate, therefore, shifts from competition to complementarity. Psychodynamic depth offers insight into unconscious relational patterns. Humanistic presence ensures relational safety. Postmodern narrative work fosters agency and cultural responsiveness. Each framework addresses dimensions of experience that the others may overlook.

### **1.5 Cultural and Ethical Considerations**

Cultural humility is central across all frameworks. Symbolic meaning in art is culturally embedded. Psychodynamic interpretation must avoid imposing Western symbolism. Humanistic therapy must recognise collectivist identities. Postmodern approaches must balance empowerment with safeguarding. Campbell et al. (2023) emphasise that attachment patterns manifest differently across cultural contexts. Thus, culturally informed assessment is essential. Similarly, Rose and Johnson (2022) argue that person-centred principles must be adapted rather than universalised. Ethically, therapists must maintain reflective supervision and awareness of power dynamics. Postmodern frameworks highlight discourse and power, yet all approaches require vigilance against cultural bias. Trauma-informed principles provide a shared ethical foundation, prioritising safety, empowerment, and collaboration (Malchiodi, 2022).

### **2. Conclusion**

Psychodynamic, humanistic, and postmodern frameworks each offer indispensable yet partial perspectives within Art and Play Therapy. Psychodynamic approaches provide a deep understanding of unconscious processes and attachment dynamics. Humanistic traditions foreground empathy, authenticity, and relational safety. Postmodern frameworks emphasise narrative agency, power awareness, and cultural responsiveness. Contemporary scholarship supports a pluralistic and integrative stance. Rather than adhering rigidly to theoretical purity, effective practice requires critical engagement with multiple paradigms. In diverse family contexts marked by relational complexity and social inequality, theoretical flexibility grounded in empirical evidence and cultural humility offers the most ethically responsible path. Art and Play Therapy thus become relational spaces in which attachment, agency, narrative, and creativity converge to support children's emotional and developmental well-being.

### **References**

- Alter-Muri, S., & Klein, L. (2024). Dissolving the boundaries: Postmodern art and art therapy. *American Art Therapy Association*.
- Bratton, S. C., Ray, D. C., Rhine, T., & Jones, L. (2021). The efficacy of child-centered play therapy: A meta-analytic review of treatment outcomes. *International Journal of Play Therapy, 30*(2), 65–80.
- Campbell, C., Allison, E., & Fonagy, P. (2023). Attachment-informed approaches in child and adolescent psychotherapy: Recent advances and clinical implications. *Journal of Child Psychotherapy, 49*(1), 3–22.
- Cooper, M., & McLeod, J. (2021). *Pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Denborough, D. (2021). *Collective narrative practice*. Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Dionne, M., & Martini, T. (2022). Play therapy and socio-emotional development: Contemporary perspectives. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 39*(4), 453–468.

- Fonagy, P., Campbell, C., Constantinou, M., Higgitt, A., Allison, E., & Luyten, P. (2022). Mentalization-based treatment for children and families. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 63(4), 421–439.
- Gerge, A., & Pedersen, I. N. (2022). Creative arts therapies and trauma: Integration, embodiment and relational repair. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 842514.
- Kottman, T., & Meany-Walen, K. (2023). Adlerian play therapy: Contemporary developments and evidence. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 32(1), 15–28.
- Malchiodi, C. A. (2022). *Trauma-informed art therapy and creative arts interventions with children and adolescents*. Guilford Press.
- Midgley, N., Ensink, K., Lindqvist, K., Malberg, N., & Muller, N. (2021). *Child psychotherapy and research*. Routledge.
- Ray, D. C., McCullough, L., & Bratton, S. C. (2022). Advances in play therapy research. *Psychotherapy Research*, 32(3), 345–360.
- Ribeiro, A. P., Gonçalves, M. M., & Salvatore, S. (2023). Cultural considerations in psychodynamic psychotherapy. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 118742.
- Rose, R., & Johnson, A. (2022). Humanistic therapy with children. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 22(3), 514–523.
- Springer. (2023). Humanistic therapy for young people: *Client-perceived mechanisms of change*. SpringerLink.
- Sweeney, D. S., & Landreth, G. L. (2022). Theoretical foundations of child-centred play therapy. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 31(4), 185–198.
- White, M., & Morgan, A. (2022). Narrative therapy with children and families. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 44(2), 211–227.
- Xie, Y., & Sun, X. (2025). An overview of the integration and development trends between arts and psychotherapy. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, Article 1617700.
- Yates, T. M., & Grey, I. (2021). Resilience and relational repair in child psychotherapy. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 26(4), 1087–1102.