

Identity, Performativity and Social Action: Community theatre among refugees.

Outline of the Project:

Rationale: Displacement, migration, resettlement and the major traumas these usually involve deeply affect the ways refugees view themselves (Hayter, 2000). The daily struggle to survive and integrate into their new social environment often leaves them no space to reflect on their experiences. In this context, conventional interviews often produce little more than stereotypical narratives. Our research is methodologically innovative in using performative theatrical techniques (*Playback* and *Forum Theatre*) instead: refugee audiences will be narrating and performing personal stories, focusing on crucial moments in their lives since coming to Britain, particularly highlighting conflicts between constructions of self, community and society, as well as exploring alternative strategies for social action.

Theoretical and conceptual background: Ever since the works of Mead (1967) and Goffman (1958), the reflective and performative nature of identity construction has been at the centre of theoretical thinking on identities. Furthermore, postcolonial adaptations of Frantz Fanon's use of the reflective relations of Master/Slave (1995), Jacques Lacan's (1977) emphasis on 'mirroring' for the constitution of the self and Judith Butler's (1990; 1993) use of the concept of performativity from linguistic speech-act theory have firmly anchored this approach in most contemporary theorizations of identity (Hall 1996, Bell 1999).

The proposed research aims to observe the narrative, reflective and performative moments involved in the constitution of identities in everyday life in the theatrical space itself. By doing so, it will blur the boundaries between the real, the fantastic and the playful in order to provide a safe and non-threatening environment for exploring processes of identity-construction. In this environment participants will be able to explore and enact particular moments of their lives and those of other people in the audience. Identities are stories that people tell about their lives and who they are (Martin, 1995), and these stories – contested and multiplex, depending on time and context – are continuously evolving, shifting and borrowing from more than one source of collective identity. Identities can never, moreover, be reduced to and/or confused with social positionings, on the one hand, or political value systems or projects, on the other hand, although these are interrelated (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Participants invest within the community setting and in front of the 'others' (actors/facilitators) stories based on memories with emotional material. Watching others re-enacting one's story creates a reflective distance between the tellers and their stories. Evaluation sessions and interviews can help the cognitive processes of exploration and clarification of 'what really happened in the session'. Re-visiting their stories and trying out other options could lead to personal change and growth (Sallas 1993; Boal 1998). Of special importance would be the ways the 'others' (actors and facilitator) are perceived and integrated into the participants' narratives (Pajaczkowska and Young 1992).

Hill & Wilson (2003) differentiate between 'identity politics' in which notions of identity and culture are used for explicit political gains and 'politics of identity' in which people choose or are forced to interact with other people within institutions and

collectivities at least partly on the basis of their shared or divergent notions of identity. One of the questions we would like to explore is to what extent the ‘politics of identity’ is being transformed and authorized in the community organizations in which the theatre performances will take place into ‘identity politics’ which stabilize, if not reify, meanings and boundaries of identities. More broadly, and probably more importantly, we are interested in observing the general intersection and interplay between discourses of identity, culture and power as they are reflected within the theatre settings and as constructed within the variety of social, public and institutional spaces in which the experiences narrated by the audiences have taken place.

Our interest in the ‘politics of identity’, however, is just one aspect of our interest in people’s ‘politics of belonging’ (Yuval-Davis, 2003). The participatory dimension of citizenship and the emotional dimension of solidarity and cohesion are the other major planks that constitute these politics. It is important to emphasize in this context, however, that people’s membership in collectivities is multi-layered and relates to sub-, cross- and supra-state collectivities as well as national (Hall & Held, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 1997; 1999) and that while refugees and asylum-seekers might be stripped of their rights and legally become the Agambian (1998) ‘bare life’, their politics of belonging is often richer than that of ‘normal’ citizens.

It is for this reason that we consider it so important to observe and analyse the politics of belonging of refugees in London as they are enacted in the community theatre in the refugee centres that take part in the research project.

Key Questions:

- To examine the ways the use of experimental community theatre techniques can add to theorizations of identity, especially those that emphasize the performativity of identity, and the links between identity and patterns of social action
- To explore the ways identities and modes of belonging are constructed, reflected upon, communicated and authorized in the community setting
- To investigate the ways particular notions of conflict and/or cohesion between self, community, society and the state are being enacted in practices of everyday life
- To identify what practices and policies towards refugees can be pinpointed as models of good practice, and to inform community and state agencies about them
- To demonstrate the use of community theatrical techniques as alternative or complementary social research methods for investigating experiences and identity constructions among refugees and other social groupings.

Approach:

Research Methodology:

A series of theatrical events which focus on the refugees’ lives since coming to London and their encounters with local voluntary, statutory and governmental agencies are going to be realised. In Playback Theatre, members of the audience tell

stories based on their own experiences and reflections that are then 'played back' to them by actors on stage. Forum Theatre allows both actors and audience members to change the course of the dramatic action, to 'step in' and to suggest and explore alternative behaviour. The theatrical events will be followed by evaluative sessions and semi-structured interviews with a sample of the audience.

If permission by the audience is granted, the theatre performances will be videoed. Otherwise they will be audio recorded, as will be the follow-up interviews. Interpreters will always be present.

Our method of discourse analysis will broadly follow that of Wetherell and Potter (1992) and will focus on the interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas and institutionalized intelligibility found in the various discourses on identity, community and British society that emerged in our analysis, as well as particular constructions of boundaries and belonging/s.

On a different level of analysis we shall register all instances of interaction between the subjects and agents of community, statutory and state organizations and highlight moments of good practice as they emerged in our collected data.

Outcomes:

- Our work will increase understanding of how refugees who come to London experience their new environment through a new body of knowledge. It will highlight instances of social inclusion and exclusion and the ways legislation and local and national government policy affects and constructs the everyday lives of refugees.
- It will investigate models of good practice for professionals working with refugees, knowledge and understanding of which will be useful to the work of a wide range of scholars, community activists, development workers, civil servants and policy makers.
- It will introduce into the context of social science for the first time the theatrical techniques used in our work as a new methodological tool that could be used in a wide variety of circumstances.
- Together with the other research projects of the overall research programme, our work will contribute to theoretical debates on *Identities and Social Action*. It will especially add a new perspective on the debate on the performativity of identity constructions as well as on the relationships between politics of identity and politics of belonging.

Further Information: The project will run from April 2005 to March 2008. The organisations involved so far are Social Action of Health, RAMP (Renewal Refugee and Migrant Project), Shpresa programme (Kosovo Group), Halkevi and KCC(Turkish, Kurdish centres) SWAN (Somali women's Advice Network) and Shoreditch Trust peer education group(mixed refugee and migrant group).