

Dear Stephen,

Many thanks for sending the link. What a great session.

I've placed some quick comments for all below - such a pity I couldn't be there in person - the tyranny of distance and time combined...

### Observations

First of all I'd like to thank and congratulate Stephen on establishing this very stimulating symposium route for furthering EDT and the emancipatory goals of CED and kindly inviting me to participate. I'd also like to congratulate all of the participants on your wonderful and very diverse projects.

There is so much I'd like to talk about but I am going to try and limit my comments to what seemed (to me at least) to be some of the recurrent questions and key themes of the discussions. The discussants have also added much valuable insight - so I'm just seeking to add a little here and there and I hope these few hastily penned notes will be of interest to you.

For me it was interesting to see drama therapy being used in the exploration of themes and social concerns in ageing by Dr Lee. Fascinating to see the training aspect of this overall approach. I have previously written about all drama having therapeutic elements or therapeutic potential and have discussed this briefly with Stephen. One of the powers of drama (drama as a vehicle of exploration and play with children *re Heathcoat and Bolton*) is the notion of vicarious experience and exploration which seems to have huge potential when examining social and cultural issues. Particularly apt in examining attitudes towards aging or end of life scenarios in cultures and societies, I suspect.

For a long time there has been tension between the worlds of theatre (as an art form or commercial activity) and the notion of theatre being a therapeutic or political vehicle. It revolves around aesthetic understandings, perceptions and desires. I will come back to this in more detail later. But Chloe's EDT project with Left Behind Children is fascinating and its use of ancient traditional theatre is wonderful - but also flags a question or two around how directors potentially impose an aesthetic upon the shape of the informants' stories and how this might take control away from them. I think Chloe mentions being at RCSSD in London which has a long tradition of training its stage actors to the aesthetic expectations of traditional theatre (although it might have changed since I attended some decades ago!) I am wondering how applying a traditional aesthetic performance form and expectations (even Shakespearean or traditional Chinese) advances an informants' narratives?

Jessica's really important theoretical analysis and examination of *authentic collaboration* takes my concerns with the addition of traditional artistic forms to an ethnodrama piece (as described by Chloe) a little further. Where do the lines defining informant collaboration begin and end and where do power relations implicitly impose director driven shape, form, content and interpretation on a performance and its audiences' understanding?

In most of our early critical ethno drama projects I was concerned that informants were made vulnerable by also being required to perform to audiences. Mostly our informants were in rehab or were persons with schizophrenia who wanted and needed anonymity. They were 'in the room' - to borrow Jessica's phrase - but they did not perform on stage. They worked with the actors who were telling their collective stories during rehearsal sessions that were closed to others. Their immediate health team members were also in the room - to give support but there were also sessions where informants would be able to give their data to researchers/nurses/peers or friends of their own choosing. Yes, still potential for power relationships to have influence over the telling of their stories - but (hopefully) a reduced potential.

That real concern over the cost to informants of telling their stories in the research was ever present. The protocols of standard ethnographic practice though entailed informant anonymity at all times. This is different and more of an issue when informants are telling their own stories on stage. On one hand they may have more control of the narrative as they are the ones giving it but they (potentially) as non professional performers are more reliant upon a director's views and instructions than if they were simply off stage validating the representations that were being made on their behalf. That is why this notion of achieving 'authentic collaboration' is so important in EDT. Irrespective, there is clearly more therapeutic potential in informants performing than not.

As for 'who is in the room' and 'who is not' Eric touched upon this in respect to his comments on audiences and aesthetics. The first series of Critical Ethno Drama projects had large audiences. We had 'closed' or 'informed audience' performances with invited health, social services, medical research and health consumer groups, care-givers and informants who debated the issues raised at the end of each show. These data collection sessions were used to adjust (inform) the performance script where required. Informed audience performances were followed with performances to general (largely student and general public) audiences. Following Dario Fo's approach, post performance audience discussions were an absolute given. Health professionals were always on hand in case the performances raised any concerning issues for anyone in our audiences. The emotional safety of everyone involved- including our audiences- had to be foremost in our minds.

For me, who is in the room (particularly the audience) is a central question. We sought to inform, challenge and change the (possibly uninformed) perceptions of people who had little or no direct knowledge or experience of the health circumstances we were representing. Because of the therapeutic intentions of EDT the route towards performance is a little different but the potential is clearly the same. The drive towards producing emancipatory outcomes is fundamental. However, both Habermas and Alberoni note that there is no guarantee that those seeking emancipation will achieve it or where emancipation, once precipitated, will take you. I've often been troubled by that. Enlightenment and emancipation are not necessarily comfortable end destinations. None-the-less, improving/educating broader understandings of the lives of others has to also be a form of worthwhile emancipatory action.

Simon's issue around utilising pre-selected themes seems to be substantially off-set if participants and other agencies agree that the themes are important and that they can be worked into a script

without making informants' preferred themes subordinate. This could be one way of limiting influence. I was very taken with Simon's rich array of techniques and approaches to his project and again its connection to that hard question of authentic collaboration. Equally, Anat's questions around who/what and how informants might be inhibited through the presence and understanding of others in the room is part of this critical power relationship. And I loved your example of the boy role playing his teacher as the provider of both good food and imprisonment. Perhaps early signs of resistance in his 'acting out'...

Power relations have consistently been an issue of concern throughout these presentations. And with Valerie's poetic - creative space and the golden island I now return to the elephant in the corner of the room - the aesthetic!

I have previously written that we need to develop acceptance of a different aesthetic in order to be able to digest and fully comprehend the fractured and fracturing narratives of ethno-drama and health theatre for what they are - the explanations of other people's lived experiences.

The lives and stories we derive from ethnography are often episodic, patch-work and incomplete. The temptation to round off storylines, introduce dramatic moments, add pathos and laud the ethos of the writer and director are powerful influences. We are shaped by our cultural traditions, artistic tendencies (and training in the performing arts) to seek to make beautiful and poignant imagery and representations. And audiences actually expect performances to do this. Often informants also wish to make 'rounded stories' similar to those forms they recognise from popular culture and media.

- The story telling urge to 'embellish and improve' a narrative for the sake of the audience and our own aesthetic satisfaction is very compelling.
- For ethnodrama projects to be authentic (and accepted as valid research) they need to remain true to the informants' contributions/data. After all, it is their stories and lives we seek to explain.

I always try to start by asking informants *'what would you like to say to young people or those who don't know anything about living with the impacts of alcoholism or brain injury or depression or unemployment or physical disability or sexual assault etc, etc, etc about your lives?'* Their initial explanations then drive the process. I have found that asking for advice from informants is a fundamental first step in giving them authority.

Essentially in respect to this mode of research I see it in the following way:

Sociology is explanation.

Ethnographically derived theatre is validated interpretation and explanation.

- Consistently validating the script/scenarios as authentic, credible and cogent representations of informants' lives doesn't rule out including aesthetic considerations but it does place some constraints upon our desire to be artistic.

- Once a performance claiming to be authentic research is perceived to be *theatrical artifice* its power to emancipate is reduced. Its truth is no longer evident.

Finally, Pam's approach to establishing a community centre engaging with personal care, growth and engagement is stunning. It has phenomenal potential to create positive change through its wide array of strategies - not the least being EDT and more traditional drama therapy. Inherently it could be a lighthouse project for social community development. A model for collective change in other communities.

OK. I will stop at this point but am happy to discuss further if required.

Thank you all for your enjoyable presentations. May I again congratulate you all on your projects and wish you every success in moving forwards!

Regards,

Jim