TRANSLATION BETWEEN ACADEMIC RESEARCH, COMMUNITY AND PRACTICE: A FORUM THEATRE PROCESS

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ABSTRACT
On 6 February 2008, a deliberative theatre experiment was held at the National Archives of Quebec. Inspired by the democratic virtues of public deliberation but preoccupied with its blind spots, Forum Theatre was used to initiate discussion about the social tensions between the homeless and other dwellers of public space in downtown Montreal. Using Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, we hoped to emphasize the narratives of the homeless in these neighbourhood forums to engage a variety of stakeholders in a reflexive debate on normative conceptions of public space which tend to reproduce the marginalization of the homeless by reinforcing the denial of recognition they face. Drawing from Michel Callon’s Sociology of Translation (1986) as an analytical model, we argue that our research process was riddled with blind spots as it did not explicitly identify and negotiate its ‘obligatory passage points’. This undermined its co-constructive aims as well as its deconstructive outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Forum Theatre, homelessness, deliberation, translation, recognition

THE GENESIS OF THE PROJECT
A joint effort between academic research and Applied Theatre was initiated to explore Forum Theatre as a dialogical medium between a small group of homeless participants and other urban dwellers. This project involved twenty two weekly two hour workshops, a Forum Theatre amongst homeless peers’ midway through the process to validate and/or

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modify the content of the play, and a final Forum Theatre including a wider audience. The project rallied the participation of a non-profit artistic group that included our project in the programming of their yearly weeklong artistic public event\(^2\) targeting the homeless and a neighbourhood coalition that held a Forum Theatre event involving downtown Montreal stakeholders to discuss cohabitation issues in that area. This coalition included residents, business owners, municipal and community organization representatives, scholars from several Montreal universities and from research groups, and healthcare workers.

This project - initiated by the researcher - was predicated on close collaboration amongst the researcher, the Forum Theatre practitioner and his colleague, and the homeless participants. It aimed at cross-fertilization amongst theory, practice and action.

One of the homeless participants – a sounding board from the very inception of this project - had considerable firsthand knowledge of the homeless milieu in downtown Montreal. He also had a significant stake in reclaiming the status of the homeless as legitimate citizens.

This research aimed at restoring the dignity of the homeless participants by focusing on their narratives of oppression. They are on the front lines in keeping public space public in the absence of a private space to call their own, and in the push toward gentrification in many urban settings (Mitchell, 2003).

Indeed, Montreal’s downtown area is fertile ground for conflict. The right to the city in this neighbourhood is waged between a student population; affluent residents; tourists attracted by the numerous cultural happenings and by Montreal’s red light district; and urban promoters and planners pushing for the gentrification of this area, where a significant proportion of single parent households and welfare beneficiaries live. Amidst this cacophony, downtown Montreal is a rallying point for street youth and other indigent populations for whom its hustle and bustle provides them with survival opportunities like squeegeeing and panhandling. They are also drawn by community resources and illicit activity which surrounds the drug trade.

The relocation project of a controversial non-profit organization in the heart of Sainte-Catherine Street - a main commercial avenue - is a case in point. This organization distributes safe material for intravenous drug users and inhalable drug users. Its relocation - rejected by many - led to a neighbourhood coalition\(^3\) to mitigate the tensions between the various stakeholders by initiating public forums where they could voice their concerns.

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\(^2\) In this yearly event the homeless take center stage before their domiciled neighbours and enjoy food and warm tents, as well as several creative happenings designed to deconstruct common representations of homelessness.

\(^3\) This coalition agreed to participate in this project
However, when it comes to cohabitation the homeless are rarely considered legitimate interlocutors. We were able to observe this when we were hired by this coalition to explore underground cultures in downtown Montreal. This investigation took place as city officials were implementing a cultural policy for this city, and shortly before we began the action research discussed here.

During a public forum addressing the strengths and weaknesses of this downtown neighbourhood, a homeless participant objected when a police officer blamed the presence of Native homeless people in a park for the increase of incivilities: ‘I don’t know what’s more uncivil: sleeping in a park or being kicked awake by police officers!’ he cried. While the police officer’s comments were included in the minutes of this event, his objection was not. This omission prompted this research project as it illustrated the lack of epistemological authority of the homeless in these settings.

While the high concentration of homelessness in this area is a recurring theme, homeless people themselves are seldom seen or heard during these forums. When they intervene their comments are deemed too emotional and incoherent to be taken seriously. Consequently, the homeless - commonly considered mentally ill or drug-addicted ‘colonisers’ of public space - seldom contribute to the socially constructed definitions of urban cohabitation whereby rules of engagement between urban dwellers are discussed. Beyond reifying their pariah status, their voicelessness in these debates narrows the potentialities of the city as a space of encounter from which emerges an inclusive and diversified public sphere.

The creative workshops exploring the experiences in public space of a small group of homeless participants followed several meetings with the Forum Theatre practitioner to establish the *modus operandi* and discuss the research protocol; meetings with the two other neighbourhood partners; and several informal visits in two homeless gathering places to mobilize homeless participants.

These workshops combined games and exercises typical of actor workshops, discussions concerning the homeless participants’ relational experiences in downtown Montreal, and improvised simulations of the situations discussed. By the seventh workshop time was mostly invested in learning lines from a play written by the practitioner’s colleague, and executing staging instructions. The written play aimed at reducing potential insecurities amongst the homeless participants, the practitioners and the researcher as it provided a safety net. As it was later stressed in the researcher’s journal, by putting words in their mouths, this choice undermined the participants’ ownership of this experience (Meyer & Fels, 2013).

We will review this process by drawing on Callon’s translation model (1986). First, let us explain our theoretical underpinnings.
Theoretical Backdrop

This research asserts the link between the very ‘publicness’ of public space and the inclusion of the ‘Other’ as a legitimate stakeholder in spaces where urban co-habitation and the common good are discussed. We draw from Nancy Fraser (1992) who argues that the cultural ethos of marginal groups is not only devalued but deemed inappropriate in deliberative settings, thereby undermining their ability to formulate public claims around this ‘common good’. Accordingly, Participative Parity is undermined. Building on Fraser’s argument, Payet and Laforge (2008) go further by focusing on specific features in discursive settings which are more or less conducive to the emergence of the Voices of the less powerful considered here as Weak Actors.

The concept of Voice in Payet and Laforge’s work (2008) goes well beyond being heard in public discursive arenas: it also includes the Weak Actor’s ability to influence the standards of discussion in such settings in order to democratise knowledge on the ‘common good’. In that sense, while marginalized actors are understood as subordinate, they do possess agency as ‘actors’ in Payet and Laforge’s framework thereby going beyond Fraser’s dominate-subordinate dyad. This allows us to consider their experiences as active agents rather than as passive subjects of a dominant culture.

Theatre of the Oppressed seemed promising as it potentially provides an innovative means of discussing public issues, where all participants - as theatre neophytes - can exchange on a more even keel, thereby enhancing Participative Parity in Fraser’s terms (1992). Furthermore, focusing on the Voices of the homeless as Weak Actors would enhance their ability to establish the tone of discussion and perhaps influence the standards of discussion in public forums, following Payet and Laforge’s framework (2008).

Our findings show that these potentialities were confronted to several hurdles leading to a gap between research aims and how the process actually unfolded. Despite two attempts to be heard during the last stage of this process, the homeless participants were rendered voiceless. We will demonstrate that this experience faced significant challenges related to the translation between research, applied theatre practice, the homeless participants, and downtown stakeholders both homeless and domiciled.

An Action Research Couched in Forum Theatre

Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (1979) was developed in Brazil during the dictatorship. Inspired by Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 2000), it was designed to empower disenfranchised populations through an organic process in which participants claim ownership of their experiences by unravelling their underlying power struggles. Drawing on Marxist theory, Boal conceived his Forum Theatre model as reflexive praxis which transgresses the actor-spectator divide through the figure of the Joker. Beyond Master of Ceremonies or Stage Director, the Joker encourages participants to creatively and critically explore their social condition during the workshops and events. He does this by activating spectators and stage actors through the concept of ‘Spect-actor’, where audience members replace the protagonist in order to overcome his oppression. This Boalian model aims at fostering a critical projection in the role of the protagonist.
rather than being lulled by an Aristotelian catharsis which reinforces the status quo (Boal, 1979).

We had worked with the practitioner as co-facilitator in one of his Forum Theatre projects several years before this research began. In this project we observed how this empowering approach emphasized the experiences of disenfranchised youth. It also solicited participation from other stakeholders: local city authorities, community workers and neighbours, all of which were invited to participate in a Forum Theatre event following previous ones only amongst youth. This experience inspired the Theatre of the Oppressed reading chosen for our action research project.

In short, what drew us to Boal’s model was its emphasis on the voices and empowerment of the oppressed as well as its reflexive features for homeless and domiciled dwellers alike. The former could potentially tap into their own sense of agency as *Weak Actors*, whereas the latter could uncover their internalized privilege (Weinblatt and Harrison, 2011) and their own oppression as ‘powerless observers’ of the plight of their homeless neighbours thereby deconstructing the oppressed-oppressor divide (Diamond, 2007).

Moreover, by instigating a public forum grounded on theatrical representations of our homeless group, we hoped to foster critical deconstruction of normative conceptions of the public domain as a transitory space between home, work and play, a space centered on the city as a consumable good (Lefebvre, 1972). Within this framework, visible homelessness is often correlated with delinquent behavior and poor individual *choices*, rather than being a manifestation of a delinquent State unable or unwilling to provide affordable housing.

The aim was not to *solve* homelessness. Instead, by dramatizing the subjective narratives of our group of homeless participants and engaging the audience in a theatrical dialogue through character replacements, we hoped to creatively challenge the discursive practice of public forums where communicational codes are often established and policed by those who possess valued symbolic capital. Forum Theatre was solicited to challenge a reading of public space as ordered and uncontested, by enhancing the capacity of the homeless participants, to be heard and seen in a different light: not as victims or nuisances but as legitimate members of the ‘public’.

This project involved prolonged rather than punctual participation-collaboration from both practitioner and the homeless group we mobilized as is the case with action research. Yet, this particular action research project was proposed by the researcher unlike some action research projects whereby the initiative rests on community stakeholders and/or practitioners.

As a neophyte of Forum Theatre our role as researcher was to document this whole process via participant-observation during the workshops and direct observation during the events; the practitioner *joked* the twenty two workshops, the preliminary event amongst other homeless peers, and the final event. However, because of the previous working relationship between the practitioner and the researcher, the latter’s role often
moved from that of participant-observer to that of co-facilitator in the workshops. This led to a fragile balance during the creative process which impacted on the outcome. Our own theoretical stance and social activism as researcher underscored this process with real risks of its colonisation by research imperatives as was later stressed by the practitioner. We will see that the very aims of this research - established mostly by the researcher - were disavowed by the other actors involved.

Homeless participation was on a volunteer basis following informed consent. Each was provided with a small financial compensation and a snack at each workshop to enhance their fidelity and foster a convivial climate. They either lacked a stable address at the time of the research or had been recently homeless for at least two years. Despite financial compensation we lost and gained a few players along the way.

Apart from fleeting informal discussions before or after the workshops between the researcher and the practitioner, one of which involving the key homeless participant, no systematic feedback mechanism was implemented. A journal was consistently held by the researcher and less consistently by the practitioner. The two events were videotaped and later transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The journal fueled the content of the play as notes between the researcher and practitioner were exchanged in the beginning of the process. While some mutual concerns emerged in these exchanges, they were never discussed thoroughly. Midway into the process, when the play had been written, notes were provided strictly by the researcher thereby likening this intended co-constructive process to an exchange of services between practitioner and researcher. It is against this backdrop that the space of translation between research-practice and homeless participants was undermined.

**Sociology of Translation as an Analytical Model**

Michel Callon’s Sociology of Translation (1986) provides insight for understanding the space between practice and research. It uncovers the complexities and power relations which underscore the collaborative process, scrutinizing its every step. This model sheds light on the hidden spaces of in-between where tensions between research and action, theory and practice and social engagement intertwine to expose the ambiguities of respective roles and their wider context.

Callon’s 1986 study on the domestication of the scallops and fisherman of St Brieuc Bay in France includes the actions of humans and nonhumans when investigating the decline of the scallop population in St Brieuc Bay and the power relations between researchers, fisherman, scallops and their larvae. Callon (1996) applies his sociology of translation to a study initiated by three biologists who developed an anchoring device to address the declining scallop population in St Brieuc Bay. It required the active adherence of the fishermen in this region. His account uncovers the complexities of the collaborative process as each research partner is embedded in wider social structures which can impede or enhance its intended results.
His framework identifies four stages of translation in which researchers attempt to impose their definition of the decreasing scallop population to their interlocutors. First, *problematisation* where researchers seek to become indispensable to their partners by defining the problem they face and the ‘obligatory passage points’ to overcome them. Second, *interressement* whereby the respective roles proposed in the research program are identified and negotiated. Third, *enrolment* where the interrelations between each of the roles are defined and where the roles are stabilised. Finally, *mobilisation* where researchers seek to ensure that the research partners are legitimate representatives of their particular community to optimize its participation. The author demonstrates how these stages are ongoing rather than finite moments in the research process. It may indeed fail as it involves constant negotiation, not to mention possible dissent.

**PROBLEMATISATION**

As in our research, Callon’s study describes a process initiated by academe. Yet our research programme was submitted to the practitioner and the key homeless participant before it was finalised with our scientific peers. Contrary to Callon’s *problematisation* stage where the researchers seek to become indispensable to their partners by imposing their definition of the problem, we aimed at a joint definition of the research framework amongst all the partners. This initial negotiation was couched in an effort to render each partner reciprocally indispensable as it was designed to foster a community of inquiry providing concrete input on their part.

The key homeless participant was closely involved in our thought process through several informal discussions prior to the final version of our protocol, enhancing his adherence during the *problematisation* phase. However, the practitioner had very little to say when we submitted our protocol: he inquired about our proposed theoretical backdrop and explained that he needed to simplify the terms used in the protocol and soften its activist tone to obtain additional funding. His quasi silence was an ominous sign of the translation hurdles ahead.

His role as Director of this theatre company - guided by funding imperatives - was premised on showing tangible impacts of his mediation work. The researcher’s role, beyond generating useful and transferable knowledge to the community, emphasized the creation of a discursive arena established by narratives of the homeless to challenge exclusionary conceptions of public space. Each partner, then, was predisposed according to wider implicit expectations.

While the homeless partner was motivated by the possibility of reclaiming his legitimacy as a homeless activist, the practitioner was not at all convinced of the link between the denial of recognition of the homeless in public space and their lack of epistemological authority in public forums where tensions in public space are discussed. His reservations emerged after the final event, when he claimed that the researcher’s theoretical perspective dominated the process: ‘It seemed to me that you were intent on proving your own thesis.’ (Practitioner, email exchange with the researcher). Thus, our critical interventions during the workshops were received by him as stifling the creative process. They also challenged
how he defined his specific role as *Joker*: a mediator focused on the resolution of problems rather than on how these problems are defined.

When faced with the antagonistic relational experiences in public space adamantly described by the homeless group, he related this acrimonious tone to what he considered a strong influence exercised by the researcher and the key homeless participant on the group: ‘It’s almost as if we [the group] were acting according to your [Carl and the researcher] expectations concerning where we *should* go with this process.’ (Practitioner, discussion following the final event). In other words, beyond our interventions, our presence was felt as coercive by the practitioner: a far cry from the intended egalitarian inquiry climate as a foundational principle of PAR.

While the Boalian model of Forum Theatre we chose focuses on the narratives of the oppressed, the practitioner quickly emphasized the antagonists rather than the protagonists as soon as the second workshop, thereby curtailing an exhaustive exploration of their own roles and voices as homeless protagonists and *Weak Actors*. Following our analytical model and the previous statements, this focus could be interpreted as a disavowal of the researcher’s definition of the problem and theoretical stance. In other words, this perception prompted our practitioner to bypass another obligatory passage point of Theatre of the Oppressed in general and of our research program in particular: a rigorous exploration of the experiences of our homeless participants in their own words (Meyers and Fels, 2013).

The *Problematisation* phase also involved defining the identity of each partner. Unfortunately, this process was implicit rather than explicit. For instance, within the small group of homeless participants, the level of investment was quite uneven: only two felt the urgency of being heard while the others moved from passive resignation to total disengagement toward the creative process. This disengagement was superficially discussed following one of the workshops but was not resolved: while the researcher related this disengagement to the disempowering repercussions of a written play, the practitioner related it to an overly cerebral process, each partner caught in their respective habitus thereby widening the rift.

We assumed that our practitioner adhered to the Theatre of the Oppressed model. Beyond the debate over orthodox versus unorthodox Forum Theatre practice, the emphasis on the voices of the antagonists during the workshops and the public forum alike, demonstrates that our assessment of the practitioner’s identity was erroneous.

Moreover, as we later realized, being more accustomed to working with professional actors, the methods used by our practitioner were ill-suited to meet the specific challenges of working with non-actors. Writing a play *for* our group was not conducive to the latter’s ownership of the creative process, thereby undermining another obligatory passage point: creative ownership on the part of the homeless participants in order for them to author their own realities. In fact, writing a play *for* them dispossessed them from their own experiences, as they repeated lines they had not formulated. In their PAR with woman
inmates, Meyers and Fels (2013) emphasize the importance of the latter’s active ownership in the research process to optimize their status as ‘co-agents of change’ (p.308). These concerns are echoed by Taylor (2003) who insists on critical reflexivity through active engagement from participants who define the parameters of an applied theatre process rather than performing instructions.

This situation impacted the practitioner’s propensity, in his role as Joker, to act-out the tool submitted for evaluation, as he was not convinced the group would be able to withstand potential resistance from the audience. Consequently, interventions from the Spect-actors, another obligatory passage point in Forum Theatre where spectators engage with the process through character replacements (generally the protagonists), were not systematically solicited by the Joker turned ‘protector’, as one of our homeless players remarked: ‘It was more a Forum than a Forum Theatre.’ (Serge, evaluation of the event).

The following passage concerning police sweeps denied by a police Chief in the audience illustrates this:

Carl: ‘Since when have these sweeps stopped?!? The day after Thanksgiving this year Sir...there was one the day after Thanksgiving!’
Police Chief: ‘The day after Thanksgiving?!’
Carl: ‘The day after Thanksgiving of this year!!!’ (Pause) Anyway, we won’t take the time to settle this now...
Police Chief: ‘Yeah, yeah... We’ll discuss this later.’ (Shrugging Carl with a wave of his hand)

The Police Chief was not invited by the Joker to engage with the protagonist in a scene. He also suggested that the exclusion depicted in the play was misleading because ‘According to most the exclusion is self-applied by the homeless who choose to drink beer instead of buying food’. Besides the overt refutation of well documented police sweeps this spectator claimed to embody widely shared sentiment about the moral fiber of the homeless. Both went uncontested while the homeless protagonist, standing alone in his claims, was reduced to self-censorship outweighed by the unchallenged epistemological authority of the antagonist.

Clearly, the initial phase of our research was riddled with erroneous assumptions on the identity of the practitioner, the motivations of some of the homeless participants, and with awkward silence between researcher and practitioner. This climate rendered open, transparent discussion remote. While the aforementioned obligatory passage points were explicitly defined with the homeless participants we mobilized and to which they consented, they were never unequivocally negotiated with the practitioner as we assumed he was on board, especially in light of our previous experiences as co-facilitator. His lack of input at this crucial stage led us to believe his practice was grounded in Theatre of the Oppressed and its obligatory passage points.
**INTERRESSEMENT**

At this stage, the identities of the partnership and their interrelationships have not yet been tested. It is at this stage that attempts are made to stabilize these identities. It is also at this stage that each partner can integrate the process by enacting his identity or challenge the process by redefining his identity.

Etymologically, *Interressement* also refers to the notion of ‘interposed’. The identities defined in the initial stage are redefined during this second stage in light of the larger relationships each entity is rooted in as they are likely to interfere directly or indirectly in the collaborative process.

The practitioner was an ex-employee of the neighborhood coalition we partnered with for the final event: ‘I was contaminated by my previous role as coordinator of this coalition as mediator between competing interests while avoiding conflict at all cost.’ (Practitioner, evaluation of the event). Evidently, as the above vignette demonstrates, his previous status conflicted with his capacity as *joker* in a Forum Theatre to personify the theatrical and critical conduit between actors and spectators.

Our experience raises important questions on the interests of each partner. For instance, what was at stake for audience members? Did they even feel the need to better understand the subjective experiences of our group of homeless actors, individuals often defined as nuisances? Were they even inclined to reconsider their own assumptions around public space and who has a right to it? More importantly, would they not challenge their role as oppressor? These questions might explain why the few character replacements concerned the domiciled passer-by depicted as oppressed by over solicitation or as stepping out of the neutral observer stance to mediate tensions between two young beggars and an indignant urbanite, a scene in the play.

The above also speaks to our own reading of Boal’s model and its focus on the protagonist, and sheds light on the practitioner’s uneasiness around this tacit emphasis. Perhaps generating dialogue between audience members as *Spect-actors* and the homeless on stage involved recognizing the former as possible allies rather than as antagonists, by acknowledging their own oppression without obfuscating their internalized privilege as part of the problem (Diamond, 2007; Weinblatt and Harrison, 2011). The three character replacements certainly point in that direction. As Schutzman argues (1994), in the North American context, the pre-eighties Boalian model can be read as dogmatic. It cannot account for what Schutzman defines as *Territories of Oppression*: the oppression of those who are not directly targeted by systemic oppression but still affected by it (p. 40).

Similarly, we assumed that other homeless peers would jump at the chance of participating in this theatrical public forum. Their absence contradicted our supposition. Following Theatre of the Oppressed, it hindered dialogue between the homeless actors and the audience. Without a minimal echo in the audience from homeless peers, experiences in the play were unsurprisingly invalidated in a two-way conversation between the *Joker* and the audience. In his role as ‘Protector’, he was acting as a human shield between the stage and
the audience instead of a dialogical conduit. What unfolded during this event and the process speaks to foundational PAR principles of power and ownership, raising significant ethical questions related to the homeless participants as show pieces rather than empowered co-agents of this process.

Beyond referring to these stages of translation as an unpredictable process, these questions uncover the necessary alliances, which lead to actual enrolment.

**Enrolment**

This stage designates ‘...the device by which a set of interrelated roles is defined and attributed to actors who accept them. **Interressement** achieves enrolment if it is successful.’ (Callon, 1986, p. 205). In Callon’s study, enrolling the scallops so they would anchor to the collectors meant negotiating with possible obstacles such as the currents or other parasites which could potentially impede the capture of the larvae.

Likewise, we had not planned on the pressures our practitioner was under from previous associates he faced at the final event. We underestimated the constraining impact and confusion brought on by our previous involvement with the practitioner. It undermined thorough discussions between researcher and practitioner: the former dared not question the latter’s practice oriented toward mediation while the latter dared not challenge the former’s theoretical expertise experienced as a coercive straightjacket.

Much like Callon’s currents impeding the capture of the larvae, we did not adequately assess this ‘white noise’ as a possible obstacle in the practitioner’s role as **Joker** in the final event and throughout the creative process, as well as in our own reflexivity as researcher. While our main homeless partner consented wholeheartedly to this research program ensuring his enrolment, in retrospect this consent was tenuous at best on the part of the practitioner and perhaps on the part of the other homeless participants. Their motivations raise unanswered questions: was their participation prompted by a desire to be heard or as a break from the winter cold and their daily routine? In short, was their participation a mere exchange of services echoing the relationship between the researcher and the practitioner?

**Mobilisation**

While the group of homeless participants was not representative of the larger homeless population in Montreal, their plight in public space is generally shared by their peers, as was confirmed during the validation event. That said, being heard in public forums as legitimate neighbors in order to inform relational issues in public space, was not necessarily understood as a means to eventually overcome denial of recognition. This statement points to a crucial question: who speaks in the name of whom? Our project did not pay sufficient attention to whether or not other homeless peers would actually feel the need to be heard in a public forum setting alongside their domiciled neighbours. While domiciled stakeholders were present, this final stage fell short of actually displacing homeless stakeholders.
CONCLUSION: DISAVOWAL AND DISSENT, A CAUTIONARY TALE

Generally speaking, this experience speaks to tensions and dichotomies which underscore action research. More specifically, Callon’s Sociology of Translation (1979) uncovers the often implicit obstacles deriving from the interstitial spaces between research, practice and community which undermine effective partnership adherence. It also uncovers the complexities of action research itself as it involves competing orientations around social change: each partner often performs his-her role according to prescribed expectations, some conscious, some not. In this case, an unfortunate divide between problem-solving and problem-posing uncovered tensions between theory and action.

In Callon’s account only the first few scallops hatched thanks to the collectors while the fisherman disavowed their representatives by satisfying their immediate desires: fishing the scallops hatched as a result of the protective anchorages instead of patiently awaiting future long-term rewards.

Similarly, our experience tells a story of disavowal and dissent whereby the homeless participants were unwittingly left in limbo, caught between unnamed competing orientations between research and practice. The lack of input from the practitioner at the Problematisation stage rather than being a sign of adherence was no doubt a sign of dissent when faced with what he perceived as potential ‘colonisation’ of his practice by our research goals and the pressures from those neighbourhood stakeholders in the audience he engages with on a continual basis in downtown Montreal.

This dissent was exacerbated in the Interressement stage, where we erroneously defined him as a Boalian practitioner, an identity he implicitly disavowed throughout the process. Foregoing the passage points of Theatre of the Oppressed as we understand them speaks largely to the unexpressed pressures from wider social forces, which seriously undermined his Enrolment in the research program. The methods used unintentionally disempowered the homeless participants pointing to an unforeseen ethical dilemma whereby they were reduced to show pieces rather than partners.

The absence of homeless peers at the last event can possibly be understood as a final disavowal of the means explored to overcome their denial of recognition, and even of the theoretical premise of recognition and inclusive public spaces which guided this project. Homeless populations are perhaps grappling with more urgent survival issues than lofty research goals can ‘translate’.

Problematisation begins as conjecture, which is potentially transformed into mobilization in the process of the different overlapping stages of translation. In our case, problematisation remained at the level of conjecture as mobilisation was partial: domiciled stakeholders were present yet more interested in saving face and expeditiously solving the irritants tied to the unruly presence of the homeless than exchanging with them as equals. Homeless peers did not feel the urge to displace themselves to this public forum event in order to be heard. As such, the last stage of translation was one of disavowal and dissent whereby the
homeless participants were rendered silent after performing their lines, rather than swaying the discursive codes of this deliberative space.

Indeed, apart from the two discursive attempts by two of the homeless participants, without their active ownership of the process and an echo from other homeless peers or domiciled allies in the audience, Participative Parity was undermined. Homelessness as a matter of poor personal choices dominated discussions while the small group of homeless participants endured silently, reifying the very standards of discussion concerning public space and reducing homelessness to individual pathology. In this case, the reductive focus on poor personal choices as an explanation for homelessness is not to be confused with Payet and Laforge’s (2008) Weak Actor concept and the agency it involves: it fails to acknowledge the social forces which limit choice and the skills these Weak Actors develop in the streets via untold survival strategies and innovative ways of occupying public space.

That said, in a later retrospective discussion with some of the homeless participants led by an uninvolved third party, satisfaction of stepping on stage, of gaining momentary confidence and a better understanding of their domiciled interlocutors were mentioned as positive outcomes. At the very least, these findings mitigate any possible harm caused to them and point toward a short-lived sense of empowerment and enhanced reflexivity only to return to the cyclical vicissitudes of the streets.

While our own reading of Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979) was not enacted by the practitioner, the absence of comprehensive discussions hindered our ability to address the wider web of conflicting relationships each was embedded in and tackle the very structure of this project experienced as a ‘straightjacket’ by the practitioner, let alone the ethical issues which resulted.

Inasmuch as many of its foundational guidelines were bypassed, evaluating Forum Theatre as a promising deliberative medium particularly for the homeless remains out of reach. Notwithstanding the above, Boal’s protagonist-antagonist model (1979) as we understand it might have undermined the collaborative effort required in an action research initiative by pitting one set of actors against the other in a rather one-sided version of the downtown area despite the practitioner’s efforts to the contrary. The design of this project - rooted in Boal’s focus on the protagonist - kept audience members out of the loop until the final event. Hence, they could not relate to the seemingly reductive depictions in the play, rendering reflexive dialogue remote.

By breaking down the various stages of action research, Callon’s model (1986) reveals how the translation process between the various research stakeholders can go awry stressing competing orientations rooted in larger relational systems. However, this model underestimates the Lewinian egalitarian ideals of action research predicated on communities of inquiry rather than on scientific expertise ‘imposing’ a top down definition of the problems at hand.
Our theoretical definition of social tensions in public space - strongly influenced by our key homeless informant and the Boalian model we hoped to enact - blind sighted us to other bottom-up possible readings of the relational dynamics in downtown Montreal.

Further experiences which account for the numerous pitfalls and ethical issues of a project like this one are needed in order to assess their outcomes including those of Forum Theatre on marginalized populations and wider collectivities. Beyond the blind spots related to the translation between practice, research and community in this particular case, subsequent research should invest more significantly in creating substantial rather than instrumental alliances within the specific settings where action research unfolds in order to foster long-term communities of inquiry founded in reflexive partnerships. Achieving this requires more time to initiate several spaces of encounter where all stakeholders – homeless and domiciled - are mobilized and contribute to the definition of the social problems they struggle with. It requires that the lead researcher temporarily suspend his/her scientific assumptions. Finally, it calls for space-time mechanisms whereby research partners can review research orientations, methods and their roles including the wider social configurations they are entrenched in.

Ironically, the promise of possible ‘results’ stemming from the research program obliterated the collaborative modalities required to attain them. As such, our experience remains inconclusive inasmuch as we were not able to evaluate our tool: Forum Theatre - A cautionary tale indeed.

REFERENCES


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