Workshop Report

Experiments in using Drama and Theatre to look at Sexuality and Oppression.

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Sexuality and Drama Workshops Report

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Summary

As part of the Sexuality and Development Programme at IDS, a project was undertaken to explore the application of drama and theatre to research into sexualities. Three workshops were undertaken in Uganda, India and UK to work with different groups working in the areas of gender and sexualities. The workshops were in part to train groups in qualitative research methods, but also to give space to experimentation and discussion about the use of drama techniques. Mostly this took the form of practical, physical workshops followed by reflection. The methods seemed to resonate with and be interesting to the groups, allowing spaces for in depth, intimate discussion which may not have existed otherwise. There is also discussion about the implications of prioritising physical, non-verbal communication and knowledge, especially when researching the area of sexualities. The potential and possibilities of using such methods is clear, as well as the need for more in depth exploration and rigorous analysis of the complexities they present.

Keywords: sexuality, drama, workshop, development, Uganda, India, UK

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Contents

Summary 1
Acknowledgements 3
Introduction 4

1 The workshops in Uganda, India and Brighton 4

1.1 Questions relating to epistemology 6
1.2 Application to the study of sexuality 7
1.3 Examples of Practice 7
  1.3.1 Delhi is explicit (Delhi) 8
  1.3.2 Intimacy spreads (Brighton) 8
  1.3.3 Beyond our existing knowledge (Kampala) 8
  1.3.4 Images that resonate (Delhi and Brighton) 10

2 Conclusions 10

Appendix
Theatre of the Oppressed 12

References 13
Acknowledgements

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Introduction: Using drama as a research method on the Sexuality and Development Programme

This strand of investigation formed part of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) funded Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Sexuality and Development Programme, and looks at the innovative application of drama and theatre techniques to research objectives. This has emerged through existing work of IDS researchers and this project allowed space to test, question and explore these applications.

There are contexts globally where certain expressions of sexuality or gender are not tolerated and communities live in fear and silence. In such contexts it can be extremely difficult to research that which is illegal or forbidden using normal methods. Equally it might be that research into some issues such as early marriage, can miss vital aspects like perceptions of gender norms and sexual desire which are intimate but no less important. It can be that in such contexts the use of drama and theatre is a valuable tool to use alongside other methods, to begin to delve into the unspoken and the unseen. This document is the result of a series of workshops, which were tentative experiments in the application of these methods, in the hope that more researchers, activists, practitioners and community members in the future can take up the tools of making theatre and explore their possibilities for research.

Cultural expressions such as performance have long been documented, observed and analysed like any other art form as part of qualitative research practices. Recently though, the field of practice-led research has emerged. This field is based mostly in research into arts practices themselves, but can equally be applied to the sociological. Applied to drama, this means that the act of creation; the exercises, the discussions, the debates, the rehearsals as well as the final performance all contribute to the knowledge generated by the research and indeed can determine its focus.

1. The workshops in Uganda, India and Brighton

Over the period of one year between October 2013 and 2014, IDS coordinated and delivered workshops in Uganda, India and the UK to further investigate these methods. In Uganda, this took the form of a three day training workshop on qualitative and participatory research methods in research for the Civil Society Coalition for Human Rights and Constitutional Law. The workshop was attended by 12 participants, representing different organisations who form part of the Coalition. At this training workshop, alongside more traditional qualitative research methods, drama and theatre techniques were shared and explored as an alternative for use with Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Intersexed (LGBTI) communities in Uganda.

We also spent time exploring the use of role-play as a teaching method, experimenting with different interview techniques by performing interview scenarios for the group to learn and evaluate the different methods. In the section of the training which focussed on drama, we drew on many of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed Image techniques, leading to a small example of how a Forum Theatre piece could be shaped
and used in the community, by way of example. We also ran games and exercises every morning which informed our interactions and intentions with ideas of fun, play and creativity. Our interactive, physical and explorative way of working was received well at the training, and the methodology was interspersed throughout the programme, resulting in an immersive experience for the group.

In India, the workshop took place with members of an experienced, well-known feminist Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), Nirantar who were keen to experience a drama workshop process, which was fully participatory, personal and reflective. We had three full days with them in a residential context where we were able to devote all of the time to the exploration of theatre as a research method, as participants were already well versed in other methods.

Over the three days we led participants through a process which again drew on Boal's Image Theatre and Rainbow of Desires, using physical exercises to provoke discussion around oppression and conflict faced by the group. We identified areas which were common in the group and worked around those areas. Because of the time we had and the relative familiarity between group members we were able to work at a very personal, emotional level which has helped us to understand the intimacy possible when using theatre. We created several role plays and scenes through the three days, but culminated in short performances around the issues of sex work and the pressures on feminists in India. Again, we experimented by way of example with the concepts of Forum Theatre and Legislative Theatre around these two final performances.

In addition to the workshops in Uganda and India, we wanted to explore the applications of this methodology in another context, closer to home. Rather than assuming that it is only in other countries that narratives are unsaid and oppression is experienced we wanted to see what this looks like in the UK, in Brighton. This context was not defined around a particular organisation, rather informal networks which led to the gathering of a diverse group of interested individuals to work together for one day in Brighton. In some ways, not having the imperative of an agreement between IDS and another institution to provide a formal training freed us to experiment with the time we had, making it a space for sharing, learning and reflecting on the things we had tried, and wanted to try, with colleagues in the field.

On the other hand, this meant that the workshop had to take place outside of normal working hours so we were restricted to only one day of working together. However, this time was very useful as the majority of participants had experience in theatre and community theatre, which meant that we very quickly were able to progress in exercises that might have taken longer in a less familiar group. We mostly explored exercises that had worked in the Kampala and Delhi contexts, to compare responses in this context and identify similarities, and differences. We also discussed and briefly explored experimentations, which had not been possible in the other contexts and gathered the feedback from the group.

In all contexts, we found the use of Image Theatre to be really powerful and we asked participants to work in pairs sculpting each other to represent a moment of oppression they had experienced to create a series of statues, without moving and with no words. In each case images shared amongst the group and reflected upon, were resonated with and brought out strong emotions. Groups found that the interpretations of those looking at the images were meaningful to them, and the group as a whole. All the groups also felt that the discussions which happened after the exercises had taken place, had a different character than if we had started with them – more intimate, more detailed and more nuanced for being grounded in experience. This is a key learning and advocates
for even a simple application of these methods, for the sake of enriching focus group
discussions and traditional research methods.

1.1 Questions relating to epistemology

‘When we truly experience the moment, it’s a different kind of consciousness and
one isn’t paying attention to what’s going on at all in a meta kind-of way. But in
theatre you’re present and embodying it but the feelings are measured so they
can in a sense be stored and studied.’ (Participant at the Delhi workshop)

Epistemology has particular implications for the use of drama, a form of expression
which is physical, emotional and ephemeral without the hallmarks of traditional research
material: written words and quantifiable objects. It can be difficult to imagine how an
exercise which is embodied and not necessarily recorded can contribute knowledge,
especially knowledge which can be articulated and shared with a wider audience. We
associate theatre with art and performance with pretence – whereas research is
associated with a search for facts, knowledge and truth. However, does the measuring
of feelings referred to in the quote above, which happens through theatre and
performance, result in enough distance to store and study them, having accessed them?

There were questions raised at each workshop we gave: ‘What is the data’?, ‘How do we
know if this is true?’ ‘Will the research be rigorous and respected’? These concerns are
valid, especially in a research world which prioritises certain kinds of knowledge and
experience. We feel that the use of these methods offers an opportunity to challenge
some of the norms in research, resulting in more complex, more nuanced and difficult to
articulate findings; ultimately something closer to real life experiences.

Everything in the world has historical narrative and political economies, and so does
knowledge – so does Anthropology. Anthropology and research in general creates
objects through their study. Therefore, certain relationships of power exist between the
objects we are creating and the disciplines of the research we are working in; the
methodology. By our choices as researchers we construct an object, for example
domestic violence has always existed but by constructing it as Domestic Violence which
frames it as a particular problem; which is perceived and imagined in a particular way –
this influences the populations we work with, the questions we ask, the
narrative our research creates. The phrase has a history which influences those choices, resulting in
the omission of other aspects like sexuality, which fall outside our initial understanding of
domestic violence as an object. The ability to construct an object relates to the lens you
use to look at it. Research is never about understanding something that already exists.
As such research is necessarily a creative, productive and reductive process – we
create an object but also reduce it to its limits.

All research is based on narratives, stories, our interpretations of data. Using drama
allows an opportunity for these narratives and interpretations to come directly from
participants, getting a sense of the different ways people experience different things in
the world. Such complexity in the research process and results requires attention to the
inevitable power dynamics in the process. It is particularly important to be reflexive as
researchers and practitioners - continually challenging not only our own power in the
research process but the context which surrounds the work itself. There remain many
questions about the possibilities of using such methodologies to collect data, what that
data is, and its quality. However, we feel it is important to engage with this challenge,
and equally worth the struggle to reconcile these conflicts.
1.2 Application to the study of sexuality

How can the unlearning happen? Away from the development discourse idea of what something is? What are the lived realities for people? (Participant from the Delhi workshop)

Sexuality has emerged as a huge issue in global politics, law and health. In many countries legislation around sexuality is oppressive and divisive, whilst being entangled with political and social meaning forged from years before. As such, communities affected can be forced into obscurity and silence. Equally, it may be that in this silence or inarticulation that power and support can be found.

These intricacies can make research into sexualities challenging. The application of drama and theatre techniques is one innovative possibility. It is a responsive and agile methodology, which can be controlled and claimed by the groups involved. This gives it a certain safety compared to other research methods. In addition to the possibilities of knowledge generation in closed environments, there is also great potential in public performance. Performance (which can be framed as fiction) is a space where it may be possible to openly discuss taboo issues that would otherwise be silenced. This affords opportunities for the wider community to witness silenced realities, and, in interactive theatre models, to explore and debate them. There is potential not only for valuable research to take place, but for social transformation. In an advocacy context, using non-verbal methods can open up engagement with a subject to a wider audience; new allegiances and experiences between groups can be forged and strengthened. The political application of theatrical performance or protest is also possible and when built within movements, has the potential to contribute to wider processes of change.

Sexuality, especially in relation to International Development, has become synonymous with LGBTI movements, identities forged from very specific contexts and cultures. These identities may mean nothing to individuals in other contexts who are desiring, acting, loving and living other realities, and may not fit into those paradigms. Despite this, the global discourse on sexuality is shaped around these identities and countries are judged on their policies, which relate to them. Whilst this has value in terms of visibility and solidarity, this also has the affect of silencing non-verbal explorations and exhibitions of sexualities. It also means that complex, local and even traditional expressions of multiple sexualities, which may go beyond these definitions or transcend them, are forced to narrow their edges, outlining them clearly into these perimeters.

Using non-verbal languages to look at this allows space for sexuality to be explored and expressed in all its complexity, emotion and sensation. Sex is not about words or definitions but an embodiment of a desire, an interaction. Our physical and emotional impulses are unconcerned with boundaries, accepted behaviour and rules, whether we admit to this or not. It might be that theatre offers a space to explore these impulses, to place on hold our need to verbalise, to name and to identify.

This space is valuable in the context of development for bringing local, lived, realities and experiences to the wider discussion, enriching the current discourse. Once they are there they may be categorised and contextualised more widely, but they will have arrived whole, even if they are confusing, complicated and contradictory.

1.3 Examples of Practice

Below we share some key moments and reflections from the workshops we undertook, glimpses into the experiences we shared, for readers to respond to and get a sense of what we are trying to articulate in this paper. After these we will draw together our experiences to discuss the practicalities and possibilities of the process.
1.3.1 Delhi is explicit (Delhi)

The first day of the workshop in Delhi, we arrived in an empty studio but for a circle of wicker chairs edged with coloured leather which squeaked and creaked with the movements of participants. We had slowly filed into the cool room, outside the wet heat of the day, to begin our three day workshop. As usual, Akshay and I had decided to start practically, to start with games before our formal introductions.

One of the first games we played was ‘The sun shines on…’; a circle of chairs sits around one person standing in the middle, they being by saying ‘The sun shines on...anyone who....’ and continue with a fact that is true about themselves (has black hair, likes pineapple, is wearing a red top) those sitting in the chairs around them must get up and swap places if the fact is also true about them. The person in the middle uses this opportunity to sit in one of their chairs, again leaving someone in the middle to say ‘The sun shines...’ with a fact this time true about them. I have played this game with many groups, with many differences and it always works. However, it has never been quite like this game.

Akshay knew a lot of the workshop participants, I knew only one and not very well. As always when working with an existing group, there is an invisible web of histories, relationships, secrets and experiences that hangs between everyone which you as a facilitator try to see, rather than destroy by bumbling through and tangling it all up. I saw a room of elegant, educated women who were confident and assured in the space; there was a sense of maturity.

We began the game innocently enough; simple things were revealed in the middle of the circle like number of siblings, where we live, what we ate for breakfast but it began to shift. The group took quickly to the forceful physicality of the game, charging across the room, throwing themselves into the squeaking wicker chairs, tumbling over with the force of it. There was a childlike delight in the chase. As this grew, the sense of mischievousness spread to the centre of the circle. Statements like ‘The sun shines on anyone who…had sex at the weekend’ came up, then ‘anyone who watched porn at the weekend/has an unfulfilled desire/identifies as queer/has ever had a threesome’. The game had become a way for people to perhaps test each other, to test the space, to experiment with the boundaries, to negotiate what the next three days would hold.

1.3.2 Intimacy spreads (Brighton)

I had to take part in this exercise which usually I would have observed and managed from the outside, due to group numbers. We were experimenting with co-piloting, one of Boal’s techniques, which we had tried in Kampala. The group breaks off into pairs and finds a quiet spot, closes their eyes and tells each other a story. The story-teller thinks of the listener as a co-pilot who must experience and understand everything about the story as clearly as possible, as closely as if they were there. The listener may ask questions but only to clarify details of the story, not to question the intentions of the teller. It is a technique which is part of a wider string of exercises in Boal’s book; but here we lifted it as a stand alone, to see what makes it different from other storytelling techniques. We kept the theme very broad, not something you would want or need to do when working with a group over a long period of time, but with this group we were interested in challenging them, and ourselves. What happens if you give a theme as broad and dense as ‘sexuality’ and ask for a story about it? The first one that pops into your head?
I sat with my partner and we closed our eyes, our heads close together to listen to the story. I was amazed at how clearly I saw everything in her story, the girl she had left in bed; I felt her footsteps on the stairs and heard familiar morning kitchen sounds. By closing our eyes we were able to see much more of each other’s stories. My partner felt the same way about my story. The stories were interesting in themselves and when we came to share with the wider group the breadth of stories was vast; some were huge narratives of love affairs and life events, some just single moments and some were more a reflection on the human condition.

For me what was also interesting was the intimacy that had been created between my partner and me. We sat, post-storytelling, and discussed our stories and the theme of sexuality in general. Pretty quickly we were engaged in a discussion about masturbation; what and whom we thought about, and how this relates to our sexual identity or not. Masturbation, in a way, is a far more personal, private space than sex between two people and what one thinks about at those times need never be shared by anyone. And yet, we had found a space and time where we felt comfortable to talk about that, even though it perhaps might conflict with our outward sexual identities and how we are perceived. This is a clear example of the potential of these methods to build relationships and trust between group members, they can be a way to quickly tap into an intimacy between participants which might not have been possible or imagined before.

1.3.3 Beyond our existing knowledge (Kampala)

In Kampala we had three groups of around four people. Each had modelled their own Image of Oppression in silence: sculpting the other group members to recreate a moment of oppression that they had faced in their own lives, finally placing themselves into the image as the oppressed person. Each group of four people then had four images of oppression, based on one experience of each group member. We watched the images one after the other, discussing each.

This moment made it really clear to me, as a facilitator, how important Boal's division between the objective and subjective viewing of the image. There is a distinction between objective fact about the image - someone is sitting or standing and subjective interpretation of it - they are tired, they are ill etc. The group start with objective commentaries, followed by subjective.

We saw assembled in front of us three men crouching down in a row, facing across the stage. Their hands behind their backs, crossed at the wrists. On the other side of the stage, the only woman in the group stood facing away, hands together on top of her head, interlaced at the fingers, elbows coming together. For me this image was an example of how cultural and personal knowledge can colour the interpretation of images. The group instantly read the position of the woman as someone in intense pain, or mourning. I also recognised this from my time in Malawi as being a physical shorthand for someone who is crying. In another context, this image may not be read as such, or if it was, would not be so instantly recognisable.

Other interpretations from the group watching all focussed on the idea that one of the prisoners was trans and that he had been put in the male section of the prison, which is why his mother was in such anguish. From Boal’s objective perspective, there is no way such a reading would have been possible – from the bodies in the space all we could say would be physical positioning. These interpretations were based on participant’s knowledge of each other’s identities, histories and experiences. This was not a problem and as a researcher it is useful and interesting to know what a group does or does not interpret their colleagues experience to be. But it made me realise that this objective phase is hugely useful, in first distancing the image from any
story, which may make it easier for other interpretations to come forward, even if the circumstances behind the image are well known. Particularly when working on trans issues, reducing the images to bodies in space can be useful for freeing up interpretations allowing the audience to make decisions based on image rather than history. By ignoring previous knowledge that one of the prisoners is trans, the interpretations centre more on the anguish of the mother; she becomes the oppressed person, responding to the pain experienced when a loved one is imprisoned, regardless of where they may have been held.

This can be a radical moment that some groups can struggle with, the idea that there is no ‘correct’ interpretation of an image, but individual interpretations which are grounded in personal perceptions. This can be challenging, but can lead to a space where people are open and responsive to points of view they had not considered before, building a wider understanding of collective group perspective and experience.

1.3.4 Images that resonate (Delhi and Brighton)

We began sculpting in pairs: taking it in turns each person gently sculpts the other into a moment when they (the sculptor) felt oppression. Then we look in turn at all the images and discuss them: how they feel, the emotions they bring up in both audience and sculpture, the different possible interpretations and situations of oppressions they might represent. This was a way to try and identify key oppressions or emotions associated with oppression that these diverse groups of people feel or identify with.

In each case this exercise was extremely powerful and brought with it a brooding atmosphere. The exercise is fundamentally intimate, even if one is sculpting with a ‘mirroring’ method and not touching the other, because of the shared creation of physical images. Every participant is both sculptor and sculpted, embodying a moment of powerlessness and having the chance to shape the representation of such a moment.

In both contexts, those who were the sculptures felt they took on certain emotions, simply because of where and how their bodies were positioned. It was possible to communicate the emotions associated with a moment to someone else nonverbally, through helping them to physically embody the experience. In turn, this was then communicated through the image of that physicality to an audience who articulated it verbally.

This is not to say that each interpretation or experience of emotion was correct or exactly the same as that of the person sculpting, but rather, it created a sense of shared experience - an empathic situation. This allowed us to see, experience, feel and record a huge range of experiences, oppressions and emotions in a short space of time. Which led afterwards to an intense discussion on what it means to be oppressed, how it felt to be sculpted and sculptor, and the situations of oppression identified by the group.

2. Conclusions

The use of drama and theatre as a research method holds great interest for communities working on these issues. Workshop participants were greatly curious about how the methods would work practically, but also having experienced a workshop for themselves they were convinced there was value in their application. In particular, in those contexts where certain communities may exist under the radar or hiding aspects of their identity; the flexibility of the aesthetics of performance, which allow people to play a character and therefore be protected by a persona or fictionalise their own stories, is appealing. This also applies to communities
who may not identify with the label driven LGBTI agenda, instead experiencing sexual identity as desires, acts and ways of existing, which go beyond the verbal. The use of images and other symbolic and interpretive ways of exploring identity can be especially valuable in these contexts.

There is a need for further investigation with these methods, in particular studies which would not only investigate the methods themselves, but practically use them in a wider research process. By applying methods with appropriate rigour and finding ways to record, map and report on results, will their true potential be realised.
Appendix: Theatre of the Oppressed

The Theatre of the Oppressed was developed by Brazilian theatre-maker Augusto Boal in the 1960s. It is a collection of methods, which use theatre in different ways as a tool for social and political change and transformation by oppressed communities. In Theatre of the Oppressed there is no hierarchy between actor and spectator and any community can hold the means of producing theatre, becoming a performer and intervening in transforming the performance or reality.

Forum Theatre – an interactive theatre performance. A play is performed which has a central character who is facing oppression. The audience watches the play for the first time, then for a second time, facilitated by a Joker they are allowed to stop the play at any moment and replace onstage the main character with an idea for a different solution to the oppression. The term spect-actor refers to the audience members who are also potential actors in the Forum.

Image Theatre – a Theatre of the Oppressed technique, which centres on images made using the bodies of participants who model themselves or others to represent experiences, feelings and concepts. The images are then discussed as a group or explored in exercises.

Rainbow of Desires – one of the techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed, drawing largely from Image Theatre and relating more closely to oppressions experienced internally.

Legislative Theatre – a development of Forum theatre to allow the dialogue and discoveries of the audience to feed into the creation of new laws. The focus of the Forum is on discussion of new legislation, which is then progressed by lawmakers and politicians who are present at the performance.
Key Influences and Further Reading


Boal, Augusto (1979) Theatre of the Oppressed, New York: Theatre Communications Group Ltd


