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Action Research, Performance and Critical Hermeneutics

Kevin Kelly

Table of Contents

Abstract:3
Introduction4
The hermeneutics of action.....5
**A confirmation problem: participatory action vs. socio-critical
interpretation9**
Performativity, performance and intentionality..... 13
Interpreting performance 15
Performance as intervention 18
 Forum theatre 18
 Invisible theatre 20
Concluding comments 21
References 22

Abstract:

The interpretation of action, and especially the critical interpretation of action surpasses the actor's own understanding of intentional acts. The implications of this are discussed in a participatory action research context where the discordance between intentionality and the critical interpretation of action become readily apparent. Understanding of this problem is developed using Ricoeur's (1979) 'model of the text' for the understanding of meaningful action. Building upon this model the concept of performance is introduced and it is argued that the concept of performance is theoretically useful for understanding how convention plays out in our utterances and intentional actions. Some of Boal's 'theatre of the oppressed' techniques for critically analysing performance and which use performance towards the end of social transformation are described. Through examination of these techniques the need for understanding the constitutive conventions which underlie processes of social analysis and activism, is explored.

Keywords: performance, critical research, hermeneutics of action, participatory action research

Introduction

In this paper the terms ‘action’ and ‘research’ will be posited as being at odds with one another and given this it is suggested that it is of value to better understand the nature of their difference, if we are to understand their interplay in ‘action research’.

No strong attempt is made in this paper to understand whether or not ‘action research’ is a coherent and distinctive paradigm, and thus the term is used loosely. The kinds of projects where these arguments are most applicable fall under the rubric of ‘participatory action research’, where there is a strong accent on the communicative processes leading to formulation of interventions and evaluation thereof. In this context the term ‘reflection’ will be used to refer to ‘acts of interpretation’, and the terms ‘research’ and ‘evaluation’ will be used as general terms to describe the more programmatic level of reflective processes.

By way of introduction it should be said that there are also other ways of talking about the issues outlined below, the basic features of which are addressed inter alia in structuralist theories of interpretation of human action, discourse analytic theories of action and interpretation, activity theory and speech act theory. The reason for choosing Ricoeur’s philosophy of action (the model of the text) to sketch out the interpretative problem of interest here, is that Ricoeur makes the interpretative problem to be sketched out a cornerstone in his model for understanding human action. Ricoeur’s ‘model of the text’ provides a useful framework for: understanding that actions are overdetermined; understanding that access to intentionality (‘authorship’ in the model of the text) associated with action does not give final authority to the interpretation of action; understanding that the analysis of convention in the sense of repeatable action (performance) is fundamental to a critical hermeneutics of action; and understanding that distanciation is a necessary hermeneutic function in the interpretation of human action.

In linking Ricoeur’s semantics of action with ideas about performance derived from speech act theory, and action research practices which use ‘performance’ as a tool, the practical import of Ricoeur’s model is developed in a procedural or methodological way, because his theory is a foundational one rather than being about methods. If the product remains a somewhat unsatisfactory hybrid, it hopefully has some merit in spelling out the issues, which need to be addressed in developing an appreciation of critical interpretative practice in the context of participatory action research.

The hermeneutics of action

The commonsense use of the term ‘action’ is usually taken to refer to that which is intentional, or that which is deliberately achieved through goal directed performances of the human body. The term ‘performance’ is carefully chosen here, because it introduces a tension into our understanding of the field of action, which will end up being central to the argument. Whereas ‘performance’ applies to something that is deliberately achieved, rather than something which happens as a by-product or consequence, it will be shown that latent in the notion of ‘performance’, is an undoing of the idea of deliberate intentionality. Performance refers to a kind of doing which surpasses our own intentionality; for example, in the repeatable performance of a ritual, or the performing of a role. The ontological status of self-accounts of action is of central concern here and will be posed as a ‘problem’ in relation to critical interpretation of performance in participatory action research processes.

It will be argued that for a variety of reasons, amongst which is the understanding that the character of much action is social and conventional in nature (cf. Doyal and Harris, 1985), actions should not be thought of as being uniquely determined in the mind of the actor. This is hardly an extraordinary claim, and it has been argued in many different ways in structuralist and social constructionist literature. The value of arguing it here, in the way that it will be argued, is that it establishes some useful theoretical connections between the textual model for understanding human action, and the theory of performance and performativity. This in turn assists us to theorise Boal’s (1985) performance oriented action research approach, which offers practical leads towards the development of a critical approach to participatory action research.

The line of thinking to be pursued here is based on Ricoeur’s ‘The model of the text: Meaningful action considered as a text’ (Ricoeur, 1979) and ‘The hermeneutical function of distanciation’ (Ricoeur, 1981b). It seems appropriate to begin the account of Ricoeur’s model of the text with Dilthey, who at the turn of the century suggested that there is a strong affinity between textual interpretation (the discipline known as hermeneutics) and the epistemology of the human sciences. He proposed that a method of understanding, the operation known as *verstehen*, is the point of coincidence (Ermarth, 1978). Following the hermeneutical model of *verstehen*, the meaning of texts is to be established through imaginatively re-entering the context of the text’s creation.

Thus Dilthey says that the meaning of a text can only be ascertained through a knowledge of the inner mental life of the author; that is, through access to the author’s subjective experience. He adds to this by saying that it is necessary to include in the operation of *verstehen*, a knowledge of the socio-historical and linguistic context in which the author worked. So to know the author’s intention one has to stand within the total context of the author’s life. In the human sciences this has translated into the idea that the meaning of human creations, words, actions and experiences can only be ascertained in relation to the contexts in which they occur. Dilthey referred

to the process of coming to stand in this context as *nacherleben*, usually translated as 'empathic reliving' (Ermath, 1978). What Dilthey didn't seem to theorise adequately is the possible tension between the author's mind and the meaning of the conventions that the author employs, and this is where Ricoeur's contribution becomes relevant.

Ricoeur (1979) points to the limitations of Dilthey's model. Central to Ricoeur's reformulation is the difference between the relationship 'speaking-hearing' and the relationship 'writing-reading'. He maintains that understanding human action is more like reading a written text than listening to a speaker. Speaking is distinctly contextual. The sense of what is meant in speech can be questioned, clarified and confirmed in relation to what is specifically meant by the speaker. Speech has an ostensive sense that is set within the context of speaking, and in this respect the meaning of the utterance can be said to be identical to the utterer's meaning. Now, in the laying down of a text the original intention of the author and the meaning of the text cease to coincide. What the text says now is not necessarily what the author meant to say and the meaning of an inscribed (written) event surpasses the meaning contextualised in a situated event; that is, the event in its specific context.

Ricoeur (1981b) suggests that using available conventions of expression, and in the interests of communicating to a particular audience, the speaker refers to the world through an act of interpretation. Ricoeur, in developing a model for textual interpretation is saying that although it is important to appreciate what the author is trying to say, we need to understand the speaker's positioning in the semantic field, which is not a matter of conscious choice to the extent, amongst other things, that it relies on a lexicon of available conventions. The meaning and effects of these is not exclusively determined in the mind of the author and it is this that we are concerned with here. Ricoeur says that 'Only writing, in freeing itself, not only from its author, but from the narrowness of the dialogical situation, reveals this destination of discourse as projecting a world' (Ricoeur, 1979, p.79). By this Ricoeur means that textuality allows interpretation to say more about the world to which the text refers than can be ascertained in a dialogue with the author.

In short, textuality is not being bound by the confines of the author's appropriation of reality, and being free to see the effects of the author's adoption of convention allows the reader to gain an understanding of the world beyond the author's appropriation thereof. This makes intelligible Ricoeur's contention that 'Hermeneutics begins where dialogue ends.' (Ricoeur, 1970, p.420). In applying this argument to intentional action Ricoeur suggests that the meaning of action is 'overdetermined', and the content of overdetermination he calls the 'surplus of meaning'.

The ethnographic ideal of 'telling it like it is in context', looking at the world of the subject as it is seen from the inside, or telling stories as people might tell these stories themselves; corresponds to Dilthey's 'mind of the author'. However, most ethnographic research may set out to be no more than simply descriptive, in most cases research reports come to conclusions which exceed what participants intuitively understand about their own

worlds. Common sense explanation is usually no more than descriptive (for example, 'we do it because we like it', or 'I do it because it brings me good luck') and we need interpretation to derive a product that justifies the research effort. If there could be such a thing as purely descriptive social science it would, as Rosenberg (1988) suggests, be platitudinous. If we think that the subjects who are the object of investigation are finally the ones to whom we are to return our interpretations in order to establish their veracity, we might reduce our attempts at understanding to a banal and superficial level. Certainly we would not have the foundations of a critical approach to research.

Ricoeur (1981a) theorises interpretation as surpassing the limitations of contextual understanding. He describes such interpretation under the rubric of the 'hermeneutical function of distanciation'. It would seem important to develop an appreciation of what distance tells us about contexts; that is, what we might say about contexts that the context itself does not disclose in its presentation. The following are some of the achievements of the hermeneutical function of distanciation.

Distanciation allows us to find patterns that occur across different contexts, and which are not evident when we consider contexts in their particularity. Distanciation allows us to ask questions and develop interpretative perspectives that throw into relief limited contextual horizons of intentional action. Temporal distanciation, or the benefit of hindsight attests that the 'here and now' of experience is perspectival. Distanciation gives place to the meaning of actions as these inhere in the minds of others and with this introduces an appreciation of the social character of action. Distanciation allows us to apprehend certain phenomena, the presentation of which occludes their own existence as phenomena - for example, belief and ideology - or prevents their accurate apprehension as phenomena (for example, powerful emotional states which place perceptual parameters on experience). Distanciation allows us to perceive interest and value inherent in our subjective positioning and ironically allows a description of subjectivity as a standpoint. Distanciation allows us to understand the causal influence of events and the patterns inherent in sequences of events; and to understand thus how phenomena might be linked across time. Distanciation allows the understanding of action in relation to events and displaces the concern about who acted and the intentions which motivated an action, in favour of 'What was done?' and 'Why was it done?'.

Perhaps most important for the present argument is that distanciation reveals the role of convention and tradition in the crafting of action. If we wish to understand why a person performs a ritual, custom or ceremony in a particular way, or why a person acts superstitiously, or why a person uses a particular hand gesture to indicate disapproval, rather than another gesture, it will not usually be all that helpful to ask the person why. The reason why is not carried in the mind of the actor, who might perform an action merely by following a convention. Distanciation allows interpretation of the conventions that we adopt as models of action, to be part of what is interpreted in understanding the meaning of action.

Distanciated interpretation of action when conducted in the presence of the actor is quite different from the kind of interpretation that we might conduct when the actor is not part of the interpretative effort itself. I cannot spontaneously confirm the meaning of an interpretation of my own action conducted from a distanciated perspective in the same way that I can intuitively accept an interpretation of meaning that replicates my own intentional mind. What is revealed through distanciation does not have the immediate ring of truth that is constituted in response to statements reflecting our lived or intentional appropriation of understanding. For example, the distanciated interpretation that whereas I see myself as being polite, I am actually being arrogant and condescending, might conceivably be true. But it might not immediately and intuitively seem to be so to me, and I may need to adopt the perspective of another to see it as such.

‘Action’ in action research usually refers to broad-scale, programmatic action, which is often aimed at bringing about change in a step-wise fashion or by interventions which only have desired effects in concert with other efforts, which are developmental and contribute to changes, but are not direct actions in the sense of something that someone does. The model of the text discussed above is a model specifically developed for understanding human action and it might be argued that it really only applies to individuals. However, there is nothing about the model of the text that limits its applicability to individual action, and nor is this the case for speech acts, to be addressed below. A group or institution fit just as comfortably as do individuals, into this theory of action. What is at issue here is the tension between the intentions and justifications that ostensibly motivate actions and the underlying conventions (we might say ‘discourses’) that from a distanciated perspective can be seen to inform action. If an action can be conceived by a group, in the same way as a text can be written by a group or conceived by an institution, the model holds.

Let us now consider an interpretative problem that emerges out of the use of both distanciated and intentional (‘mind of the actor’) perspectives in action research processes.

A confirmation problem: participatory action vs. socio-critical interpretation

If the meanings of our actions do not correspond with our intentions, this should be expected to show as a problem in participatory action research. One of the assumptions in participatory research is that actors, who are stakeholders in the determination of outcomes, know their own minds, and that their actions are a pragmatic articulation of the knowable interests that they stand for. The notion of participation as it is used in 'participatory research' is premised on an understanding that participating parties are able to articulate and represent their own interests, and this is usually taken as meaning that they act out of an understanding of their own needs and interests.

Action research processes are often conceived as involving a circular process between action and reflection. The argument to be put forward here is that the interpretation of action, rather than seamlessly flowing out of or into action itself, is discontinuous with action. It has a relationship of distancing to action. Following the model of the text, intentional action and its interpretation should not be expected to coincide, and action should not be thought of as necessarily containing the germ of its own interpretation. This is particularly significant in forms of action research where the parties involved in the implementation of action are part of a research team evaluating that same action programme.

The contrast between action and reflection is particularly stark when action research is married to critical research; that is, when the research component is critical in nature.

Before preceding any further it is important to make a distinction between two different referents for the term 'critical'. In the first place, standing on the side of the disempowered and the marginalized we may take issue with the way in which their situation (or our own for that matter) has been managed. For example, critical thinking of this variety may 'problematise' the manner in which the interests of the physically disabled have been represented around issues of access to public amenities. Research on their experiences could be used as a basis for advocating changes in the way in which public amenities are designed. This could then be used as evidence in support of an advocacy campaign aimed at changing public policy in this area. Here the research would aim to accurately portray the experience of the disabled and would take this as evidence of a problem needing to be addressed.

The term critical in this sense is critical only in being critical of existing social policies or practices. It is critical through its activism, in having an agenda alternative to the status quo and because the analysis places into public discourse voices which have not hitherto been adequately represented. Rights campaigns are typically of this type, and advocacy is usually a key word, meaning literally to speak for and/or on behalf of people who need to have their voices represented.

There is another sense of 'critical' which is more what is intended here. It is more suspicious of self-accounts. It reads politics into experience itself, and looks to describe what produces self-accounts. According to Thiselton

(1992) black hermeneutics, feminist hermeneutics and Latin American liberation hermeneutics share certain major themes. 'First and foremost', says Thiselton, 'they construct critiques of frameworks of interpretation which are used or presupposed in dominant traditions... These frameworks transmit pre-understandings and symbolic systems which perpetuate, it is argued, the ideologies of dominant traditions.' (p. 410)

We know from Freire (1972) that the self-understanding of a problem which exists in the context of the problem, or which a group has of its own predicament, may be a part of the problem, even for a protesting community. Freire (1972) suggests that the historical understanding which a community has of its own conditions of life may be part of the reason why the community is unable to find creative solutions which are likely to change these conditions. In Freire's view, liberatory action needs liberated understanding and this should be seen as an achievement of an action research project rather than an a priori thereto. This is an important point and much of what is to follow hinges on the possibility of problematic self-understanding or at least misapprehension of the conditions that create a problem.

The tension between 'advocacy' and 'critique' might be framed as an 'actions-ideas' dialectic, or in Thiselton's (1992) terms, as the 'socio-pragmatic issue vs. socio-critical issue'. When the action programme relates to specific practical difficulties experienced by a group, and the explicit aspirations and desires of a group, it is easy to take the understanding of the problem as a given. Needs analyses conducted in the South African development context are often like this, with the product being no more than a summation of the expressed needs of a community. But this could conceivably lead to misapprehension of the conditions that create a problem. In Thiselton's words 'If praxis (which properly includes theory) becomes practice based on given experience, how can the future genuinely liberate rather than merely extend the present?' (Thiselton, 1992, p.419). It is all too easy in participatory research to filter out that which does anything other than affirm the hopes and aspirations of a social group. Thiselton wants to ask of approaches to critical enquiry: 'Do they merely reflect back the horizons of the community of protest in self-affirmation, or do they offer a social critique under which all (or many) communities may experience correction, transformation, and enlargement of horizons?' (Thiselton, 1992, p. 410).

This issue is reflected in sociological debates about the relation between life-world accounts of action (rationality of everyday understanding, local knowledge, and so on) and systemic accounts which attempt to detail structural factors which lie behind the manifestations of human action and problematics. In practical terms the one is oriented around activism and advocacy and the other grounded in a conscious hermeneutic of suspicion (cf. Ricoeur, 1970).

Freirian method (Freire, 1972) is based on the need to bring a community to think differently and particularly critically about the causes of the negative conditions that prevail in the community. Freirian methods for doing this include a general critical dialogical method for managing the

insertion of critical thinking into contexts of local understanding (see Hope and Timmel, 1984). The method of ‘problem posing’, and ‘problematising understanding’ are fundamental to Freire’s liberation epistemology.

Deeply wedded to the idea that received or a priori understanding is an embedded part of the problem, Freire develops a methodological approach based on exposing the cultural-epistemological context as problematic. This involves initially analysing analogue problems, and then using the cultural thematic paths developed in this process to apply to problems that are closer to home. That which is immediate and already a part of experience, does not easily lend itself to being reflected upon, because it will have a presence within the reflective process itself, and thus will escape reflection. The general epistemological tendency of Freire’s thinking is represented, albeit in a different form, and using different methods, in Boal’s (1985) work. It would be worthwhile looking more closely at some Freireian practices for developing the thesis here, but it serves the current purposes better to look at Boal’s work.

Whereas both Freire’s and Boal’s work have been developed in the context of explicitly political contexts, it is suggested that the problem outlined above is relevant in other kinds of contexts too. It comes to play in participatory action research whenever the ostensive problem is held in place by conditions which are not conceived as part of the problem; for example, participatory projects aimed at the reduction of the risk of HIV exposure where gender issues and cultural beliefs are part of the problem. The challenge is to simultaneously address the problem at a level of socio-critical analysis, and address the day-to-day aspirations, intelligibilities and ostensive problems for those concerned (for example, ‘But we want boyfriends, so we let them have sex without a condom’).

It might be noted, having sketched a tension between critical and participatory/empathic approaches, that there are some who argue that situated intelligibilities are not necessarily lacking in distance and critical perspective. Haraway (1991), whilst recognising that the standpoints of the subjugated are not ‘innocent’ positions, says, ‘On the contrary, they are preferred because in principle that are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretative core of all knowledge.’ (Haraway, 1991, p. 291). There is much to debate here, especially on the question of whether the affordances of being subjugated include the wherewithal for ‘how to see from below’ (p.291).

The line taken here is not specifically related to oppressed or subjugated people, and is simply that the partialities of being in a context, whilst offering access to the intelligibilities of lived experience, are in a dialectical relation to critical perspective. The tightening of the dialectical tension between participatory and critical methodologies may well give rise to transcendent forms of situated criticality, but the present discussion does not concern this possibility. What is of concern and what has been claimed above, only goes so far as to say that in participatory enquiry critical perspectives should be seen as an achievement rather than a natural outcome of the self-expression of those whose interests are at stake. We will now go on to examine the need for a critical hermeneutics of convention as an

element of the hermeneutics of action, and then look at some of Boal's methods for bringing this about.

Performativity, performance and intentionality

The idea that speech acts might bring about the effects which they ostensibly describe was established in Austin's (1962) influential work 'How to do things with words', which in the French translation is interpreted as 'When saying is doing' (Ricoeur, 1992. p.42). Performatives have the effect of 'doing by saying' and in this sense speaking is understood to be a species of action, with the act of speaking being understood as the predicative operation itself. Austin (1962) cites many examples, amongst which is the example of the marriage ceremony where the pronouncement 'I pronounce you man and wife' may be understood as being not simply descriptive, but as achieving the very conditions it describes. Another example is the statement 'I promise you ...' which is not simply a statement of an existing condition such as would be the statement 'He promises you', but it is simultaneously the act of achieving the promise it describes, through the act of making the statement.

Recent work on 'performativity' (Parker and Sedgwick, 1995) has questioned Austin's distinction between performativity and performance. A well-quoted passage from Austin (1962) asserts the distinction in question:

A performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance – a sea change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language. All this we are excluding from consideration. (p.22)

There has been considerable debate about this passage. One of the main lines of debate has been centred on the question of the difference between theatre and life. The critical argument in favour of bringing together the notions of 'performance' and 'performativity' has been that there is a pervasive theatricality to stage and world alike. 'Performativity' is characterised by a generalised iterability (Parker and Sedgwick, 1995) which is close to the idea of performance, as in repetition of a role or convention. Butler (1995) says: 'If a performative provisionally succeeds... then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices.' (p. 205)

Butler (1993) takes the argument further in saying: 'a performative 'works' to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilised.' (p. 227). Thus speaking, performativity not only requires some form of iteration (draws on a constitutive convention), but it involves also an unreflected upon obeisance (covers over) to this convention on the part of the audience to the act, and this completes the speech act. For example the performative 'I promise you' is bound by the convention of promising, and the performativity of the statement rests on tacit acceptance of this convention. Were you or I on the receiving end of the promise, not to believe in promises, or to mistrust the practice of promising, the promise would not have its performative effect.

Thus the idea of performativity relies on the performance of a particular social contract to which we are both beholden. A speech act is in this sense not constituted as an action through the act of the first person only, but is completed in its reception, in the convention it enacts being complied with on the reception side of the act. The performativity of the speech act relies on the performance of a convention, but is phrased in terms of the 'author'ity of the intentional act 'I promise you', as if it is I alone doing the promising.

This suggests rapprochement of the terms 'performativity' and 'performance'. Performativity, like performance, relies on iterability, and the iterability lies not only in the saying, but invokes and draws on a recognisable and pre-constituted convention on the reception side of the communicative act. Performance, as in the taking of a role or enacting of a convention, is a less inclusive term. It refers only to the statement side of the speech act, whereas performativity includes within its scope the reception side. But both terms rely on lack of originality, whilst seeming to refer to constituting acts; and both have the idea of repetition behind them. Our attention will now turn to the question of what it is that is repeated and how this might be interpretatively approached.

We will look at this through the lenses of Boal's 'techniques', which whilst based on theatre methodologies, were created in the interests of bringing together critical reflection and action in serious and 'real-life' socio-political contexts. The work of Augusto Boal, a Brazilian writer, activist and theatre director, involves the use of 'performance' in action research, giving us a useful inroad into understanding the relation of performance, action and reflection. These methods are ways of inserting distanciation into the interpretation of everyday action, such that underlying authorities can be exposed. The methods also facilitate the crafting of new actions based on a critical hermeneutic exploration of their meanings.

Boal's (1985) 'theatre of the oppressed' (TO) approach encompasses a vast range of techniques, only some of which will be described below, thematised for present purposes under two headings: 'Interpreting performance' and 'Performance in action'. Under the first heading we will look at the way in which these techniques are used to interpret the forms of authority which are brought into play through conventions of action. Under the second heading we will look at how the techniques mobilise crafted performances in the interest of generating socially transformative actions.

Interpreting performance

It should be said that my interpretation of these techniques is derived from direct experience gained in using these techniques in a variety of participatory action research projects, and in evaluating projects which use these methods in a South African context, including a Southern African training workshop with Boal. Boal's theorisation of these techniques does not strongly inform the following discussion, although the discussion does not seem to be significantly at odds with Boal's theorisation of his own methods.

Boal's work is concerned with practically understanding how action is undergirded by performance repertoires which create structures of intentionality before we come to reflect on the world and choose to act. Our background situatedness needs to be brought to awareness through socio-critical analysis if we are to do more than re-enact power imbued conventions. In this sense the methods work to 'deritualise' social life, and in so doing strip it of its forms of hidden authority.

On the most fundamental level, for Boal, power relations in the domain of human action are performed through the way we use our voices, the way we position ourselves in relation to each other, the way we use our eyes, the way in which we carry ourselves in communication, and so on. 'That the body is (quite literally) inscribed by ideological discourses is a major tenet of Boal's conception of a theatre committed to ideological analysis.' (Auslander, 1995, p. 128). Boal sees ideological relations as shaping the body and these can be exposed by interpreting the body's habits/conventions of relatedness to the world. This project is pursued in 'image theatre' where participants explore the expressions of the body as these are revealed in the enactment of various kinds of everyday and non-everyday situations. These are deconstructed, interpreted, exaggerated, and reframed in different contexts, moving towards critical understanding of the type of relations which are enstructured in action and towards new horizons of expressive relatedness to the world.

Part of the interpretative work involves artificially breaking patterns of ideological situatedness in relation to the world and bodies of others, and thereby gaining insight into the ways in which our bodies are positioned in response to the world in the first place. Whilst this may seem to move towards a kind of encounter group 'know yourself' activity, the emphasis is unrelentingly social. Boal's methods have sometimes been criticised as reflecting a humanist bias (Schutzman, 1995), but they are not about self-naming and self-claiming. They are about ongoing reflection upon the practices which underlie the same, and the adoption of agency and responsibility for action is based on socio-critical analysis of the way ideology plays out in the body. The 'mineness' of expression is seen as a form of sociality and image theatre moves towards identifying and destabilizing the constitutive conventions which we subscribe to both in crafting our own intentional actions, and in completing the performance of the oppressive actions of institutions and others.

Many of the ‘games’ described in ‘Games for actors and non-actors’ (Boal, 1992) are designed to bring participants onto an equal footing as preparation for participatory work. When we do something together that none of us have any experience of and which doesn’t rely on acquired knowledge and expertise, a temporary short-circuiting of the dynamics of power between us takes place. Interactive games introduce novel activities which no participants are likely to be practised in, and some exercises specifically disallow the use of the tools of authority, in the form of, for example, voice and intellect, or our standard ways of positioning ourselves in relation to each other. These ‘experiments’ are designed to deconstruct the workings of ‘techniques’ of power and domination in interpersonal space. Games are used as a kind of screen against which implicit manifestations of power and ideological positioning can readily be seen. Unless and until the underlying manifestations of power in the participatory setting itself, are subverted, the participatory work will involve the exercise of power.

Boal founds his analytic on an understanding of the inevitability of performance, which as we have seen involves enactment of received social arrangements, or conventions. Any analysis must begin with an analysis of what is constituted by way of prior understanding enacted in everyday cultural practice; that is, with analysis of what is performed in our actions as background, even as we choose to act. In particular the work moves towards understanding how power is constituted in such contexts. The methods strive to interpolate a self-critical process into the process of empowerment itself. Of course who is ‘able’ to be self-critical and who actively participates in such processes is itself subject to exclusionary force, but the process at least is constructed in such a way as to avoid this. When one takes away voice for example, and explores a solution without speaking, the centre of agency in a group often shifts from those who are most vocal, to those who are usually silent in discussions.

This brings to mind Habermas’s (1984) concern to establish ideal speech conditions as a precursor to participatory action. These conditions refer to communication contexts where there is no domination of the dialogue by one of the participants to the dialogue, or by one of the perspectives represented and where there is an equality of discursive opportunity between participants. He suggests that a ‘dialogical ideal’ requires an equality of participatory opportunity. However, in participatory action research in the development field this model seems problematic, because it is exactly in those situations where the capacity for engaging is compromised in the first place, that dialogue is so often cited as a method.

When ‘dialogical partners’ differ greatly in terms of access to legitimate and dominant modes of participation, and when power dynamics make equality of discursive opportunity problematic (Kelly and Van Vlaenderen, 1997), this has to be identified as a problem which precludes a dialogical communicative approach to participatory action research. Image theatre, with its concern to identify how power works in everyday world-relation and how it comes to intrude in negotiation and participatory processes, creates understanding of the problematics of engagement in so-called

dialogical contexts. It seeks out the ways in which authority weaves itself into conventions of participation and consultation, and this lays the foundations for circumvention of the social arrangements which set up relations of domination-submission and inequalities of discursive opportunity in the first place.

In image theatre attempts are made to identify 'typical particulars' (Boal, 1985, p. 172), by making connections between particular experiences and their 'generic form' in social arrangements which cut across contexts. It is the latter that are posed as problematic. An image theatre process might begin by recreation of an image of one participant's relationship to an oppressive landlord, say. Parts of this image would be explored, including its gestures, glances, postures. It would be given movement and voice and its limitations and enablements interpreted. Another person might add to the interpretation by contributing elements of their own experience and recrafting the enacted scene (usually a 'frozen' tableau), and so the hermeneutics of the image grows. Responses to the conventions embedded in the image will also be developed such that intentional positions are seen from the perspective of what they demand of others. The understanding of the image progressively moves from that which is localised and specific to an understanding of the conventions that drive and inform the problematics of the particular situation, which is usually a context of oppression.

In Boal's 'image of the images' and 'kaleidoscopic image' methods, images are created of the pluralistic context of images (Schutzman, 1995) and herein lies the possibility of understanding intersubjective and community perspectives. Collective images are thereby problematised in the same way as are individual intentional ones. In summary, as Schutzman (1995) says the methods evoke a dialogue between reflective/theoretical knowledge and visceral/practical experience. They enliven the circular relation between the specific and the general, the individual and the cultural, the cultural and the cross-cultural, the perspectival and the objective, the intentional and the performative.

Performance as intervention

Forum theatre

A forum theatre performance represents a kind of code of understanding, but it is a generative code, designed not to explain but to facilitate acts of further explanation. It is based on recognition of a particular type of social arrangement as a problem, although participants in forum theatre would be quite at liberty not to find the particular issue problematic or to steer the interpretative work in another direction. The generative code in a forum theatre piece is necessarily open, and whilst in being researched it may well come to reflect particular biases of understanding, the idea is that it be richly overdetermined and unfinished, so that it can be used to generate interpretations and corresponding paths to social transformation.

Forum theatre performances are preceded by warm-up exercises and games for audience and players alike. The purpose of this is to break down the barriers between spectators and players. If a performance is conducted on a stage the audience is invited onto the stage, across the proscenium, introducing the idea of being both spectator and actor. All are participants and Boal terms this hybrid role, 'spect-actor'. In this sense forum theatre may be understood as a practical deconstruction of the problematics and politics of the proscenium, the invisible arch that separates the stage from the audience; and by analogy our world from our ability to intervene in its constitutive conventions.

Forum theatre begins with the enactment of a carefully prepared and rehearsed anti-model (problematic situation/scene) in which a protagonist who is one of a group of actors, attempts to overcome a problem or oppression which is relevant to the audience. The play would typically have been researched and developed through image theatre and gradually a generative story would have been constructed. In rehearsing forum theatre the players try to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issues at stake and an appreciation of the societal contingencies through which the performance manifests and comes to be considered as problematic. There is a range of rehearsal methods to enable the actors to analyse and understand the performative possibilities of the play. Actors may be required to switch roles and play each others roles so that they may understand the constituting conventions of their role from the other side: they may interrogate enrolled players about their motives and desires; they might play the roles from the perspective of a particular genre (for example, praise poetry); apply a feature of one part to other parts ('now all play it as cripples'); or play it in another encompassing context ('now you are all in prison'). Thus the forum play is layered with understanding so that players know the conventions which enstructure their parts, and are able to respond to whatever the audience (spect-actors) bring in their attempts to undermine the authority of the performance of oppression.

An intermediary (joker) facilitates the audience's relation to the play and invites them to replace the protagonist (oppressed person) at any point in the play by shouting 'Stop!' and then coming in to take over the part of the protagonist to try and reverse the course of oppressive action. The actors

having thoroughly researched the scene of oppression are usually adept at finding ways around the new protagonist's intervention and different members of the audience will in turn try to find solutions, to change the outcome of the play.

The outcome of the forum theatre piece as a whole is to interpret the performance and identify the problematic conventions therein (for example, in a play about rural development a development facilitator's tendency not to consult with rebellious youth) which the audience will find ways of trying to change, as protagonists. They move towards discovering how and why the performance of the protagonist is unsuccessful, and this usually refers to a social role that is enacted in the protagonist's interpretative and decision making processes. The break-through is usually achieved through the protagonist rejecting a received role which has enstructured into it the fate of not resisting the oppression.

Often audiences will not notice the 'oppression constituting' convention and will repeatedly fail to resist the oppression, until they recognise the underlying mode of engagement of the protagonist as a problem, and having recognised this are suddenly able to construct a range of alternatives. Whilst this may seem to be an individualist approach with the change taking place in the mind of the actor, forum theatre is about social roles and ways of interacting rather than changes of mind per se. This finds its strongest expression in another form of boalian theatre, 'legislative theatre' (Jackson, 1997) where the outcomes of the forum theatre piece are translated into suggested legislation, further leading to an understanding of how action is led by regulatory conventions of society, and towards an understanding of how action and social convention are interrelated. Forum theatre in this sense opens up 'affordances' or possibilities of action. It strips 'oppressive acts' of their authority, the recognition and tacit acceptance of which is performed through subordinate and non-resisting roles in relation to oppression. This opens up the possibility of alternative acts, successful performance of which will reverse the performativity of the oppressive situation.

The modelling of performance in the rarefied context of a forum theatre piece (it is after all not real life) is close to the idea of 'prefigurative action' as spelled out by Kagan and Burton (1999). They define prefigurative action research as research which pioneers alternative social relations, 'redefining, and anticipating the new social forms to which the struggle itself aspires.' (Kagan and Burton, 1999, p. 4). This is the achievement of forum theatre. It is a practical way of conceiving new social forms through exploring their possibilities and also thereby deconstructing the constituting conventions of action which defined the problem in the first place.

To summarise forum theatre, amongst other things we might say the following: it is a method for identifying a problem, but which presents the problem in an open way which is not finally defined; it short-circuits anti-dialogical participatory dynamics which may hide within more ordered and structured programme development processes; it facilitates critical analysis of social structures and a socio-critical hermeneutics of intentional action; it facilitates a formative process of searching for solutions which is contingent

on and procedurally bound to development of understanding of the conventions of action which create and define the problem; and it embodies a concept of transitive learning (cf. Freire, 1972) which has participants actively engaged in problem solving, and mobilisation towards action.

Invisible theatre

In a South African context where there is a strong culture of popular participation in public life, one does not usually have to goad people into taking roles in a forum theatre performance. The authority of the proscenium does not have to be transgressed. People will be involved. But all such theatre is not conducted with ‘the oppressed’, or with people who are strongly motivated to ‘problematise’ and be involved in social transformation. What about situations where vested interests against social transformation need to be problematised, and where the oppressed are not in a position to resist (for example, in non-unionised employment situations)? Boal has developed a method called ‘invisible theatre’ for use in such circumstances.

Invisible theatre consists of rehearsed action, which like forum theatre is designed to generate critical reflection, but it is done with an audience which is not otherwise motivated to deal with the problem as a problem. The scene is rehearsed, played and facilitated by actors but it is not revealed as a performance. The performers respond to spectator responses in such a way as to unpack and accentuate the discourses which are brought to the fore in spectator response and intervention. The performance typically problematises a marginalised or covered-up issue by ‘outing’ it in public space, revealing what is at stake, or what is contested.

A South African example is a performance of actor’s who played a marginalised street music group which set up in the ‘wrong place’ at an arts festival. The performance, played in the foyer of an arts establishment had the effect of sullyng the façade of genteel public encounter with the arts. The piece was intended to problematise ideas about the arts and the organisation of the arts, amongst other things. The piece unfurled into a larger drama about public space and how it may be used, strongly overlaid by racial discourses the relevance of which would otherwise have been denied. A remarkable display of public anger and conflict emerged, showing how the management of public space works to cover up underlying tensions, by subtle forms of selection and exclusion.

It is often asked of an invisible theatre performance, ‘Did they know it was a performance?’ and the question is a telling one. For an intended audience to know invisible theatre as a performance would detract from the reality of what it sets in motion. It has to be done ‘invisibly’ because to disclose it as a performance in a context where the issues being addressed are contested, would too easily allow the concerns being addressed to be denounced as artificial. In this sense performance is from the perspective of the intended ‘audience’, the same as action. Invisible theatre is strategised action, designed to ‘force’ reflection in contexts where the possibilities of reflection are otherwise muted or de-activated by the communicative dynamics inherent in the context.

Concluding comments

Perhaps the most important contribution of Boal's work lies in its affirmation of the value in being inventive in the field of action-reflection, in discovering forms of action which lend themselves to reflection, and forms of reflection which lend themselves to action. This work is about conceptualising and performing new ways of 'doing things' in a context of understanding that the meaning of our actions surpasses our own 'natural' capacity to know what it is we do. Towards this end we need to think creatively about the procedures and processes which might span the dialectic of action-reflection: forms of social action which are both driven by and drawn to critical understanding of the problems they tackle; forms of reflection which self-consciously prefigure action; forms of action that generate ongoing reflection on social relations even within the context of their own enaction; and forms of action (performances) which are open (porous) and generative rather than fixed and conventional.

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Kevin Kelly is Research Director of a South African NGO, Centre for AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation. He works as an action researcher in development and training projects in South Africa and has a particular interest in the relations between critical and participatory methodologies. Address: CADRE, Institute for Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, P.O. Box 94, Grahamstown, 6140, South Africa. Email: kelly@imagnet.co.za

When I say 'Research' I mean 'There's a nice knock-down argument for you'

Why go to the Universe when you're already there? Or here? Or wherever it is/you are?

I'm here already, but I want to prove it to my own satisfaction

Research is the unsatisfactory satisfaction

Who was that Research I saw you out with last night? That was no Research, that was my life!

Sister Susie sewing Research for Senators

Bare ruined Senators, where late the Research sang

John Rowan