Identity, performativity, mirroring – some thoughts for the first advisory board [Sept 05] of the ESRC projects

N Y-D

I want to start to talk on the triangle of concepts of identity, performativity and mirroring.

If Shakespeare argued that the whole world is a stage, and Goffman followed in his ‘presentation of self in everyday life, Judith Butler has tried to draw a line between the performance of a theatre and the performativity of identity in everyday practices. Community theatre techniques such as Playback and Forum, are trying to breach the performance/performativity divide and facilitate self awareness and reflexivity via the tool of community theatre.

This is where the third notion of the mirroring enters. Social psychologists like George Mead and the Chicago School viewed identities as a result of the double mirroring of ‘who I am is determined – at least to an extent – by the way I perceive significant others perceive me’. Also psychoanalysts like Lacan use the image of the mirror as the way children come to conceive of themselves as embodied people, males and females.

One of the problems of the Lacanian analysis is that mysteriously in his account the embodied image only gave sexual clues of difference rather tan those of race, age, ability and other categorical social relations. I’m much closer to the much more encompassing definition of social identity by Reicher and Hopkins who define [p.48] social identity as ‘an understanding of one’s place within a system of social relations along with the proper and possible actions that flow from such a position’.

There are several components of this definition which are particularly important and relevant for our research.
Firstly, this definition does not talk only about perception of mirroring but also of understanding. The Theatre of the Oppressed is strongly affected by Paulo Freire who called for acquired knowledge and understanding as the precondition for personal and communal empowerment.

Secondly, this definition relates to social relations rather to specific significant others. As Reicher and Hopkins emphasize, following Stuart Hall (in Rutherford:225-6) this is a dynamic definition that views identities as constantly becoming rather than the static being, of intersectional positioning, rather than of reified uni-dimensional uni-categorical identities as have been constructed by identity politics.

Thirdly, this definition directly connects identities and social action – the name of the research programme within which our research program is located – and the overall purpose of the experimental theatre techniques which we have selected for the research.

In Playback theatre the performance of the actors operate as direct, if stylistic mirroring, of the participants’ stories; in Forum theatre, the mirroring is not just performative but aims also explicitly to be transformative and emancipatory.

All this is fascinating and thought provoking. However, already from the pilot performances we started to encounter some questions that need to be answered theoretically as well as methodologically.

Firstly, far from just ‘playing back’ the participants’ stories, the players, as the story tellers, the conductors and the researchers, are situated. We found that the different conductors asked very different questions, even if they were briefed similarly. We decided to have much more detailed guidelines to the conductors in future, but I don’t think that this will resolve the issue completely, and, of course, it is not just conductors but also the players that
translate in differential ways our guidelines. Of course we can perhaps transform this weakness into strength by exploring, in the post-performances interviews the ways people perceived or not perceived these differences when their stories are played back to them but at the moment I would like to leave this as a problem rather than as a problem with a solution.

Secondly, in Forum theatre, the image work which involves relating to particular concepts, such as power or exclusion – which were used in our forum pilot, both assume and question particular understanding of particular concepts. In the excerpts that we saw, people were divided between understanding power as physical or authoritative [the second group which did not make fists] and exploring such differences and their significance can be very illuminating. However, when a similar exercise was tried using the notion of exclusion, it became quite clear that many of the participants didn’t have any clear idea what exclusion means. Does this means that in such work verbal discussion should come before the performative? What can/should be the relationship between labelled images and projections of conflicts? What is the relationship between constructions and authorisations of identities, their performative mirroring and social emancipatory action? And what is the relationship between all of the above and the definition of identities by Denis-Constant Martin (1995:10) who defined them as specific forms of cultural narratives, closely related to political processes which, among others, involve strategic syncretism, invention of tradition thanks to liberating amnesia and – probably most important to our interests here - efforts to make change legitimate, if not natural.

I’ll, of course, expect all the answers from you just after the break… Thank you.