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Forum theatre

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IN A NUTSHELL:

Forum theatre is a practical form of theatre of the oppressed, a format originally developed as part of community education, and which Louise Lacoste argues is useful for policy evaluation. Forum theatre involves actors and oppressed "spect'actors" co-constructing a scene depicting a situation of oppression, with the "spect'actors"; then invited to intervene to change the situation being played out. This format makes it possible to capture the perceptions and experiences of those who are the target of public policies and who live in situations of marginalisation and oppression, and in particular the way in which they receive the policies that target them.

Keywords: qualitative methods, popular education, forum theatre, pedagogy of the oppressed, participation, power relations, reception of public policies

I. What does this method consist in?

Forum theatre is based on the oppressions experienced and suffered on a daily basis, staging them by and for the people concerned, and acting on them collectively to transform the reality being played out. Forum theatre is a practical form of theatre of the oppressed (Boal 2007) which is itself closely linked to the pedagogy of the oppressed: "that which must be forged with the oppressed and not for them, as individual or people, in order to fight relentlessly for the recovery of their humanity". (Freire 1970). It is an illustration of a political evaluation methodology, the challenge of which is to move towards greater symmetrisation of the evaluation and research relationship, to move away from positions that could be extractivist (i.e. where research and evaluation capture the knowledge of the people concerned without the results being a resource for them).

Forum theatre involves actors and the oppressed co-constructing a scene depicting a situation of oppression. The scene must be told from the point of view and experience of the oppressed. The scene is then performed in front of the workshop participants, who are invited to intervene to change the situation played out during the forum, by replacing on stage the person they feel solidarity towards and whose oppression also affects them. The participants are traditionally called "spect'actors", a contraction of the words "spectators" and "actors". One cannot observe a forum theatre scene without taking part in it in some tangible way (by intervening directly during forum time) or emotionally (the scenes shown should, in theory, concern the participants to some degree). The aim of the forum time (i.e. the time during which the situation is re-enacted through the interventions of the spect'actors) is to bring about forms of social change, through the transformation of the modes of interaction and the situations played out. In other words, during the forum, a social transformation takes place "between actors and spect'actors, where everyone acts as agents of change, creating individual and collective solutions". (Noël et al., 2021, p. 86). The forum is therefore a space for reflection to identify oppression and a space for militant training to react to it. The forum serves both the oppressed and the group taking part in the workshop.

I will be talking here about forum theatre as it is used in a workshop, i.e. a space where the actors in the forum are also participants in the workshop (forum theatre can also be performed in "show" mode, where the actors on stage are actors and the audience has no knowledge of the scene before it is shown to them). When the scenes to be performed in the forum are written and set up, one realises just how much Forum Theatre requires a shared emotional commitment between workshop leaders and participants. In particular, there is a three-way collaboration between the person whose story is being told, the facilitators

and the other workshop participants who will be acting in the scene. The challenge is to create the conditions for genuine reciprocity and a relationship of trust. The interviewer/facilitator accompanies the participants in the workshop as they tell their stories. The group supports the process, asks for clarification and is brought into the scene. The oppressed, whose story is acted out in the forum, has the difficult role of supervising the staging so that their story is realistic while accepting certain chronological or relational inaccuracies in the service of the clarity of the staging. This methodology creates a situation of joint work and joint development of the story. Requests for clarification and detail are made in the act and are supported by the whole group in the process of staging the stories of oppression.

The forum time brings together all the participants in the workshop: the group of actors and the group of spect'actors (who have usually written and directed another situation at the same time). The situation is acted out and then discussed by the whole group, before moving on to what is known as the forum, where the spect'actors are invited to replace someone in the scene that has just been acted out, someone they feel solidarity with and/or whose oppression they share. The use of forum theatre as part of the pedagogy of the oppressed prevents a participant who is not affected by the oppression being played out on stage from replacing an oppressed person. In this context, we suggest that participants who do not experience oppression on a daily basis are invited to replace, when the scene allows, people who are "allies": people who are not affected by the oppression being played out, but who are not active oppressors either. For example, cisgender men are not allowed to replace women or gender minorities in a situation depicting sexist oppression, nor are white people allowed to replace racialised people. The risk is that they will not be able to leave behind their position of privilege and fall into a position of "lecturing" on how to react to an oppression that does not concern them. The need to be concerned by the oppression that is being played out affects only the spect'actors and not the actors, who by definition play a role that may therefore be disconnected from their own position in society.

A Theatre of the Oppressed workshop requires the presence of two facilitators trained in the method and a group of participants (minimum 6 people, maximum 15) who share a common experience (either a common oppression or belonging to the same collective). It is therefore preferable, if this is not a certainty, to hold a discussion and/or training session on the subject one wishes to tackle, to ensure that the workshop is not a forum for the (re)production of systemic violence.

II. How is this method useful for policy evaluation?

Forum theatre makes it possible to evaluate public policies in a way that takes full account of the concerns and issues as experienced by those for whom the policies are intended. More specifically, it is a popular and political education methodology that can be used in an evaluation process to highlight the issues that are of direct concern to stakeholders of the intervention (whether they are social workers or people receiving support), even when these concerns are not addressed by public policy and traditional evaluation practices. Forum theatre can make two contributions to the evaluation of social policies.

Firstly, forum theatre is a powerful tool for analysing practices, opening up the black box of support and all the dilemmas created by the implementation of specific policy tools. At the heart of the work of supporting social workers, forum theatre has been used in a 'roundabout' way (Dangoumau 2023), that is, not directly in the fight against oppression, but as a way for social workers to problematise certain difficulties encountered in the course of their work. This makes it possible to reconstruct thorny

professional situations. Forum theatre, in a research-evaluation context, is a tool that promotes participants' empowerment (Noël et al. 2021).

Secondly, forum theatre makes it possible to uncover some blind spots in the design of social policies. This was made possible by my doctoral thesis in sociology, on the study of the "*Premières heures*" intervention (Lacoste, 2024). This use of forum theatre for policy evaluation is new and has not yet been the subject of publications.

III. An example of the use of this method to evaluate an "employment first" programme for homeless people

My research tested the use of forum theatre to evaluate an intervention. In France, the "Premières heures" programme gives homeless people access to employment on specific low-paying contracts (€200 to €300 a month) involving limited working hours (6 to 12 hours a week). This programme is designed as a springboard to socio-economic integration.

With Chloé Dufresne, we organised nine forum theatre workshops with beneficiaries and social workers within the framework of this programme. During each workshop, we came up with situations to explore, deal with and problematise with the participants, based on their concerns and life stories. With Marie Loison and Alice Krzystofik, we also set up forum theatre workshops with associations during the qualitative evaluation of the "*Premières heures en chantier*" programme. We organised several forum theatre workshops in Brive-la-Gaillarde, over three full days. Two days were dedicated to the programme's beneficiaries, and one to the social workers involved in the programme.

Significantly, the issues that homeless recipients of the programme wanted to address in these workshops never concerned their integration job, but rather other difficulties in their daily lives: their concerns lie elsewhere, in a life littered with difficulties and obstacles that require daily productive and relational labour to adapt. By giving a glimpse into the daily lives of beneficiaries outside the programme, the forum theatre helped to put the role of the latter into perspective, but also to understand the nature of the obstacles limiting the scope of this type of policy. In essence, the deployment of forum theatre workshops led me to theorise about the existence of an important form of work aside the work required by the programme itself, that is, street work. Street work encompasses all the activities and interactions that take place *in* the street (understood as the place and space of life and survival) or *in connection* with it in the daily lives of homeless people. It refers to the time-consuming, full-time work of subsistence and survival. Taking into account the reality of this street work helps understand the limits of these policies, which seek to make employment compatible with the street situation and its constraints.

IV. What are the criteria for judging the quality of this method?

To be effective, this method must be used in a way that is fair to the people taking part in the workshops. Using forum theatre as a tool for evaluation cannot and must not be at the expense of the methodology rooted in the pedagogy of the oppressed. There are several elements at stake here:

- It is essential to **train** the facilitators, with a company or training group that fully embraces the pedagogy of the oppressed. Within a Theatre of the Oppressed framework, forum theatre can be a fully-fledged space for emancipation.

- The question of **intention**. This tool should not become a showcase for the use of participatory approaches, but should be part of a genuine research-intervention or research-action approach, where the results of the evaluation can be used by the institutions and structures involved in the evaluation as well as the people they support.
- The use of the testimonies and situations collected must be subject to the **informed consent of** the participants in the research or evaluation.
- As part of the evaluation of social policies, it is advisable to start with homogeneous-group **workshops** within the structures, so that each group of participants can appropriate the tool at its own pace and according to their own reality. At a later stage, setting up mixed workshops (gathering participants from different social groups) could be very fruitful in terms of results.

It is necessary to call on people trained in the method and to do so within a participative evaluation framework, where the objective is the emancipation of the participants.

V. What are the advantages and limitations of this method compared to others?

Strengths of the approach

- **An effort to balance social relations and create reciprocity in the evaluative relationship.** Using forum theatre workshops as part of an evaluation process is directly useful and empowering for the workshop participants, and helps to reduce the asymmetry that exists between the beneficiaries of social policies and those who support them (Gardella 2017) and between researchers and research participants (Papinot 2014). Forum theatre invites people to take note of the social relations of domination and to situate themselves in the social space, in order to intervene in the situations brought into play from their place in the world. In other words, forum theatre objectifies social positions on the basis of the stories told by the people concerned, thereby enabling evaluative results to be drawn from forms of symmetrisation of social relationships. In addition, the militant dimension of the tool directly increases the participants' capacity to act, and its primary objective is to equip them to react to the oppressions that affect them or that they witness: in this way, the evaluative relationship acquires an immediate reciprocal dimension.
- **Deploying an expertise that is resolutely militant and centred on the voice of those affected and oppressed.** The forum theatre used in qualitative evaluation is directly linked to a situated (Naudier and Simonet 2011), feminist (Clair 2016) and often embedded (Thoreau 2019; Alam, Gurruchaga, and O'miel 2012) practice of research and evaluation. Abundant research has demonstrated the great fertility of these often-militant investigative practices: acknowledging one's position and one's relationship to one's object of enquiry allows for original and objectified results. In this case, the results have to be in the service of the oppressed and the pedagogy of the oppressed. This ideological guideline becomes a methodological guideline for evaluation, enabling the design of public policies to be rethought through a prism that is resolutely at the service of the oppressed, who are often the target of the interventions.
- **Facilitating feedback on evaluation results.** Forum theatre, as a community education method that serves those who are the intended beneficiaries of public policies, can make it easier for the structures being evaluated to accept the evaluation.

- **Reaching an audience for whom qualitative interviews are not always suitable.** It is possible to run a forum theatre workshop with people who have little command of the language the research is conducted in, or whose ability to concentrate and theorise is poor.

Limits of the approach

- **A political method that can create suspucion.** However, the political dimension of the tool is also its limit: if it is used without methodological precautions (aimed at explaining the approach, its political origin and its implementation), the decision-makers, the managers of the structures evaluated and sometimes the scientific committees of the evaluations risk remaining suspicious of the militant dimension of the tool. A militant evaluation tool may in fact be perceived as lacking neutrality.
- **A fairly costly method, over the long term.** Forum theatre requires knowledge and training to be deployed. It's also an energy-consuming tool that requires a substantial material commitment for evaluation and a sometimes time-consuming organisation, for the schedule of workshops and the recruitment of participants.
- **A method that engages all participants on an intimate and emotional level.** Forum theatre requires a great deal of emotional commitment, so great care must be taken not to fragilize the people who talk about their situation and put it to work.
- **Precautions need to be taken when generalising results drawn from the forum theatre method.** The method enables a case study of the blind spots and dilemmas that structure the design and implementation of social policies, but its evaluative use must rely on a broader knowledge of the public programme under study to enable relevant/sufficiently general conclusions to be drawn.

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