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## Empowering Community: Theatre of the Oppressed as a Tool of Homeless People's Emancipation

### Abstract

In the chapter we describe a process and outcomes of a research project which aimed to find out knowledge about "social housing" for those who are poor, and how we can co-produce, within what action strategies, such knowledge. We take pedagogy of the oppressed as a theoretical grounding. Emancipatory action research is chosen as a research design, specifically theatre of the oppressed: a participatory methodology that can be used for knowledge co-production. In the chapter, we introduce screenplay of theatrical performance *Having Home Means Being Housed!*. Further, we present business with poverty in flats as a central theme. Specific action strategies were co-developed while performing the play. Key common issues identified within them are decisions not to give up, building solidarity and making the problem public. In the final part of the chapter we discuss the use of theatre of the oppressed as a tool of empowering marginalised communities.

### Introduction

In social work, there are central principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect to diversities to be met by every practitioner. It is clearly stated (IFSW, 2014) that social work "engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing".

How are we going to achieve such goals in times of subjectivization and individualization of socially and institutionally produced risks that are

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being interpreted as a failure of an individual? (Bauman, 2002; Keller, 2007; Beck, 2011).

In the contribution, we argue, theatre of the oppressed might be a tool for engaging and empowering communities as well as enabling social work or social pedagogy practitioners to be in line with the core values of social work. We will present an example of the emancipatory action research conducted through theatre of the oppressed with homeless people.

The theatre play *Having home means being housed!* was played in communities affected with poor housing conditions and/or threatened with evictions. Our motivation to create such a play was to raise critical consciousness of those involved in the play as actors and as audience. We are convinced raising such consciousness is the necessary and basic step in the participatory process we engage in with disadvantaged communities we aim to empower.

We would also like to highlight the importance of interdisciplinary cooperation between social work and social pedagogy. Learning about group processes and creation of the theatre of the oppressed was reached through pedagogical means. The emphasis on community empowerment fits more with social work goals. This cooperation enriched our understanding of participatory and emancipatory processes within community settings.

In the chapter, we first introduce theatre of the oppressed, its theoretical background and techniques used in the play. We then introduce the theatre of the oppressed as a research methodology. Third and fourth sections of the contribution are dedicated to research results. The last section discusses the use of theatre of the oppressed as a participatory and emancipatory tool in work with disadvantaged communities.

## Theatre of the Oppressed

### *Theoretical background of Theatre of the Oppressed*

Theatre of the oppressed is grounded in critical theories. One of the main authors of 20<sup>th</sup> century who influenced the method was a Brazilian pedagogue, reformer and advocate of unconditional humanity, Paulo Freire. Freire became famous for his conception of pedagogy of the oppressed, which was developed, as well as theatre of the oppressed, in reaction to the political and social situation in Latin American countries in 60–70s. of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The author of theatre of the oppressed was a Brazilian director, dramatist, theorist, writer and pedagogue Augusto Boal.

Theatre of the oppressed is inspired mainly by P. Freire's critique of society and by the method of Socratic dialogue. Freire shows various forms

of oppression in society when power is held only by a small group of the privileged who overpower others. The oppressed do not have an access to discussion about societal issues; they are unable to speak up, although they form a majority in the society (Freire, 2007). Augusto Boal (2006) understands oppression as a dynamic relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. The oppressed are, from theatre of the oppressed perspective, individuals or groups “who are socially, culturally, politically, economically, racially, sexually or otherwise deprived of their right to dialog” (Theatre for Dialogue, 2015).

With his conception, based on critical consciousness-raising through asking questions (Socrates dialogue), Freire wanted to strengthen the oppressed. Through dialogue he led the oppressed to “true” reflection and an understanding of their life conditions (“conscientização”) and to an awareness of possibilities in their acting in order to change their life situation (Freire, 2007). According to A. Boal (2006) it is the theatre that can offer unique space for exploring and confronting various opinions and ideas and for searching alternative strategies of acting among the oppressed in certain situations of oppression.

We can say then, that the theatre of the oppressed is “a translation” of pedagogy of the oppressed into theatrical language. Augusto Boal developed different theatrical techniques to analyse oppression.

### ***Selected techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed***

Boal taught students according to Freire’s pedagogical principles to reach transformation from perceiving themselves as objects, as individuals who act as others, to perceiving themselves as subjects, through to being individuals acting autonomously (Babbage, 2004).

In this chapter, we would like to introduce three specific techniques of theatre of the oppressed, that help to achieve such transformation and were used in the process of the presented research.

#### ***Image theatre***

In the image theatre participants materialize and visualize their ideas and experiences.<sup>1</sup> Created “images” can be concrete or abstract. Intentionally, language and speech are marginalized in order to create a space for other ways of perception, which A. Boal (2006) calls the theatre language. Research participants do not talk at the beginning of image creation, they

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Participants are divided into small groups. They are asked to make an image of “oppression”, one after another. He/she can use bodies of other participants in the group, like a sculptor. The bodies are becoming his/her clay. The final image serves as a visual reflection of one’s image of oppression in his/her mind.

are noticing their own emotions coming to them through bodies of other participants placed in the image. They observe the image composition, face expressions, colours, mutual relations of the bodies in the image etc. The task is “to become aware through feelings”. Their knowledge can be further enriched by reflections of other participants who later share their feelings and thoughts related to the image (Boal, 1995).

### ***Forum theatre***

It is interactive theatre directed to people experiencing similar forms of oppression. The moderator of the performance is called the “joker”. The task of the joker is to mediate the dialogue between the actors and the audience and to provoke critical discussion about the topic.

In the forum theatre there is a story of the main character – “the oppressed” who experiences different conflict situations with the oppressor. The oppressed is defeated, because s/he is not aware of possibilities that would help her/him to free the oppression (Boal, 2006).

Spectators are invited to participate in the solutions to the submitted problem during the performance itself. The participants can replace the main character on the stage and try to act differently towards the oppressor, in the safe theatre space. The main aim is to change unsatisfactory situations. The power of forum theatre lies in participation of those who themselves struggle with the same kind of oppression and feel desire and need to change it (actors). It enables spectators to identify with the story and the main character. They are supported by actors to learn to act differently not only in the imaginary theatre world but in the real life as well. The overall goal is not to solve the oppression but to reach a fruitful discussion in the sense of critical consciousness rising (Boal, 2006).

### ***Rainbow of Desire***

The Rainbow of Desire is a family of theatrical techniques developed by Boal (2006) to analyse origins of inner oppression inside of a person. Analytical techniques permit us to uncover that oppression we feel as individuals (e.g. fear of losing the roof over their head), and has its origins in structures of dominance and power in our society (Boal, 1995). The Rainbow of Desire replays situations from our everyday lives and reveals invisible elements of our relationships, such as emotions, mental obstacles and desires that may be of hindrance or of help. We can uncover mechanisms of specific oppression, make oppressors more visible and transfer them from “our heads” on to the stage, where we can fight them.

## Theatre of the Oppressed as emancipatory action research

Creation and production of the play *Having home means being housed!* copied individual phases of emancipatory action research (Ledwith, 2016: 152–154).

Emancipatory action research is framed within the belief that specific „wisdom“, is contained in the lived experiences of those struggling with oppression. It enables us to co-produce new knowledge, which is at the root of “acting for change”. Hence the main meaning of such research would be to achieve social change and to contextualize personal lives within political, economic and social structures in present day society (Ledwith, 2016).

The research was conducted from October 2016 till May 2017.

### *Selection of research method and research participants*

The authors of the chapter (academicians, working at the university) together with ASLIDO – Association of People for Homes<sup>2</sup> decided about creation of a new theatrical piece. We chose theatre of the oppressed as a theatrical method because of our past experience with it. The authors of the contribution also held a knowledge about possibility of using theatre of the oppressed as a research methodology (Hendl, 2005) and offered the possibility to realize the whole theatrical process as a research process. We argued in that way the results of the process could be captured, discussed together and further developed. The authors also proposed to write an article at the end. ASLIDO members agreed, so we had all become research participants.

There was a self-selection (Miovský, 2016) of research participants from ASLIDO. Anyone from the Association could participate in the theatre workshop (one week in October 2016). The authors of the contribution also intentionally chose (Miovský, 2016) another academician and two students of social pedagogy whose role was to help with theatre workshop.

The workshop was attended by 9 members of Association (6 men, 3 women) and 5 academicians.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In the Czech original: ASLIDO – Asociace lidí pro domov. ASLIDO is a small independent NGO (formed in 2013 as a theatrical group focusing on theatre of the oppressed) whose members are people with experience of homelessness. It has a network of allies, who help to proceed with administration, facilitate meetings and are available for any support needed and defined by the NGO members. The main aim of Association is to improve life conditions of homeless people in general. The authors have a history of cooperation with ASLIDO for the past five years.

<sup>3</sup> 3 teachers (including authors of the text) and 2 students of social pedagogy.

**Table 1.** Research participants (members of ASLIDO) according to type of dwelling

<b>Type of dwelling</b>	<b>Number of members</b>
“Social housing – subletting” at private housing market	4
“Social housing – subletting” at municipal housing	1
Municipal housing of poor quality	1
Hostel – social work on site	2
Hostel – commercial	1

### ***Data collection and data analyses***

During the workshop we (research participants) collected and analysed the data together.

As data collection methods we used group discussions (Miovský, 2006), image theatre and forum theatre (Boal, 1995), as set out above.

We analysed obtained data within research phases of problematising, conscientisation and action (detailed further down in the chapter) through modified procedures of grounded theory (open and axial coding) (Strauss, Corbin, 1997).

We consider the whole research process as participatory. The research participants decided about the topic, research methodology and co-produced the knowledge (collected and analysed the data) in mutual partnership (of academicians and people with experience of homelessness and living in poor housing conditions). According to Arnstein (1969) partnership is one of the highest level of participation (and is classified as full citizen power).

In the text below, we will describe each phase of emancipatory action research (according to Ledwith, 2016) applied to our research situation in a detail.

### ***Being***

The first phase of emancipatory action research is called “being”. It includes the identification of an issue or situation needing our attention (Ledwith, 2016). In the case of our research we attended regular meetings of ASLIDO. Some of its members obtained so called “social housing” in the past year and seemed to feel ambivalent about that. On one hand they were happy to finally arrive at a stable housing situation, on the other hand, they were experiencing technical problems with their flats. Some of the flats were also situated in socially excluded areas. The owner was either a private company or a municipality, renting the flats to NGOs that sublet them to ASLIDO members. The contracts were short term, extended each couple of months. The members had to use housing benefit to subsidise for housing costs. The rents were comparable to market prices on the local

housing market. There was a social worker assigned to each of them, but it was felt he/she mainly controlled duties of the subletting tenants to be fulfilled, rather than supporting people in their tenancies. In ASLIDO, there were also members who did not qualify for any “social housing” and were remaining in hostels. They felt injustice as they did not understand why they are not being selected for “social housing”. The group decided to look into these experiences in a more in-depth way through theatre of the oppressed. We together planned the one-week theatre workshop.

### ***Problematising and conscientisation***

In the phases of problematising and conscientisation we realized a one-week theatre workshop. First day we (all research participants) were searching for the main topic, trying to identify group emotions and interests (Ledwith, 2016). Our starting point was the above mentioned experiences with so called “social housing” and lack of access to it for some of the research participants. Second day we came across feelings of fear from housing loss in case the group would highlight technical issues with the flats or pointed out unavailability of it. This theme resonated with all participants from ASLIDO.<sup>4</sup>

We were able to formulate the main research question: “What knowledge about “social housing” for poorer people can we co-produce and what action strategies based on such knowledge do we choose?”

The rest of the week we had elaborated this question into a screenplay (detailed in next section). Reflecting on political context, it led us to incorporate theatre scenes also highlighting structural context of the whole housing issue (e.g. ethnic discrimination or poverty).

The screenplay and research were developed simultaneously. In open coding we focused on topics identification brought to the process by all research participants, their naming and categorization. Grounded theory method inspired us as well in the phase of axial coding, where mutual relations between categories are explored. We created a paradigmatic model emerging from axial coding that formed a basis for the screenplay. We understood the theatre story as a transformative paradigmatic model, told from the perspective of the oppressed. It served as a basis for further research phase (action).

### ***Action***

The action phase is typical for involvement of the broader community (Ledwith, 2016). We decided to perform a theatre play for people affected with poor housing conditions. The play was performed three times

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<sup>4</sup> We also shared experience about a real case of not extending a housing contract to the renter in the socially excluded area when she complained about the mould in the flat and started petition in the community for better housing conditions.

(December 2016, February 2017, May 2017) at the community centres of the area. We (all research participants) carried out intentional selection of certain localities (Miovský, 2006).

Each performance was visited by 10-30 spectators (mainly inhabitants of areas with poor housing conditions).

### ***Making sense***

The making sense phase should lead to deepening of an understanding and identification of further cycles of development (Ledwith, 2016). We reflected upon the action phase immediately after the play, and also some days later, in an intense group discussion with actors. We were discussing co-produced action strategies and making proposals for further development of the play (where to perform next, adjustments of the play). We completed the whole analysis with open coding of group discussions (Strauss, Corbin, 1997).

### ***Communication***

The last phase includes communication about co-produced knowledge (Ledwith, 2016). In our research this phase remains open. So far we have published articles in academic journals (e.g. Černá, Polánková, 2018). But we feel more could be done to introduce the topic in to more public spaces.

## **Screenplay of the theatre play “Having Home Means Being Housed!”**

The performance is opened by the joker, with a short story “Homes without people, people without homes” about selling a house with its residents to a new owner and its consequences, which gives an audience a social context for the play. Afterwards the audience watches a short video – an advertisement of the company PRD (Nice Family Homes) which offers housing in, at the first sight, good looking flats. The story is situated in one of these flats on offer.

There are four applicants who are interested in the flat – “debtor”, “drunk”, “Roma man” and “single mother”. The first three of them are turned down under fictional excuses. After each viewing, the walls of the flat become alive and critically talk about situation of each applicant and the behaviour of the owner towards them. In this scene, the emphasis is on the message that housing should be a right for everyone.



The successful applicant is Martina, the single mother, who has certain income secured with housing benefit, therefore she is attractive to the owner. When viewing the flat, she sees everything through “rose coloured glasses” as she is led by her desire and need to have a stable place. On her first night in the flat, she dreams (“shadow play”) about her joy and happiness from the flat, as well as her fear from a difficult financial situation that she might not be able to cover all the housing costs from housing benefit.

After moving and settling in, defects in the flat start to appear (mould, leaking gas, old windows...). The owner doesn’t care. Martina decides to call a neighbours meeting with requests for help.

The audience, in the role of neighbours together with the actors decide some strategies, on how they are going to act towards the owner and go to her office (another room). There is the owner, Mrs. Lucky and her real estate agent Mr. Happy who start negotiation with neighbours (audience). They try to apply oppressive strategies, which we identified at the theatre workshop (e.g. requesting the name list of involved neighbours, delaying visits in the flat to see defects, singling out the individual from the group, intimidation, belittling, etc...).

The owner ends the negotiation. The audience hears her talk to the real estate agent behind the closed doors. She is unwilling to repair anything. After hearing that, the actors induce an atmosphere of demonstration. Another short movie is screened – an anti-advertisement for PRD company (this time Renting of Defected Flats), combined with the video from a real demonstration for decent housing held to support Residomo<sup>5</sup> tenants in October 2016.

A couple of days after the demonstration, Martina is served a letter informing her about not extending her rental contract. She turns to the audience with the question what to do next. The joker calls the audience and the actors together to small mixed groups where they look for strategies that are presented as images (image theatre). The small groups present images to each other and discuss them. At the end the joker invites the audience to join ASLIDO if they wish to be involved in a housing struggle in a collective way.

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<sup>5</sup> Residomo is a real estate company owning over 43 000 flats in Moravia-Silesian region in the Czech Republic. The company is owned by international investment firms Blackstone and Round Hill Capital since 2015. Blackstone is by some housing activists in the USA and Spain accused of speculative practices in housing market (leading to forced evictions of families and individuals) (<http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com>, 2015).

## Business with poverty in flats as a central theme

As a central theme of the play, as a phenomenon resulting from our paradigmatic model we (all research participants) identified issue of business with poverty in flats.

In this section, we will present co-produced action strategies as a reaction to that phenomenon.

### *Action strategies against business with poverty in flats*

In the research phase called action, we played three performances, in which outcomes were captured through image theatre in the final interactive part. Co-produced action strategies (image theatre) were photographed, and later commented upon by actors of theatre of the oppressed (making sense research phase). Photographs were redrawn as pictures securing anonymity for participants. Here we present specific co-produced action strategies to deal with business with poverty in flats according to the participants.

**Picture 1.** Come to us, we will help you



**Source:** own research

Picture 1 captures an image of an evicted family. Neighbours and/or relatives are giving them a “helping hand”, accommodating them for some time. Actors later reflected upon a lack of physical space as an issue. Despite this inconvenience neighbours decide to help.

**Picture 2.** Social worker supports the family



**Source:** own research

On picture 2 that family was evicted. The social worker supports them at the hostel where they moved from the flat.

**Picture 3.** Give us back the deposit



**Source:** own research

The evicted family goes to the landlord to ask the deposit back. In this case actors commented the deposit won't be returned. According to them the owner can always find some excuse for not returning the money. Powers are not equal, but the family resists, they do not want to be "robbed".

**Picture 4.** Blockade: we are not leaving the flat

**Source:** own research

In this image a family decides to resist eviction by staying in the flat. The family refuses to go to the hostel. They consult a lawyer and defend themselves legally. It gains public support.

**Picture 5.** Tent on the square

**Source:** own research

The evicted family makes their situation public. They are protesting in tents on the square. They share their difficulties in a public space.



**Picture 6.** The power is in the unity

Source: own research

In this image people are giving the message to those who decide to fight against business with poverty in flats. The solution is to unite and don't give up.

**Picture 7.** Collective negotiation with the owner

Source: own research

Picture 7 shows the owner who is approached by a group of people (crowd) to ask about stopping the eviction. The pressure of the collective negotiation can cause, according to actors, fear and further refusal of tenants' demands or vice versa a surrender of the owner. Big crowd also raises needed attention.

### ***Theatre of the Oppressed as a tool of empowering community***

As academicians, we feel, together with Adams (2008), our role in the whole process was more of “practitioner/facilitator” rather than “practitioner/rescuer”. Taking this role, we could, in a participatory way (enabled by using theatre of the oppressed) cooperate with ASLIDO actors, and later with the audience, on raising their consciousness towards self-liberation. We could observe the process of self-empowerment. Victims had become the oppressed.<sup>6</sup>

Main aspects of resistance (and signs of empowerment) identified by us (as academicians) in co-produced action strategies were the decision not to give up, building solidarity and making the problem public.

Decision not to give up is present in pictures 3–7. People decided not to accept the role of the victim and actively defend themselves.

Further, ASLIDO actors commented that decision not to give up could be supported by “gaining courage” (e.g. by seeing others resisting, having allies), having a sense of commitment and playing other performances.

Building solidarity is shown in picture 1 where neighbours or relatives offer help to the evicted family. In pictures 4, 6 and 7 there are allies, including a lawyer, who came to support the family in their struggle. ASLIDO actors commented that displayed and shared emotions and mutual sharing of stories/experiences are part of the process of solidarity building.

Making the problem public includes the political layer of blurring the boundaries between private and public. In pictures 4, 5 and 7 the family decides to fight for housing and decides to speak up or to act in a public space. To be empowered to do that, ASLIDO actors commented, there needs to be a realization of inequalities; for example, searching for a flat is not equal for everyone. There are different conditions for a Roma family, because of strong discrimination, than for others. With this realization there comes an abandonment of self-blame.

### ***Challenges Identified in Empowering Community***

ASLIDO actors identified also challenges that need to be faced, when trying to empower the community. Those are mainly fear (e.g. losing the roof over their head, although the quality of it might be low). Disadvantaged communities have not got resources to secure themselves an alternative, therefore the risks are not equally distributed between social workers/facilitators empowering them to act, and themselves.

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<sup>6</sup> In our understanding the victim and the oppressed are both the target of the oppression. The difference is that victim gives up, while the oppressed decides to stand up to it and to resist.

From the point of academicians, we would like to emphasise here the point about the importance of a strong network of allies which can help with solutions in a case where there is a crisis (pressure of one or few individuals is too low to make a change). We would also like to mention “over-class” solidarity we can build by intervening in our own, mainly “middle class circles”.

Challenges might also include, according to ASLIDO actors, feelings of frustration resulting from long negotiations and never ending meetings, when things seem not to be moving fast enough and the lived reality for people does not change. Therefore it is important, at least from the authors’ perspective, to include direct actions or community events into the struggle. In this way, people take part in constructing their own reality, feeling they have a power to transform it.

The last challenge we as academicians could pick up on is displayed in picture 2, where the social worker helps the evicted family in the hostel. Although we acknowledge the importance of helping in critical situations, we would also argue this situation brings social workers to the role of rescuers. Rescuers (according to Adams, 2008) produce victims. In this sense there might be a danger in falling into the relationship of rescuer – victim, which is in direct opposition to the ideas of empowered individuals who can co-produce community.

## Conclusion

In the introduction the authors of this contribution asked the question about the ways of engaging people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing in present day society. We presented theatre of the oppressed as a tool of raising critical consciousness and co-producing new alternative solutions of the issue we struggle with. We consider theatre of the oppressed a participatory method, where formal boundaries between social workers/social pedagogues and their “clients” are dismissed. Critical consciousness raising happens not only with the oppressed but also on the site of practitioners. Social workers do not stand aside, in a neutral position, they are involved, or rather engaged.

Within that we need to recognize different power positions exist, therefore social workers need to be aware of their position and where necessary apply “power with”, rather than “power over” approach (Adams, 2008).

In our research we have realised there are challenges that are difficult to overcome, such as feelings of fear and frustration or the position of victim. But we have also experienced we can overcome them through solidarity

building, encouraging ourselves and others for decisions not to give up, and blurring the boundaries between private and public, making struggles we face public and therefore political.

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