

The kingdom of the subjunctive:

Theatre as meaning making of the self

AV SISSEL HORGHAGEN

ABSTRACT

This article is based upon a study where homeless people were invited to participate in a theatre project by three cultural workers. The performance was a result of the participants' narratives and most of them participated in the performance together with professional performers. In drama, subjunctivizing realities are used to explore human possibilities rather than settled certainties. Such thinking is applicable to narratives where people express their way of thinking about the world, taking the form of personal reflections on the past and hopes for a future. The aim of the study was to explore narratives presented by homeless people in ethnodrama and how they relate them to meaning in their everyday life.

The material was collected through participant observations. Through the paradigmatic analysis of the narrative data, four subjects were identified and presented in the result: The experienced injustice disturbed their storyline, The rewritten narratives presented in the performance created possibilities and changes, The narratives had subjunctive aspects, and Lack of relations that could be trusted.

The discussion highlight how drama can be used as a method to liberate people's resources and through the subjunctive they are offered possibilities to consider themselves differently and find ways to participate in everyday life occupations. Such methods are also useful to create an information exchange between people living in different spaces in the same world.

Keywords: homelessness, drama, narratives, participation, everyday life



Sissel Horghagen er førstelektor ved Avdeling for helse- og sosialfag ved Høgskolen i Sør-Trøndelag. E-post: Sissel.Horghagen@hist.no

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In almost every city in the world, there are a number of people who are constantly or intermittently homeless. Cziksentsmihalyi (1997) claims that two separate and distinct worlds exist in one city; one is affluent, well-educated, technologically skilled, and obsessed with conception. The second is poor, demoralised, and consumed with mere survival. This article is based on a project involving homeless people. They were invited to share their experiences through developing a drama to enact together with professional performers. Such projects may highlight avenues for change required to support marginalised people. In this article the use of drama is explored to gain insights into homeless people's narratives and how they relate them to everyday experiences. The introduction presents possible understandings of the term homelessness and drama as research on subjunctive possibilities, which indicates a hypothetical state such as a desire or a kind of imaginary situation.

Possible understandings of homelessness

The Medline definition of homeless people is *Persons who have no permanent residence. The concept excludes nomadic peoples*. The United Nations describe «absolute homelessness» as the condition of people without physical shelter who sleep outdoors, in abandoned buildings or places not intended for human habitation. Further they describe «relative homelessness» as conditions for those who have a physical shelter, but one that does not meet basic standards of health and safety. This is the definition that is most frequently used in health-related research (Hwang, 2001), but homelessness is an indistinct term with diverse use (Andersson & Sward, 2007). Homelessness is one of the most pressing social issues of the world. The physical and mental health of homeless people is worse than the general population and the prevalence of mental disorders is three to four times higher among the homeless population (Shelton et al., 2009). A disproportionate number of homeless people report experiences of childhood adversity, including poor relationship with parents, neglect, physical and sexual abuse and being placed out of the home (Koegel, Memamid & Burnham, 1995).

Some homeless people are illegal refugees with limited rights to medical and social services. The Norwegian Association for Asylum Seekers (NOAS, 2009), estimates that there are approximately 25 000 people without legal residence just in Norway. Persons with ethnic minority background are over-represented amongst people with an unsuitable habitation (Järvinen, 1992; Hwang, 2001).

This article focuses on homeless people in Norway that were offered public shelters (where the person has to spend most of the day outside); they lived occasionally with friends or in abandoned buildings. They had periodically slept on the streets.

Drama as research on subjunctive possibilities

There are challenges when conducting qualitative research on homeless people, because they are often not accessible, might have mobile living patterns, and do not use modern communication as most people do. This invites research-

ers to employ creativity and flexibility such as we may find in ethnographic methods. Some researchers (Rossiter et al 2008) have taken interest in drama as a unique method of analysing data and interpreting findings. Drama has been a means to inspire thoughts, critical reflections, emotional engagement, and personal transformations. Different drama genres have been used for such aims (Denzin, 1997; Gray et al., 2000; Kwon, 2004; Fox & Dickie, 2010; Horghagen & Josephsson, 2010). The form of drama utilised in this article has similarities to ethnodrama. Ethnodrama is defined by Saldana (2005:2) as the written script, which consists of dramatized, significant selections of narratives collected through, for instance interviews or participant observations.

In drama, subjunctivizing realities are used to explore human possibilities rather than settled certainties (Bruner, 1986). Such thinking is applicable to narratives where people express their way of thinking about the world, taking the form of personal reflections on the past and hopes for the future (Alsaker & Josephson, 2010). Several research traditions have focused on narratives as a prime source of data within ethnographies of healthcare, and consider narratives to be the best way to discover persons' lived experiences of particular events (Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000). Stories may provide a place for those who may find themselves stripped of their voices. A rediscovery of the voice is significant for those who feel themselves misunderstood and voiceless in the health care system (Mattingly, 1998). Inability to perform activities that are considered normal in a society may, according to Creek (2008), lead to a feeling of exclusion and worthlessness. Engagement in activities for an underground group of people may be highly valued and lead to a sense of connectedness with the people belonging to this specific culture. Such engagement may create social meaning, and the term meaning in a narrative sense is about how individuals establish causality between experiences, actions and images of future events into a coherent and understandable whole (Eikeland, 1989; Ricoeur, 1991; Reed, Hocking, Smythe, 2010). In this article stories are used to describe human action and how the participants interpret events and actions.

Through listening to peoples' stories we might learn about the impact on individual level occupation. The participants in this study are consciously presented as people with unique knowledge and experiences. Through narratives people may express a way of thinking about the world, taking the form of personal reflections. Therefore the aim of this article is *to explore narratives presented by homeless people in ethnodrama and how they relate them to meaning in their everyday life*.

Method

Project Description

The theoretical and methodological foundations of the project were supported by ideas from ethnodrama (Saldana, 2005), narratives (Mattingly, 1998), and ethnography (Hamersley & Atkinson, 2007). Narratives play a po-

werful part in the construction of our selves. This choice of conceptions was made to match the aim of the study.

The project was initiated by three cultural workers including the current author. The intention was to create an art expression from the experiences of homeless people. The context of events within which the participants acted was a city in Norway with approximately 150 000 inhabitants and according to NIBR, 200 homeless people. Illegal homeless people are not included in the figure.

The performance was placed outside and inside of the locations of a community centre: outdoors as this was where the participants stayed periodically or permanently, and indoors as a metaphor of hope and being included in the warmth of the society, the participants themselves argued. Such performances may diminish the boundaries between the illusion of the theatre and the reality of the outside world (Thompson, 2003).

Participants

The act of establishing contact with homeless individuals for the purpose of recruiting them to the cultural project became a long social process. This phase was defined as a starting point to explore the homeless peoples' way of living, where they spent their days and nights, what their daily life was like, and what they were concerned about. The team recruited participants through spending time walking around specific areas of the city as well as spending nights on the street, in order to find out what it was like to be homeless, as well as to establish contact with homeless people. We met people belonging to a, for us, unknown society. We presented ourselves as the persons we were, cultural workers including a researcher that wanted to involve homeless people in a cultural project. Through these activities the twelve participants were slowly recruited. They were adults around fifty years old; which was coherent with our own age, but significantly older than the average homeless person in Norway.

Four were asked to participate in the research project. These were the persons that we got the most stable contact with. Inclusion criteria were: dependent on social services, living below the poverty level and being homeless. The four participants were three men and one woman in the age range of 40 - 55 years, and all of them were ethnic Nordic. All of them had long experience of being homeless according to the UN definitions. Two of them had spent their childhood in institutions, one was a drug addict. Their living patterns changed related to the seasons in Norway. Before the informed written consent was collected, we made sure that the participants were aware of their rights to withdraw from the study, as well as the consequences of the consent. For ethical reasons, names are fictional, the age is approximate, and personal descriptions are limited. The four chosen participants are in this article called Ulf, Undis, Ulrik and Ulvar. To protect their anonymity we do not describe them in any detail.

Data Collection

The data consisted of field notes and the created manus-

cript. The collection of data followed recommended guidelines from an ethnographic design (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Extensive field notes and reflections were written shortly after each rehearsal and performance. The field notes were structured in three categories: context, experience, and reflections. Data collection took place one day a week for a six-month period. Two persons wrote field notes individually. Notes were then shared and discussed. In total, the period of data gathering, creating the manuscript, and presenting the performance lasted for one year.

The process of developing the manuscript implemented themes such as telling stories about my life, physical impressions, voice techniques, and the act of dramatising events from life narratives (Eik, 2004). We focused on the everyday life and practical details to understand the participants' perspectives, actions, incidents, norms and values (Bauman & Sherzer, 1996) through an open, unstructured design, which could increase the opportunities to catch sight of the unexpected. The questions we asked in order to make them tell stories were related to their way of living, as well as what they had done before, and their wishes for the future. We had to be patient because appointments were often changed. At the end of the process of data gathering we started to work dramaturgically with their stories to highlight important plots in them together with the persons involved.

Data Analysis

The preliminary analysis started after the first field encounters and continued through the data gathering period and afterwards, consistent with the ethnographic method (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Experiences were shared between participants, the cultural workers, and the researcher and evoked numerous discussions related to the content of the performance. The preliminary analysis, done by the cultural workers and the researcher, highlighted subjects that became the structure in the performance:

- 1) Everybody has a story to tell
- 2) The treasures in my suitcase
- 3) I want to get rid of a stigma
- 4) The experiences of injustice by adults at institutions
- 5) Different versions of the same space
- 6) I am a pilgrim, and
- 7) The challenges of being a whistleblower.

In the next phase the material was analysed by the author, to be presented in this article. The data material was narrative in its form, but the analysis was paradigmatic. Paradigmatic analysis of narrative data seeks to locate common themes from several stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). To do so, systematic readings were done to obtain an overall sense of the data through repeated reading of the fieldnotes. Then the overall sense of data was broken into parts. All topics relevant to the research aim were identified and gradually four themes appeared from the analysis:

- The experienced injustice disturbed their storyline
- The rewritten narratives created possibilities and changes

- The narratives had subjunctive aspects
- The lack of relations that could be trusted

Ethical and Methodological Considerations

The project was approved by Norwegian Social Science Data Service. We repeatedly talked with the participants to determine whether they felt comfortable to present their stories in the performance. Those who were most highly profiled had no doubts about this, because they wanted to tell society about years of oppression and anger; some were in a user organisation for children and had spent their childhood in institutions.

Describing the project on paper, it appears as if we inhabited several positions, for instance as cultural workers and researchers, however in the process this was not perceived as difficult. I experienced it as if we were in the position of society-involved researchers.

Findings

Each of the major findings will be presented by an illustration from the performance, followed by the result of the analysis supported by quotes, examples, and discussions.

The experienced injustice disturbed their storyline

After my second year at school, the child welfare authorities and the police came to our home. They placed me in an institution for children. I lived there for nine years and they pigeonholed me, said I was not as smart as the others, how come; I managed to get a driver license when I was 19 years old! Now I am 49 years old and I want to get rid of this stigma that has hindered me a lot in my life.

When telling stories, the participants talked mostly about the past. One issue in their stories about the past was abuse and neglect in their childhood. Some had spent years of their childhood in special institutions for children. One participant said he had never told his (ex-) wife and children that he had been a pupil at this special school. *Two years ago I joined a supportive group for pupils from... (Name of the school). Then I managed to talk about what I have been through. But I still haven't told my children about those experiences of mine.* One interpretation of this story is that traumatized experiences from childhood hindered him from linking together the past and present times of his narratives, and this disturbed him from living an ordinary life. All participants except one person organized most of their everyday life according to where they could have free meals. One had recently got lodging for homeless people from the community. Some days they sold the street magazine. One of the three was a drug addict and had therefore a pressure to get money for this activity.

Two of the participants explained that some teachers at the institutions sexually abused many of the pupils. A user organisation had recently been established for people that had been pupils at this special institution. The mayor of the city deplored officially to those pupils and verified that many of them had been exposed to gross neglect and that they could apply to get compensation. It may be considered that this encouraged some to dare to tell about those

experiences and this subject became an important part of the performance.

Some plots described helplessness related to experiences when they were taken into care and sent to live in institutions. Ulrik explained that many of the so-called problem-children were sent to institutions. Some were labelled mentally retarded even though they, as described by both Ulf and Ulrik, were maybe hyperactive or filled with anger and sadness because of their life situation. *Against the will of my mother I was sent to a special institution. I was eight years old. I was crying.* Both Ulrik and Ulf often focused on those issues when we were talking to them. In the interpretation of the material it seems to be a kind of healing power in their stories. They managed to reflect on both a personal and a societal level, but at the same time their personal storyline never went into present or future time. It might seem that the injustice they experienced disturbed their storyline. When they linked their narratives or plots to the future, the narratives were connected to a wish for justice that was out of their control.

To summarize, the participants' stories concerned both their actions and experiences. There seemed to be a weak link between past, present, and future in their stories. One might suggest that such lack of coherence might affect people's feeling of who they are and who they want to be in life. They strived to establish causality between experiences, actions, and images of future events into a coherent and understandable whole (Ricoeur, 1991), and this may affect their abilities to create strategies for making changes in their lives.

The coherence in rewritten narratives created possibilities and changes

Yes, I did set fire to that house, and I am very sorry for the person who died in that fire. I did not do it on purpose. I have fulfilled the punishment. In prison I became familiar with Fritz Moen that was wrongfully convicted for two distinct felony murders serving a total of 18 years in prison. This case is termed the largest justice scandal in Norway of all time. Moen was deaf with a severe speech impediment. He was also partly paralyzed. I dream about making a film about him that shall present the injustice, but also the real Fritz; the nice man that was my friend; presenting the good sides of us. Imagine...

Working with the performance, the participants' plots were prepared for the performance by the instructors in cooperation with the participants. Undis told stories about how she felt her life had been destroyed due to injustice by the authorities. One story was about her experiences when the child welfare authorities took her new-born child into their care. She ultimately chose three stories from her life that she wanted to share with the audience. At the performance she sat in a chair with a box of three fabrics in her lap. One story was connected to each fabric. She took a fabric out of her lap, sensed it, and told that this fabric had been a blanket that belonged to the daughter she had lost. *But now I shall redesign it into pillows; pillows that I can hug and feel comfort from.* From our interpretation of her per-

formance we see that this act contributed to meaningfulness and pride for Undis. She had invited all her family members to the performance, and through this act it seemed that some kind of reconstruction of her identity took place through her narratives. She proudly presented her stories.

As we interpret it, the act of telling stories, dramatizing them, preparing and presenting them, created meaningful activities for the persons involved. Through playful but professional theatre methods they reflected on their own stories. The analysis of the material indicates that this promoted new experiences and insight. In narrative theories as well as in the theatre, the term «plot» is used. Plots are structuring devices that give poetic narratives their capacities to deal in universals by placing actions within a coherent whole (Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000). *It is like I take myself more seriously working with this performance... changing my own view on myself, remembering how I viewed myself as a creative person when I was young* (Undis). The plots appeared to establish relations between themselves and the events while enabling them to construct, together with the instructors, a meaningful story and not merely an assembly of facts. Through the process of dramatizing their narratives and embodying them through the actions, they were given possibilities of reshaping the meaning and results of what had transpired. Ricoeur (1991) uses the concepts configuration and reconfiguration about this process, and Bruner (1986) expresses how we create our identities through storytelling. We could see how problem-solving occurred through storytelling; participants were challenged to view their lives in another perspective and this engaged positive and empowering energy. For instance, Ulf's story was dramatized so he could present himself as a person with resources and not only as a person that experienced himself as a victim of injustice. In the performance we made a royal seat for Ulf and from there he told his stories: *When I go to the social services no one asks if I can do something. I just get the social insurance. Next time I will say: people who know me say I am a good driver. Maybe I can get a job as a driver? Or can you use my other resources? My name is Ulf and I want to be a part of this society.*

The subjunctive aspects in the narratives

If I get economic compensation for the years of child abuse and neglect in the institution, I want to pay my debt, get a place to live and maybe buy a car. I have a girlfriend in another city and I could help her with small repairs in her house. – And we could go on holiday together in that car... She is the love of my life... And I would like to take a course in computing and buy a PC. – But most important is that a compensation would give me dignity; like an official apology.

Through the work with the performance, subjunctive possibilities occurred. Ulf expressed that he hoped to receive financial compensations for the injustice suffered at the institution. We asked him if the compensation could change his life and in what way. Followed by such stories they made reflections of what they had done, what they

wanted to do now, and their hope for future occupations. One decided he should organize himself as a seller of the street magazine to get an income. Some started to talk about dreams they had for their lives when they were younger. This has an element of subjunctive (Ricoeur, 1991) and became an important part in the performance. The element of subjunctive was used consciously to link together their narratives about the past to the present and to thoughts about the future. The subjunctive was used as a dramaturgic handle. In the process of making the performance, they were asked for hypothetical perspectives and when they raised them they were asked to be specific and exemplify them. In this way the hypothetical perspectives could assist the participants to use their narratives to think with.

The subjunctive was used dramaturgically when the participants did not have the courage to perform. Some withdrew from part of the performances, but the team were allowed to say what was supposed to be said. We solved this dramaturgically in this way: *At this chair Undis should have been standing. Then she would have raised her head like this, and told you her story.* Most of them were amongst the audience at the performance on those days when they did not feel well enough to perform. Through interpretations of the material we saw how storytelling became a significant action used to pursue the direction they wished their life to take; though it felt like a huge challenge for some of the participants. It seemed obvious that storytelling offered them a way to make sense of what had happened and weave their storyline together.

The lack of relations to trust

When I started at the new school as a nine-year-old, I told my schoolmates that I was living at the orphanage. They became suspicious. No decent child lived at an orphanage. I could understand that this was what they meant. It was stupid of me to tell them the truth. They could not understand my situation. None of them wanted to spend time with me...

The term narrative is relational. Stories are told to someone and consist of plots that involve relations as well. Most of the participants' stories were about significant relations, but they described many of those significant relations as bad. Some talked about the lack of relations in which they could confide; they told sad stories about having few or no persons to trust as children in an institution far away from home. They had experienced degradation by others and had been offended by persons that they should have been able to trust. In our interpretation of the material we see that maybe the worst was when their stories and experiences were not considered as being true by the adults they should have been able to trust.

In the performance some of the texts were dramatised and presented tape-recorded in the performance because they were too painful to tell: *Around twelve o'clock I was lying in my bed in the dormitory, it was totally dark, and I was listening to the footsteps. Would the steps stop by my bed this night...* A possible interpretation of those stories is that

some of the participants had experienced feelings of powerlessness for sexual abuses that took place at some institutions. As a child you cannot hinder the assailant to stop the sexual abuse. A national mapping of institutions for children with special needs, The Befring-report (2004), concluded that sexual abuse took place and that few assailants have been convicted because of the high requirements of the law.

Through participation in the theatre performance some of the participants told powerful stories about themselves as persons that had lived a hard life; but also as persons with rich experiences and resources. At the performances they were surrounded by people that wanted to listen to their stories. *That my family came to the performance meant so much to me* (Undis). In our analysis we see that the stories serve as both an aesthetic and a moral form. Mattingly (1998) claims that we may create story-like structures through interactions. She emphasises the events of the stories and she names this as therapeutic emplotment. They are a result of an ongoing process with people we interact with. Despite the participants having experienced betrayals from adults, they were now in social surroundings where they were believed, and this encouraged them to move forward.

The stories of the homeless people in the study had extensive political consequences and were woven into a collective story of how children with special needs had been treated: stories about how children were in some cases wrongly diagnosed. In these instances many children experienced gross neglect at the institutions and did not have a childhood with trust, care, and love. While the intention of the study was to find out more about the everyday life of the homeless people, they themselves wanted to tell painful stories that had hindered them from participating in the society as ordinary people having home, work and family. It is obvious from this study that the participants involved were concerned about being respected and treated with dignity, and did not focus that much on their living conditions.

Reflections

Different interpretations of narrative structure

The aim of this study was to explore homeless people's narratives presented in a performance and how they related these narratives to meaning in their everyday life. A central discovery from the interpretation of the material was that there was a weak link between past, present, and future in the narratives of the participants. It seems that their experienced injustice disturbed their storyline. For most of us creating such links may be described as a mental process where emotional, conscious, and unconscious imaginations play a role (Eikeland, 1989). Rösen (2004) claims that the ability to link together the past, present and future helps us to instruct ourselves for our actual life. Few of the participants told stories about more practical life aspects of contemporary time. When they did, they told stories about how their days were structured by opportunities for free meals and when they had to go to the

hospices to get a bed for the night. Their stories lingered on injustice in their past.

The participants' stories were dramatized by the instructors together with the person involved. In this case the stories had a dramaturgic structure with moments such as: presenting a plot, rising action, turning point, falling action, and the end of the story. Of course, there are always many possible truths and realities when people construct stories. From the interpretations it seems that this rewriting satisfied the participants and demonstrated that they could tell stories that were important and meaningful for them to share with others. As well this included that they got warmly response from the audience.

In the process of making a manuscript out of participants' stories, we reasoned that the stories were fragmented and in many ways not what we had expected. The stories were not structured around just one plot and were not presented in a linear structure. Bruner (1986) claims that such implicit expectations originate from the western dominant traditional discourse of what a story of the self should look like. On the contrary, postmodern narratologists assume that narrative characteristics are not inherent in human nature (Sermijn et al 2008). This implies that a universal definition of the essence of a story is difficult to construct.

Theatre as a subjunctive space

The use of ethnographic methods may enable researchers to work with knowledge production in a bottom-up position, using one's resonance consciously in the interpretation of the material. Doing a project like this involves the researcher as a human being, scientist and culture worker. Many artists of today are concerned with the more direct integration of art into the realm of urgent social problems such as homelessness. The position of the artist is however undergoing a mutation and mingles with, for instance, the scientist, the occupational therapist, etc. (Kwon, 2002). It may seem that art is more and more about matters that traditionally belonged to politics, and that art has to reshape political conflicts at the risk of testing the limits of its own politics. Considering this, it became obvious that the current project implemented human relations outside the traditionally defined objectivity of the researcher. Bourriaud (2002) introduces the term «relational aesthetic». He claims that contemporary art creates free arenas that differ from other communication zones. In this way, the performers, instructors, and the audience created a space where people were more open-minded to understand each other. The work with the performance triggered many thoughts among the participants. Some of them wanted to do more projects. We did follow-up on this to some extent: we made a short film with one of the actors involved in the project and we wrote an article that was published in a street magazine.

Limitations and implications for future research

Demographic characteristics of homeless people vary significantly from country to country and the term homelessness has different nuances and diverse use (Hwang, 2001;

Anderson & Sward, 2007). Such dilemmas, as well as the causes of homelessness, have not been discussed in this article, but there is a need to discuss this further, as the 'typical' homeless person changes, and this has huge implications for the countries' health and social services. A limitation of this study related to this issue is that all the participants were born approximately during the same decade (1950 - 1965).

It may seem that homelessness is neglected by medicine and psychiatry (Folsom & Jeste, 2002) and more research is needed to identify better ways to deliver life opportunities to this population. There is also a need for further experience and knowledge of how drama as an activity may be a medium that can support marginalised groups such as homeless people in clarifying their needs. It is obvious from this study that their needs go beyond getting a home.

Conclusions

Through the work with the performance and the interpretations of the material, it was obvious that the meaningfulness in the subjunctive of the participants' stories created possibilities for changes. All the way through the work with the performance, the participants were offered a new space, where they could create a performance based on their stories together with cultural workers. The results reveal how the participants were offered possibilities to construct and change their identities related to how they wanted to be perceived by others. They could present themselves as performing persons with rich experiences that other persons wanted to listen to. Through the perspective of considering the participants to be persons with possibilities, we could highlight the knowledge from their stories and reflect how such knowledge has an impact on the occupational opportunities available for individuals.

The point of departure in this project was linked to the discourse in occupational science and occupational therapy regarding people's rights and possibilities to participate in the society. Living in one of the richest countries in the world, there are still many homeless people living below the official poverty line. Despite the parole of a society for all, society has difficulties in integrating everybody. There is a need for more professional considerations of enabling homeless people to live in homes, considering their resources, and making adaptations for part-time work or opportunities to engage in meaningful and relevant occupations. Using drama as a method obviously liberates people's resources, and through the subjunctive they are offered possibilities to consider themselves differently and through this find ways to participate in occupations. Such methods are also useful to create an information exchange between people living in different spaces in the same world.

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