



Using Playback Theatre To Explore African American Identity

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Introduction

Social workers are trained to appreciate that inside every client they work with are many stories. Each story is complex, rich and embedded with the particularities of who clients are, who they were, and who they want to become. Our theories tell us that in the dance of talking and being listened to clients can gain a greater sense of self acceptance. We hope that through telling their stories they can integrate the pleasurable and painful elements of their past and develop better strategies for their future.

Most social workers develop this listening bond with their clients in individual or group sessions. Yet there is another accessible alternative social workers can offer their clients. This paper will explore how Playback Theatre was used as a type of cutting-edge social work intervention for individual and group empowerment in the African American community. One in which this writer introduced as a social work student at Howard University.

On March 4th 1997 the Howard University School of Social Work agreed to sponsor a special "listening place" for African Americans. Approximately forty people of mixed ethnic and racial heritage gathered together in a small theatre on Howard's campus. The event was titled: "Playback Theatre: Come tell your story of your African American identity, the Pleasure and the Pain." It was intended to be an event which encouraged participants to share stories about their unique conceptions of their personal identities as well as experience a deeper connection to a collective African American identity.

Founded in 1975 by Jonathan Fox, a playback performance is composed of tellers, interviewed by a conductor, narrating a moment in life which is "played back" by performers using mime, music, and spontaneous spoken scenes(Kintigh,1993). These stories can be from the past, present or future perspective. Members of the performing ensemble are chosen by the teller to become the significant persons, things, or themes within the teller's story. After the conductor has helped the teller shape the scenes of the story, the musician begins to play a prelude to set the first scene. Once the actors are set, the ensemble spontaneously recreates the teller's story, striving to creatively and compassionately capture its essence.

Playback Theatre and Identity Politics

The performance sponsored at Howard University was dedicated to magnifying the important life events, thoughts and feelings that shape African American Identity. Just as each African American person is different the stories that emerged were diverse. As Zora Neale Hurston remarked during a 1944 interview with a reporter from the New York Amsterdam News: "There is an oversimplification of the Negro. He is either pictured by conservatives as happy, picking his banjo, or by the so-called liberals as low, miserable, and crying. The Negro's life is neither of these. Rather, it is in-between and above and below these pictures"(Cross,1991).

Playback Theatre provides a vehicle for African American to define their own identity and thus capture the in-between qualities referred to by Zora Neale Hurston. This process can also be conceptualized as a way for African Americans to engage in what Sampson (1995) refers to as identity politics. "Identity politics is a politics based on the particular life experiences of people who seek to be in control of their own identities and subjectivity's and who claim that social dominant groups have denied them this opportunity.

Susan's* story most clearly illustrated the conscious need for self definition. Susan, was a lively African-American woman in her mid forties. When she bounced into the teller's chair she proclaimed that this was the first story that came to mind for her. She began telling her story by quickly choosing Pam (an actress on stage), to play her. When asked by this conductor: "Why Pam?" She said because she knew that Pam had a lot of energy, just like she did.

Susan's story was about her conscious choice in the 1950s to bring a black baby doll to school for show and tell when everyone else brought white baby dolls. She told how she experienced shocked stares from her white classmates when she walked down the hallway.

In the playing back process the Playback performers depended on little more than their creative imaginations to magnify the theme of self-determination in Susan's story. Pam playing Susan, began the story by saying to a white drum "You are not me, you are not me." The white drum began to symbolize the whiteness that was being imposed on her. The musician in the ensemble heightened the tension by chanting, "My name is not Sally." The three other performers; were cast in the supporting roles of family members and class mates who didn't understand why Susan would want to carry a black doll.

As Jo Salas, one of the original founders of Playback writes: "The basic idea of Playback Theatre is very simple. And yet its implications are complex and profound." (Salas, 1993). Through witnessing a real woman tell her story of striving for self-identification the theory of nigrescence was brought to life, Nigrescence is a model of black identity development conceptualized by Dr. William Cross. His theory will be elaborated on later.

Playback Theatre as a container for self-disclosure

Susan's choice to tell her story to a room full of strangers illustrates the magical way Playback creates safety. Yalom (1985) wrote that "self-disclosure is a prerequisite for the formation of meaningful relationships in a dyad or in a group" (Yalom, 1985). Therefore for a meaningful sense of African American community to emerge in a group of strangers some level of self-disclosure must emerge and be positively reinforced.

Playback Theatre offers a safe container for individual self-disclosure to emerge in a group. The following two methods will be explored in terms of how they assist in this process: (1) Projection onto actors; and (2) Conductor-weaving and negotiating.

Projection onto actors:

The conscious use of projection is the key therapeutic underpinning of Playback. Through the process of projecting onto actors their thoughts and feelings individuals are able to clarify and integrate their experiences as well as reflect upon different perspectives in a non-threatening atmosphere.

Goldstein offers a classical definition of projection : "Projection is when an individual attributes to others unacceptable thoughts and feelings that he himself has but are not conscious(Goldstein, 1995). In Playback this process is made conscious through a process of externalizing unacceptable as well as acceptable thoughts and feelings onto the actors. The actors will then embody the projections as defined by the teller and is in many ways magnify these projections through creative acting choices. The teller can thus make a psychic separation between their thoughts, feelings and the resulting behavior they see on stage. Blatner (1988) notes "Instead of saying that one is stingy, for example, the person could be described as playing that role in a stingy fashion (Blatner, 1988).

It is very important that in playing back the projections the actors to stay honest to the essence of the teller's story. This honesty is reinforced by the conductor asking the teller to affirm or reject what they have seen. The question is usually phrased: "Did they capture the essence of what you said?" If the teller says no, then usually the conductor will ask the teller to clarify what should be different. Thus even if the actors are far off base, the teller has had a sounding board to assess their reality against. It is safe to say that the actors involved in this type of theatre must be able to sensitively listen to the truth of a role without having their own egos or interpretations interfere in capturing the teller's truth.

After the projections are given to the actors the teller then sits back and receives a mirror reflection of their projections/story. Blatner emphasized the incredible healing power of this process when he wrote, "By replaying the past in the present, all of the resources of the intervening time and surrounding social supports become available, and the individual is helped to become liberated from the fixated attitudes and emotions associated with traumatic memories. Positive aspects of the past can be recalled and reclaimed, re-projected as renewed future goals (Blatner, 1988).

Unfortunately if any part of the performing ensemble, whether it be the conductor, actors or musician engage in the playing back process with more therapeutic than artistic intentions the story can lose creative integrity. As Salas puts it "What is lost in such a moment is the healing that can be bought specifically through art, which works through allusion and metaphor, through the call to imagination, intuition, and creativity, and acknowledgment of beauty." Therefore it is essential that Playback performers be able to perform Playback with integrity. They must strive to listen to the teller's story and artistically reflecting its' essence without overstepping the story with their own positive intentions. When the temperature is just right the stew can really cook.

In the Playback performance on African American identity the stew was very tasty. The dynamic interplay between art and therapy was evident. For example, the first teller *Rob, was a young man in his early twenties who told a story about the death of his father. Rob emerged from the audience hungry to recite his poem "America why do you kill your own?" Rob told a story about what happened when he learned at the age of thirteen that his father was killed. Rob shared his belief with the audience that his father was murdered by the corporation where he worked because his father was a brilliant political scholar. After his father's death Rob lost faith in his mother who did not believe his father was murdered. At thirteen he was sucked into a life of drugs until he was saved" by a Christian man who befriended him.

After seeing his story played back Rob sat on the stage with tears in his eyes. When asked what he was feeling Rob remarked that he was surprised how much feeling he still had about his father's death. This affective display of sadness was in contrast to the quick verbal jitteriness Rob displayed when he first emerged from the audience. It was apparent that he was greatly impacted by seeing his projections mirrored back to him by the ensemble. At the closure of the performance the conductor asked anyone present to respond to the question "What is a feeling anyone has about this experience?" Rob responded that he felt vindicated. This comment illustrated that seeing his story has moved him somewhere along his journey of healing.

Another example of the power of the dynamic interplay between the projective process and art occurred in Jeff's* story. Jeff told a moving story about being a young African American male who was recruited unknowingly to fight in WWII. Originally he and a group of the 'best and brightest' black minds were protesting mistreatment at their university. Unbeknownst to them the President of the university had arranged for a surprise recruitment process.

Jeff cast one actor in the symbolic role of American racism which he said was a strong force in his life. Jeff described the role of American racism as uncaring and unfeeling. The performer who played the role of racism chose to laugh during heavy emotional moments. In one scene the ensemble played back a moment in which Jeff described being turned away from a restaurant by a white mate. The white male told Jeff to go around the back and eat with the dogs. Throughout this scene the actor playing racism stood on a box and laughed uproariously. This actor's creative choice to make racism large and loud had the effect of amplifying Jeff's projection. In response to the large action demand made by the racism actor, the actor playing Jeff had to become larger and more powerful to be heard. In the end the creative conflict was won by the actor playing Jeff, but with the quiet presence of racism still on stage. Thus without any formal dialogue between them the actors reflected back the ever present element of racism the teller said was a part of his life.

The Conductor's role as a weaver and negotiator

The role of the conductor is another method Playback has to create a safe container for self-disclosure. The conductor in a playback event serves to provide a vehicle for the group to have an outside facilitator in charge of holding the intensity of the emotions being disclosed. It is their job to create an atmosphere for people to feel that they can disclose some of their most intimate feelings in oftentimes a roomful of

strangers. Salas (1993) writes, "You are in the paradoxical situation of establishing intimacy with one person in the midst of a public event."

At the Howard event the majority of audience members present shared a common ethnic classification as African Americans. Since there was this large degree of homogeneity there was the assumption that there would be some shared perspectives, and thus group cohesiveness. However, the purpose of the performance was to use Playback as a way to explore one's personal relationship to the theme which meant exploring difference and possible conflict. Corey (1995) wrote that a group leader must be aware that the primary tasks of the initial stage of groups is the question of inclusion and identity. Schutz (1973) says that "this phase involves finding a balance between maintaining one's individuality within the group and making commitments." Thus it is essential that from the beginning the conductor encourage people to share their true feelings even if they were very divergent from others in the group.

At the Howard performance the conductor had the task of giving the group permission to have varied perspectives of African American identity. In order to fully appreciate the issue the conductor familiarized herself with the work of William Cross. Cross developed a model of nigrescence - the process of becoming black. Attempting to explain the rise of black consciousness in the 1960s, Cross outlined a developmental sequence beginning with a pre-encounter phase, the starting identity that is bound to change. This starting point is the negative self- and racial identities dominated by internalized self-hatred. The second stage, encounter, is represented as a personal experience that challenges the pre-encounter view and makes a person susceptible to changed identity. The third stage is a two-part process of immersion-emersion. Immersion describes the newly acquired sense of the beauty of blackness and its superiority to what went before. Over time, however, this "discovery" gives way to a feeling of incompleteness and a desire for a broader understanding of blackness that is more flexible and open- emersion. Stages four and five reflect an achieved identity that integrated blackness into personal identity and embraced the racial group in a positive way, but views the out-group (whites) not as enemies, but as participants in the systems of oppression that must be changed. Positive self-regard, combined with openness to others and a commitment to working to make the world a better place, particularly for blacks, characterized internalization (stage four) and utilization & commitment (stage five) (Cross, 1991).

In preparing for the event the conductor accepted that the Cross' model of Nigrescence was valid and thus was going to be operating in audience members' responses. The assumption was made that the teller's, thoughts, feelings, and stories that emerged would be anywhere on the Cross continuum from encounter to internalization

Fluid sculptures were used by the conductor to create an atmosphere that gave permission for the full spectrum of Cross's model to be explored. Fluid sculptures are traditionally used in Playback at the beginning of a performance to help establish the trust. A "fluid sculpture is a short response in sound and movement to an audience comment" (Salas, 1993). The conductor asks for a one word response to a single question. Even very reluctant audience members are generally willing to engage in this brief moment of self-disclosure.

At the very beginning of the Howard event the conductor posed the question "What is one feeling you have about African American identity?" This choice brought the theme of the event collectively to the surface. It is important to note that on the average Playback performances do not necessarily impose themes on the audience. In many instances audience members are given the freedom to tell any important story from their lives. However this event was advertised as a performance solely dedicated to exploring the theme of African American identity and presumably those present came ready to do so. By opening the performance with this question the conductor attempted to focus the audience thoughts and feeling and bring clarity to the group purpose. After the question was posed several brown skinned individuals who assumedly were African American raised their hands.

As the following direct quotes attest the audience responses were in alignment with theory of Nigrescence.

One feeling that I have about African American Identity is that it is a constant struggle for survival.

One feeling that I about African American Identity is that it is a constant struggle to find the truth.

One feeling that I have about African American Identity is that it is a good feeling to come back home.

The constant struggle comments echo the struggle Cross refers to in the third stage of his nigrescence identity model. The third stage is characterized by a tension between immersion and emersion. The above comments reflect the sense of being immersed in the sense of being black while at the same time desiring a stronger sense of positive self-regard. From these responses the conductor verbalized a group theme of struggle and healing which was weaved as a theme into the rest of the performance.

Not everyone present at the event was an African American. Of the sixteen people surveyed after the performance 26% were African American, 18% were White,

6% classified themselves as Other and 6% gave no racial identification. Therefore since the audience was of mixed racial heritage it was a rich opportunity for many perspectives of African American Identity to be explored.

Since those of non-African American descent came to this particular theme performance the conductor made the assumption that they had thoughts and feelings about the subject they wanted to explore. It was therefore very important that the conductor negotiate with the fears of all audience members that the Playback event could serve as a safe container for possible conflict. Corey writes " The way conflict is recognized, accepted, and worked with has critical effects on the progress of the group. If it is poorly handled, the group may retreat and never reach a productive working stage. If it is dealt with openly and with concern, the members discover that their relationships are strong enough to withstand an honest level of challenge."

One technique the conductor used to negotiate this level of safety was to make effective use of here-and-now process comments. To do this effectively Yalom (1985) wrote that an experiential group leader must " First, plunge the group into the here-and-now experience; second, to help the group observe and understand the process of what occurred in the here-and-now experience, that is, the implications that the interaction contains about the nature of the members' relationships to one another."

The following interchange illustrates the use of the here-and-now technique in the Playback event:

The conductor asked the group: "As a non-African American what is one feeling you have about African American identity? "

*A response came from an Anglo-Saxon female who identified herself as *Kate: I feel envious of African American spirituality. "*

During Kate's response the conductor noticed that there was an audience member on the opposite side of the room shouted out "Yea. "

After the ensemble played back Kate's sense of envy, the conductor asked the group. "Who said that big Yea? "

*A man identifies himself as *Bill. The conductor said: " So what was a feeling you have about the sense of 'envy *Kate, expressed? "*

*Bill's * response: " I have a lot of respect for her to say that in a room full of Black people. I have been in many circumstances where the envy was never acknowledged. "*

*the conductor then requested that the ensemble play back *Bill's sense of respect.*

The above exchange was a rich moment for the group. It demonstrated an early willingness on the part of group members to take risks in self-disclosure. It served to create the norm that this Playback event was going to be a rare opportunity to explore the concept of African American identity in a safe racially mixed atmosphere.

The above was a general introduction to Playback and its unique ability to be used as a social work intervention in the exploration of African American identity. The next part of the paper will describe a survey of audience members perceptions of the event.

DESIGN

The investigation employed a Post-Test Only evaluative research design. This non-experimental approach has the value of allowing the researcher to be free of pre-existing theoretical frameworks and controls. While the Post-Test Only design precluded dependency cause + effect relationship between the intervention and the outcome variables, the technique allows broad discovery and therefore is heuristic in generating testable hypothesis about the impact of Playback Theatre where the subject is both an observer and a participant. A primary asset of the Playback Theatre intervention is that the interactive process forges an introspective self-analytical process. Theoretically then all who experience the theatrical transactions engage in cognitive processing and emotive reaction.

SAMPLING PROCEDURES AND SAMPLE

Sampling of audience members perceptions was done on a volunteer basis one week after the performance. Participants were asked to self-administer the questionnaire and return it to the research team. The population sampled represented approximately 40% (n= 16 out of 40 participants) of the audience. The demographics they listed about themselves were the following. Age range = 25 to 63 years of age Gender = 68% Male, 25% Female, 6% Missing Race = 26% African American, 18% White, 6% Other, 6% Missing

INSTRUMENTATION

The instrument for the Post-Test was a 10-item Likert scaled questionnaire. This instrument was developed by this researcher based on the following constructs involved in the Playback event, namely: 1. Arousal effects of the event 2. Ethnic connectedness + identification The instrument was developed through a panel of a psychologist, practicing Doctor of Social Work and the researcher who has eight years of experience Playback Theatre.

RESULTS

The results of the survey provide strong evidence that the Playback event impacted the two constructs under exploration, namely arousal effects and increased ethnic connectedness and identification. Questions 1, 5, and 6 addressed the arousal effect of the event and questions 2, 4, 7, 8, and 9 addressed increased ethnic connectedness and identification the event brought forth in the respondents.

Arousal Effects:

Question (1) was formulated to address whether the event elicited feelings of happiness. 93.8% of those surveyed responded that they strongly agreed with the statement that the performance gave them a feeling of celebration. Question (5) was formulated to address whether a feeling of empathy emerged through participation in the event. 75% of those surveyed responded that they strongly agreed that they felt the performance helped them develop empathy for the tellers. Question (6) was formulated to address the wide range of intense and perhaps cathartic feelings that could have been emerged in participants. 68.8% of those surveyed strongly agreed and 31.3% surveyed agreed that the performance brought forth strong and mixed feelings of anger, sadness and joy. Ethnic connectedness and identification:

Question (2) addressed to what degree the event provided a historical learning experience about African Americans. 62.5% strongly agreed and 37.5% agreed with the statement that the event was a tool for learning about African American history. Question (4) addressed whether the event was allowed respondents to identify African Americans as diverse individuals. 81.3% strongly agreed with the statement that the performance showed an appreciation of the African American diversity. Question (7) addressed the respondents sense of increased connectedness to African American community from their immediate and personal perspective. 50% strongly agreed and 50% agreed that they were helped in feeling more connected to their immediate African-

American community. Question (8) was formulated to address whether the respondents felt that they felt more connected to African Americans in a national sense. 43.8% strongly agreed and 56.3% agreed that they felt more connected to African American experiences from a national perspective. Question (9) was formulated to address the issue of whether respondents felt the performance demonstrated that African American had to and did respond to continuing oppression. 93.8% strongly agreed that the performance demonstrated African Americans' ability to respond to oppression.

IMPLICATIONS:

There are many implications for social work practice to be drawn from this research. Overall, the results of the survey indicate that this intervention served as a positive vehicle for exploration of African American identity. Although the survey research process was highly discovery oriented the responses did indicate that participants were greatly impacted by their involvement in the performance. Since Playback is based on subjective experience it would be highly recommended that in the future further research use a more structured qualitative methodology to explore its impact on participants.

Yet even though this research was highly discovery oriented it did illustrate that Howard University's social work program used a creative methodology to help African American's tell their stories of identity. Hopefully social workers interested in broadening their repertoire will be encouraged to learn more about its applicability for those they know need a listening ear.

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