

# Strengthening social fabric through narrative theatre

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*In this paper, Narrative Theatre is described as a means of strengthening the social fabric in dislocated communities. In the first part, we describe basic theoretical constructs underlying the social foundation of human functioning. The key elements are bonding and bridging as dynamic features of social fabric. This is followed by a brief discussion of the emancipatory roots of Narrative Theatre. In the third part, we give a conceptual framework based on deconstructing problem stories and reconstructing the emancipatory opportunities in the preferred strength-based story. The concepts of critical consciousness and reflexivity form part of the framework. Lastly we briefly present a case study that illustrates the use of Narrative Theatre as a powerful tool to promote individual and community social action and mental health.*

**Keywords:** narrative theatre, social fabric, social capital, social action, critical consciousness

## **Social Context**

The facilitation of social action for psychosocial support in communities torn apart by political unrest, inequity and poverty is a major responsibility for those involved in the reconstruction and healing process of communities. The search for sustainable problem-solving strategies in dislocated communities challenge conventional

practice in managing psychosocial trauma. In a context where social systems and support have been eroded, minor problems often escalate into major problems. The management of presenting problems becomes difficult and results in an over-dependence on external agents for problem solving, an approach that is unsustainable. The role of supportive social contexts in improving health and well-being is widely accepted (Kawachi, 1997, Kawachi & Kennedy, 1997; Lomas, 1998; McKinlay, 1995) and is specifically relevant for dislocated and traumatised communities. Effort is therefore needed to create and change social contexts to generate healthy communities which can address social, psychological and physiological problems as well as promote the growth and development of its members (Chavis & Newborough, 1986). Narrative Theatre is presented as a methodology for the generation of positive societies in support of mental health and well-being. It acknowledges the embeddedness of individuals and thus their problems in social, cultural and political contexts. Narrative Theatre is directed at both the individual and the social environment, with specific interest in strengthening social fabric through a process of critical consciousness and reflexivity. It aims at working with

problematic behaviours or problems within a group context. The strategy works through presenting problem stories while juxtaposing elicited strength-based stories for collective problem solving. From a careful reconstruction of ideas and concepts influenced by Narrative Practices, Forum Theatre, Critical Consciousness and Social Capital as well as a vast experience of community development work in Africa, Narrative Theatre emerged. These constructs will be discussed, followed by a conceptual framework for Narrative Theatre. A case study will briefly illustrate application in practice.

### **Narrative Practices**

People produce meaning in their lives from the stories that are available in their contexts. Narrative Practices is an approach that has been used as a means to invite people to begin a journey of co-exploration in search of abilities and strengths that are often masked by life problems. The journey helps people to reflect on positive life experiences as it is significant for the individual which helps to reduce the magnitude of problems (White & Denborough, 1998). The story teller often emerges as a courageous victor with colourful and vivid stories rather than a pitiful and pathetic victim (Sliep, 1998). The lived and shared stories do not only change the teller but also the audience, as witnesses to the tale. The facilitator of the process is not the expert on people's lives, and cannot prescribe suitable solutions, but instead acts as a guide in the journey to explore and reaffirm the creative ability to solve problems that exists within individuals and groups (Sliep et. al., 2003).

### **Forum Theatre**

Aspects of Forum Theatre or 'Theatre for the Oppressed' has been included in the

methodology of Narrative Theatre. It was developed by Augusto Boal in Brazil in the last thirty years (Boal, 1995). According to Boal (1992) the word 'Theatre' is used in its most archaic application of the word. In this usage all human beings are seen as able to act and can therefore be viewed as Actors. Similarly everyone in life observes and thus takes on the role of a spectator. The purpose of Theatre is for everyone to be involved, actors and spect-actors. Spect-actors are seen as active spectators. Boal used the technique to create change and to actively unmask and address practices of power. The methodology is participatory, non-judgemental and accessible to all ages, levels of education and cultural backgrounds. In Forum Theatre, the audience generates the scene, or a scene that is recognisable to all can be proposed by the facilitator. Participants become involved in the action through an invitation to provide commentary on what is witnessed. Scenes are replayed at the audience's request. The audience act as spect-actors in that they can replace any of the actors at any stage, are invited to stop the action if they are of the opinion that what is played out is an incorrect presentation of their experiences and if it is unrealistic. A discussion is encouraged when an interruption occurs, thus creating an awareness of the different elements of the scenario. The scenario is then replayed with the new suggested elements resulting in a different ending. The acting and reacting of the scenario with its alternative endings, promote a deeper understanding of the issues involved and a platform for active creativity in finding suitable solutions. It allows for experimentation with proposed and modified strategies for solutions to difficult issues, until satisfactory and appropriate solutions have been developed collectively.

Different strategies are incorporated into the drama to deepen understanding of the issues projected, for example hot seating and role reversal. In 'hot seating', the drama is stopped and the facilitator or someone from the audience can interview one of the characters involved in the drama. This is done to gain a better understanding of the position of others. The motivation and determinants of the characters' behaviour and the consequences of their choices are highlighted in this way. Role reversals on the other hand can be used to increase an experiential understanding of the power constructs operating in social systems. At all times, the facilitator is not the expert but merely acts as an assistant for the manifestation of critical consciousness.

### **Critical Consciousness and reflexivity**

Paulo Freire (1970) who coined the concept 'critical consciousness' pointed out that the one aspect of critical consciousness that is often neglected is that it is embedded in action. If being critically conscious relates to something more than awareness, one needs to ensure that conditions for sustained action are in place. The challenge is that it requires the emergence of new social practices beyond the individual to keep the process going. For this reason it is important that all the possible players (stakeholders) form part of the strategy and that the linkages and interdependence between the individual, household and community are made clear (Sliep, 1996; 2002; 2003b). Acknowledging and dealing with the tension that may emerge between the different stakeholders should be normalised as part of the expected process as it reflects the reality people live in. Cognisance needs to be taken of this relational aspect of the work by increasing awareness of the different

positions of those involved. Taking into account how changes of practice will impact on different people in different ways is essential in development work. For desired change to be meaningful and for preferred outcomes to be negotiated and achieved, the assumptions and intentions of the various parties involved must be revealed and worked with. The process of grappling with this awareness is what is referred to as reflexivity in this work (Gilbert & Sliep, 2003).

### **Social capital – bonding and bridging**

The health and well-being of communities seems to be affected by the physical and social contexts including social cohesion (Lomas, 1998; Patrick & Wickizer, 1995; Wilkinson, 1997). Various scholars (Kawachi & Kennedy, 1997; Lomas, 1998; Patrick & Wickizer, 1995) argue that the answer to improved comprehensive health and well-being lies in the generation of social capital. Social capital has become a dominant discourse in both the literature of development and public health. While its rhetoric seems appealing, attributes measured by social capital are only a small part of the complex multilevel processes of relevance in understanding patterns of health and well-being (Bouare & Meyer-Weitz, 2003). Hawe & Shiell (2000) are of the opinion that the science of social capital is weak in comparison to that of other social constructs, with its own history of development. Despite the limitations of social capital as a construct to encapsulate and measure the complexities of social phenomena and its relation to health inequalities (Shy, 1997; Mackenbach, 1995), the emerging debates have placed new focus on the role of social phenomena in health and well-

being, particularly in contexts where sustained development is required.

The concept of social capital has been used as a multipurpose descriptor for all types and levels of connections or networks among individuals, within families, friendships, and communities including the exchange that arises from them and the value of these to achieve mutual goals (Muntaner, 2001; Putman 1995; Schuller, Baron & Field, 2000). Putman (1995) referred to norms and trust that contribute to the coordination and cooperation of people for mutual benefit. These understandings reflect the relational and material components of social capital (Portes, 1998) also referred to as bonding and bridging social capital (Putman, 2000), which are particularly relevant for the purpose of the paper. These two forms of social capital are viewed as useful in conceptualising the nature of community relationships and mobilising these relationships (Campbell, 2003).

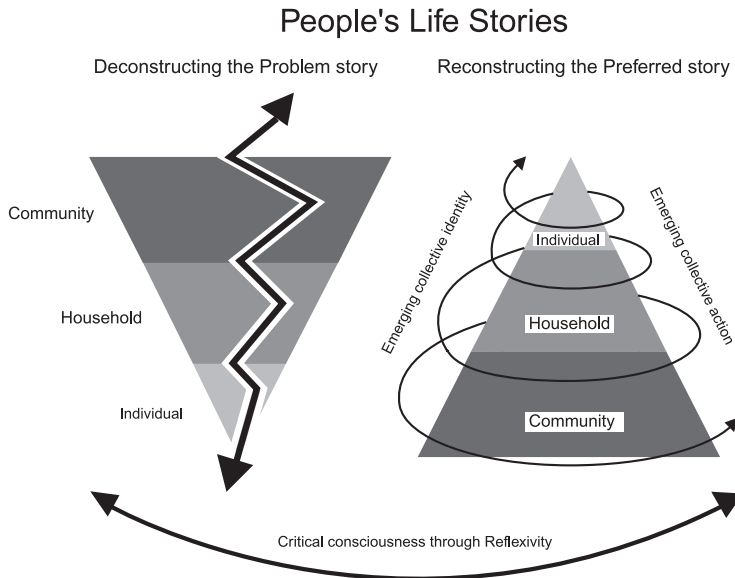
Bonding social capital refers to intra-community networks (links individuals together along horizontal lines) that bring integration and cohesion through trust, reciprocal support and a positive identity. Its effects refer to the facilitation of collective problem solving or collective identity. Social cohesion on the other hand is the adequacy of the physical and social contexts in a community to facilitate health and well-being by decreasing ill-health, fostering cultural and social compatibility, facilitating acceptance of difference, improving self-esteem and a creating a sense of belonging (Lomas, 1998). Bonding social capital is a particularly useful idea in the case of marginalised voices and would help to regenerate more positive identities of the self. An example of social bonding would be amongst women who are implicated by domestic violence. In

this case, it would be important to break the silence and isolation that takes place with these kinds of problems and to create networks of support. Sharing of similar problems, increasing trust through a support group or friendships and creating a safe place where discussions could take place are suggestions of ways in which this process could be facilitated. In practical examples of the work, the involvement of other members from the community like neighbours and leaders have helped to break the silence around sensitive problems.

Bridging social capital integrates the levels and nature of contact and engagement between different social groups or communities. Diverse groups with varying levels of access to material and symbolic power are linked. It brings people in contact with resources and benefits that are accrued from having a wide and varied range of social contacts. It is evident that in dislocated communities there is generally little evidence of existing trusting and supporting networks amongst different groups, and these would need to be actively facilitated. Small groups can also be linked to networks of influence outside of their geographical location. Knowing when social bonding and social bridging needs to take place and how to translate that into action would form part of the critical consciousness that is actively instilled during the work.

In this paper, the understandings of bonding and bridging social capital in combination with innovation (creative problem solving), social responsibility and care are conceptualised as social fabric. The Narrative Theatre strength-based approach, which is non-judgemental and inclusive, enables the development of social fabric necessary for social action in support of mental health and well-being. The complexity, range and subtlety of this approach allow people to genuinely

## Narrative Theatre to strengthen Social Fabric: A Conceptual Framework



explore their values, attitudes and beliefs, and the effects of these on the self and others. The elements of social fabric as they emerge from the Narrative Theatre process will be discussed in the next section on the conceptual framework.

### People's life stories

In Narrative Theatre, the drama is constructed from people's own stories. People are viewed and acknowledged to be the experts of their own lives and thus of their stories. The facilitator is an expert in the methodology for eliciting and working with people's stories with the intent of increasing understanding of the presenting problem while enhancing efficacy in dealing with problems. Through the process of eliciting these stories, opportunities are provided for the identification and deconstruction of problem stories, while active incorporation is simultaneously sought for a preferred, strength-based story. The process aims at

decreasing and decentering the Problem story while enriching and centering the Preferred strength-based story.

The Problem story and the Preferred story are thus juxtaposed and worked with simultaneously. The starting point is a 'pressing' problem that has been identified either through observation or reporting. The context of the problem story is understood through exploration as well as how it manifests itself in everyday experiences. The presenting Problem story and the reconstructed Preferred strength-based story are simultaneously incorporated.

Problems are understood to have been socially constructed and created over time. This understanding decreases the negative overwhelming effects problem stories may have on people's lives. The exploration, discovery and affirmation of local knowledge, strengths and abilities increase self-efficacy, which in turn leads to creative and collective problem solving. In the search for joint

solutions, a collective identity is fostered through which social action becomes possible. There is a constant alternation between working to strengthen a collective identity and stimulating collective action, as will emerge in the discussion.

### **Deconstructing the Problem story**

Problems present themselves strongly through individuals with effects on households and communities. These effects often cause divisions and confusion in social relationships and result in feelings of hopelessness and helplessness of all those who are affected. In the conceptual framework, the triangle apex that rests on the individual component symbolises the weight of the problem, while the apex which can easily be toppled reflects the individual's vulnerability in dealing with problems that have become attached to self-identity. The individual's difficulty in dealing with problems when in isolation from broader social support systems is also reflected.

Over time, problems tend to mask people's abilities and strengths and distort the sense of the self. It is for this reason that problems first need to be identified, named and described (White, 1991). This process might be time-consuming because the presenting problems often confuse the root causes of problems. Once consensus has been reached in the group about the name of the problem, it can be externalised as a character in a chosen drama so that an understanding can emerge that people are not the problem, but that the problem is a separate entity that has an effect on people. The process of externalisation is strengthened by the use of particular language and the interaction with the Externalised Problem as a character. The historical development of the problem is explored to uncover root causes so that the social con-

struction of problems becomes clearer to the audience. Understanding is further enhanced by the deconstruction of the specific ideas, beliefs, and practices that sustain and support the problem (e.g. constructions of power and gender). Experiential work is included by encouraging participants to play different roles of power and gender (e.g. a chief in the village playing the role of a schoolgirl who is being blackmailed by a schoolteacher to have sex with him). Experiencing the powerlessness in this position enhances understanding of the context. The effects of the named problem on the self and others are also mapped. The drama is extended to include the voices of those affected to make the problem more visible. Special attention is paid to marginalised voices in the process. If, for instance, the work is done around the initiation of young girls, then girls should take part in the discussion.

Externalisation is a technique used to help people step back and separate themselves from the problem through a process of deconstruction, where they can untangle themselves from judgment and self-blame. It does not, however, absolve people from their responsibilities for the actions that they take. By making the consequences of actions visible through the affected characters, greater responsibility for actions is encouraged.

### **Reconstructing the Preferred story**

Apart from the problem story in every situation there is a story about people's strengths and abilities. The presented framework shows two triangles. The triangle that points downwards places the emphasis on the individual. The triangle that points upwards places the emphasis on the community or collective. Symbolically,



the framework reverses the triangle to illustrate that working from a broad base with many voices increases strength.

In the reconstruction process of a Preferred strength-based story, the participants are guided through a historical overview of specific strengths and abilities that exist in the individual, group or communities that should be considered. The emerging strengths and abilities are identified and named. To fortify the strength-based story, opportunities are created for the sharing of stories of other situations in which similar strengths and abilities were demonstrated. It is also beneficial to identify unique outcomes of situations where problems did not dominate those affected, and to explore why this happened. A continued affirmation of strength is ensured by including voices of others who have witnessed a demonstration of these strengths. At times it may be necessary to also externalise the identified strength as a character in the drama to make it more visible. The character can also be interviewed to further enrich the strength-based Preferred story.

Reconstructing the preferred story happens collectively within a community and audience context. Through the different activities, sharing and movement, a group or collective identity emerges. During the process less emphasis is placed on differences between members and more on the effect of a problem on everyone involved. The activity gets directed towards evaluating the effects of the problem and taking a united position against the problem (Sliiep, 1998; Sliiep, 2003a). Solutions and action is generated by the group, based on shared values and norms which also guides future behaviour, ensuring a sense of continuity. Collective action is aimed at using local knowledge and experiences to achieve preferred outcomes decided upon on the basis

of consensus within the group.

Social strengths as well cultural and historical strengths are actively sought by exploring existing proverbs as a reflection of shared values and norms. The awareness of this common wisdom is another step towards an emerging collective identity. The experience and affirmation of strengths and abilities lead to an increased sense of self-efficacy necessary for creative and independent problem solving.

The methodology always works with emerging stories rather than using a top-down approach. This means that the problems that are dealt with will differ from context to context. Problems chosen by the group to work with are usually influenced by prevalence or because of an inability to deal with a particular problem. These range from dealing with the effects of HIV/AIDS, alcohol addiction, and the stigmatisation of epilepsy to other relational problems like domestic violence, bewitchment and conflict. The entry point of the work could be through the presentation of an individual problem as happens in individual consultation with clients, through a household, as would be in the case of domestic violence, or in a community context such as a communal conflict situation. Narrative Theatre provides an entry point at any of these levels and enables one to involve the other levels at different stages.

### **Case example**

An example of how Narrative Theatre was conducted during a training workshop is presented below. The case example that is discussed in the paper highlights the relational nature of problems and how this can deal with issues around social bonding and social bridging. The importance of working with real life stories in the workshops has been described earlier on in the article. The

theoretical training was applied through experiential learning techniques in much the same way as the participants would be expected to do in the communities in which they are working. The work was done in collaboration with Trans-cultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO) in Uganda (Sliep, 2003b). TPO works mainly in refugee camps or communities that have been affected by violence.

### **Problem description: conflict between refugees and local village**

Part of the preparation for the training is visiting the local context which often provides real life stories that can be used as examples during the training. Working with real life stories ensures that one works with local knowledge and appropriate contexts with which everyone involved can identify.

During a visit to a transit camp for refugees a meeting evolved where the following story was narrated to the psychosocial worker and the facilitator. At a waterhole near the local refugee camp a woman from the camp got into an argument with a young woman of 15 from the neighbouring village. It became ugly and turned into a physical fight that was eventually stopped by those standing around. They were taken apart and the young woman was told to go home. The woman from the camp continued to shout verbal abuse and threatening her while following her home. It ended with a curse at the young woman implying that she did not have many days to live. After three days the young woman became sick and died soon afterwards. The whole village was in uproar and went to look for the refugee woman who had cursed the young woman. For her own safety, she had to be

physically removed from the transit camp and transferred elsewhere. It did not pacify the local villagers who wanted revenge. They demanded one billion Ugandan Shillings ( $\pm$  \$500 000) compensation from the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) for the woman's death. The UNHCR did attend the funeral of the young woman but ignored the demand. A few days before the visit of one of the authors, the refugees received a letter written in red (culturally very significant) threatening the refugees that if the villagers were not compensated they would come in the night to kill them. Half of the people at the camp fled or slept outside of the camp. The women no longer dared to collect firewood in the surrounding forest; the children no longer attended the local school. Everyone was living in fear. Having witnessed and escaped the horrors of a war in Southern Sudan, they were really afraid that the same thing was happening to them again and that no one was doing anything to protect them.

In retelling the story, the field co-ordinator highlighted how *fear* was dominating the lives of the people in the transit camp. Not only did the refugees not know how to deal with the problem, the psychosocial worker also did not know how to proceed. She experienced a sense of responsibility to solve the problems as she was seen as the expert in the situation.

After some discussion the group identified fear as the main underlying problem. Part of the exercise became the *externalising* of *fear*. The participants broke up into small groups to brainstorm their ideas on what would lessen their *fear* in that particular context. The technique is used to ensure that everyone's voice is heard and included in the dialogue.

A number of suggestions were given by the



small groups during the general feedback:

1. The refugee community should identify representatives who could discuss problems with other external facilitators like the camp commander, UNHCR, other NGOs (Non governmental organisations) and local government.
2. A joint committee should be formed with the representatives of the refugee community; representatives of the outside organisations and the leaders or representatives of the village community should meet on a regular basis.
3. The joint committee should also undertake the task of sensitising the rest of the refugee community and the village community, and above all, prevent escalation of violence or threats of more violence.
4. Open communication channels should be set up through which problems and concerns could be channelled.
5. Activities should be arranged to build relationships between people of the refugee community, the village community and the intervening organisations.
6. The refugee community should also be made aware of how fear is dominating their lives and rational thinking, and to explore ways to decrease fear.

The first five points raised are examples of social bridging where the psychosocial worker could be active in facilitating this process. The last point is an example of social bonding and social bridging and some determinants of social fabric like creative problem solving that will now be discussed further.

At first a forum theatre event was created where a discussion about *fear* could be held. To make *fear* more visible to the group, one person was asked to take on the character of *Fear*. A label around his neck depicted the role he played. The rest of the partici-

pants became the spect-actors and role-played the refugee community having a discussion about *fear*. The psycho-social workers were well informed about the feelings of the refugees as it had been a very important recent event. The acting refugee community spoke about what had happened and what might well happen to them at night, and what other terrible things had happened to them previously. The person portraying *Fear* sat on the side of the circle growing bigger and bigger, finally climbing on a chair and reaching the ceiling with his hands, until *Fear* could grow no more and the discussion was stopped.

A discussion was held to identify what parts of the conversation had led to *Fear* growing and the following examples were given:

*'... they (people from the neighbouring village) wrote us a letter in red ink and told us they are coming to get us'*

*'... they (people from the neighbouring village) are going to come tonight to come and they are going to murder us and our children'*

*'... they (the enemy) have bombed us before and burnt our houses –it is going to happen again'*

It became evident to the participants that talking so much about *fear* and continuously putting fear in the limelight had the effect of the character *Fear* growing with each part of the conversation. The problem-saturated story in principle was discussed theoretically with the group. At this point, the importance of eliciting a strength-based story was revisited. The participants were asked what the opposite of *fear* was and the participants suggested *courage*. *Courage* was then also made into a character by one of the participants and placed alongside *Fear*. *Courage* was asked to become bigger or smaller depending on what was happening in the group discussion. The enacted 'refugee community' resumed their discussion and were prompt-

ed by the facilitator to share instances where *Courage* had been present in their lives.

The following examples were given:

*'... they (the enemy) did not kill us with their bombs when they outnumbered us while we were in Sudan. We are not going to let them (the villagers) do it now that there are only a few of them'*

*'We have suffered many difficulties but we took action and we survived.'*

*'We crossed the Nile with our families and arrived here on foot - we are strong.'*

*'We will win as long as we stay united.'*

At this statement there was great animation in the room and the character *Courage* had become very big while the character *Fear* had totally shrunk and sat flat on the floor with his chin on his knees. Experiencing the 'voice' of *Courage* brought forth feelings of self-efficacy and greater self/group esteem. This would not have happened if the facilitator had merely told the group not to be scared.

Discussions that explored the reasons for the presence and size of *Fear* and *Courage* and the underlying constructs of power, facilitated a process of critical consciousness and reflexivity. The participants had found it very helpful to have characters in the room who could demonstrate clearly what was happening. They also witnessed the importance of working with a strength-based preferred story to take the limelight away from *Fear*. The next stage was to interview the characters *Fear* and *Courage* to create a deeper understanding about the conditions that either enable or hinder them. For example, *Fear* liked people to believe that they were alone and that no one cared about them, but did not like to hear stories of courage to be told. *Courage* was made stronger by people sharing proverbs that exist in their language, which illustrated a sense of togetherness, but was weakened by

people arguing amongst themselves and creating more divisions.

At some stage, the other options of solving the presenting problem that had been raised by the groups earlier on were also explored. The importance of simultaneous action for structural changes in the environment was highlighted. The participants collectively created an innovative plan of action to appropriately address the raised concerns.

## **Conclusion**

The dynamic methodology of Narrative Theatre lends itself to fostering the critical consciousness necessary to promote a sense of social responsibility and action. Creating a safe space to develop potentialities within individuals and the collective, enhances a sense of self-efficacy. The division caused by problems and conflict is seen as opposed to the unity of abilities and strengths. The expressive activities of Narrative Theatre—namely, the telling of stories, physical movement, song and participating in creative exercises— all result in positive energy. It is this energy that assists in the dissipation of tension and brings forth feelings of 'togetherness' and social cohesion.

Stories of overwhelmed and helpless communities change to stories of communities standing together and taking action against prevailing problems. It is the careful and intentional reconstructing and strengthening of social fabric that leads to healthier and more self-sufficient communities.

While the article allows for the theoretical underpinnings of the process and the description of the case study illustrates the context, the vibrancy brought about by the active participation and emerging strengths of the collective cannot be truly reflected in writing. It is the hope, enthusiasm and energy that is generated while working with Narrative Theatre for all involved that ulti-

mately seems to make a difference in the experience of working with otherwise overwhelming problems. An enhancement of the quality of life through a greater sense of independence and efficacy as well as improved self/collective esteem is a valuable asset for those who have lost much.

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