

## The Making of *Harry and Susie Get Married?*: A Performative Approach to Data Collection

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the potential impact and practical difficulties of using arts-based tools for the collection of social scientific data. It draws upon research which examines the experiences of ex/recovering addicts/alcoholics involved as participants in a participatory theatre initiative. The author's interest is in exploring performative methods as tools capable of engaging with the realities of research participants. The analysis focuses on participant perceptions of the initiative and on the viability of the data produced through performative and collaborative interaction. The author argues that a performative approach to data collection offers ways forward, despite some limitations, by offering participants more power over the (re)presentation of their voices. The author explores some of the possibilities for the re-envisioning of performative methods, focusing in particular on the extent to which the initiative can be understood as a focus group discussion. The paper highlights the importance of a performative approach for transcending the traditional representational constraints of academia and engaging with knowledge rooted in the experiences of socially marginalised groups.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores the potential of an arts-based approach to qualitative inquiry, drawing upon ethnographic research conducted with Outside Edge Theatre Company in 2001<sup>1</sup>. It focuses particularly upon the company's involvement in a participatory theatre initiative spearheaded by London Arts (L.A), which consisted of an extensive workshop programme centred on (community) participants. At the heart of the initiative was the assumption that participants could be active agents in a play constructed through their collective life stories and experiences. The initiative speaks directly to the ways in which an arts-based approach to data col-

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1 The research is part of a larger study which examined the work of community theatre companies between 2000 and 2001. The study included semi-structured interviews with 25 community theatre companies and participant observation in 3 case study settings. One of the case studies was Outside Edge, a participative, community-based theatre company specifically concerned with people affected by addiction. The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (R00429834660).

lection can transcend the traditional representational constraints of academia: that is, by giving participants more power—i.e., increasing consciousness, a sense of worth and efficacy—over the representation of their voices (MATTINGLY, 2001, p.449). I am particularly interested in the performative strategies incorporated throughout the workshop programme, and specifically how they can be seen to give "more-than representational" (LORIMER, 2005, p.84) authority to the participants. My analysis centres on the process of participation and the participants' making of *Harry and Susie Get Married?*—a play which follows the relationships of drug addicts/alcoholics and their non-addict/alcoholic partners during active addiction and in the recovery process. The making of *Harry and Susie* provides a valuable opportunity to think about the potential impact of a performative approach to data collection. As well as allowing for a more inclusive understanding of the research process, there are also a number of recurrent themes which emerge, suggesting that there are limitations to using arts-based tools as methods for qualitative inquiry. There is, for example, overwhelming emphasis on the subjective nature of arts-based methods (ROSSMAN & RALLIS, 2003). There is also a sense in which an arts-informed account of qualitative research can distort the authenticity of data (BROSSEAU, 1994, p.336), the basis of which it is argued, rests heavily on self (indulgent) introspection (BEST, 2000, p.3). [1]

The primary purpose of this paper is to address some of these issues in relation to the experiences of participants involved in creating *Harry and Susie*, and to consider carefully what may be the potential of a performative approach to data collection. By performative, I am referring both to the arts-based tools utilised in the workshop programme and to the *doings* and *showings* that made real the story of *Harry and Susie* (DEWSBURY, 2000; THRIFT, 2000). In this sense I am also referring to the performance and practice of (addictive) identities and to how the participants' construction and reconstruction of themselves led to transformative (MARKUSSEN, 2005) and transgressive (NAGAR, 2000) moments in the initiative. The paper is structured into two main parts. First, in order to show how performative methods are productive I examine the workshop phase, the first stage of the programme. In particular, I suggest that the performative strategies for collecting data throughout the workshop phase—i.e., the process of play, textual and symbolic mapping and improvisation—gave participants some autonomy while also enhancing personal and group development. At the same time, I explore some of the limitations associated with a performative approach by looking at the therapeutic elements of the programme and the way in which data was often obtained through an introspective delving into self. I use narrative vignettes as a method which captures the resonance and flavour of this topic and to enhance, as HUMPHREYS (2005) has argued, reflexivity in this account. Second, I move somewhat beyond the content of *Harry and Susie* to explore some possibilities for the re-envisioning of performative methods. I consider the extent to which the second stage of the workshop programme, the feedback session, can be understood as a focus group discussion by re-reading the session as a method for producing and verifying the performance text (RICHARDSON, 1994; DENZIN, 2001). I do this through a consideration of issues of participation and authenticity. Conclusions

are drawn which have implications for the performative turn in social science and for social scientists seeking to use methods of research which more appropriately engage with the realities of research participants. [2]

Before undertaking either task, however, some further preliminary comments about the nature of the initiative will provide a contextual overview of the discussion which follows. [3]

### 1.1 Making *Harry and Susie Get Married?*: The initiative

The making of *Harry and Susie* took place throughout the course of a five-week initiative spearheaded by L.A. The director of Outside Edge was commissioned to work with a group of ex/recovering addicts/alcoholics; four professional actors; and a documenter<sup>2</sup>, over four one-day workshops and a one-day feedback session<sup>3</sup>. The programme also included rehearsal and performance attendance, though save for the actors and documenter this was optional. Most participants were recruited to the initiative via a letter detailing the aims of the programme and were people the writer had come into contact with during his own battle with drug dependency. The actors were recruited through castings for *Harry and Susie* and my own access had been negotiated via a prior meeting with the director<sup>4</sup>. Out of the nine participants taking part in the initiative (i.e., four actors, five community participants and one researcher), seven people identified as ex/recovering addicts/alcoholics and one person as having a very close sibling affected by addiction/alcoholism<sup>5</sup>. While my own inclusion in the initiative risked dangers of voyeurism, particularly for a (non-addictive) researcher, all participants were advised about the highly intimate and personal nature of the workshops and the importance of confidentiality<sup>6</sup>. Participants were also told that there would be an opportunity to talk to a counsellor during the workshops to discuss any issues that might potentially arise. [4]

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2 Assigned by L.A, the documenter's role was to provide a map of the writer's process throughout the workshop programme. The purpose of this map was to detail the various stages of the writing process, from the workshop phase to feedback session and performance, to be used as a manual for other (participatory theatre) writers. This provision was made possible through a New Writing Fund Award by L.A.

3 The director of Outside Edge would be the project's writer and also the facilitator of the workshops and feedback session.

4 When my research study first began I met the director of Outside Edge with the view to gaining further access to the company. As a result of an interview with the director, in which I also expressed an interest in using the company as a case study group, the director suggested that I come to the workshop sessions to see what the company was about.

5 All ex/recovering addicts/alcoholics had to have a *clean time* (functioning without the use of drugs or alcohol) of at least six months to be eligible for inclusion in the initiative.

6 As a *participant observer* involved in the initiative, I chose to use semi-overt participation in the workshops and thus positioned myself as a "student with an interest in theatre". This positioning was aided by the fact that as *participants* we were all new members; the director had made it clear that all participants were there on his invitation; and I was also considerably younger than most participants, which was advantageous as people felt I had a lot to learn from their experiences. In the context of workshops, issues of confidentiality were of extreme importance. Highly intimate and personal details of participants were disclosed on a day-to-day basis. For this reason, all recording of field notes took place away from the workshop, and special care was taken to maintain the anonymity of all the participants involved. For further discussion of the ethical issues surrounding my own inclusion in the programme see ROBINSON (2004).

The initiative is important when thinking about the performative turn in social science and thus the value of placing neglected, fleeting and emotional voices (SMITH, 2001; LAW & URRY, 2004) at the heart of the research agenda. At its core rests the assumption that *Harry and Susie* could be created out of the lives and experiences of participants and that they could be the principal means through which the play was constructed and understood. The initiative thus fulfils a very important function: that of *privileging* the voices of ex/recovering addicts/alcoholics, voices which have been largely ignored or excluded in wider society. In fact, the impetus for the initiative and for the programme as a whole was to challenge dominant representations of theatre and also distinctions between high and low status performance existing in the arts world and popular imaginary, but which also rest on the artistic efficacy of performance. In contrast, much of the performative power of *Harry and Susie* would come from the inclusion and involvement of participants in the creative process and from the fact that participants would be given access to and become empowered through their involvement in the key stages of theatre production. In other words, by being primarily concerned to *recover* and *centralize* the neglected story(s) of addiction, *Harry and Susie* would function according to its own, distinctive aesthetics. [5]

Throughout the course of making *Harry and Susie*, a number of performative strategies were employed for gathering data about the social worlds of addicts/alcoholics. This process of data gathering began in the workshop phase, which offered participants autonomy and choice in the (re)presentation of their stories. In exploring the workshop phase in the next section, I argue that the participants' gained authority at a considerable degree of (emotional) cost to them. [6]

## **2. The Workshop Phase: (Re)Presentation, Power and Choice?**

The workshop phase represented the first stage of the creating process for *Harry and Susie* and consisted of four one-day workshops. The central purpose of the workshops was to produce, through the collective stories and experiences of participants, the content of the play. Ex/recovering addicts/alcoholics had come to the workshops with the knowledge that they would be involved in the creation of a play the director was working on. Similarly four actors had come through the process of auditioning to be included in the initiative. As participants, their different voices would merge to produce one narrative, the process of which played a pivotal role in increasing consciousness, self-esteem and a sense of worth. Yet, in the course of making *Harry and Susie* the many tensions of the participants were also played out, emotions ran high, and there was healing and therapy. In this context, it is arguable that the process of creating *Harry and Susie* placed participants—who to varying degrees could already be considered as vulnerable—in a highly vulnerable position. It is worth exploring then, the performative strategies used for collecting data throughout the workshops and to think through more carefully, the practicalities of a performative approach to data collection. [7]

## 2.1 Performative strategies: Building trust, forging bonds, performing self

The performative strategies adopted by Outside Edge in the creating process of *Harry and Susie* suggest ways forward for social researchers wishing to promote wider and more inclusive research practices with more effective representation of socially marginalised groups (KITCHIN, 1998; KRUISE, 2002). The workshops for example, incorporated a number of arts-based methods to generate information about *Harry and Susie*: i.e., the process of play, textual and symbolic mapping and improvisation. The process of play consisted of warm-up exercises such as the name writing activity and trust games, which were aimed at breaking-the-ice and helping the participants begin to work together. Textual and symbolic mapping focused on text/symbolic work such as brainstorming and pictorial biographies and were designed to help participants think about and structure the themes of the play. Improvisation functioned to further develop themes for *Harry and Susie* by reproducing scenes from participants' lives. This helped participants define character motivations, feelings and thoughts. As tools for generating data the process of play, textual and symbolic mapping and improvisation also allowed participants to build trust, forge bonds and enact social identity. [8]

Work for participants began at 10.30am until 4.30pm each day, Monday through to Thursday. Each day began with a check in and ended with a check out, which was an opportunity for participants to reflect on how they were feeling and to raise any issues which had emerged as a result of the playmaking process. The first two days of the workshop were devoted to the process of play and consisted of break-the-ice activities which helped participants to overcome shyness and get to know one another. It is important to emphasis here that participants all shared an interest in performance, which opened up far greater possibilities for participation in the exercises which themselves largely depended upon an intrusion of personal space.

### *Vignette 1: Breaking the Ice*

*I am standing in front of my partner, who for the purposes of anonymity, I shall call Rehan. All participants have been coupled in an uneasy alliance, courtesy of the director. I say uneasy, because as far as possible the director has insured that no participant has been partnered with another of the same sex. So here I stand in front of my partner, Rehan, who is a very attractive man. We are told that in a moment we will be asked to close our eyes. Whilst our eyes are closed we must familiarise ourselves with our partners hands, taking note of the texture of their skin and shape of their fingers, etc. The director continues: "Be sure to adequately acquaint yourselves with your partner's hands, because in a moment I will ask you to separate and move as far away from them as possible. I will then ask you to close your eyes once more and find, through trial and error—that is by moving around the room and touching the hands of whoever you come in contact with—your partner"! I look at Rehan, he has an expression on his face which tells me he is no more comfortable about doing the activity than I am. It is awkward and self-conscious. I feel just as uneasy but the silence serves only to prolong the moment. We nervously begin the exercise. [9]*

It is no wonder that we were nervous. Participants had been propelled into the exercises in a bid to encourage spontaneity and loose inhibitions. In this way participants were encouraged to explore, discover and create, which not only allowed them to bond and connect with each other but very quickly defined the workshop as a space of interaction and performance. Other activities designed for participants to become better acquainted with one another revealed some of the pitfalls associated with an arts-based approach to data collection. The name writing activity for example, involved participants writing their name on a large piece of paper, and then explaining to the rest of group what their name meant to them. The process produced a complex web of sensitivities as participants explained that their name was not simply a name but a symbol of their identity and who they were. The corresponding narrative represented the lives, experiences and aspirations of participants which while being crucial to the construction of *Harry and Susie*, depended upon an almost Artaudian confrontation of the self<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, in my conversations with participants many of them articulated to me that the primary experience they had obtained from the exercise was therapeutic.

*Vignette 2: And the Significance?*

*As this first day draws to a close, I ponder over the significance of past events. Now, as I sit with a bunch of keys in my hand, the entire room is silent. No one else can speak whilst I am in possession of these keys, "group rules". I must now ponder aloud. Share my thoughts of the day with the other participants. One of the participants had made a desperate leap for these keys minutes before me. They had very positive things to say about this first day. What did I have to say? It is now I remember a conversation I had with some of the participants at lunch. For them, the object of the workshop, contemplated as an opportunity to develop and master the great skill of acting, seemed to be shrinking. The clear objectives they'd expected to achieve had become difficult to see at this point in time. One of the participants expressed disappointedly: "It feels like therapy. When will the acting begin"? Never perhaps as any of them had conceived it, but maybe in some other way? [10]*

The difficulties experienced by participants raise some of the dilemmas of using arts-based methods. While the break-the-ice activities effectively encouraged unity and trust, the process through which participants built trust was characteristically subjective (see Table 1 for further examples of these exercises). This was also seen in the textual and symbolic mapping exercises, which were utilised as further tools for producing information about *Harry and Susie*.

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7 Antonin ARTAUD, a visionary and theatre practitioner who believed that theatre should be capable of confronting man/woman with the true self. In essence, the spectator would experience his/her unconscious, evil side and in so doing, be *purged* and *cleansed* of it.

<p>Select a partner. Take turns in transporting partner around the room with their eyes closed. As partner and you grow more confident with a controlled pace, take pace up slightly. Repeat exercise, experimenting with pace, direction etc.</p>	<p>Form a large circle. Allocate one person to take a journey around the circle with their eyes closed. Those who make up the circle guide this person around by first receiving them, and then passing them on to someone else. The point is to maintain eye contact with the person receiving the participant, so that if you are selected as the person they send the participant on to, you are ready to receive them and can ensure that they reach you safely.</p>	<p>A participant is selected to lie on the floor with their eyes closed. The remaining group place themselves evenly on either side of the participant. Slowly lift participant above head level and transport carefully around the room.</p>
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Table 1: Break-the-ice exercises [11]

Brainstorming was integral to the process. Participants were asked for example, to discuss spontaneous ideas about relationships and addiction (see Table 2), which depended on them actively drawing upon their own life stories and experiences. This is important when considering the efficacy of a performative approach to data collection. While the primary purpose of the brainstorming activity was to produce material for *Harry and Susie*, the process also involved participants recounting often painful experiences which had a profound affect on my own and other participants' moods. As reflected in the following vignette:

*Vignette 3: Feeling Low*

*Gradually as the paper gorged with words, I felt myself full with an uncontrollable sadness. I look at the participants, they are sad also but there is something else. From their voices I understand that they are both ashamed and proud of their contributions. Spontaneous suggestions are offered—"porn", "abuse", "using"—with hardly a moments pause. They are on a roll. I have yet to make one suggestion—I am out of my league. The participants were effectively dictating what any story about addiction should say, more eloquently, more authentically than any actor. This process had enabled the valuing of the once devalued; those who at some point in their lives had assumed they forfeited the right to be treated as fellow human beings. The story of dependency—on drugs or on alcohol—is not however pretty. And that is why my mood is so affected, so low.*

### Relationships and Addiction

*Sex deceit lies using porn*

*Selfishness unsociable low morale*

*Clucking loneliness craving dependency*

*Boredom promiscuity perverseness*

*Jealousy love habit arguments*

*Hate abuse paranoia secrets denial*

Table 2: Brainstorming themes of addiction [12]

Despite my own feelings as a participant, many other participants in the group—while obviously affected by the brainstorming process—felt energized and positive about the central role they were playing in making *Harry and Susie* and said they had also forged closer bonds through sharing similar experiences. It is arguable that participants also became empowered and more confident through what was at times an emotional process, as they were able to dictate the direction of discussions. This negative/affirmative binary was characteristic of the strategies employed throughout the workshop. For example, the symbolic mapping exercise involved participants mapping their own life stories in the form of a picture. Participants were then required to "share" their stories with the rest of the group (though this was optional). Sharing for participants entailed deep meditative reflection, an almost burrowing into self in order to reveal what was happening inside. This also involved making the unconscious conscious so that participants could move closer to an understanding of their own feelings.

#### *Vignette 4: Gleaning hope*

*I have just finished listening to the harrowing accounts of the life so far lived by (all but two) participants in this room. I will never again look at them in the same way. As much as I tried to keep focused, I found listening to their life stories very disturbing. Most of today, because of this obsession with keeping focused, my thoughts have ironically remained obscure and misty. But I have learnt that for some participants, the only role (in real life) they believed they would ever be able to play wholeheartedly was that of an addict/alcoholic. It sounds melodramatic, but life really has been cruel to them. For some, it was sexual abuse that tipped them over the edge; for some, simply isolation. Others spoke of life as children being a struggle against death which lurked at every corner; whilst others, violently abusive parents. Clean-time, which was to bring clarity and a sense of worth, had not yet freed them from the torment of memory; it had not even filled them with hope. What is interesting is that some participants said that this process has—filled them with hope that is. Nearly all express an interest in theatre and I think being included in the theatrical process—their personal stories and life experience providing firm foundations for the creation of the play—has enabled participants to narrate a sense of worth and self respect. [13]*



The above examples illustrate some of the complexities of using arts-based methods for the collection of qualitative data. While, as I have suggested, the decision to use performative methods allows for a flexible frame in which to work and also contributes a great deal in terms of increasing access and empowering individuals, this also means that working contexts can seem less structured and the materials produced, highly sensitive. Questions also have to be asked about whether arts-based strategies serve to reinforce the vulnerability of the people involved in performative and collaborative interactions and therefore care must be taken to not use these methods at will and without responsibility. On the final day of the workshop improvisation was used as an artistic tool to produce further information for the play. In this way improvisation became a useful means of highlighting a particular theme or potential dramatic situation in *Harry and Susie*. Participants were organised into two groups of three and one group of two and they were advised to devise a scenario based on themes generated in the brainstorming and symbolic mapping exercises (see Table 3).

**Enactment**

Two children are at home. They are between the ages of four and five years old and sit playing with some toys. They are smiling and laughing and appear engrossed in each other's company. Suddenly, the front door bursts open. It is the children's father. He is home and in a drunken fury. He looks at the children and roars: WHAT THE FUCK YOU LOOKING AT! He then proceeds to enter the kitchen where he demands from the children's mother: GIVE ME SOME MONEY! GIVE ME THE FUCKING MONEY!

**End of Scene**

Table 3: An improvisation [14]

My own participation in this exercise was guided by the participants I was teamed with. Their life stories offered potential in relation to the possible content of *Harry and Susie* while I became more instructive in *theatricalising* the enactment (i.e., making suggestions about the participants' method and style of delivery, the level of voice projection, the artistic effectiveness of the piece etc.). The germs of the scenario emerged through the participants' recounting of pivotal events they had experienced as children, events which, on all accounts seemed to have left a lasting affect on them. Once the main themes of the scenario were identified, we began work on characterisation and on dramatising the scenes. Since the chosen scenario was an amalgam of their own life stories, the participants took the lead in directing how each character should be portrayed. Both participants had clear ideas about character motivations and were concerned that, for example, the enactment accurately portrayed the siblings' innocence and fragility and that the father in the scene displayed "real anger". More generally our group resolved that all character portrayals were realistic, as in the manner of Constantin STANISLAVSKI's method acting (1980), and that certain parts of the scene were stylised and therefore follow in the tradition of Bertolt BRECHT (1964). The performances were, as the workshop had been, marked by an emphasis on the emotional; yet in the process of performing memory (HOUSTON & PULIDO, 2002) participants had enacted and constructed meaning for *Harry and Susie*, and more importantly

had been presented with the opportunity to change perceptions of their life choices and of themselves. In the next section I move somewhat beyond the content of *Harry and Susie* to consider the extent to which the feedback session can be understood as a focus group discussion, providing further participative opportunities for the participants.

#### *Vignette 5: Endings*

*I sit now facing, among others, the group counsellor, who as promised has come to listen to us air our views on what the workshop has meant to us. Many have spoken of the courage of others, their willingness to explore difficult issues for the "sake of art". They have been touched by the support shown to them, and the strong bonds they have forged. As each participant speaks, a marked feeling of camaraderie binds us. For me, who at certain times during the week have struggled with the belief I had nothing to give, I realise I have given my all. The participatory process, which contrasts sharply with the traditional theatre process—i.e., playwright writes play, director casts it and actors perform it as it is written—has enabled us to give. Participants were given a voice and effectively became the experts in the construction of *Harry and Susie*. By peripherally focusing on personal truths, life experience, the participatory process enhanced both personal and group development, whilst if only in a marginal way, alerting us to the aesthetics of theatrical production. [15]*

### **3. The Feedback Session: Participation, Authenticity and Artistic Quality**

#### *Vignette 6: The Coffee House*

*The scene is a coffee-house set on a trendy suburban road. There is a regal looking mat placed in its entrance and a made to look old wooden coat stand just a little further in. Inside there is an inevitable aroma of coffee. I am sitting at a table discussing the one-day feed-back session with the director. It is good to see him again. It is the first time since the workshop. He tells me that a couple of days after the workshop, he had one to one meetings with two of the participants. For one reason or another, they hadn't had the chance to relay their life stories fully. They felt they had more to say. It was good to know they had been given the chance. There is a pause as the director takes a sip from his coffee. As he continues, I am aware that the man behind the counter is watching us furtively. As I return my attentions to the director, he is telling me that it had been very useful going back to the material generated in the four days and remind himself of the various contexts in which the ideas had been constructed. He seemed very keen, almost intrigued by this. I decide to ask him how he is finding writing the play and am pleasantly surprised to hear that it is largely complete. For the director, the writing process had begun with the knowledge that he would see the participants again for the feed-back session. But it had also been important for him to honour his own intentions for the play. He gazes into his near empty cup and says confidently: "I knew from the beginning I wanted Susie to be Black". I wondered what had prompted his particular choice of who Susie should be. But then remember that he had commented on the first day of the workshop about the low turnout of women in rehab, and the even lower proportion of*

*these being Black women. The director knew of Black women who were users and he wanted to try and tell part of their story. I deduced then, that much of the content of Harry and Susie had invariably come from the director's own experiences. As he spoke however, it was clear too, that many of the speeches he had written for characters were taken directly from the stories participants had told.* [16]

The feedback session provided an opportunity for the director to liaise with participants about any issues arising from the drafted script. Acknowledging the multiple subject positions that participants occupy (ELWOOD & MARTIN, 2000), the session was intended to be used as a vehicle for participants to share and test ideas in relation to the effectiveness of *Harry and Susie*. The session parallels examples cited by BEDFORD and BURGESS (2001) and KNEALE (2001) in regards to the focus-group experience. And it might be possible to interpret the feedback session for *Harry and Susie* as a focus group within which ideas for the play are challenged by participants, who are in turn called to evaluate their stories. In practical terms the feedback session was designed to validate the data secured in the workshop whilst also providing further participative opportunities for participants. Re-reading the session as a method for producing and validating performance text also, then, brings into focus ideas about participation, authenticity and artistic quality. The group session began with the director encouraging participants to understand the first draft as *potentially* relevant theatre, the effectiveness of which would be discovered through further group discussion. Participants were also encouraged to explore the believability of the play's central characters—did they represent the truthful voice of ex/recovering addicts/alcoholics and their partners. What did participants feel would be a good ending to the play, and what kind of audiences should the show seek to attract? [17]

After some discussion several participants argued that the play was "too working class". They felt that by telling the story of addiction only as it occurs in a working class context, the director was inadvertently saying that addiction/alcoholism did not affect the middle classes. This was a myth I knew the director himself was only too happy to dispel, as he had explained to me in an interview:

"It's interesting because I feel that, it [addiction/alcoholism] seems like a working class thing, like it's perceived as a working class problem, with associations of economic deprivation. And I think that there is a statistical corollary between that, but I think that the middle classes and the upper classes are just as affected ... I think they have other ways of managing, they can go to private treatment centres, they can have private, professional help, so they don't come into the statistics"<sup>8</sup>. [18]

After further discussion, the director and participants agreed that some characters had become overshadowed by the working class plight. In this way, a number of suggestions were made regarding what and how the script might be altered in order to be more sensitive to the possible class divisions within prospective audiences. In this context the feedback session, like focus groups, allowed the

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8 Interview with Artistic Director of Outside Edge, 2001.

participants to argue their different points of view and to challenge the (director's) representation of addiction as a working class problem (GOSS, 1996, p.118). Importantly, participants appeared to be at complete ease and seemed to be enjoying the process. I am thus in agreement with HOGGART, LEES and DAVIES' (2002, p.214) argument that participants are given more freedom and choice in group discussions and with KNEALE (2001, p.138) who suggests that focus groups can promote confidence and empower participants. [19]

The content of *Harry and Susie* revealed that it was also a play that dealt with adult themes and participants were also concerned to discuss the cut off age of potential audiences. Some participants felt that parts of the script needed to be censored in order to communicate more effectively with younger audiences, while others argued that the play should tour to rehab centres and thus speak to audiences of people affected by chemical dependency. Once these and various other issues had been taken on board, the only thing that had to be decided, was how the play should end? The constraints of forum theatre meant that *Harry and Susie* would have a negative ending<sup>9</sup>. With this in mind, participants agreed that whilst the audience should be confronted with Susie's relapse, they should also be given a chance at the end of the show to change this. [20]

Re-reading the feedback session as a focus group discussion offers insight into the ways in which the participants negotiated meaning and representation beyond fixed and static notions of addiction. By discussing the effectiveness of *Harry and Susie* the participants also produced a rich and varied picture of chemical dependency, which challenged other assumptions about the relationships of recovering addicts and their partners. The participants can therefore be seen as providing a supplementary source of data to that previously constructed in the workshop phase. My own positioning as a *participant* in the session proved particularly helpful in illuminating how participants were given improved access to theatre making and how theatre itself was made open to an otherwise socially excluded group. I was also given an insight into issues I had not considered, for example the dynamics of the group. In this way I concur with HOLBROOK and JACKSON (1996) who suggest that group discussions can often provide researchers with unexpected findings. [21]

While the possibilities for re-imagining the feedback session as a focus group have highlighted the opportunities presented by the method, negotiating some of the problems associated with the approach may be more difficult. Take for example the degree to which participants were involved in the feed-back session and the fact that this was largely determined by the director. From the moment of inception, certain aspects of *Harry and Susie* were firmly fixed. As Vignette 6 reveals, aspects such as Susie's ethnicity were fixed because the director wanted to tell a particular story. Similarly, castings for the play had already been carried out, and the actors for the various parts, chosen by the director. The feed-back session was equally driven by the director's focus: the believability of characters, the authenticity of the play text, etc. In terms of the group discussions then,

9 Outside Edge utilises a form of theatre known as forum theatre which derives from the Brazilian director, Augusto BOAL. See BOAL (1992) for a discussion of forum theatre.

participants were less free to follow a natural course of expression and were more constrained by the issues of focus (HOLBROOK & JACKSON, 1996). There was thus minimal opportunity for participants to form individual opinions and there was instead a good degree of input on the director's part. This raises the question of representation and how far the director's interventions distorted the reality(s) of how the lives of addicts/alcoholics are actually lived. [22]

In fact, the main issue for the session centred on the authenticity of *Harry and Susie* and the participants' role in authenticating the performance text. Certainly the participants' sharing and testing of ideas in the session allowed for a critical reflexive account of addiction, however, certain visions came to be privileged by the director and thus only certain voices came to be heard (CRANG, 1992). The director's decision to include certain stories was tied in my opinion, to the tension between presenting truth and what made for *good* theatre—that is, performance which would be deemed as *stimulating, moving* and *powerful*. This is a recurring theme of participatory theatre and stems from the need of participatory theatre to meet both the participative and artistic aims of projects. For Outside Edge, meeting the participative objectives of the company meant that in the feed-back session participants were able to contribute something unique to the director's own vision of *Harry and Susie*; ultimately however, satisfying the artistic aims of the company meant that the director would go through a process of selecting, merging and dramatising such narratives (FORTIER, 1997, p.124). Having said this, the role of the group discussion should not be underestimated. Discussions in the feedback session have been reflexive, performative and critical, and have produced and validated performance text about the everyday lived experiences of ex/recovering addicts/alcoholics. [23]

#### 4. Conclusion

A performative approach to data collection was adopted as a strategy by Outside Edge in the creating process of *Harry and Susie Get Married?*. This paper has argued that such an approach is productive while at the same time acknowledging some of the difficulties associated with arts-based methods. My analysis has focused on the workshop and feedback phases of the initiative and has tried to provide a more detailed insight into actual experiences of participation. Experiences of participation in the workshops have been marked by an emphasis on the emotional yet they have also allowed participants to actively build a sense of community, which increased consciousness and a sense of agency. The feedback session provided further participative opportunities for participants and an important theme in this discussion related to the authenticity of the performance text and therefore the validity of the data produced. While using real life experiences to create a plausible story, that story became a generalised narrative about addiction. [24]

The examples used in this paper are ones which show the utility of an arts-based approach to data gathering; yet, as I have also argued, performative methods should not be used at will and without responsibility. The performative strategies employed throughout the initiative involved some kind of direct encounter

between the director and participants, encounters which produced highly sensitive data and could have potentially harmed already vulnerable people. And I would argue that while a performative approach was an appropriate strategy to adopt in the context of this particular group of participants—because of the unstructured and flexible nature of the approach and because it allowed participants the scope and freedom to participate in ways which privileged who they were—critical engagement with the limitations of the approach is needed so that researchers can (better) develop performative strategies. I hope however, that I have shown that performative methods *are* productive and the initiative, helpful for illuminating the possibilities of a *performative* social science. For example, that artistic and social scientific practices can productively be used together and that a "performative sense of social inquiry" (LAW & URRY, 2004, p.403) offers tools for better understanding and grappling with the complexities and *messiness* of human experience. An arts-based approach to data collection signals a new approach to social science; a performative turn capable of expanding the agenda of science and enhancing its analytical abilities. Challenges for social researchers include the need to push traditional boundaries of research and look beyond standard methods which "often strain at the limits of text" (GIVEN, 2006, p.56) and fail to adequately engage with or capture the diversity, multiplicity and emotionality of everyday life. A performative turn in social science offers the chance to redefine what is relevant and what counts as data; to better engage with research participants and meet them on their own terms; and provide a more inclusive research process with more effective representation of marginalised groups. [25]

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