IPSA – END OF PROJECT REPORT

Background

The title of the dissemination conference at the end of our research project was *Methodological, Theoretical and Political implications of doing Research among Refugees*. It reflects the three different but related motivations for this research project. The Research Fellow has been working for several years in participatory theatre, and we wondered whether we could adopt these theatre techniques as a successful innovatory sociological research tool. In particular we wanted to examine them as a research tool for studying identity issues. In recent years we have seen the growing influence of the *performativ* approach on theorizations of identity and belonging (Butler, 1990; 1993; Probyn 1996; Bell, 1999; Fortier 2000).

Although Butler herself has differentiated between performativity and performance, her approach has also become influential within theatre studies (Sedgwick 1995, 2003, Kershaw 1999, McKenzie, 2001). At the same time, there has been a massive growth in the use of theatre, especially participatory theatre, as a tool of education and transformation among youth, women and members of various marginalized groups (Jackson 1993; Prentki 2003; Taylor, 2003). We decided to combine two major forms of participatory theatre techniques – Playback (Fox 1986) and Forum (Boal, 1979) to explore constructions and politics of identity and belonging, processes of communication, authorization, contestation and transformation, as they take place in the collective space of four different refugee groups in East London.

The reason we focused on these particular groups relates to the third impulse that motivated this research project. Politics of immigration in general, and of refugees and asylum seekers in particular, have come to occupy in recent years an increasingly central plank in British (and other countries’) political agenda (Crawley, 2005; Marfleet, 2006; Stevens 2004). Securitisation and militarization of borders have come to be seen as a precondition of social and political solidarity and inclusion, as summed up in the, by now the classic, White Paper – ‘Secure Borders – Safe Haven’ (2002; see also the special issue of *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 2005 on the White Paper, including the article by Yuval-Davis & al.).

Refugees – and especially refugees of Muslim origin - occupy central roles in media, popular and official discourse on these issues (Castles 2001; Nielsen 2001) and we thus
decided to work with such refugees, from different origins and with different histories of migration.

**Objectives**

As a result, and as stated in the research proposal, the aims and objectives of our research project were the following:

1. To examine the ways the use of experimental community theatre techniques can add to theorizations of identity, especially those that emphasize the performativity of identity, and the links between identity and patterns of social action.
2. To explore the ways identities and modes of belonging are constructed, reflected upon, communicated and authorized in the community setting.
3. To investigate the ways particular notions of conflict and/or cohesion between self, community, society and the state are being enacted in practices of everyday life.
4. To identify what practices and policies towards refugees can be pinpointed as models of good practice, and to inform community and state agencies about them.
5. To demonstrate the use of community theatrical techniques as alternative or complementary social research methods for investigating experiences and identity constructions among refugees and other social groups.

During the course of our research project we addressed all of these objectives. In the report, objective 1 will be discussed in the Theoretical Implications section; objectives 2 and 3 in the Findings section, objective 4 in the Policy Implications section and 5 in the Methodological Implications.

**Methods**

Both for ethical reasons (so as not to make the refugees relive some of their most traumatic memories) and because we wanted to explore processes of inclusion and exclusion in the lives of refugees in Britain under contemporary political conditions, we focused in our research on their lives since coming to Britain and settling in London, highlighting
encounters of self, community, state and society, and examining the interrelationships between identity constructions and social action.

Similarly, for ethical as well as practical reasons, we worked with groups of refugees who were mainly already settled here rather than with the most vulnerable undocumented migrants and asylum seekers.

In order to deconstruct the homogenized notion of ‘the refugee’, as well as that of ‘the Muslim’, we chose to work with three groups of refugees of ‘Muslim’ origin, as well as with a mixed group of migrants and refugees who were training in advice work, all located in East London. The aim of choosing these particular four participant groups in the research was not to form a ‘representative’ sample of refugees, but rather to explore some of the varieties of life and experiences of people, all defined [at least collectively if not individually and legally] as refugees, all living in East London, and all belonging to ethnic communities constructed as ‘Muslims’ in the post 7/7 London reality. The Kosovan group was composed mainly of young people; the Kurdish – of members of a theatre group and the Somali – of a women’s only group. The fourth group of the advice work trainees brought together people from all these communities as well as others.

**The groups:**

*Shpresa (Hope)*

Shpresa is an organization aimed at support and education of Kosovan refugees and their families. They were part of a group of refugees accepted by Britain during the conflict in Yugoslavia for the self determination of Kosovan ethnic Albanian community which was followed by the military intervention of UN and European states in 1999 (Kostovic & Presreshi 2003; Kushner, 1999). Most of the Kosovans currently in the UK are either asylum seekers or have temporary leave to remain. Shpresa was initially part of Renewal Refugee and Migrant project funded by statutory funds. The coordinator of the group was trained and supported to set up a social enterprise in 2000 for the settlement and support of the Albanian speaking Community. The specific group we worked with was composed mostly of young people (6th form and college age).

*Kurdish Community Centre’s theatre group*

Most Kurdish refugees arrived from Turkey in the late ‘80s and ‘90s after the escalation of crisis between the PKK (the Kurdish Workers Party), who fought for the national rights
of Kurds and the Turkish Government, which resulted in mass arrests and other forms of persecution (INTEGRA, Report 1999; Kushner, 1999).

The group we worked with came together initially to work on theatre production in Kurdish, focusing mostly on nationalist Kurdish themes. It is part of a larger Kurdish community centre which was formed in 1989 and constitutes part of an informal network of Kurdish community centres, mostly concentrated in East and North London.

The Somali group – Somali Women Advice Network

The Somali community has strong historical and colonial links with the UK and this was probably one reason why they sought refuge in the UK. The devastating effects of the civil war after the defeat by Ethiopia and the subsequent overthrow of Siad Barre in 1991, led to a de facto division of Somalia. On 18 May 1991, the Northern Republic of Somaliland proclaimed its independence. New levels of violence followed between different groups competing to fill the political power vacuum. (INTEGRA report, 1999; Dixon et al, 2006).

Many refugee Somali women arrived in the UK with members of their extended families but without their husbands who often followed later. The Somali women’s centre is part of an umbrella voluntary sector service provider based in the Stratford Archive centre. It works mainly with volunteers and the co-ordinator is an established activist and community leader.

Shoreditch Trust community development unit

The fourth group we worked with was a mixed group of students from refugee and migrant origins studying for a vocational diploma in advice work based in Shoreditch Community School. This ‘skills for employment’ initiative was part of Shoreditch Trust Community development work with British minority ethnic groups to enhance their employability. It is a charitable regeneration agency based in the south of Hackney. It is part funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government’s New Deal for Communities programme.

The fieldwork stage of the research consisted of seven sessions with each group – two Playback and five Forum Theatre, as well as some post-theatre individual interviews. In Playback Theatre (Fox, 1986), following the actors’ stories, the audience tell their own stories based on their experiences that are then ‘played back’ to them by the professional actors on stage. In Forum Theatre (Boal, 1979) personal stories on conflict and oppression are acted out by the participants themselves who, by stepping in and replacing the protagonist, test out
strategies for action. Unlike in Playback, the Forum theatre scene is not based on on-the-spot improvisation but is built gradually and collectively over a period of time, using exercises such as image work and character building. In our research the Forum scenes often followed and collectively the stories told in the Playback stage.

We videoed all theatre sessions except the Somali women who asked to only be audio recorded, and we also audio recorded post-theatre interviews of members of each group\textsuperscript{1}. The transcripts of the recordings were used for a discourse analysis of the research data, relating to the lives of the refugees, their views of themselves and their communities, their encounters with British society and state, as well as their views of the research process and methodology.

Our methodological strategy was to look at how participants themselves interpreted and read their own and each other’s non-verbal gestures rather than imposing our own meaning. When the participants spoke in other languages, especially in the Kurdish and Somali groups, we relied on the interpretations of other group members in the Kurdish case and the group’s co-ordinator in the Somali case\textsuperscript{2}.

Results

Both Playback and Forum sessions brought back to life a variety of everyday experiences of the different refugee participants. The narrated and enacted experiences related to their families, peer-group, community and neighbourhood as well as interaction with various agents of the state, such as schools, the Home Office, job centres and Social Services. Given the constraints of space we can present here only some, highly generalized, findings\textsuperscript{3}.

Constructions of ‘the refugee’\textsuperscript{4}

Probably more than any other identity constructions, the notion of ‘the refugee’ has absorbed a lot of its hegemonic negative media discourse, even in discourses of resistance: ‘We came here to escape terrorism, not as terrorists’. ‘Refugees’ were perceived as second class citizens, often disempowered and excluded and with no ability to plan a future, with the risk of deportation constantly hanging over their heads, even when they had ‘indefinite leave to

\textsuperscript{1} Please see the no.3 Annex which includes excerpt recordings of the various theatrical activities in the research.

\textsuperscript{2} Please see section on ‘difficulties’ in the form.

\textsuperscript{3} For more details please see our article in preparation: ‘Performing’ refugees: dis/empowerment and social exclusion’.

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remain’, since there was always the possibility their country would be declared as ‘safe’. This affected their ability to integrate in British life.

At the same time, refugees should not be seen as one homogenous group of people. Differential social locations, identifications and values in terms of ethnicity, religion, gender, class, stage in the life cycle and histories of migration also affect their identity constructions as refugees. Different refugees have different resources, economic but also human and social capital, to aid them in their settlement process in London and Britain, and in their encounters with the state.

Special tensions emerged between two different genealogies of refugees who belong to different classes – the urban political activists and the rural or nomadic victims of war. The first ones were perceived by some of the participants to be not only more educated and politically articulate but also as regarded by themselves and others to be the ‘representatives’ of all members of the community. This came across among both the Kurdish and the Somali refugees. At the same time, however, it also became clear that the less the resources available to the individual refugee, the more dependent they become on community organizations and activist advocates to mobilize resources to support them in their struggles against discrimination.

Construction of ‘the Muslim’

Although members of all three groups come from Muslim origins, the place that Islam played in their narratives was very different. It was very marginal among the Kosovans and the Kurds, much more central among the Somali. Among the Kosovans, it constituted, if anything a performative identity mode, such as not eating during the day during Ramadan. It also played a naturalized boundary role between them and the Kosovan Serbs, although the Albanian national signifier was much stronger here.

Among the Kurds, and especially the group we worked with, who were sympathetic to communist revolutionary organizations, religion was virtually irrelevant, as both they and the Turkish majority are mostly of Muslim origin so Islam does not represent an identifying marker. However, there was some mention of the divisive role of religion in the homeland, which prevented mixed marriages of Sunni and Alevi Muslims irrespectively of their Turkish or Kurdish origins.

For the Somalis, Islam was considered a unifying way of life, and the theatre workshops were structured so as to end or break for prayer times. Some women saw Islam as a cultural
and moral guide, which would protect them and their families from ‘destruction’. Others mentioned how much they liked to pray or to go on the ‘Haj’ [to Mecca], while others mentioned they liked weddings or watching ‘Eastenders’. One intergenerational conflict that was mentioned related to the fact that while the mothers considered non-religious music to be ‘non Islamic’, their daughters loved African dancing which they learned from local friends.

*Living in London*

Pre-arrival expectations of how British and London society would be like varied from the expectation of a homogenized European society recalled by one Kosovan girl who thought, when arriving to London and seeing Asian people in the street, that she had been brought by mistake to India, to a view of Britain as the perfect multicultural society in which members of each community could live according to their traditional cultures, expressed by a Somali refugee who moved to the UK from Denmark for that reason. The level of involvement and mixing with members of other (majority and minority) ethnic communities varied, with generally the young and the Kosovan boys being the most integrated. Similarly, experiences with neighbours varied, from closeness and support to racist persecutions.

*Multi-layered belonging/s*

As refugees, the relationships of the research participants – at least of the Kurds and the Somalis - to their ‘homelands’ were often ambivalent, combining longing for faraway landscapes and a utopian vision of their society with bitterness towards its present state and their inability to go back there in many cases. This bitterness was enhanced for those who felt unhappy and alienated living in Britain, especially those who came from rural backgrounds, whose English was poor and whose legal status was most insecure. At the other end of the spectrum were those who managed to acquire British passports and who were thus able to travel between the two countries and lead a more transnational way of life. Having a British passport also enabled some Kurdish refugees to perform subversive identity games, representing themselves in Turkey as British and then moving to speak in Turkish. To others, gaining British passports embodied the reality of their new lives in Britain, a practical mode of belonging, much more marginal to their view of self than that of their origins (which did not correspond to the existing states: Kosovans -Albania, Turkish Kurds – Kurdistan and Somalis – a united country).
The sense of belonging to British society was strongest among those who had obtained citizenship, who were fluent in English and who, rather than being engaged in casual labour as so many of the participants were, had built a professional life which although it sometimes involved working with other members of their community of origin, meant they had also become part of multicultural Britain. They considered themselves to have a hyphenated identity, their lives and future now rooted in cosmopolitan London. However, many youngsters felt blocked in their pursuit of higher education, forced to go to work in order to support their families.

**Encounters with various state agencies**

Overall the research participants tended to portray their encounters with various state agencies in a negative light, from schools which were authoritarian and moralizing, insensitive to the children’s and parents’ needs (although some teachers were singled out as having played crucially important positive roles in their integration), to indifferent, incomprehensible health and employment services, disempowering and punitive immigration officers, police and social welfare workers. As one participant stated: ‘In Somalia, they kill you; here, they take away your children.’ We heard that children are sometimes separated from their parents so that the latter could be deported while enabling the British state to conform with the ban on child deportations in international covenants on the Rights of the Child.

The dramas revealed that special technologies of intimidation and disempowerment are used in crucial encounters of asylum seekers with the state, such as taking away their mobile phones, or preventing them from bringing their solicitors, friends or interpreters with them.

The dramas also showed that even when state schemes are aimed at support, inclusion and integration, such as Sure Start or family planning, they can end up being counter- productive, as their mode of execution is not individually sensitive. A bureaucratic top down approach can also have other unintended effects - of disempowering refugees and others. For example, the dramas revealed that refugees who wanted to retain independence and autonomy, and not to rely on social security were told they could not get any training and support in applying for various training courses or jobs, as such help was only available
to those registered as unemployed\(^4\) or that overseas qualifications were not accepted and thus they would not be able to work in their field.

The roles of interpreters emerged as crucial, although we heard many stories of their incompetence and corruption, as well as of children being pushed into an interpreter role and ending up feeling trapped in adult conflictual conversations between their families and state agencies.

**Policy implications:**

Following these findings, we would argue that there is a central paradox in the treatment by the state of refugees and asylum seekers: on the one hand, they are accused of not being willing to integrate into British society and its values and, on the other hand, many of the policies aimed at them are intended to prevent them from staying in Britain.

We found that ethnic community organizations can help rather than hinder integration to British society, although preoccupation with difference can be destructive and pluralist citizenship spaces are vital.

The dramas revealed that the burden of integration and cohesion is seen to be carried by the refugees and other migrants rather than by everyone, including the local population and the state, who blame ‘outsiders’ for what they perceive to be the disintegration of British social cohesion. In our view, neither assimilationism nor multiculturalism which reifies and homogenize ethnic cultures and boundaries are the solution but rather, a convivial attitude to difference and a shared sense of common destiny.

**Models of good practice** should emphasize individualized, case sensitive approaches to service provisions, which would take into consideration the specific circumstances of the refugees’ lives and histories, their family relations and their differential social, economic and cultural capital.

There should be provision of well trained and supervised interpreters, and use of new technology in flexibility of access, so as to avoid the exploitation of children in this role as well as of refugees by corrupt interpreters.

The provision of English lessons should be expanded rather than shrunk and they should be available to all asylum seekers from their time of arrival. Child care provision should be attached so as to enable parents of young children to attend these classes.

\(^4\) Like in other state provisions, such as Sure Start, these unintended consequences which came up in the refugees’ narratives, affect not just refugees but also other members of the society.
When possible, training and other social and communal services should not be segregated between refugees and local people so as to avoid social divisions, sentiments of backlash resentment of local people and a common local space for social cohesion which would not put the onus of integration only on the newcomers.

**Theoretical Implications**

The theoretical approach to the study of identity employed in this research continues the work of Yuval-Davis on belonging and the politics of belonging (e.g. Yuval-Davis, 2003, 2006). A central element in this approach is the view that all knowledge – and imagination – are situated (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). Another is that all social relations need to be analysed in an intersectional way: although each social location has its own discursive ontological basis, in concrete terms they are constituted and constructed by each other (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1983; Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Our intersectional perspective is deconstructive, undermining essentialist and reified constructions of subjects.

The theatrical sessions and the post-theatre interviews provided rich and dynamic data on processes of identity constructions, communications, contestations and authorizations, as well as their relationships to various forms of social action. The theatrical participatory techniques provided an environment in which identity performance and performative processes were intertwined, producing complex narratives of normativity, resistance and transformation. Given the length constraints of the report we would like to limit our comments on the theoretical dimension of our research project to some central points.

Identity is a contested concept, used in multiple ways in different academic disciplines as well as in everyday discourse (e.g. Williams 2000, Brubaker et. al, 2000). The notion of identity employed in this research needs to be differentiated from categories of social location on the one hand, and normative reference to belonging, on the other hand. We define identities as narratives (which can be verbal or non-verbal) told by people to themselves and to others about who they are, who they are not and who/how they would like to be. The narratives involve both cognitive identifications and emotional attachments. Not all identity narratives are about belonging to particular groupings, but even then such narratives often relate, directly or indirectly, to oneself or others’ perceptions of what being a

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5 For a more developed argument please see the attached theoretical paper, *Identity, Performance & Social Action*
member in a collectivity (ethnic, racial, national, cultural, religious) might mean. These narratives of identities tend to be more or less stable in different social contexts, more or less coherent, more or less authorized or contested by oneself and others, depending on specific situational factors.

In the vast literature on identity, much of it, especially that relating to psychoanalysis, refers to the construction of identity and subjectivity as a dyad of differentiation of me/other (e.g. Lacan 1977; Winnicott, 1967). Another body of literature on identity emphasizes the dialogical process involved in identity construction (e.g. Bakhtin 1981; Ricouer 1992) in which the emphasis is not so much on this dyad of me/other but rather that of me/us.

These two very different approaches to the construction of identity have very different implications for theorising the relationships between individual and collective identities, as well as for processes of boundary de/construction and maintenance. In our research we found evidence of identity processes that followed both theoretical paradigms. The first, usually, was confined to constructions of reified, racialized identities and to situations where the refugees were confronted by official discourses related to who they were and how they should behave. The second, much more contested, shifting and multiple, related to processes arising out of group dynamics and constructions of collective identities. Both of them involved different forms of social action within the theatre space relating both to internal social relations and to various replications of (and preparations to) social actions outside it.

However, the medium of theatre, and especially participatory theatre, highlighted the fact that processes of identity construction cannot be delimitied to me/other and me/us, but that the fields of emotional and power relations in which processes of identity construction, contestation and authorization usually take place are much more complex. The non-me, to most people, is not identified as either ‘us’ or ‘them,’ except in extreme conflictual situations and participatory theatre provides ample space for in-depth explorations of non-adversarial study of different characters.

While using theatre to study identity processes is not in itself a common practice, theatre and role playing have been used as a metaphor by some of the most important theorists of identity, while pointing out the difference between theatre and so-called real life. Goffman (1969), for example, focused on the different constructions of ‘the audience’ and actors in
these two situations (as separated in the theatre space, often collapsed together in real life), and Butler (1990) comments on the differential ability to regulate identity practice, which she considered easier in the theatre than in real life. One of the advantages of using participatory theatre techniques has been the blurring of ‘audience’ and ‘participants’, ‘theatre’ and ‘social’ space, and therefore the greater permeability of the boundaries between the two. This was the primary aim of Augusto Boal when he established the Forum Theatre as a medium with which to carry out the emancipatory ideas of Paul Freire (1974). He argued that unlike the usual reflective mirroring of traditional theatre, in Forum, the mirror is penetrated and is used for personal and social transformation (Boal, 1979). We feel, however, that such a claim needs to be qualified since they apply in only very specific historical conditions. In our research, Forum work opened up spaces for trying out strategies of conflict resolution and personal empowerment.

Nevertheless, even when the scenes of conflict enacted do not necessarily lead to easy emancipation, we found that they evoke an in-depth sense of reflection and identification, both for those who have undergone similar situations and for others, who have not. While Butler (1990) sees performative identities as repetitive practices within regulatory discourses, she acknowledges, in her later work (1993) that ‘performance’ (like drag) has an important subversive role. For us, the participatory theatre space proved to be a space both for reflection on normative discourses identities and for resisting and transforming such constructions. It is for this reason that we feel that participatory theatre techniques can become such an important tool both for research but also for dissemination of knowledge, in the civil society, to experts, and to policy makers.

Methodological implications

There is no space in this report to describe the different kinds of information and knowledge that each type of theatrical activity adopted during the seven sessions (Playback; image work; character building; final scenes and final scene interventions) produced6. Here we only wish to argue that overall, we found the use of participatory theatre techniques a useful and enriching sociological research method, particularly suitable for studying narratives of identity of marginalized groups as well as for illustrating perceptions and experiences of social positioning and power relations in and outside community groupings.

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6 For a more detailed description please see the attached methodological paper Participatory Theatre as research Methodology.
We recommend, therefore, that this research tool be added to the range of tools of sociological research. Sharing with other standpoint feminist methodologies a situated, deconstructive and reflexive perspective, the main characteristics of the knowledge produced by our research method can be summed up as embodied, dialogical and illustrative.

*Embodied:* Constructing theatre scenes require specificities of ‘who’ and ‘how’, while taking place in a temporally condensed stage space of the here and now. In Forum the stage becomes multiple spatially as a result of the different reconstructions of scenes by different interventions of the participants, who challenge and change the identity positions enacted each time, even in the same scene.

*Dialogical:* the narratives and performances of the participants are produced within the collective settings of the theatre space in which identities are constructed, communicated, authorized, contested and transformed in a process that cannot be analyzed either as individual or as collective but as an inter-relational and in-between ‘becoming’.

*Illustrative:* rather than producing narratives of either linear biographies or attitude surveys, the dramatised illustrative moments produced by the participants, highlight and encapsulate central ‘generative’ themes. This can be particularly effective when disseminating the research results as they reproduce the embodied as well as the affective dimensions of the participants’ experiences and thus trigger empathy.

**Activities, Outputs** (please see Form 2.a.&b.)

**Impacts:**

The research project aimed at initiating and disseminating a model of research practice in which all the participants co-produce knowledge. We worked directly in dialogue with members of the refugee groups rather than seeing the process as one of top-down knowledge ‘transfer’ in which they were defined as ‘user’ groups. We worked from the start with community groups, incorporating their questions and perspectives arising from the applied theatre model into the research, and built together a cooperative approach to defining conclusions. The end of project conference was both the marker and breakthrough moment in which the research team, including the refugee groups, artists, social activists and policy advisors, came together to voice this way of doing research.
In addition:

- The Kosovan group created a scheme for providing interpreters after listening and being affected by the issues young people shared and enacted during the project as family interpreters to statutory services.
- There is a growing interest in our model of using participatory theatre techniques as a research methodology and we hope it will have the impact of becoming a standard tool in the growing range of innovative methodologies in contemporary social sciences.

**Future research priorities:**

Many methodological, theoretical and policy-related issues emerged out of our research, interrelating subjectivities and experiences of refugee and members of other marginalized and racialized groupings with their encounters and access to community and state services. Other issues relate to macro-management of diversity by statutory and non-statutory bodies and their related constructions of multi-layered citizenships and membership in local and transnational civil society. In particular, however, we would like to:

- explore further the use of participatory theatre techniques as a sociological research methodology
- compare the reality of refugee lives in London and in other locations both in the UK and in other western locations

Erene Kaptani, the Research Fellow, is currently applying for a PhD which would incorporate these two elements, using participatory theatre techniques in research on Kurdish refugees in London and Athens.
ANNEX 1: REFERENCES


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- Waters, Nicholas & Freda Belinda (1999) *Combating social exclusion: Integra the refugee partnership project report* A comparative study of Bosnian, Kurdish, Somali and Senegalese communities in the UK, Germany, Denmark and Italy, University of Surrey.

**ANNEX 2: DVD OF THEATRE WORK [CONFIDENTIAL]**