Music and Performing Arts Professions

Program in Educational Theatre

Topic Proposal

If Obesity Is so Bad, Why Are so Many People Fat?
Interrogating, Exploring, and Understanding Obesity through Theatre

By

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Introduction

What causes obesity? Is it a matter of eating more calories than your body burns? Is it a societal problem – too much available food? Is it a psychological issue? Do people eat to deal with stress or anxiety? Is a lack of physical exercise the problem? Is obesity genetic? All of these reasons have been put forth by those who research, deal with, and speak out on obesity including doctors, public health workers, nutritionists, diet gurus, and journalists. Yet, despite all the research, articles, and education programs that address the issue, obesity rates in the United States are steadily rising instead of falling.

As someone who has struggled with weight gain since adolescence, I have a personal interest in the area of obesity. What I have found through my reading of the literature is that there seems to be no one simple reason for obesity. Yet, the most frequently heard solution to obesity is to eat less and exercise more. Unfortunately, this dictum ignores two key issues that also impact obesity – emotional eating and societal influences on food choices. As a mental health counselor, I am very interested in the emotional aspect of obesity.

When eating is not just about feeding one’s body, but is also about feeding one’s emotions, simply eating less actually brings on stress and anxiety (O’Malley, 2004). Thus, people who are simply told to eat less and exercise more may not be aware of how to deal with the emotional ramifications of changing their eating habits (Spain, Spain, & Fredericks, 2007). Thus they fail to lose weight.

Changing one’s individual eating habits in a society that is identified by its overconsumption, quick meals, and fast/junk foods also creates a challenge when trying to eat less and eat more healthy foods. Additionally, the diet, fitness, food, and health
industries all have a stake in obesity that must be explored (Nestle, 2006; Julier, 2008).

So why bring theatre into the issue of obesity? What can theatre do that doctors, nutritionists, fitness experts, and journalists cannot? Theatre is an interactive medium. It involves connecting with others, putting one’s thoughts into actions, and delving into one’s feelings. When people are directly involved in theatre, they are connecting their thoughts, feelings, and physicality. Obesity is also about connections or, more accurately, disconnections between the mind, feelings, and the body. As a theatre artist, I can think of no better way to tap into those areas of disconnection than to explore obesity through theatre.

I am strongly influenced by the theatre for social change of Augusto Boal (1979, 1995). He created two major types of theatre for social change which he entitled Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) and Rainbow of Desire (ROD). His notions of TO explore the external oppressions in people’s lives, while his theory of ROD explores their internal oppressions. As I believe that obesity has both external and internal forces feeding it, both types of theatre for social change will be useful in my approach.

**Topic Proposal**

I intend to conduct a series of weekly TO and ROD workshops over the span of an academic semester with a group of emerging adults (18-25 years old) in a college setting in the New York City area. By emerging adults, I am interested in people who are just coming into adulthood. I find this age group of adults are at an intriguing point in their lives in which they are exploring and defining who they are as adults. I believe they are in a perfect point in their lives to both explore obesity from a fresh perspective, and
make choices, based on what they learn, which can impact how they live with obesity the rest of their adult lives.

In these workshops, I will use the participants’ lived experiences and their understandings of obesity to explore what obesity means to them and how they understand its construction in society. Using a series of exercises from Augusto Boal’s arsenal of theatre games, the participants will explore obesity from a variety of constructions -- personal, communal, societal, political, industrial, and national -- in order to develop a more complete understanding and picture of what obesity means to them. We will then develop a forum theatre piece about obesity which they will present to an invited audience. As the facilitator, I will bring in materials about obesity as well as provide resources for the participants to study outside of the workshops to enhance their awareness of the various facets of obesity. In order to develop a fuller picture of obesity in the United States, it will be helpful to increase the participants’ knowledge of factors influencing and facts about obesity beyond their lived experiences and own cache of knowledge.

**Statement of Topic**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of emerging adults in a college setting as they explore obesity in their own lives, as well as in their larger community and society using theatre for social change exercises to create and perform a forum theatre piece.

**Sub-questions:**
1. Does the experience of exploring obesity in theatre workshops affect the ways that emerging adults experience, understand, and respond to obesity?

2. How do emerging adults understand obesity?

3. What relationships exist between oppression and obesity?

4. What does it mean to create safe space in a theatre environment?

The Need for the Study

Obesity continues to be a growing problem in the United States. According to data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2007), the prevalence of obesity in adolescents aged 12-19 increased from 5% to 17.4% between 1976-1980 and 2003-2004. Obesity carries health risks such as high blood pressure, Type II diabetes, and fatty liver disease (Daniels, 2006).

While others have used Boal’s work to explore body image, I found no literature that showed its use in exploring obesity. In addition, in an August 2008 conversation in Brazil with Augusto Boal and also one with one of his facilitators, Helen, one knew of any application of TO or ROD with obesity. I believe this is an untapped area of research for understanding and addressing obesity.

Literature Review

The work of Augusto Boal (1979, 1995) is designed to explore, interrogate, and problem solve external and internal oppressions faced by people. Boal developed his theory and practice of TO when he saw a need to help oppressed people explore ways out
of their oppressive state. As his work expanded into Europe and the United States, areas in which oppressions were not so external, he created a way of exploring people’s internal oppressions. This work is known as Rainbow of Desire (ROD). In both forms, activities are designed to open up dialogues about the oppressions under which people live so as to increase understanding, problematize the issues, and explore possibilities for change.

Leigh Anne Howard (1995) conducted her qualitative dissertation research looking at the use of Augusto Boal’s TO techniques with adult women in a university setting through a performance-centered mode of inquiry to explore body image and eating. Her research consisted of three phases – focus group discussions, 10 weeks of rehearsals, and 3 public performances (2 at the university, 1 for an academic conference). Her goal was for a change in her participants in that they would develop “personal awareness, critical consciousness, and the ability to take action as a result of participating in a performance process” (p. v). Howard was also focused on seeing how performance could impact learning and empathy. Her goal in using performance was that it would be “a method to explore problems and concerns related to eating and body image” (p. 4). She concluded that “performance constitutes a tool to change the way people live, think, and perceive” (p. 2). Howard also concluded that more research is needed in utilizing Boal’s work in this area. Additionally, Howard never directly worked with Boal nor with anyone trained in his techniques. As a result, her use of his techniques was imprecise and uncertain, but serves as an inspiration for my study.

TO was developed in a country in which the citizens faced oppression in their government. As we do not face the same sort of oppressions in the United States, one
could raise a question of whether or not TO will be effective here. In his dissertation exploring facilitation in TO, Bentley (2001) suggested a mixing of the two techniques (TO and ROD) in exploring the internal and external oppressions for people in the United States (p. 160-161). Jan Cohen-Cruz (1990), a prominent community-based theatre scholar and practitioner in the United States, also noted that Boal sees TO and ROD complementing each other, especially given that you can have both external and internal oppressions occurring in the same situation. In his dissertation on the use of Boal’s work with youth theatre in the Unites States, Jorgensen (2000) found that, when used appropriately, Forum Theatre is a “powerful tool for education and self discovery” (p. 200). Jorgenson also cautioned when doing ROD work, which asks participants to bring painful memories to the surface so they can be explored, that the facilitator not leave the participants without support once the activity is over. As Jorgensen points out, the need for emotional support is important when working with emotional topics of oppression. As a counselor, I am attuned to assessing people’s needs for emotional support and will put resources in place to make sure my participants’ emotional needs related to our work are met. I am fortunate that many scholars and practitioners have utilized Augusto Boal’s work in their research and/or in their practice (Marin, 2005; Fernandez, 2000; Rohd, 1998; Snyder, 2008, just to list a few). The wisdom from those who came before me will be invaluable as I conduct this research and reflect upon it.

**Research Methodology**

I look primarily through a dual-lens of feminist theory and arts-based research in my methodology. My work is also infused with the collaborative nature of participatory
action research. I find it critical to include my participants as collaborators in the work we do. This inclusion of the researched in the research process is but one reason for grounding my work in feminist theory. I am also drawn to exploring oppression, as I believe that obesity is both a form of and a reaction to oppression. Feminist theory is about exploring inequality, power dynamics, and oppression so fits in perfectly with my focus on giving voice to those who are oppressed. Participatory Action Research follows a similar line of thinking which is why I am also drawn to that approach, although the length of time required for a pure PAR project have led me to focus my dissertation on a more bounded study. As a scholar, I am a critical theorist, a belief, articulated by Paulo Freire, that power relationships must be unpacked and explored so as to avoid oppressive relationships. I believe this directly relates to the issue of obesity, especially in relation to the food industry, the medical community, and other relationships in the lives of those dealing with obesity. My interest is in helping people with obesity become aware of and respond to those oppressive relationships.

As an arts-based researcher, I am deeply aware of the need to be a reflective practitioner and have incorporated that into both my teaching and my research. I am also excited by the possibilities for using the arts as a distinctive source of data collection. I have been helped along the way with my understanding of arts-based research by reading the works of and working directly with Cecily O’Neill (1996), Philip Taylor (1996), and Christina Marin (2005). Dr. Marin utilized TO in her work with adolescent Latina females and continues using TO to explore oppression with a variety of groups of people in her research. Dr. Taylor’s research and writings are grounded in arts-based research, especially pulling in the pedagogy of Freire and TO. Dr. O’Neill’s research in drama in
education practices, especially her work with the technique of process drama, is also a
great example for me in how to assess and collect dramatic work for demonstrating the
effectiveness of the work.

Although I come from a quantitative background, I am a qualitative researcher.
Data will be collected throughout the course of the twelve to fifteen weekly three hour
workshop sessions held on the campus of a college in a metropolitan northeastern city in
the United States. All workshop sessions will be digitally video recorded. I will also
keep a logbook of my observations and my reflections of the process both as a participant
observer and of my role as the facilitator. I will ask my participants to keep a journal in
which they reflect on the work we’ve done. Although this is a more quantitative
measure, I will ask my participants to track their eating habits in the journal. I believe
this will help us more concretely connect the theatre work to lived experience. I am also
curious to see if the theatre work has an effect on eating practices of participants.
Additionally, as the nutrition world is very quantitative, having that data of food practices
of my participants will be a useful way of introducing nutritionists to the work.

I will develop a curriculum prior to the commencement of the workshops, but I
will revise the plans as the work develops. My experience as an educator has taught me
to be sensitive to my students’ learning needs which sometimes require a change in what
I had originally planned to teach. I will bring that same mindset to my facilitation.

I will gather participants by connecting with the Residential Education program at
the university in which the work will be conducted. The program will be offered through
the Residential Education’s programming in one of the freshmen or sophomore
dormitories. Participants will be given information on the program through their
Resident Assistants (RAs) as well as from fliers posted around their residence hall. I will host an informational session and/or give a brief presentation during a resident meeting to recruit participants. Alternatively, I will affiliate with one of the floors by becoming part of a theme-based collaborative learning community in which this program will be offered as part of that community’s learning opportunities.

Ideally, I would like to conduct two focus groups with residents who opt not to participate in the program, but who plan to attend the forum presentation. The first focus group would be conducted before the program starts to discuss how obesity is understood by the individuals in that group. The second focus group would be held after participants in the focus group had attended the forum presentation at the end of the program. In the second focus group, we would discuss the forum presentation and thoughts about obesity.

I will conduct interviews with the participants at the beginning and end of the program. I will utilize the Listening Guide Method (developed by noted psychologist and researcher, Carol Gilligan) in my analysis of those interviews. The Listening Guide Method is a voice-centered analysis which will give me a deeper sense of my participants’ experiences in the program.

I will also be keeping track of my participants’ level of participation in the workshops from their actual physical presence to their participation in the individual sessions. I am interested to see what impact the frequency of and/or commitment to the program has on their understanding of obesity. I have also thought about utilizing pre and post surveys, but believe the interviews and observations will provide me with plenty of data to analyze.
As the facilitator of the program, I will be leading and participating in the activities alongside my participants. I will also keep a journal to reflect on my experiences and to track my food practices through the course of the program. As an obese person, I have a personal stake in this research. As a beginning researcher, I have many questions about how one goes about doing research, especially good research that makes an impact on the field without harming its participants. As a theatre artist, I am especially curious as to how one conducts research and then performs that research in a way that honors the voices of the participants, portrays them realistically, and, in regards to the forum presentation, leaves an audience reflecting on what they’ve seen and discussing it with others.

Ethics

As my research will include working with human participants, I will need the approval of New York University’s Institutional Review Board, the University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects, and the IRB of the school where I will conduct my study. Any recordings, transcriptions, and other confidential data collected during the course of the study will be kept in a locked cabinet and will be destroyed after the study is complete. Given the personal nature of this work, I must be vigilant in protecting my participants’ emotional well-being and giving them the opportunity to be heard both in the workshops and in my writing up of my findings. As a mental health counselor, I am very aware of the potential for this intensely personal theatre work to turn into therapy. I will be very clear about the boundaries between theatre and therapy during the activities while being sure to support my participants.
Recognizing that it’s still possible for participants to become overwhelmed by the work and want additional support, I will make sure to inform my participants of available mental health services to them. The university at which this research will be conducted has a mental health center at which students receive ten free counseling sessions.

**Conclusion**

I don’t intend to solve the problem of obesity from this research, but I am excited about opening doors to understanding obesity better so as to enhance our ability to address it successfully. As I believe the current lack of success in alleviating obesity in the United States shows, the problem needs to be better understood before it can be properly addressed. Given that the problem of obesity resides in both the mind and the body, theatre is uniquely positioned to address to explore both areas simultaneously through the techniques I have briefly explained previously. With the knowledge we gain about how obesity is understood and experienced individually and collectively from emotional, intellectual, and physical (perhaps spiritual, as well) perspectives through the research collected in this study, we can develop more effective ways of addressing obesity in the United States through the techniques of TO and ROD. From this work, I also hope to discover a concrete research methodology using theatre techniques. Ultimately, this research is a stepping stone to the research I will continue to do for the rest of my professional life.
References

Educational Theatre Arts Based Research


**Mind Body Connection**


**Obesity and Eating Disorder Research**


**Feminist Theory**
