

# STUDYING **FOOD** AND **EATERS**

## A cocktail of perspectives and methods

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## Chapter 14

# Theatre workshops: accounting for food-sensitive experience

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Theatre workshops encourage participant involvement in an artistic creation process based on supervised improvisation exercises, with high emphasis on the expression of emotions, lived experiences and the formulation of criticism and alternatives. Investigators using this method should be skilled actors-facilitators while also being sensitive to social exclusion and oppression issues.

Action theatre emerged in French-speaking Belgium in the 1970s, in the wake of the May 1968 social uprising in Europe. It offered an alternative framework of expression relative to that of the dominant culture (Biot, 1996; Brahy, 2019) and became a prime tool for social actors. The resulting 'theatre workshops'<sup>64</sup> became a unique mechanism for enhancing the creative capacity and involvement in social debates of socially/culturally disadvantaged people. In the research community, action theatre—ranked within the broad category of popular theatre<sup>65</sup>—is comparable to qualitative artistic and participatory methods. This approach is hence often used to produce knowledge, particularly in its sensitive (i.e. lived and experiential) dimension, and to transform situations deemed unfair or undesirable from the actors' standpoint, yet it is still seldom applied in food research.

This chapter first discusses the overall use of theatre in research and its specific features as a participatory method that is sensitive to people's experience and affects<sup>66</sup>. Secondly, we describe the way an action theatre process helps unleash people's voices and reveal the social injustices experienced by individuals. The use of theatre

64. According to the Belgian decision issued by the Government of the French Community on action theatre (2005).

65. As an artistic and political movement of a theatre designed for and by the people, while addressing cultural democracy issues.

66. In the sense that theatre, even more so than other qualitative investigation methods (e.g. interviews, focus groups, ethnographic observations), provides a means of eliciting, externalizing and communicating sensations and affects through acting and role-playing. The term 'sensitive' is used in this sense throughout this chapter.

workshops to address a research question<sup>67</sup> concerning the social and cultural inclusion of a cooperative supermarket in Belgium revealed the mechanisms underlying inequalities in access to quality food and, more specifically, the feelings of injustice associated with the workings of the structure. This survey served as a case study to illustrate the novelty of the method, as well as its contribution to food research.

## ► Description and contributions of the workshop theatre method

### Use of theatre in participatory research

Theatrical forms within the popular theatre sphere include a broad range of denominations and formats (social theatre, community theatre, developmental theatre of the oppressed, applied theatre, etc.), practices and practical arrangements (Conrad, 2004). These different forms all involve a diverse range of actors in the theatrical creation process. The latter is regarded as a means of expression, but also of reflexive analysis and exploration of pathways to empowerment and even personal and social transformation. Augusto Boal (1996), the Brazilian founder of the Theatre of the Oppressed, stressed the transformative impact of theatre, which he defined as a form of knowledge that helps us build our future.

In scientific research, collaborative forms of theatre may be used to meet this dual cognitive and transformational challenge. These approaches stem from participatory sciences and performance ethnography or so-called art-based ethnography (Conrad, 2004; Dennis, 2009; Muller et al., 2017). They are all hinged on the analysis of self-representations, i.e. representations of reality created by the concerned actors. The first major distinction with regard to classical qualitative methods is that the interpretation of these self-representations is part of a negotiation of meaning process whereby the researcher is not the only interpreter of the representation but shares this role with the different participants in a collective analysis. The second major distinction is that the aim of such approaches is to provide actors with 'stepping stones' to act on their world. These approaches therefore help address the ethical and political challenges of research (Jankowski et al., 2020).

Theatre as a participatory research method is leveraged in a range of disciplines, such as sociology, ethnology, psychology, medicine, education and environmental sciences (for a review see Heras and Tabara, 2014). However, the actual level of individual involvement and the mode of participation can vary markedly. There are two main approaches: one where participants' personal experiences are the starting point for the theatrical creation process, as in the case for action theatre workshops; and one where a performance is devised by a team of facilitators and then performed in front of a target audience, who then participate in a forum on the play (Heras and Tabara, 2014). Otherwise, for researchers using participatory theatre as an assessment method, theatrical performance is also viewed as a representation of global knowledge jointly encompassing the mind and body. Some authors stress the key role of action

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67. FALCOOP action research project (Promoting access to sustainable, quality food for people representative of the urban diversity through the local implementation of an innovative cooperative supermarket model), funded by Innoviris.

in theatre, which enables the expression of embodied, culturally situated and socially distributed knowledge. According to Courtney, theatrical performance “offers an alternative performative way of knowing—a unique and powerful way of accessing knowledge, drawing out responses that are spontaneous, intuitive, tacit, experiential, embodied or affective, rather than simply cognitive” (Courtney, 1988 in Conrad, 2004, p. 16). Research that implements a theatrical method thus comes within the scope of both participatory and sensitive approaches by reinserting the affective dimension in the core of knowledge production.

## Theatre workshops

The theatre workshops defined by action theatre rely specifically on these experiential, embodied and affective dimensions to produce ‘collective creations’. Brahy (2014) describes participants’ involvement in these workshops as “*engagement en présence*” (in-person commitment). The latter implies new modalities of coordination between participants that “places emphasis on emotions, feelings and corporealities.” (Brahy, 2014, p. 46). Theatre workshops involve ‘ordinary’ people guided by so-called actor-facilitators to produce collective creations whereby various dimensions of their experience are re-enacted. “In practical terms, a theatre workshop is an activity consisting of a number of repeated sessions (generally 3 h, once a week) with the same group (generally involving a dozen participants, ranging from two to up to twenty at most) for a relatively long or intense period (generally 10 months). This enables serious consideration (without always being successful) of a collective creation (usually theatrical), where the participants are actors in the play.” (Brahy, 2011, p. 80-81).

A session consists of improvisation exercises designed to develop the participants’ expressive fluency and some confidence in relation to the group through the collectively experienced languages.

The language may be verbal, as in the ‘gromolo’ exercise, i.e. an invented sound language involving multiple onomatopoeia (e.g. Ooh! Aah! Blarg!). This language on its own has no meaning—participants communicate with each other via gestures, vocal volume and intonation. The technique focuses on the energy that accompanies utterances while sidestepping the need to find the right word. This kind of language also helps break away from pre-constructed discourse so as to focus the exchange on the person’s emotions and feelings.

Body language is also possible, as in the ‘statue’ exercise whereby individuals have to stand still in a certain posture that represents what a situation, moment or term brings to mind. The statue notion therefore refers to a specific psychological stance. In this case, the signifier (the body) and the signified (words, images) are considered inseparable. Even when fixed, statues are suggestive of an emotion: joy, fear, sadness, anger, etc.

## Contributions (and constraints) as a participatory and sensitive method

This approach, as a survey method, differs in several respects from semi-structured individual interviews and group interviews:

- the stances and relationship between the interviewer and the respondents clearly differ from those generally adopted in traditional interviews. Unlike a semi-directive

interview or group interview, the use of theatre—through its improvisational techniques—breaks with hierarchical relationships by creating a between-participant status equilibrium.

- through improvisation exercises and the collective creation of the play, self-representations, i.e. representations of reality created by the concerned actors, are asserted, analysed and criticized by the group—not solely by the researcher—in the sessions.

- the theatre workshops are not of conventional deliberatory form. They help to transcend difficulties associated with language, such as the building of an articulated discourse through ordinary expressive codes. The exercises are based on a range of verbal and non-verbal modes of expression (drawings, body exercises, simplified and invented language such as the ‘gromolo’ exercise mentioned above, etc.), which facilitate the expression and release of emotions in the presence of a group, especially when the language used is foreign to the actors.

- while the clarification of different viewpoints is jointly pursued in group interviews (e.g. focus groups) and theatre workshops, the former generate more emotional regulation/timing processes, implemented by both the interviewer and respondents, so as to enable each participant to clarify his/her standpoint, or to make it more ‘objective’. However, for the theatre workshops, diversity is also the foundation for sensitive individual expression, which is bolstered by a collective rhythm driven by an emotion that is no longer restrained by the group.

- similarly, unlike collective interviews, where one of the issues is the *a posteriori* collective discourse definition, in theatre workshops this discourse is shared by all participants through collective creation in the form of scenes jointly created by all participants. This collective discourse can sometimes be based on unique artistic stylistic devices such as metaphors.

- theatre also offers new opportunities for debate to a wider group, i.e. the theatre audience. The use of metaphors and symbols contributes to sharing emotions with the audience. These processes define the context of an empathetic actor-audience relationship. As we shall see, they also provide the framework for sensitive critical discussion rooted in the actors’ experience.

- the debate that takes place after the presentation of a play allows the various, sometimes contradictory, viewpoints to be expressed. The diverging views expressed can be perceived through the lens shared by everyone, i.e. the joint definition of alternative solutions to the represented tensions. These debates produce original material for analysis of the justification systems used by the variety of actors involved and the observation of the processes of co-construction of alternatives deemed fair by all.

- finally, compared to other participatory methods which struggle with the problem of keeping participants involved throughout, theatre workshops foster individual commitment through the shared pleasure of ‘doing things together’ and the mutual commitment to a collective creation process.

- this method, however, has its shortcomings. It is not a ‘quick’ survey method that can be easily deployed at a moment’s notice. It involves working with a specialist at a cost, and requires participant involvement for several months throughout the collective creation and performance process.

This collective survey approach provides access to dimensions that conventional survey methods cannot readily capture, such as elucidating the sensitive dimensions

of knowledge. Through emotions, the use of theatre in studies on food representations and practices creates a space conducive to expression and dialogue on the difficulties and injustices experienced, as will be illustrated in the following section ('A survey on social inclusion in a cooperative supermarket'). These experienced injustices can be related to feelings of inability to comply with normative discourses (e.g. eating organic or healthy food), to feelings of inequality in access to a sought-after food, or to exasperation with a social situation that is experienced as painful.

The theatrical method also nurtures a holistic approach to food. This method, combined with more traditional investigation methods, facilitates the reintegration of people's affects into the research, as articulated through the explanation of shared experiences of injustice. Beyond the mere identification of a problem or its collective analysis behind closed doors, it may be debated through public performances. Depending on the objectives and the theatrical resources used to achieve them, these debates can take the form of real experiments so as to be able to define collective actions. It is thus a transformative and empowering practice for the group, since the creation and public performance processes contribute to participant acquisition and sharing of fresh knowledge and skills. As a performative approach, the method therefore impacts the actors' lives. It can, for instance, increase their feeling of injustice through its collective expression. Researchers using this approach must therefore be fully aware of the effects that the performance process can have on both individuals and groups.

More broadly, the theatrical approach can also provide a transdisciplinary dialogue framework. Through the language imposed on everyone, i.e. that of the play, the approach generates a set of translations and explanations of the interpretative frameworks used by all of the participants (academic and non-academic). It can enable the representation, sharing and discussion of the research results, alongside the processes (factors, hypotheses) that produced them<sup>68</sup> (Faye et al., 2018). From an integrative standpoint<sup>69</sup>, theatrical creation can also be regarded as the modelling of a situation or a fact by showcasing—within a space (the stage) and a limited timeframe (that of theatrical performances)—the interrelationships between different dimensions and their effects (Jankowski, 2019; Jankowski et al., 2016).

The use of theatre as a research method can therefore meet a number of different objectives and be designed in conjunction with other qualitative research methods or as part of a transdisciplinary approach. Depending on the research issues to be addressed, the theatrical arrangement and the methods for its implementation must be clearly defined before starting the research.

68. As part of a research project on water resource management in Senegal, an economic model on the the resource variation patterns was developed. The different factors considered in the modelling were thus specified for all of the other project stakeholders. The forums revealed that some key dimensions had not been taken into account. These were then reinserted into the economic model.

69. As part of research on the modernization of pastoralism in the Sahel, on the dissemination of plant genetic resources and on the concerted management of territories, theatrical arrangements were developed with researchers from different disciplines, including socioanthropology, economics, geography, political science, zootechnics, environmental science and genetics.

## ► A survey on social inclusion in a cooperative supermarket

In the FALCOOP action research project<sup>70</sup>, theatre was used as a tool to encourage people to speak out about an experience perceived as unique, i.e. shopping in a cooperative supermarket and devoting 3 h/month to working there, for a group of people unfamiliar with this type of shop. Through theatre workshops, the aim was more specifically: to clarify the representations and values that local residents associate with this food distribution structure; to test the sociocultural fairness principles predefined by the supermarket cooperators by exposing them to the residents' feelings; and to create opportunities for dialogue between local residents and cooperators via public performances so as to consolidate the supermarket's sociocultural inclusion aims. Hereafter we specifically discuss the survey context and the way the theatre-workshops helped specify the affects associated with the cooperative supermarket, while providing a metaphorical critical framework to assess its functioning.

### Tailoring theatre workshops to the survey context

The 'participant-actor' collective of the theatre workshop was formed in collaboration with a project researcher, a cooperative supermarket volunteer and a facilitator from a neighbourhood continuing education association historically serving Turkish immigrants. The collective was made up of a group of around 10 people of different nationalities (two Belgians, on French<sup>71</sup>, three Turks, two Moroccans, one Armenian and one Algerian) between 30 and 50 years old, and with diverse food practices. For instance, two cooperative members and the group leader regularly visited organic food outlets or food buying cooperatives. Yet the collective members had never joined a food cooperative of this sort, and they usually shopped in ethnic grocery outlets and hard discounters, where they sometimes purchased organic brand foods. At the first meeting with the volunteers, it was noted that they had a very low French fluency level. In this setting, the visual expression and body language exercises used by the theatre workshop actor-facilitator helped overcome the linguistic limitations and thereby fostered dialogue between everyone. The choice of these exercises, as well as the final format of the collective creation performance were shaped by this linguistic constraint. At each session, various gestural and vocal expression exercises were thus proposed to the participants to develop their fluency of expression and enhance their confidence in the group. An important feature of the theatre workshops is also the emergence of a sense of collective belonging through shared experience (Brah and Servais, 2016).

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70. This action research project was geared towards supporting the implementation of the sociocultural inclusion objectives of a cooperative supermarket in Brussels. The cooperative supermarket model is based on voluntary participation—a monthly 2.45 h shift of members, who are both shareholders (compulsory minimum purchase of a €25 share) and membership card holders. Only card holders have access to the supermarket to do their shopping (the card must be shown to a member posted at the shop entrance, but a magnetic terminal will ultimately be installed) and participate in governance of the structure at general meetings. The accessibility to all consumers, regardless of their age, gender, nationality, language or financial resources was the aim when this cooperative supermarket was launched.

71. As she was not a theatre facilitator, the researcher involved in the approach was part of the creative process as a long-term participant observer.



## A cooperative supermarket viewed through an affective lens

In order for the participants to express their emotions, the actress-facilitator used different improvisation techniques which were not necessarily verbal, as is often the case in a conventional discussion group. Some of the exercises were thus focused on the physical experience of being together through collective motor coordination and rhythmic body involvement. In one of the meetings, for instance, the actress-facilitator asked the participants to stand in line, shoulder to shoulder. She then instructed them to move forward together at the same pace, while maintaining contact with each person saying a sentence starting with “I’m fed up with...”. This statement was to be accompanied by a growing feeling of anger as they moved across the stage. After repeating this collective movement several times, the actress-facilitator proposed the same improvisation exercise, but this time the participants were asked to think about the cooperative without naming it, by referring more to something that embodied it and was related to food, or what the participants considered was associated food. In this exercise, all participants were driven by the same emotion—anger, according to the instructions explicitly given to the participants. Depending on the individual, this emotion was associated with different dimensions of the cooperative supermarket. In chorus, we thus heard:

“I’m fed up with cards!

I’m fed up with the workshop!

I’m fed up with the high prices!

I’m fed up with the word organic, organic, organic!

I’m fed up with everything good being too expensive!

I’m fed up with organic food!

I’m fed up with organic food shops!

I’m fed up with people telling us that we should eat organic food!

I’m fed up with nothing actually being done!”

In this exercise, an emotion common to all participants provided a vehicle for individual expression.

## A metaphorical criticism framework

We should stress the importance of the metaphorical and symbolic references involved in this collective creation process, particularly their role in shaping a critical discourse on the functioning of the cooperative supermarket and in the sharing of emotions. A three-scene play was co-constructed over the course of the theatre workshops.

The first scene of the collective creation was based on a metaphor of a rocket trip to another planet—the cooperative supermarket. The rocket here represented a journey to a distant unknown area. The passengers stated that they did not understand why they had to make this trip to a planet that did not really concern them. This scene also represented a shift between crew members with very different roles and skills, i.e. the stewardess and the captain. The passengers were spectators of this operation—which they found surprising—and they were getting incomprehensible messages. This scene thus expressed the range of misunderstandings felt by the project participants during



a visit to a structure that they felt was not intended for them, the interchangeability of members in the various tasks to be accomplished within the cooperative, and the associated messages perceived as injunctions.

The second scene was based on the customs office metaphor which was representative of the regulated access to the cooperative supermarket, with cards symbolizing an exclusion modality. Participants viewed the supermarket card as being in the same category as bank cards, credit cards, etc. This metaphor derives from the participants' explicit categorizations to make sense of one dimension in the functioning of the cooperative structure, i.e. controlled access on the basis of the membership status. In this scene, the customs officer seemed to be more flexible about the rules when presented cards symbolizing consumption or when handed tickets. This scene thus embedded the cooperative supermarket in a more global consumerist model which was exclusionary since it required a membership card that generated selection mechanisms, thereby aggravating the inequalities.

The last scene was based on the metaphor of the discovery of a new planet, its food and inhabitants. Everything there seemed strange and especially expensive. The food habits of the inhabitants of this planet appeared irrational to the travellers. The project participants again expressed their incomprehension about the high cost of products sold by the cooperative supermarket and its participatory operation scheme.

Beyond its critical dimension, the use of metaphor generates a symbolic shift that facilitates experience sharing. Metaphor usually involves projection of the structure of a specific field of experience onto another field. In this collective creation process, the metaphor of the trip to a strange distant planet was intended to appeal to the audience through a shared experience. The trip actually represented a cognitively salient and readily accessible experiential domain that enabled to grasp another field of experience that was more abstract for spectators with heterogeneous territorial histories. Metaphors thus helped to reorganize the interpretative and conceptual field of situations and to reassess the value of the cooperative supermarket concept with regard to the participants' backgrounds and habits. In other words, metaphorical dramatization enabled participants to express their perceptions of the cooperative supermarket, while also conveying to the audience what the supermarket aroused in them. The feelings of strangeness and exclusion experienced by the participants were likely associated with the feelings they more generally experienced as migrants in their host society. This way of referring to personal experience and to a form of lived intimacy places criticism of the cooperative supermarket's *modus operandi* in a sensitive argumentative context.

In conclusion, this chapter describes some of the contributions and constraints of theatre workshops as a participatory and sensitive survey method, as illustrated by a case study on social inclusion features of a cooperative supermarket in Brussels. The aim—through the description of one of the theatrical improvisation exercises and the use of metaphor in the collective creation process—was to take into account the unique features leveraged by this approach (in comparison to other, more conventional approaches) for the specification and sharing of representations and affects associated with the cooperative structure. We also describe the scope of the metaphors used in the collective creation process in the sharing of emotions with a broader collective during theatrical performances. The set of metaphors associated with the supermarket—a

trip to a distant country, entry through customs, the need for papers and the cost of living—made the supermarket a metaphor for the migration trajectory and the host country. The collective creation process thus enabled participants to express themselves to the audience *on their experience* regarding cooperative supermarkets, as well as *from the standpoint of their immigrant perception* of these structures. The participants' criticism of the workings of the cooperative supermarket was closely linked to their own experiences and revealed as such to other actors.

As mentioned when presenting the method, one of the aims of action theatre approaches is to provide participants with stepping stones towards empowerment. While this experience did not profoundly change the participants' representations of the cooperative supermarket, it did offer them an opportunity to express and legitimize their criticisms of the cooperative structure. This collective creation was presented on several occasions to an audience of cooperative supermarket members, social and cultural workers, researchers and the actors' families. The audience expressed two opposing responses to the critical discourse against the cooperative supermarket in the play. Some welcomed this criticism as a constructive way of improving the structure and its functioning. Yet others voiced their disagreement with the criticism (which they felt was the result of a lack of information) on the obligation to work (whereas it was a social commitment), the overly high prices (whereas they were warranted by the fair redistribution to the producers and the high quality of the food) or even the injunction to buy organic food, as stressed in the play. The debate thus highlighted a rift that existed within the supermarket while questioning sociocultural justice principles. The issue of access to the cooperative supermarket for everyone was indeed a focus of debate during meetings—these debates generally revolved around the types of food to be offered, e.g. whether or not to sell halal meat. The theatrical performances offered participants spaces to publicly showcase their feelings of injustice, while also providing a means for more widely sharing debates that normally remain in-house. The sociocultural justice principles put forward within the cooperative supermarket were questioned with respect to the diverse range of experiences, conceptions regarding 'organic' food and justifications for its price.

Yet the main issue here was to clarify and account for the viewpoints of immigrant inhabitants who were not familiar with this type of food structure, and it was less a multi-actor approach (involving the diverse range of concerned actors) in a quest for new governance arrangements. Hence it was not a forum theatre approach, for instance, where one of the main aims is experimentation and collective definition of new forms of action through forums. Since the time of this survey, some elements of the cooperative supermarket's operation have been discussed and have evolved with, for instance, the creation of a socially responsible system for allocating volunteer time. Other aspects seem harder to change, such as reducing the margins on staple foods (such as flour, cereals, oil) so as to make them more affordable (Fourat et al., 2020).

As mentioned above, when using theatrical forms as a survey method, the approach must be tailored to the context and the research objectives. It is by no means a turnkey method that could be used regardless of the research issues in question. It requires strong commitment from the participants (including the researchers) and a diverse range of expertise (thematic, theatrical, experiential). As a research method, it also offers a new framework for revealing the affects involved in singular relational settings.

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