



Theater: Engaging in Critical Thinking about Social Justice

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Privilege is a social or structural advantage or benefit that society gives to some people and not others. Those who benefit from privilege are often blinded to the fact that their privileges may be unearned and unjust.



Figure 1 Photograph by Wendy Wei. Public Domain

Verbal

conversations about privilege can be met with anger, guilt, and resistance. This research supports using visual and creative methods to engage people in thinking about social justice and their place and responsibilities within it.

“A focus on advantaged groups is necessary as the dismantling of racism and other forms of systemic injustice requires those in privilege to actively be involved in critical thinking and depowering processes.”

Political art can educate, evoke emotions, expose relationships of unequal power, and remind people that working towards social change involves a lifelong commitment. In a time when the value of community arts is questioned, this research provides evidence that the cultural and political impacts of socially engaged art should not be underestimated by funding bodies and government organizations.

Highlights

Using visual and creative methods, we can engage people in thinking about social justice and their place and responsibilities within it.

Art can be an engaging way to encourage people with privilege to work towards social justice.

Critical thinking and engagement with art is needed.

We studied how white Australian audiences were impacted by a political theatre performance. The performance consisted of different types of art forms (such as poetry, dance, music, and quotations) to illustrate the past and present experiences of Africans in Melbourne, Victoria.

Methods

Surveys were given out to interested audience attendees after the performance over three different sessions. The survey consisted of 15 questions and asked demographic information and reactions to the performance. Only the responses of the attendees who indicated on the survey that they identified as white were included in the current research.

Results

- Survey responses provided evidence that attendees were reflecting on their own white privilege and their biased pre-conceptions of Africans in Australia.
- Political theatre can encourage audiences to examine and question their privilege and power.
- Artistic methods that accompany messages can help draw people into a narrative so that they can listen with intention.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

The performance investigated in the current research presented holistic and strengths-based depictions of Africans in Australia. This directly challenged some of the existing stereotypes of this community. White attendees were able to compare and contrast their own biases against these new narratives to consider or incorporate a more balanced perspective. Similarly, these attendees were observed to position themselves and these narratives within larger contexts and settings, connecting individual stories of discrimination or privilege to national level policies.

What Does This Mean For?

Practice: The community arts have a role to play in working towards social change and should not be undervalued. We need now to understand how to attract potential attendees to benefit from these performances.

Social Action: Groups with historical and continuing privilege need to take responsibility and action for their part in upholding social injustices. The political arts are one way in which these groups may start or continue a lifelong dialogue with their privilege.

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