'Something that, actually, I could do': Community education in service of everyday human rights

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Introduction

Human rights are 'struggle' concepts and people engage in this struggle through theory and practice; people encounter prejudice and discrimination as ideas and actions. Although this is often depicted as a dichotomy, our everyday encounters with prejudice and discrimination make it clear that this struggle requires that we dismantle the false divide between theory and practice if we are to truly achieve the rights and freedoms that belong to us. Community education projects that enable people to contribute both ideas and action have much to teach us about how to weave together theory and practice in ways that enable people to contribute to the human rights struggle within local communities. I offer this article as a contribution to this task. In it I analyse participants' perceptions of their involvement in a method of community education known as The Human Library, and I discuss what these perceptions teach us about community education projects that enable people to contribute their ideas *and* actions to the human rights struggle.

The Human Library and Human Rights

Human Libraries operate in much the same way as traditional libraries, but visitors to Human Libraries 'read' humans beings, not books. Put simply, people attend Human Libraries and choose a Human Book from a catalogue of titles and descriptions, and engage in a thirty-minute conversation with their Human Book. This method engages people in the sensitive task of challenging prejudice by providing safe spaces dedicated to meeting with, and talking about, difference. The aim is to assist people to unveil their prejudices, learn about what they mean and understand how they affect others. To achieve this, Human Libraries make it possible for people to select Human Books that represent issues relating to prejudice and to engage in conversations with people whom

they would otherwise not normally meet, or with whom they would not speak. For example, Human Libraries provide opportunities to speak to people who belong to sexual minorities, live with physical or mental impairment, or come from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. The Council of Europe recognised this strategy as contributing to the development of the modern human rights culture. As a consequence, it invited the Human Library to join its program of human rights education, regarding its strategy as enacting an approach to human rights that united theory and practice:

> The philosophy of this programme contends that human rights cannot be defended by legal texts alone. They need to be protected and fostered by everyone. In order to encourage citizens to think about their own human rights and those of the Other, awareness needs to be raised in the wider public about the importance of human rights for the personal well-being of all (Abergel et al. 2005, 10).

The connection the Council of Europe makes between the Human Library and human rights resonates with a constructionist approach to human rights. This approach regards human rights not simply as given ideas but as the 'products of human social interaction' (Short 2013, 102) in which rights are continually 'negotiated, defined and redefined at all levels' (Ife 2010, 76).

Human Libraries demonstrate a strategy that values people's contribution of their ideas and actions to the construction of the modern culture of human rights, particularly within local communities. Unlike the essentialist perspective of human rights, constructionism does not rely upon the immutability of 'human nature' and, unlike functionalism, it does not rely solely upon legalistic mechanisms:

> [Constructionism] recognises the universal contribution of humanity to its construction, reconstruction and endorsement. It hypostatises no powers other than those that lie with humanity itself. If interest groups generally can come to terms on a single set of principles that will govern human social arrangements, then the morality of those principles need not be in doubt. Human rights represent not a universalisation of human frailty but a universalisation of human interests (Waters 1996, 598-599).

Viewed through this lens, Human Libraries are microcosms of human rights construction. They provide people with a method for sharing, negotiating and co-

constructing ideas of what it means to be human, and of engaging in action that demonstrates how human beings should act in relation to one another. What follows analyses participants' perceptions of their involvement in Human Libraries to better appreciate what this might teach us about the relationship between people's ideas and actions, community education and the struggle for human rights.

Analysis

Volunteers (organisers and Human Books) describe their participation with the Human Library in terms that define it as practical and achievable. One organiser, Nathalie, exemplifies this when she explains that people who volunteer as Human Books are interested in promoting diversity and social cohesion. She expresses this by explaining that 'these people have got a similar interest [and] this program has channelled them all.' For Nathalie, the Human Library gathers individuals together who share ideas about the importance of promoting diversity and tackling stereotypes, and it enables people to transform these ideas into action.

As Nathalie continues to talk about her experience with the Human Library, she reflects more deeply on the relationship between people's ideas and the need to put ideas into action, especially regarding the work of bringing about greater understanding between people who are different. She explains:

> It's not enough to have a good heart for others […] you know you don't build a world with that. I think you just need to be able to move into action and the Human Library primarily puts people together to enact, you know, this wish for greater understanding.

Human Libraries channel people into action and, in doing so, their good hearts find a way of turning their intentions into practice. Amy illustrates this further as she explains why she decided to volunteer as a Human Book:

> I was particularly drawn to the idea of challenging prejudice in society. I guess growing up having experienced prejudice and continuing to see people experience prejudice around me, I felt that, like, strong urge of social justice and said, oh this is something that actually I could do.

Other Human Books explain how volunteering in this role provides them with a means of countering specific forms of prejudice such as ableism, homophobia, and racism. Angela exemplifies this intention:

> My particular passions are around ending racial discrimination and gender and sexuality discrimination […] I felt quite confident that whatever would come that I'd be able to have engagement with someone and I thought that I should use that, to basically assist people in thinking about their views about people that, perhaps in the past, they've either never met or they had some fairly stereotype views about. So, I was kind of putting myself out there 'cause I thought I could do it.

As Nathalie, Amy, and Angela demonstrate, volunteers regard the Human Library as a method that channels people together who have shared ideas and interests about promoting diversity and challenging prejudice. They also regard it as mobilising their ideas and interests into a suitable form of action as a response. Participants expand on these perceptions about the Human Library by focusing on three issues: providing knowledge, challenging misconceptions, and increasing empathy.

Knowledge provision

Some people are attracted to Human Libraries because they want to read Human Books to know more about a particular issue. Rachel chose her Human Book, *Happily Queer,* because a friend came out to her as bisexual. Rachel explains that this made her feel 'awkward' and she feared her friend would want a relationship with her. Reading *Happily Queer* supplied Rachel with new knowledge that helped her reconsider her appreciation of human sexuality – particularly, what it means to be bisexual or lesbian. She expresses this new appreciation when she explains that 'it wasn't wrong to be a lesbian and it's okay and I don't think, oh lesbians that's so awkward. I'm more, yeah okay, you're a lesbian, that's cool, we can still be friends.' The new knowledge and appreciation Rachel gained not only changed her attitude to her friend, it reached beyond her friendship and into how she engages with other issues relating to prejudice and sexuality.

A year after her reading, Rachel explains she is studying marriage at school which teaches that 'marriage was meant to be for a girl and a man and they were made to create

children, and that's the whole definition of marriage.' Recalling her reading, and using the knowledge it provided her, Rachel explains that she regards marriage as 'between two people that love each other'. The new knowledge that Rachel gained from reading at the Human Library has enabled her to correct her misconceptions about bisexuality and has helped her to critique how marriage is defined in terms of heteronormativity. Similarly, Human Books recognise that providing knowledge is an action that engages in challenging people's misconceptions.

Challenging misconceptions

Human Books express the perception that they challenge misconceptions during readings. One Human Book uses the title *Two Many Mothers,* and includes a 'chapter' on being a gay man. That chapter was opened during the natural flow of a reading with a person who regarded gay men negatively. The Human Book explains that his Reader viewed gay men as 'party queens at the Mardi Gras', 'shallow and promiscuous', and as 'all having AIDS'. The Human Book explains that, by the end of their reading, his Reader 'realised that we weren't all drug-fucked party queens. He left realising that gay people were as much a part of the community as he was'. Concluding his reflection on their reading, the Human Book explains his conviction that he challenged his Reader's misconceptions about gay men:

> He thanked me at the end of the reading for opening up new ideas to him because he'd always had a closed mind on homosexuality. And even though that wasn't the real thrust of my book, it was a chapter and he opened that chapter; so, someone came along with no plans on being turned into a homophile instead of a homophobe.

Other participants explain how some readings go beyond correcting misconceptions and increase empathy.

Increasing empathy

Catherine and Dianne recount experiences involving increased empathy after reading Sylvie, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Catherine asserts her perception quite clearly:

> Well I think it's really great having her as a Human Book because people will

have more empathy for asylum seekers if they meet a person face-to-face and hear about their story.

This assertion is illustrated as Dianne reflects on her experience. Reading Sylvie was the first time Dianne met a refugee and the reading not only provided her with greater knowledge about refugees, it raised her empathy for refugees. Dianne validates Catherine's perception as she explains how her reading changed the way that she thinks about this human rights issue:

> I haven't experienced or haven't met anyone who has been a refugee […] You hear a lot in the press, you read a lot, and I found that, I guess it did help me to understand more that there are a huge number of people who are genuine refugees and that we should be doing more to bring them and settle them in our country.

By acting as a Human Book, Sylvie engaged Dianne and Catherine in a process of gaining knowledge about the right to seek asylum and apply for refuge, as well as increasing their empathy for people who flee persecution.

This analysis of participants' perceptions of their encounters at Human Libraries has illuminated a number of key perceptions about Human Libraries. These include the conviction that: it channels together people with shared interests and ideas about challenging prejudice, promoting diversity and building social cohesion; and it mobilises people and their ideas into action. Participants illustrated this by emphasising the ability of the Human Library's dialogic method to provide knowledge, correct misconceptions, and increase empathy. Bearing this in mind, I discuss how these perceptions might be conceptualised through the lenses of creative social praxis and counter-publics. Using these lenses, we may develop our appreciation of the ability of community education projects to enable people to dismantle the divide between theory and practice and so contribute their ideas *and* actions to the struggle for the enjoyment of human rights.

Creative social praxis

Human Books provide Readers with knowledge that challenges their misconceptions and raises their empathy. *Happily Queer* helped Rachel to gain knowledge about

bisexuals and lesbians. *Two Many Mothers* challenged his Reader's ideas about gay men. Sylvie raised Dianne's empathy for asylum seekers. These examples illustrate the value of developing our appreciation of how community education projects can illuminate 'the complexity of the social via a broader understanding of creative social praxis throughout social relations' (Stammers 2009, 30). Doing so helps us develop community education projects that can challenge the divide between theory and practice which often excludes people from engaging in the struggle for their rights because they feel ill-equipped or unqualified.

Creative social praxis narrows the focus of the study of social relations on 'real socialised individuals in their actual social and historical contexts' (Stammers 2009, 30-31). It is therefore a useful tool to bring together people's interests and ideas, and their desire to engage in action for social change within particular social and historical contexts. Regarding community education as creative social praxis helps validate our efforts to engage people in interactions between socialised individuals. It provides a lens that brings into focus the important contribution community education can make when it regards volunteers' desire, exemplified by Amy and Angela, to contribute their ideas *and* action to the struggle for rights enjoyment. Creative social praxis also helps us argue for the importance of community education projects that enable people to express their agency by crossing the theory/practice divide.

Critical social theory advances a view of people engaged in activism as an expression of human agency.

> The agency is really humanised and socialised at the same time. Common people are brought back into the picture and acquire truly human size: as aware but not omniscient, powerful but not omnipotent, creative but not unconstrained, free but not unlimited (Sztompka 1990).

Human Libraries illustrate the meaning of activism as agency within the context of community education. For example, when Angela and Amy assert that they consider volunteering as Human Books as practical and achievable activism, they demonstrate how Human Libraries bring 'common people' back into the picture. When Human Books engage people in readings, they share knowledge, challenge misconceptions, and

raise empathy; they are aware, powerful, creative, and free, but not unlimited. They engage in a form of agency that brings common people – both Human Books and Readers – back into the picture, where they acquire truly human size, as they engage in discussions about people's struggles for recognition, respect and rights. Viewed through the lens of creative social praxis, we can seek to develop community education projects that enable people to include their ideas and actions as agents who contribute to the everyday struggle for the enjoyment of their human rights. The concept of counter-publics provides another lens for viewing community education and appreciating how it can challenge the theory/practice divide and assist people as they engage in human rights activism.

Counter-publics

The concept of 'counter-publics' is useful for examining the relationship between community education and human rights activism. 'Counter publics' indicate sites that 'seek a new order' through the agitation of identity formation (Maddison and Scalmer 2006). One defining element of such a new order is the capacity to challenge theories and ideas that are regarded as valid or valuable. For example, Human Libraries demonstrate how 'counter-publics' act as sites in which 'activists connect directly with others, and share their wisdom freely, [via] a process of equal exchange' (Maddison and Scalmer 2006, 115). When designed as 'counter publics', community education projects provide 'common people' with a means of transforming their wisdom and ideas into action that counters prejudice and discrimination (Ackerly 2011).

How community education projects can act as 'counter publics' is further demonstrated by the Human Library examples analysed above (Roberts 2000). Sylvie recounts her struggle to escape the DRC and gain asylum in Launceston, and introduces people to the importance of 'the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution' (UDHR, Art. 14). Maxine explains to Rachel that people who are refused the right to marry a person of the same sex do not enjoy the same rights as their heterosexual friends and, therefore, they are not 'equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law' (UDHR, Art. 7). When Human Libraries provide opportunities for people to have conversations about

difference and prejudice – often labelled as taboo topics – they make real 'the right to freedom of opinion and expression; […] to hold opinions without interference and to seek and impart information and ideas' (UDHR, Art. 19). Community education projects that function as 'counter-publics' enable people to cross the divide between theory and practice, and to contribute their ideas and action and thus 'apply vague universal human rights principles in a local context' (Clement 2011, 127).

Conclusion

Human Libraries channel people into action by engaging them in a dynamic of equal exchange that provides knowledge, challenges misconceptions, and raises empathy. By enabling people to contribute their knowledge and wisdom, Human Libraries demonstrate the value of community education projects that engage people in crossing the theory/practice divide and thus contribute to the way that local communities struggle for their rights. Through the lenses of creative social praxis and counter-publics, community education is brought into focus and can be better appreciated as a means for enabling people to act as agents who contribute to the ongoing construction of the human rights culture.

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