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# Reinventing the self through participatory art: writing and performing among rough sleepers

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**Abstract:** Cupchik (2013. 'I am, therefore I think, act, and express both in life and in art') claims that being is associated with artistic expressions of various kinds. In line with this notion, the present paper reports on a socially engaged art project that involved the clients at a day centre for people experiencing homelessness. For nearly four months, the participants met once a week for a few hours under the direction of a facilitator and a film-maker who video-recorded the group activities. The experimental ethnographic project aimed to establish whether engagement in creative art can provide these usually 'invisible' individuals with an opportunity to reflect on their self and find a voice. The paper describes the group's activities and the individuals' responses. The focus is on the minimal narratives the clients produced from surrealistic scenarios to personal memories and political reprieves. The study shows how intrinsically participatory art, centred on the encounter of the participants' different subjectivities, can encourage self-reflection among individuals with problematic lives.

**Keywords:** drama workshop; homelessness; identity; narrative; social; praxis

## 1 Introduction: setting the frame

"I am, therefore I think, act, and express (in art, literature, and so on)." This quote from Cupchik (2013) suitably introduces the theme of this contribution. Presenting a psychological perspective on art and identity, Cupchik combines a 'Thinking-I' able to analyse reality, respond to needs and set goals (including, he says, walking to a café), and a 'Being-I,' or 'Becoming-I', 'more closely tied to the "self" and […] predicated on an ability to take the ego as an object of reflection' (2013: 87). In Cupchik's view, reflection can improve an individual's self and produce a stronger sense of identity.

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It is tempting to see this philosophical approach as a good basis for art therapy, which is close to the topic of the present contribution.

In 2018, theatre director Emma Higham (of RAPT, Research, Artistry, Participation), video producer Richard Dufty of RBD designs and I carried out a project at a day centre for rough sleepers in a city in the south of England. The art project, based on the free participation of the day centre clients, aimed to engage the people in creative activities that would provide respite from their daily routine, feed their mind and encourage a degree of reflection on the self as continuously developing (Boydell et al. 2000). In this sense, the project shares some of the goals of Rosalchen Whitecross's creative writing study with incarcerated women in this issue, where fictional writing became a 'transformative learning experience from the perspective of reconceptualising the self as a process' (p. 317). In line with that study, we wanted to offer the participants an opportunity for self-reference and for their own representation from inside to the external world (similar to what Whitecross calls 'a shift from the external to the internal gaze'). The original plan was to write collectively with the participants a play and have a final performance. However, fearing that the clients' attendance might not be consistent, due to their erratic life, and sensing that they may prefer a more fluid, less structured and bottom up plan, we opted for an alternative that would avoid constraining the participants by a rigid goal-directed routine. As will be explained later, the sessions were filmed as 'video diaries' and shared with the participants at the opening of each workshop. Out of the project came the short film 'I Get Up' (https://www.rapt-theatre.com/i-get-up). While the video was not actually co-produced with the participants, at each session they were asked to comment on the proposed partial video segments from the previous weekly session that would later go into the final film. The participants decided what was salient and what instead was less relevant to the on-going narrative. The weekly drama workshops interpreted art in the broad sense of multimodal creative expression involving miming, writing of various types, drawing and reading aloud. The language produced was of different kind; however, the focus of this paper is on the participants' stories that reflect their identity work and subjectivities or, in Cupchik's (2013) term, their 'Being-I' in response to the workshop activities.

The study is framed within Critical Linguistic Ethnography, well suited to conducting empirical research in a marginal context and aiming to identify sources of power and repression. Resulting from the merging of critical theory and interpretive ethnography, Critical Linguistic Ethnography uses qualitative participant observation techniques while investigating how power constructs and legitimates social inequalities. The study's research question was how the participants' language encodes their world vision and whether they construct their 'current self' as socially marginalised individuals or, contrariwise, as people with an aspirational identity (Thornborrow and Brown 2009) who wish not to be

associated with that image of exclusion. In consideration of its critical dimension, therefore, this study proposes a politicised ethnographic research (Giarelli 1992) in its involvement with this particular group and the association with social praxis advocated by Creese (2008) in that it proposes a practice that aims to result in changes. In light of this, the study interprets the actions and language of the actors involved within the broader social context within which they operate. Epistemologically, this qualitative study assumes a reflexive approach to knowledge, understood as a social construction with the researcher only proposing, yet doubting their interpretations. Within this approach, as a researcher I acknowledged the impact my identity had on my understanding of the context I was observing, while assuming an 'epistemic solidarity' (Van der Aa 2017) in which the space created would be open to any story the participant wanted to tell.

The paper is organised as follows: after the introduction, section two contextualises the study and discusses inequality and homelessness in the UK, while section three presents the aims of the project to provide an opportunity to these social actors who are usually invisible or 'avoided' (Iveson and Cornish 2016) to speak their intimate or public voices. Aware that the act of 'giving voice' involves a power dimension on the part of those who allow others to speak, the project only wanted to offer an opportunity to the rough sleepers to be reflective and, if they wanted, open up about their personal stories while participating in the activities. The project's main objective after all was to offer an opportunity for doing art together as 'restorative practice' and provide some constructive entertainment as a respite from the boredom of walking the street aimlessly. Section four explains the ethnographic methodology and the researcher's role, while section five analyses the clients' narratives encoding their positive identity construction and agency. The conclusion reaffirms the concept of art and social praxis.

## 2 Context of the study: rough sleepers in the UK

Britain 'is the fifth most unequal country in Europe in terms of income, while inequality of wealth is even greater: the top 10 % of households own more wealth than the bottom 80 % (Office for National Statistics 2018, in Gómez-Jiménez and Toolan 2020: 3). In this context, space is an invaluable commodity, not accessible to everyone. The situation of rough sleepers in the UK has worsened dramatically more recently. In 2015 about 83,000 young people had to rely on councils and charities for a roof over their heads and there are about 35,000 youths in homeless

accommodation at any one time across Britain. According to the charity Shelter, at least 309,000 people are experiencing homelessness in England today.

Shelter's research shows a rapid increase in the last just 12 months: over 3,000 people are sleeping rough on any given night (26 % increase) and 279,400 (most, families) are living in temporary accommodation (14 % increase) (https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_release/at_least_309000_people_homeless_in_england_today#:~:text=Posted%2014%20Dec%202023&text=The%20charity's%20research%20shows%20homelessness,most%20of%20whom%20are%20families).

While the factors that result in people living on the street are extremely diverse, the consequences of homelessness can be generalised: together with a loss of material goods, rough sleepers lose self-efficacy, self-respect, self-esteem, agency that prevent them from finding their way back into a balanced lifestyle (e.g. Boydell et al. 2000). As the number of people experiencing homelessness has increased, funding for services has decreased (Homeless Link 2013 in Iveson and Cornish 2016: 254). Although in December 2020 the Government pledged further £310 million to tackle homelessness, the way out of the dramatic situation in the UK seems to be mostly in the hands of charities and NGOs, each one with a slightly different focus and emphasis.

The day centre that hosted this experimental project is part of a housing trust in a southern English city. Sharing the trust's mission statement of 'combating homelessness, creating opportunities, promoting change (…) to both challenge the causes of homelessness, poverty and marginalisation and to deal with the consequences', the day centre offers a range of services to support people who are sleeping rough or are insecurely housed and improve health, reduce crime and realise opportunity. The centre provides food, showers, lockers and laundry facilities, case work support, accommodation and relocation services, health care, IT facilities, support for training, 'care of' postal address and leisure activities. With funding from Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) at the University of Sussex, two sets of workshops were organised, a pilot one in summer 2018 and a longer and more focused one in autumn 2018 (with a couple of people from the first group joining the second) and a final session in January 2019. Ethical approval was obtained and the participants signed a dedicated licence form allowing the filming of the sessions and the final production of the short. The group met weekly for about 3 hours for nearly four months in the day centre main hall. I was familiar with the centre, having worked previously there through some volunteering, interviewing some people and liaising with other volunteers and staff. The idea of the project and the intention behind it therefore were to distract the participants from their often repetitive daily routine, entertain them while treating them as resourceful and intelligent individuals able to reflect on their self if they wanted to. At the same time, we wanted the result of our participatory art (Matarasso 2019) to stay behind as a product of our

time with the participants, something that could be 'exported' to the outside world that does not know much about rough sleepers and give a dignified representation of those people who experience homelessness. The workshops were led by an experienced facilitator, Emma Higham, co-director of RAPT company that creates socially engaged, high quality performance projects in and for communities. RAPT makes work which challenges audiences to see the extraordinary in the everyday and searches for new models, bringing people together in unique collaborations. Emma was aided by an assistant and film-maker Rich Dufty, while my role was that of helper, participant and observer.

## 3 The drama workshop project

The project focuses on those social actors who are usually invisible, ignored or avoided. In the past, the route out of homelessness favoured an instrumental, one for all approach centred on vocational or educational training for people who have fallen out of the system to return to and reintegrate in it. However, Bandura (1995) and Samman and Santos (2009) suggest that such skill-building training does not simply have an instrumental goal, but, crucially, can provide 'psychosocial gains for homeless people, in terms of their development of a sense of agency, empowerment and self-efficacy' (Iveson and Cornish 2016: 254). The point these authors make is that without ensuring a degree of emotional and mental therapeutic work, solely instrumental support is not usually sufficient to help people out of homelessness. The project's aim, therefore, was to offer guided activities as a means for 'restorative practice' (Iveson and Cornish 2016) that could encourage self-reference and possibly self-reflection leading to building a degree of self-confidence among the day centre clients.

The present study adds to the limited literature that foregrounds rough sleepers' resilience and strength. An example is the interview-based ethnographic study by Cohen and Wagner (1992) on activists that defies the representation of homeless individuals as passive, isolated and unable to make decisions. Not dissimilarly, Tischler and Vostanis (2007) highlight the coping strategies of some female rough sleepers; Panadero et al. (2015) refer to the happiness that can be associated with a healthy night at a shelter; Wong and Mason (2001) discuss the resilience of rough sleepers in recovery and Kidd and Davidson (2007) also confirm the self-agency, self-worth and resilience in the narratives of 208 homeless youth interviewed in New York City and Toronto. Finally, Hodgetts et al. (2008) highlight the strategies of rough sleepers who blend in with patrons at libraries and disguise themselves as 'ordinary' service users, while recharging their phones, sleeping, having a respite and studying. Unfortunately, researchers in applied linguistics do not seem to have

touched the topic of homelessness; therefore, the present study hopes to encourage further linguistic investigation in this crucial area.

## 3.1 The day centre as a liminal space

The above reference to libraries, as public spaces where rough sleepers may spend some of their day, is useful to introduce the notion of 'liminality' associated with rough sleepers (but also other groups, e.g. migrants). People with insecure domicile physically occupy 'liminal' (Turner 1967, 1969) or in-between, ambiguous spaces in urban centres, from shop thresholds and alleys to soup kitchens, which offer an imprecise alternative to both a proper home and the street. In the day centre, the artistic workshops created yet another liminal space and time in which the insecurity of the participants' condition was suspended. Therefore, the activities acquire a special meaning as they granted the clients who had 'undergone liminal experiences – forms of disequilibrium that leave individuals betwixt, and between' (Buechner et al. 2020: 87) the opportunity to build a *communitas*, i.e. a feeling of sharedness with the others. The concept of communitas incidentally is in sync with this study's understanding of art as relational both socially and linguistically. The project did not just bring together people with similar experiences who formed a special 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991) once a week on a Wednesday morning; the reflexive art they created intrinsically centred on their intersubjective relations and only had sense in that the clients responded collectively, but also individually, to both the facilitator's input and their peers' output. The mood variation and the different psychological inclination of the participants – that Emma routinely checked through such warm-up activities as 'If you were a vehicle, what would you be?' and were responded to with 'An old banger with lots of dents in it/A horse and carriage with prince charming/An old unstable plane' – effected their work and had an impact on the other participants thus resulting in an continuously changing product.

As part of their identity construction, 'the individual agent constitutes and is constituted by their social setting and the discourses available to them and those around them' (Beech 2011: 286). Beech (2011) investigates identity construction in situations of liminality in the work place and proposes a model based on the practices of 'reflection' and 'recognition' in particular that can facilitate identity change. The participatory project we carried out is inspired by Beech's conviction that in a liminal space and through liminal practices, individuals may find an opportunity to reflect on their self and recognise their potentials. To this purpose, the

analysis concentrates on the language produced by the participants that encodes their emerging identities during the activities.

## 3.2 Identity, homelessness and narrative

This ethnographic study is interested in the participants' identity construction encoded in the language they use. From a post-structuralist and post-modern approach, identity is understood as situated, negotiated and discursive; it is produced in response to the subjectivity of others and the social actors' context, and reacting to the narratives or visions of the world that circulate in society (McNamara 2019). Post-modern identity theorists emphasise the 'dislocation' (Laclau 1990) and the fragmentation (Giddens 1991) of the self; at the same time, however, others highlight the discourse strategies individuals adopt for constructing a sense of self in situations of uncertainty from migration to social marginalisation (e.g. De Fina and Mazzaferro 2021; Fodor 2022; Piazza 2020; Piazza 2023).

In terms of the combination of identity and lack of abode, scholars like Wardhaugh (1999) have identified the existence of a discourse that establishes a divide between those 'good' women who managed to keep a home and those who failed ending up on the street. More recently, such an approach that tends to essentialise the socially constructed 'homeless identity' as in the seminal studies by Snow and Anderson (1987), Farrington and Robinson (1999), Osborne (2002) among many others, has been challenged as 'binding and misguided' (McCarthy 2013: 46) and reifying of those individuals who experience homelessness (Parsell 2010; Pascale 2005; Seal 2007). Therefore, a new approach sees the 'homeless identity' as negotiated and constructed like any others, one that 'will address the intersection of lines of difference and recognise that the identity of any individual is multiple and fluid' (McCarthy 2013: 46). In the analysis therefore, the attempt is to capture how through language the participants constructed their identities in response to the context, the task and in relation to the other group members but far from interpreting their performances as idiosyncratic of rough sleepers.

Within this theoretical framework, narrative acquires a central role as the textual genre most directly conducive to the construction of identity in as much as 'narrative discourse organizes life – social relations, interpretations of the past, and plans for the future' (Daiute and Lighfoot 2004: 11). The scholarship that combines an interest in identity and narrative tends to capture minimal episodic stories (Goffman 1959) that can be even incomplete, fragmented, contradictory and projected into the future rather than simply orderly and complete past recollections (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008). Through such narratives of self and others, speakers make identity claims of ordinariness, exceptionality, grandiosity, or vice

versa, victimhood and therefore negotiate different social and personal roles in the context in which they operate.

## 4 Methodology

The weekly sessions started in October 2018 in the comfortable space of the day centre where in the middle of the meeting room facilitator Emma Higham created a welcoming circle open to anyone interested for the length of time it would suit them. In the end, a stable core of six people formed the group with other participants joining occasionally. After a warm-up session in which a couple of themes were proposed, the 'Me and the city' was voted by the group in alternative to 'Home' that was deemed 'too painful', 'difficult' and even 'unknown'. With a few simple resources, such as pens, colours, paper, envelopes, masking tape, music, photos and maps often displayed on the floor, the participants were encouraged to explore a different response to the idea of 'this city' every week. Emma guided the group with questions and tasks: 'Think of a place which reminds you of when you first arrived in the city. Think of an important moment if you have always lived here. Draw a picture of this moment, like a still from a film, from then to now. We want you to think about your experience of this city from the moment of the picture to now'.

As a participant observer I followed the action shaping up around me, while also taking part in the workshop activities. I explained my role to the group, which made my note-taking understandable and acceptable to the participants. After each session, I would tidy up my notes often containing the snippets of language I had managed to hear and scribble down from the position I was occupying in the circle. The limitations of such fieldwork in which the researchers are the filter of the environment around them cannot be minimised. However, ethnography observes individuals in context; therefore, being not too conspicuous and merging with the day centre clients in their own environment allowed me to contextualise their cooperative linguistic responses. I tended to arrive in good time and stay on after the workshops for lunch and a chat, which reassured the clients I was not just observing, but participating in the project and sincerely interested in their life. However, taking a critical approach to ethnography meant accepting my subjectivity as researcher, not just in terms of what I could see and hear, but especially in terms of what I focused on. I was therefore aware that as a researcher, the meaning I drew out of the group's response was entangled with my own history and identity (Behar's 2003 work on the entanglement of stories) and, consequently was only my own understanding of the experience. My experience as a privileged and successful migrant to the UK for instance, someone whose identity centred, to a degree, on a spatial displacement as some of the rough sleepers did, in my mind clashed dramatically

with the clients' much less satisfactory lives. Similarly, as someone with a very strong attachment to a home, I felt the people's resilience and resistance to the lack of their own private space was particularly painful. Finally, although I never shared these concerns with the participants, I was constantly wary of my observer's role and nervous about being perceived as someone exploiting the situation for my own academic interests.

Such concerns, however, were partly compensated by the presence of Emma as the facilitator who made the clients feel at ease and with whom i shared notes before and after each session.

The weekly filming by Richard Dufty captured what I as a participant/observer missed or overlooked in the group and therefore usefully integrated the information I gathered manually.

Besides filming the clients in action, in the centre's separate computer room Richard Dufty carried out video interviews with them (for both activities a signed consent was obtained) in which he reproposed the weekly topic, e.g. 'Can you tell me about an important place in the city?' or 'Who do you think controls the city?' The goal was to ensure we kept a record of the participants' individual voices besides video diaries for each session, on which to build a final short film reflecting the group's experience. The other objective of the filming during and after the sessions was to encourage self-reference among the clients as every week the filmed diary of the previous session was shared at the beginning of the workshop for the group to react and comment on. In terms of activities, the clients were involved in creative writing, miming, drawing in response to a variety of stimuli, for example: 'Free write – describe a moment you felt connected or disconnected in the city. Look at pictures of locations when people might feel connected or disconnected (football pitch, bar etc.). Now come in one by one and act the scene to the group' or 'In pairs – define power and give two examples of people who have power in the city and people who don't.' Alternatively, a rough map of the city was laid on the floor and participants were asked to append further points of interest either by writing the names on the map or drawing a picture of the place to then discuss it with the group.

For 16 weeks the group met for the activities that finished with lunch offered by local shops. At the end of the period, out of the video diaries the short film *I Get Up* (https://www.rapt-theatre.com/i-get-up) - the hinting at the people's resilience despite the general condition of hardship - was produced by Emma and Rich with the participants' feedback and suggestions. The film captures the spirit of the meetings and offers a profile of the workshop actors against the backdrop of a poem from the same title resulting from the clients' collective writing.

The data for the project are of multiple types: the ethnographic notes, the session plans and the video diaries, the video-interviews, and the occasional audio interviews I carried out after the workshops with willing participants.

This paper focuses specifically on the narratives that emerge in various form during the workshops. The rationale behind this choice is that scholars agree that in this genre in particular, identities as a 'process' (De Fina et al. 2006: 2) take shape. Narratives 'are claims for identity recognition made in interactional dynamic contexts' (Schachter 2011: 108). The expectation, therefore, was that offering an environment that facilitates the production of self-narrative would result in self-reference and even self-reflection possibly leading to restorative practice for the clients. The narratives discussed in this study are 'tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to (previous) tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell' (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008: 5). Within this interactive, discursive and performative frame, therefore, the clients' narratives are understood as embedded in the sociocultural context of the guided leisure activities at the day centre in which they attempt to construct (rather than represent) a more or less coherent narrative account of their identity. Moreover, narrative is viewed as a goal-oriented and inherently intentional activity (Schachter 2011). In response to a stimulus or totally unsolicited, the stories showed the persona the clients wanted to share with their audience in that particular moment. In practical terms, the analysis highlights 'the ways in which the constructed/represented world of characters and event sequences is drawn up' (Bamberg 2006: 145) by looking at the many levels of language realisation from pronominal and verbal forms to lexical to pragmatic choices.

## 5 The participants' emerging voices

In line with the study's interactive discursive frame, the moments when the participants construct 'recipient designed' (Van De Mieroop 2011) agentive identities are highlighted. It will be shown how through their minimal stories, the day centre people positioned vis-à-vis the discourses around homelessness, political and social exclusion in creative ways.

The narratives emerging from the activities show some of the features of 'incidental' stories. Borrowed from the English Language Teaching literature, the term indicates language acquisition facilitated by indirect focus on form during communicative teaching (Marsick and Volpe 1999).

Similarly to incidental learning, most of these self-narratives emerged when the focus of the workshops was far from the story-telling genre. The stories seemed to fulfil many functions mainly aimed at the construction of an agentive individual with the narratives most directly encoding agency being those expressing political criticism, on which Section 5.2 focuses.

## 5.1 Tales of various kind

Before moving on to the participants' political critiques, this section gives the reader a general sense of the narrative activity in the group. The excerpts discussed below were selected out of a larger data collection, because they could be gathered under particular themes. They exemplify the many ways in which the clients did identity work while responding to the multiple instructions for activities designed to make them think of their city.

The following, for instance, is a hypothetical story along the lines of what Georgakopoulou (2003) identifies in Greek youth to encode their collective identity. Alec's (a pseudonym like all others) imaginary recreation of an apocalyptic scenario following a power cut in his town is a type of story generally recognised in the literature on homelessness as 'fictive story telling', or 'embellishment or outright fantasising, typically of the future' (Seal 2007: 3). With the group, the speaker shares a strong emphasis on the self that makes the story his own adventure: 'I'd be looting, I'll be fucking take what I need. An animalistic drive, I need to eat (…) I'd be in Asda filling up my trolley.'

Later on, talking to Rich separately, Alec retells the story with great attention to details and the preconisation that the disaster will bring up the worst in the citizens.

> Excerpt 1. *Alec*. I think at first everybody would be 'Oh it's just a power cut so when's gonna come back on? And then eventually people will start to realise that everything's off and all the back up power if it didn't kick in, there'd be serious chaos in the street. Can you imagine all the kids and young adults without their internet connection and stuff like that, they'd go crazy without it and *I've seen what it does to some people when they lose their internet connection especially young kids in a family, they go crazy with their parents because they want their internet connection.* And then there's the other side of things. After a day of not having it, some people would realise 'Shit there's something seriously wrong' and they'd be sort of (.) the survival mode would kick in. You'd have people up at the supermarket, 'This is serious, we must make sure we stock up on the right things like tins of food, not perishable foods' but then people in their houses would just be thinking 'Oh my god we've gotta eat this we've gotta eat that this is gonna go bad that is gonna go bad the fridge is not working the freezer is not working, the telly is not working' and then you'd probably have people out looting and stuff, they might be stealing the wrong things.

In this text, narrative temporality is realised not so much by tenses, but by the subsequent stages of the catastrophe, first the optimistic interpretation that it is just a power cut with consequent internet disruption, then the realisation that food is a prime necessity. As in Bakhtin's concept of chronotope (1981), impossible and fantastic space and time blend in a 'counterfactual' world constructed by the narrator's beliefs, fears and hypothetical thinking. In this futuristic dystopian

universe, the fantastic is 'a breach of the physical and logical laws of the storyworld [that] takes place within a realistic frame that the reader recognizes as very similar to his/her reality' (Garcia 2015: 12).

What is noteworthy here is how Alec portrays himself as cognizant of human psychology. The use of direct reported speech (Simpson 1989) legitimises Alec as the knowledgeable one, together with the claim 'I've seen what it does to some people when they lose their internet connection'. Both strategies attest to his knowledge and experience of people while he takes his distance from internet-obsessed individuals.

The attempt to construct a positive or knowledgeable subjectivity is widely present in many of the I-narratives. During a warm up activity that used photos of various subject matters laid on the floor (see Figure 1 below), Yacinta picked the image of a pier on fire and immediately volunteered her story, 'I was there when it was happening!' She then launched into her I-narrative recalling when she opened the window and saw plumes of smoke coming from the burning structure on the sea-front. Through the illocutionary force of this first person declarative, Yacinta positively self identifies as a protagonist and eye-witness with direct 'access to knowledge' (Chaemsaithong 2012: 481) of the event.


**Figure 1:** Photos to pick from the floor.

In another activity, a massive cardboard city map was laid on the floor and participants were encouraged to append objects they made out of paper, cardboard or fabric, representing places with which they had an emotional association. The participants were not asked specifically to narrate, in fact the activity was not specifically directed at eliciting language; despite this, many accompanied their creations with narratives. Alec made a miniature pool table out of cardboard and added '50p now £1. Inflation'. Through a self-narrative about his past, he explained to the group he was very keen on pool and conjured up the time of his youth when playing was much cheaper than today:

> Excerpt 2. *Alec*. I used to hassle my mum and dad – 'Oh I need 50p I need another game of pool' sort of thing – because when I play it takes you to a place where nothing else seems to matter. It's all just about like eh the game.

Alec's story is goal-directed (Schachter 2004) in that he voluntarily adds a segment of his personal history to the interactive context of the map-making exercise and shares a significant comment about the emotional role of pooling. There is a clear disparity in fact between the economic note he appends on the map about the increase in pool game prices and the self-reminiscing he volunteers.

Similarly, others join in the activity that brings back the memory of past experiences in the city. Such recollection I-narratives are often associated with the participants' arrival there.

> Excerpt 3. *Margaret*. (Adding to the map a cardboard green-coloured patch representing a park corner) This is the place I came to when I first came to [city name], this is where I felt the most connected, the most frustrated and the most elated. I felt every emotion in that building. This is the place where I go to connect to nature and I like to stand there away from all craziness. *I had terrible things happen in this place, also good things, I try to forget the horrible things, it's best that way*.

> Excerpt 4. *Sarah*. I was given a cot in the church, it was a bit like snakes and ladders, i (ended/ was?) again roofless again but I tend to (.) *I took the attitude in the end that I'm at home and home is internal*.

> Excerpt 5. *Yacinta* (Bringing to the map a cardboard building representing a Buddhist centre) This was a spiritual haven for me. I felt I was very welcome and *learnt to be understanding about love and peace.*

In the above small stories, the narrators construct themselves positively as individuals resilient to life traumas and in so doing, show agency 'as discursive practice [and] the process of discursively producing the self, where the self is the site of multiple subjectivities' (Kettle 2005: 48). The participants talk about their past and present circumstances in a way that shows us their willingness to construct a positive

identity. With the help of a diachronic discourse that emphasises a separation between the past and the present ('I was given a cot in the church' versus 'I tend to – I took the attitude in the end that I'm at home and home is internal' or 'I had terrible things happen in this place' versus 'also good things, I try to forget the horrible things, it's best that way'), the speakers critically resist a negative discourse of despondency and position in favour of a more resistant vision of the world (Davies 1990). Therefore, agency as "a matter of position or location within or in relation to particular discourses" (Davies 1990: 346) is encoded in a positive discourse of resilience against misfortune and the authoritative role that justifies programmatic considerations about the status quo as for the modal 'needs to' indicating the urgency to unite ('homelessness is not a normal situation and I think everybody needs to [come?] together to make a change'). Linguistically, all excerpts include an (in)direct reference to feelings through the use of emotional verbs ('I *felt* the most connected/I *felt* I was very welcome/that connection was *very crucial to me*') and analogies with situations that resemble their ups and downs ('*it was a bit like* snakes and ladders'). Together with the critical recollection of the hardship they went through, the participants construct themselves as protagonists of their own life and 'agents of their own change' (Kettle 2005: 45).

In another activity, the group was handed sheets of paper with phrases to complete and then read to the group (Figure 2) e.g.: 'These feet have …. These hands have … These eyes have … This mind has … '

Such prompts triggered personal narratives mostly hinting at the trauma in the people's lives as in the samples below.

**This mind** has known nothing and everything at once/has been overwhelmed/has focus and I will be happy/has been overworked/has experienced love hate and loss too/has its value.

**These feet** have covered some ground in their time/walked some serious miles/have taken me everywhere.

**This voice** has defended my truth/squeaked with excitement/let me speak.

**This heart** had joy/has been broken and revived/ has let me love/has experienced loss, hate and love too/has been patched, opened, rested and is still beating.

**These ears** heard noise, shouts and even desperate screams/have silence.

**These eyes** have witnessed beauty.

**These hands** have saved lives/have been very useful for so many reasons/worked hard/have let me eat.

**I will** have faith, I will get up/I will not give up on myself/I want myself to survive and thrive/always be a good friend of mine/have my say.

Besides their poetic dimension, these minimal texts reveal how the participants took this new opportunity to construct a 'Being-I,' or 'Becoming-I', 'closely tied to the 'self' (Cupchik 2013: 87). Crucially, they hide their 'disrupted' self and construct a

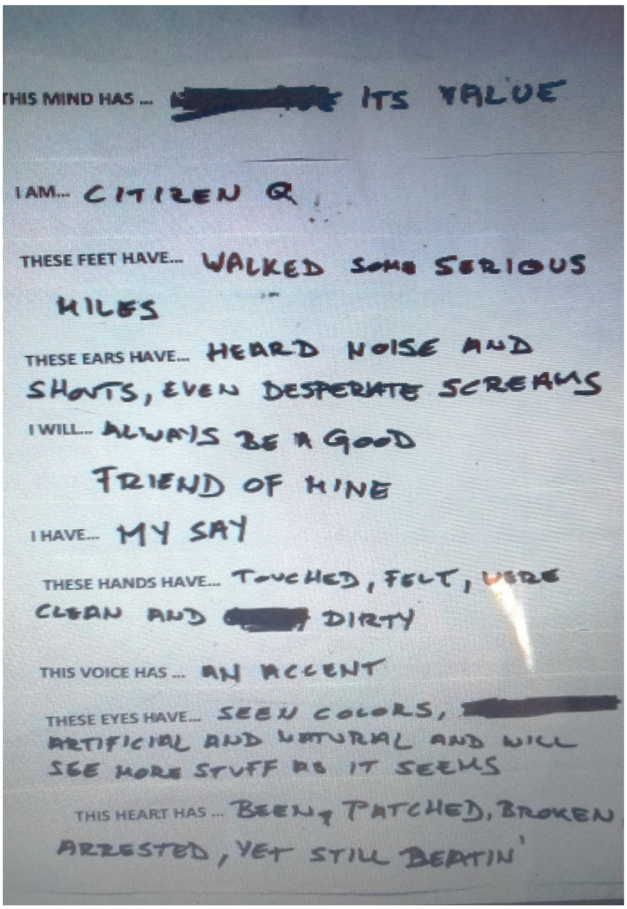


**Figure 2:** Instructions for the group.

positive one, in some cases through embellishment or 'aggrandisement' (Collinson and Hockey 2007). To this end, they employ a 'defensive practice' (Goffman 1959: 9–10) against society's negative discourses of homelessness. Such an ability to reflect on what they are doing characterises their voices as in the image below where a young woman's hands as captured in the video diary, reflect her awareness of the practice in which she is involved (Figure 3).

Worthy of note is the occurrence of material and mental processes mostly in an active mode ('has defended the truth, have taken me/has known nothing and everything, has experienced loss') and the presence of future statements like 'I will


**Figure 3:** These hands have.

be happy/I will not give up on myself' in association with processes with negative meaning ('has been broken, has been patched').

In a subsequent session, the group was asked to respond to the topic of power in the city: 'The city. Power, what is it, who has it?' Alec responds with a personal narrative that once again shows his agency by volunteering a reflection on his life, although he constructs himself as a powerless individual:

> *Excerpt 6*. Alec. [Power is] people who don't have roles and people who don't have electrics. I have been there. 'Shall I buy tobacco or shall I top up the electric meter?' (…) Even if you're rich you can't influence people. It's status that determines power over people. (…) we all come from different backgrounds.

What is striking in this incidental narrative is the speaker's switch from a general level (referring to people's roles) to the more directly experiential plane of personal needs and experience (paying for electrics). In this minimal narrative, the preface or 'orientation' (Labov 1972) 'power is people who don't have electrics' is followed by the climactic moment of the forced choice, made more dramatic by the use of direct speech.

## 5.2 Political narratives

The participants' I–narratives were often not elicited by a particular task; on the contrary, the stories with a political dimension mostly originated from the facilitator's trigger (Figure 4).

In the above for instance, Emma's prompt 'I want you to know' produces a list of urgent societal problems:

> Excerpt 7. I WANT YOU TO KNOW:
>
> – There is a housing crisis. Corporates + government *need to* be proactive in ending it by creating alternative housing options to restore this nations tattered dignity

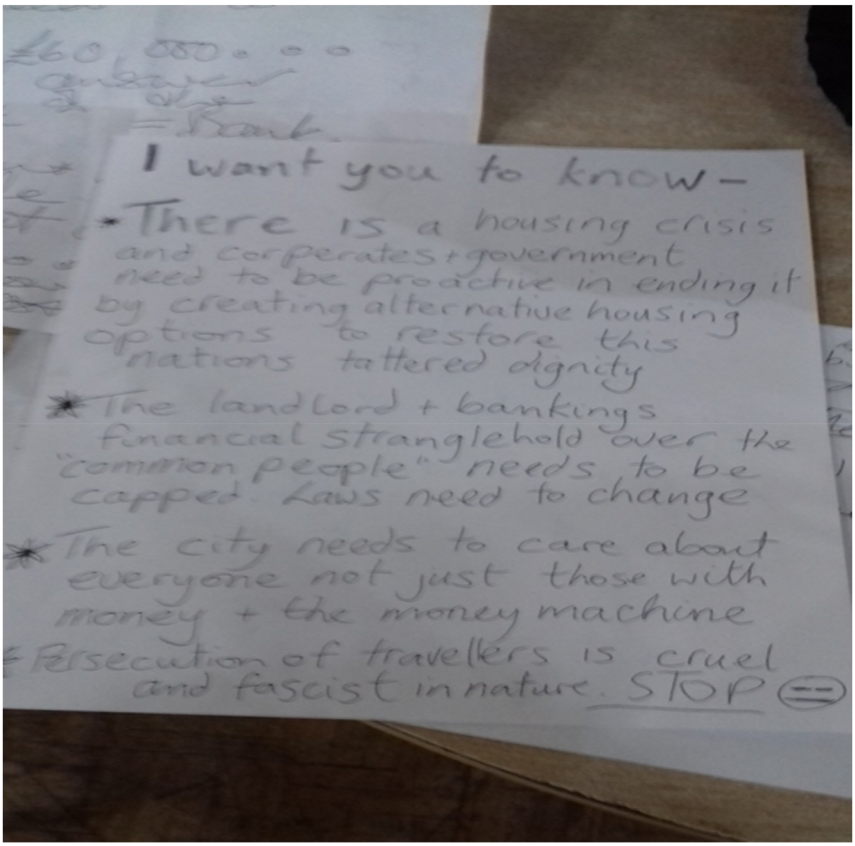


**Figure 4:** Political voices.

– The landlord + bankings financial stranglehold over the 'common people' *needs to* be capped. Laws *need to* change.

– The city *needs to* care about everyone not just those with money + the money machine.

– The persecution of travellers is cruel and fascist in nature STOP

While few people chose a more personal response ('I want you to know that I'm grateful to [name of two charities]. I want you to know that they are sensitive and kind to us'), most, like the author of the above excerpts, took the opportunity to embark on a societal critique. The task therefore gives the participant the opportunity to voice his informed opinion about the problem and its possible solutions. He then shows his 'personal authority', his knowledge of the house scarcity, as a strategy for his 'legitimation' (Van Leeuwen 2008: 106). The repeated deontic modality (need/needs) accompanying the verbal process (needs to be capped) and the objectification of 'the city' (as an abstract term instead of 'the citizens') constructs the writer as an authoritative source, legitimated to address the problem by his own direct experience.

Finally, in Figure 5 below the female participant focuses on undermining the power of an undetermined actor by using such metaphorical premonitions as 'the fuel that powers your car *will run out*' 'the power you think you have isn't real' or 'you might be an authority figure but your power is worthless'

The last excerpt is by a young woman who starts with the news that 'after living in a camp bed in a hall (…) communally with a whole bunch of random (.) lovely strangers', she will that day move into her own private en-suite room in a shared house. Like in the previous example, following this introduction, the speaker constructs herself as an expert legitimated by her own experience as a special needs teacher.

Excerpt 8. *Margaret*. I've always always been really friendly and always wanted to have friends (…) I always find that sort of *when people want to divide people into different sets* (.) I always find that (.) *makes me a bit sick to be honest*. I just like people, I always see people, like, *I've always seen the best in people* and, which has not always been a good thing because people can let you down, but I've always seen the best in people I like to connect to that, see that in people, don't know if it's because of my infancy, in my brain, as *I come from quite an abusive infancy* so I think *I don't like anything that's abusive and I think separating people is abusive* when it becomes we are better than you kinda of thing and I think because I was a pre-school teacher all about inclusivity, respecting people's diversity and worked with children's special needs and their parents and seen how hard it is for some people (…) so when I am with people I want not to overpower them, I can see who they are, I want to help them, bring the best in them.

This speaker constructs an agentive identity that challenges the narrative of hopelessness around rough sleepers. She has a professional past, she was trained to

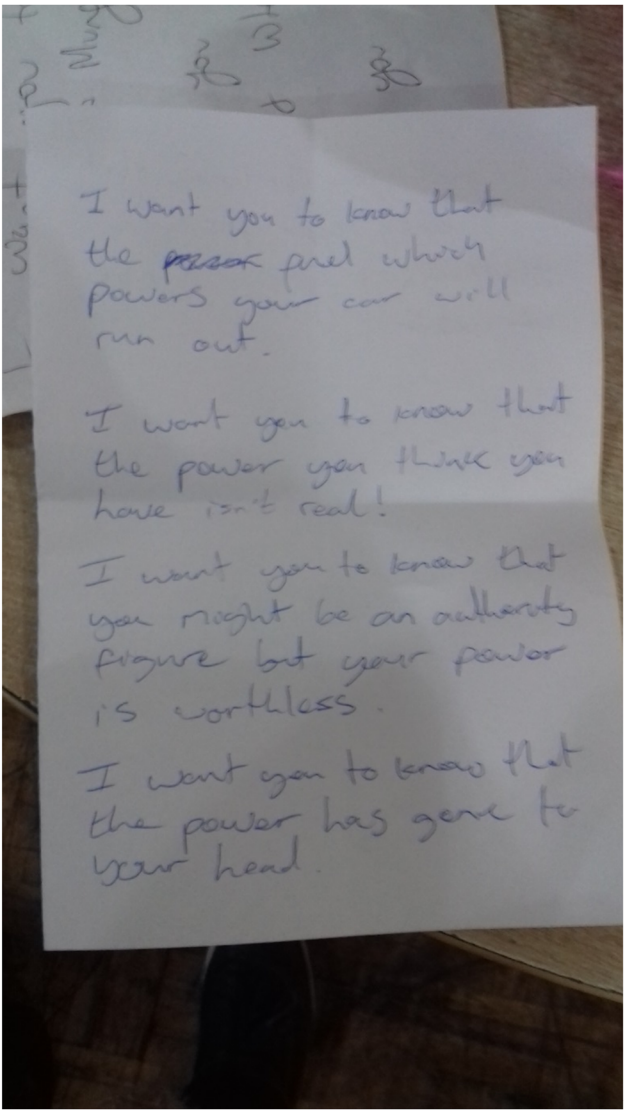


**Figure 5:** Your power will run out.

encourage diversity and practise inclusivity, she therefore knows better and the interviewer can trust her. The logic behind connecting her abusive childhood with marginalisation, in itself a form of abuse is impeccable. The recipe for success therefore is to treat everyone as equal and with respect.

# 6 Conclusions

This project involving a group of rough sleepers at a day centre reflects an interpretation of participatory art as social practice.'[A]ll practices have an irreducible discursive aspect (…) in the sense that discursive constructions of practices are themselves parts of practice' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 26). In light of this, the attention to the clients' narratives has revealed how, in constructing their positive identities, speakers 'temporarily honour particular claims' (Goffman 1959), as when they state the need to end discrimination or when they indicate possible social solutions. Pursuing social praxis was the project's objective, by emphasising the need to offer care and opportunities for identity construction as restorative practice before or in accompaniment to any vocational training intervention.

This project was intrinsically participatory in that everything was negotiated and agreed with the participants. Importantly, the relationship established with the participants was not limited to the workshops and they were involved in an exhibition at a local gallery, several events to publicise the project to the wide audience and even a trip to the Houses of Parliament organised by a local MP to raise awareness about homelessness. These moves were crucial to give the participants a sense of inclusivity and involvement.

The narratives emerging from the workshops show a concept of art as entertainment, application, creativity, experimentalism, imagination, and above all as a way to heed the 'unheard'. The focus of the activities is on relationality and what is produced in a choral context in which subjectivities are encouraged to develop jointly. Under the facilitator's direction, the participants' social and linguistic constructions challenge the diversity of their condition as they reinvent themselves as efficient narrators of personal and fantastic stories or launch into political reprieves. Once the participants established a rapport with each other and the parties involved in the project, the workshops became also a space where people like Viktor could share their own writing in a non-evaluative and friendly space.

*Poem (*reproduced with the author's permission)

(I drank a shot, only one …)

I ain't heard from you for ages

I hope it stays the same

Do not call me, I want no letter

Just forget 'bout my name

What you did was too much to me

Can you even pronunce “We”?

I wonder sometimes as I wander

If there anything I cannot see

But there is not a thing, no

I know it stays the same

I just turn my back and go

Let you have all the fame

You only keep usin’ people

And it’s only the Evil

You attend to, but ten to

Seven, I’ll be gone

(As the poison’s work is done …).

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