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Adolescents' Affective Engagement with Theatre: Surveying Middle School Students' Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs

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Abstract

This essay explores how viewing a single Theatre for Young Audiences production might affect the attitudes, values, and/or beliefs of adolescent spectators. Data is drawn from a mixed-methods case study performed with middle school students who viewed a professional performance for young people, and is considered through the lens of cognitive studies in light of advances in research considering the human mirror neuron system. Data suggest it is highly probable that under certain circumstances viewing a single Theatre for Young Audiences production can influence the values of adolescent spectators. The essay concludes by exploring the ethical ramifications of these findings.

Introduction

Can viewing a single theatrical performance really affect a person's life? This deceptively simple question has been debated by theorists since at least the days of Plato and Aristotle. This essay addresses the question: How might viewing a single Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) production affect the attitudes, values, and/or beliefs of an adolescent spectator? I analyze the results of a mixed methods case study¹ (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) conducted with a group of approximately sixty middle school students who viewed a production of Y. York's *Getting Near to Baby*² (2008) at Childsplay, a professional TYA company in Tempe, Arizona.

Methodology and Methods

To assess the participants' attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding themes the show addressed, I formulated pre- and post-show surveys employing Likert scales.³ The middle school group I selected was ideal for two reasons: they had a sizable group of students attending (approximately one hundred), and middle school populations are relatively under-researched compared to elementary and high school students. I administered the pre-survey to the students in four classrooms of their middle school during regular school hours on the Friday before the Tuesday they viewed the performance. I administered the post-survey to the students in the theatre immediately following the performance. Although I did not use a control group of students who did *not* view the performance in this study, I employed what Greig, Taylor, and MacKay (2007) refer to as *outcome evaluation*,⁴ in which participants are assessed on a range of factors before and after a treatment (p. 104). This method remains valid despite the lack of a control group due to the general rule that "the larger the gain, the shorter the time and the more direct the measure, the more likely it is to be the effect of the intervention" (Greig, Taylor & MacKay, 2007, p. 104). Since the participants took the surveys

¹ This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Arizona State University. Real names are used throughout.

² Readers unfamiliar with the play may wish to review synopsis available from the playwright's website (http://www.york.com/getting_near_to_baby.html) or a synopsis from another recent production prepared by the *Seattle Times* (http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/thearts/2011420343_baby24.html)

³ The Likert scale is a classic measurement instrument with tested, robust validity with children as well as adults that assesses a range of response degrees to a particular prompt. Comparative descriptive and inferential statistics with Likert scale data, such as the two-tailed, paired t-tests employed in this study, enable discernment of any statistically significant differences between one data set and another. All statistical analysis in this study was completed using Microsoft Excel.

⁴ While the term "outcome evaluation" implies a traditional evaluation research project, the purpose of this study was not to formally evaluate the efficacy of this particular production. Rather, this was an exploratory study in which participants' attitudes, values, and beliefs were assessed.

shortly before and immediately after the performance, any significant changes in values were most likely attributable to the performance.

To increase descriptive validity, I conducted participant observation and took detailed field notes as the young audience members watched the play, as it was important to notice how engaged the spectators seemed to be with the performance. If a student were to fall asleep during the performance, for example, that audience member would likely be unaffected by the action on stage. As a group, the students seemed attentive and engaged throughout the performance.

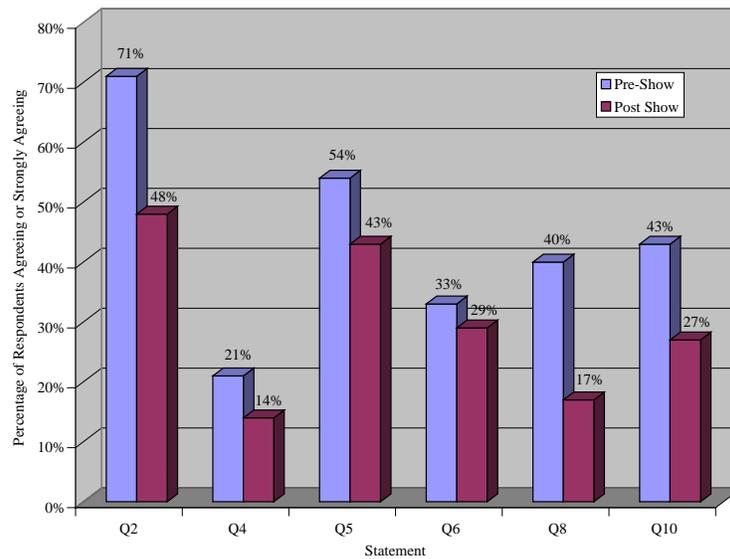
Shortly after taking the post-performance survey, I invited some students to participate in focus group discussions. Since resources did not allow me to include all students, I randomly selected respondents to participate and segregated the groups by gender. During each session, the focus group leaders⁵ asked questions that specifically probed students' attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding the performance and the ideas it addressed.

In analyzing the transcripts of both the artist interviews and the focus groups, I employed Values Coding as a heuristic (Saldaña, 2009, p. 8) to help me construct patterns in the data. When reviewing the focus group transcripts, coding revealed patterns and insights into the young people's experiences.

Audience Responses: Quantitative

Figure 1 displays participants' responses to six survey statements that addressed their attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding various issues before and after viewing the performance. The number of students agreeing with each statement decreased after viewing the performance – sometimes significantly, other times not. Overall, a paired, two-tailed t-test returned $p < .000$, strongly suggesting that viewing the production resulted in a statistically significant difference between the way students responded to statements before and after the production.

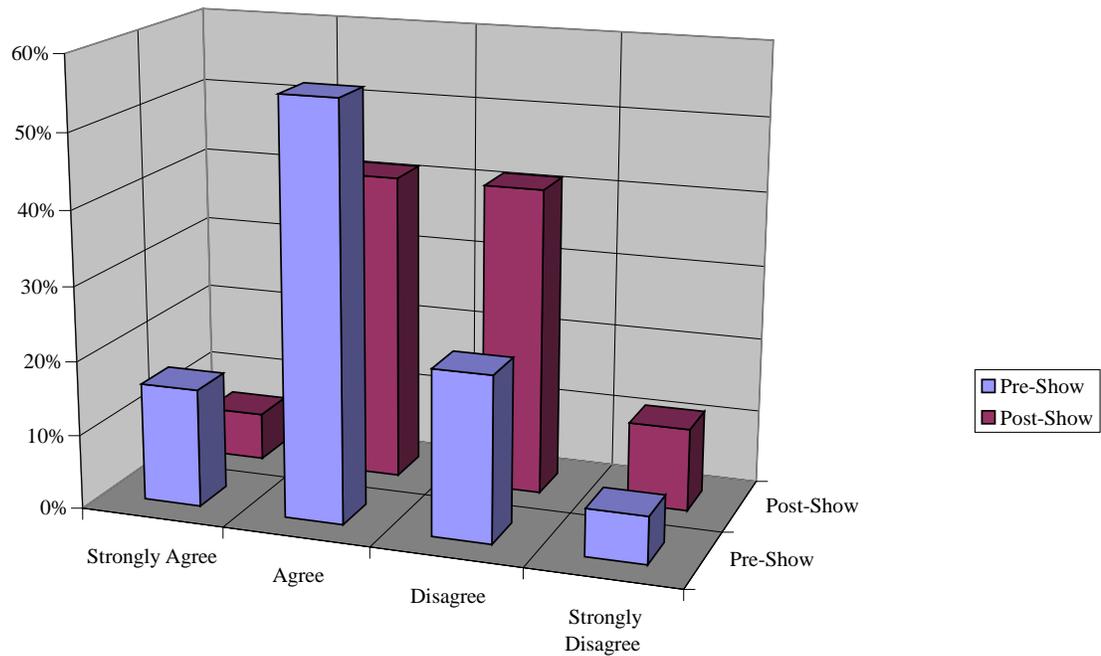
⁵ I and other doctoral students trained in qualitative research techniques conducted the focus group. All groups used a single script I prepared, and included questions about the play (e.g.: “Many of the characters in the play were in grief because of the death of Baby, the youngest sister of Willa Jo and Little Sister. What do you think each of the characters believed was the best way to deal with this situation?”), and about the respondents themselves (e.g.: “Do you think that seeing the show . . . helped you see things in a different way?”).



- Q2:** The type of people you are friends with says a lot about the kind of person you are.
- Q4:** If someone is very different from me, I would probably not be friends with him or her.
- Q5:** Adults usually know what is best for kids.
- Q6:** When some people are dealing with hard times, the best thing for them to do is work it out themselves, instead of talking about it with other people.
- Q8:** Once an adult has an opinion about certain types of people, the adult will always have that opinion.
- Q10:** If my parents tell me I should stay away from certain people I go to school with or who live near me, they are probably right.

Figure 1. Participants' responses to survey questions.

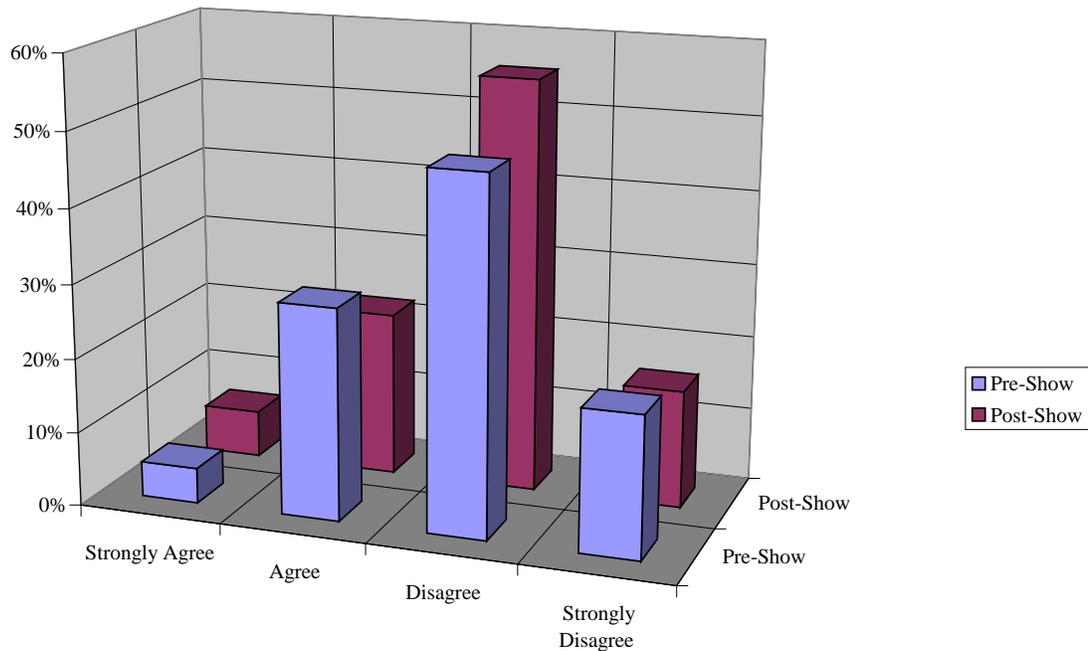
Herein I explore participants' responses to two of the statements in greater detail; specifically I consider the statement that revealed the most significant changes to students' values, and the statement that revealed the least significant change. Figure 2 represents students' levels of agreement with the statement: "The type of people you are friends with says a lot about the type of person you are." Twenty-three percent fewer students agreed with this statement after viewing the performance than before. Prior to seeing the show, a majority agreed with this statement; a majority disagreed afterwards. A t-test returned $p < .001$, suggesting a significant difference in response due to the treatment (viewing the show).



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Pre-Show	16%	56%	22%	6%
Post-Show	6%	41%	41%	11%

Figure 2. Pre- and post-show levels of agreement with the statement:
The type of people you are friends with says a lot about the kind of person you are.

Figure 3 represents students' levels of agreement with the idea that people dealing with hard times should keep their problems to themselves, rather than talking them out with other people. Although some respondents switched from agree to disagree, there were slight *increases* in "strongly agree" responses and *decreases* in "strongly disagree." As such, with $p < 1.000$, there was no statistically significant difference in responses to this statement.



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Pre-Show	5%	29%	48%	19%
Post-Show	6%	22%	56%	16%

Figure 3. Pre- and post-show levels of agreement with the statement:
When some people are dealing with hard times, the best thing for them to do is work it out themselves, instead of talking about it with other people.

Audience Responses: Qualitative

During focus groups students consistently criticized the views of the characters who judged others in the play, expressing antipathy for these antagonists and their views. When students considered whether or not their own views about judging others had been changed by seeing the play, their responses varied. Some believed their views were unchanged, especially because they "already" felt it was wrong to judge people. Others did report change, for example a respondent who said: "Before [I] felt like it was okay to kind of judge people like a little bit, but like after I saw the play I realized that we shouldn't judge people by just the way they're poor or something that happened in their family. You should judge them by their personality." These qualitative data align with the quantitative data; they indicate some students' attitudes changed, and some remained the same. Although no one expressed the view that it was "good" to judge others, this may be due to the fact that they were speaking to an adult interviewer in front of their peers.

The qualitative data concerning the students' beliefs about the best way to deal with grief also aligned with the quantitative data; there were no indicators of significant changes in their values. Responses indicated definite differences between what students stated was the *best* way to deal with grief and how they believed they themselves would *actually* deal with it. For example, most students said that the "best" way to cope with grief was to "talk about it," "express yourself," "talk about it like crazy," "write about it," or "talk to somebody," though some also believed that it was best to "just keep it in." Many students stated they would employ the latter coping mechanism. One student noted that the characters were like him, stating: "Like me, for example, I build everything up inside and then until it blows up or something, which is a bad thing, to not tell people the problems. Which happens to me every day anyways." Another student stated that the best way to deal with grief depended on the situation, saying: "In the situation when the baby died I think it was much better for her to talk about it with her family and her friends, somebody who she trusts. But there's also situations where I think maybe it would be better to keep it to yourself." Based on the quick responses that stated the "obvious" theme, and lack of any indication that students would change how they dealt with grief in their own lives, there was no significant difference in respondents' values from a qualitative perspective, just as from a quantitative perspective.

Cognitive Theory

Social Learning Theory – An Early Approach

Bandura and Walters' (1963) Observational or Social Learning Theory offered an early and compelling explanation for how theatre might prompt emulation. They assert that much human learning takes place through the observation of others (models), the consequences these models face, and observers' choices to either imitate or refrain from imitating the actions they have observed. As such, an actor's performance (or, a model's behavior via a character) and other actor/characters' responses (the consequences to the model) may result in audience member (observer) learning. Spectators not only learn new behaviors; seeing a production may prompt them to enact previously learned behaviors. While Bandura confirmed his theories through direct experiments with children, such as his now-famous Bobo Doll experiments (1961), the prevalent paradigm of behaviorism at the time prevented research into what actually happened inside the "black box" of the brain. Though his experiments supported the idea that we learned from watching others, *why* this happened was unclear and unexplained.

The Human Mirror Neuron System

Newer theories explaining the human Mirror Neuron System (MNS) and its Mirror Neurons (MNs) may offer neurobiological understandings of *why* the children in Bandura's experiments might have imitated their adult models, *how* children viewing a TYA production might help understand the actions and intentions of characters on stage, and *why* they empathize with those characters and may adopt their values.

Perhaps the most critical function of the MNS for the purposes of this essay is that it allows people to *understand* things (such as the emotions others are experiencing at any given moment) without engaging higher cognitive processes – that is, we can *know* without “thinking” in the traditional sense, making rapid judgments in a fraction of the time it would take us to think through a situation by applying theory or considering past experience to come to an “informed judgment” about something. Theatrical spectators cannot normally “pause” the action of a performance to stop and process its content; thus, this rapid decision-making is extremely important in the live performing arts.

Scientists originally discovered MNs when they monitored individual neurons in a monkey's brain and noticed that some neurons fired *both* when the monkey performed an action *and* when it observed someone else perform that action (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2008, p. 139). Contemporary studies reveal that human brains possess a MNS analogous to that of monkeys (Pfeifer, Iacoboni, Mazziotta, & Dapretto, 2008, p. 2076). However, not all movements trigger MNS activity – the system generally codes only goal-directed movements (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2008, p. 23). MNs, which control motor actions, are able to distinguish between purposeful and non-purposeful action (or between the different possible purposes of one action) *without employing higher cognitive processes*. Your brain does not need to “think about” what is going on when you observe a movement; it understands in a fraction of the time it would take to do so (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2008, p. 46).

Marco Iacoboni (2008) suggests that the MNS is able to help humans understand others' intentions and predict their actions because it employs “logically related MNs” (§10). Because these MNs fire before actually seeing an action take place, people can “know” or predict what others intend to do. Iacoboni (2008) suggests it is “likely that mirror neurons ‘learn’ from experience – such as when babies watch or interact with their caregiver” (§11). Thus, once MNs have “learned” traditional action sequences, they can predict actions. (However, since people may not *always* behave the way MNs expect them to, it is possible for MNs to be “wrong” as well; people may not always predict accurately.)

MNs facilitate learning through imitation. Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia (2008) explained that this learning functions because "the activation of the mirror neurons generate[s] an 'internal motor representation' of the observed motor act, on which the possibility of learning by imitation relies" (p. 96). Simply observing someone else perform an action allows people to learn it themselves, and they may go on to enact it.⁶ Amy Cook (2007) noted one of the MNS's effects on audience members: "Even after just two hours in the theatre, audiences leave imitating voices or the bodies of those they have seen onstage; after two hours of simulating the actions and feelings performed onstage, perhaps there is a level at which spectators and performers come together" (p. 592). Thus, MNs not only help us learn new behaviors, they may also be involved in prompting us to perform both learned and existing behaviors. Given this, theatre practitioners have not only aesthetic but ethical concerns to attend to, as I discuss in this essay's conclusion.

While the MNS plays a role in imitative behavior, Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia (2008) contend that this is *not* its primary function. Rather, they assert that MNs "are primarily involved in the *understanding of the meaning of 'motor events,' i.e. of the actions performed by others.*" They explain that this:

does not necessarily mean that the observer. . .has explicit or even reflexive knowledge that the action seen and the action executed are identical or similar. [They] are referring to the ability to immediately recognize a specific type of action. . ., to differentiate that type of action from another, and finally, to use this information to respond in the most appropriate manner. (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, pp. 97-98, emphasis in original)

This affirms the unconscious nature of the MNS. We are able to understand actions *and respond to them* without invoking our higher-order thinking skills.

Mirror Neurons and Emotions

Thus far, I have primarily described the ways in which the MNS seem to help us learn, imitate, and predict the physical behaviors of others. However, the MNS's role extends beyond the physical realm; research has suggested that the MNS is also critical in our understanding and replication of others' emotions. In the following sections I argue that, because theatre can influence our emotions via our MNS, and because our *emotions* can guide our values, *it is likely that theatre can influence our values.*

⁶ Several empirical studies confirm this. See, for example, Chartrand & Bargh, 1999, and Iacoboni, 2008.

We are able to understand/read emotions through the MNS because we express our emotions in empirically observable ways (physically and audibly, for example), in what Carr et al. have termed an "embodied model of emotion understanding" (as cited in Pfeifer et al., 2008, p. 2076). We often mimic/imitate the physical actions of those we observe without knowing that we do so. Because there is a connection between our physical actions/stances/postures and our emotions, it follows that we may at times unconsciously embody the emotions of others – even characters on stage.⁷ This leads to a new understanding of empathy as the process by which we understand and embody the emotions of other people. We cannot conflate empathy with sympathy; to empathize with someone is to experience their emotions ourselves, not to commiserate with them or place any other value judgment on the emotions they are experiencing. Nor can we consider empathy the "intellectual identification with" the feelings of another entity; we do not need to think intellectually about another person's emotions to embody them ourselves. Rather, "the neural mirroring of the emotions displayed by others may play an important role in allowing us . . . to feel what others feel, consistent with developmental psychologists' conception of empathy as the affective reaction to an emotion that is virtually identical to what one feels" (Pfeifer et al., 2008, pp. 2081-2082).

The concept of "emotional contagion" has gained currency as a metaphor for explaining this function of the MNS. Goleman (2006), McConachie (2007, 2008), and Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia (2008) have written of emotions being "contagious" – we can "catch" them from others the same way we "catch a cold" – unwittingly, and often unknowingly. We don't always realize we are catching the emotion as it happens, only when we start to feel its effects. Given that theatrical spectators are often highly attuned to the actor/characters on stage (assuming a quality performance that engages its spectators), it seems likely that actors' emotions will be highly contagious among audience members, who immediately share and experience the emotions being performed.

Pfeifer et al. (2008) conducted a functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) study with typically developing ten year-olds to determine what roles the MNS plays in empathy and interpersonal competence; they discovered that children's MNSs play a vital role in empathy (p. 2079). It seems very likely that when young people view theatre they observe and imitate the emotions of actor/characters they see on stage to varying degrees. If this is the case, and children imitate the emotions of characters *without making the conscious decision to do so*, we must consider what roles emotions might play in shaping their attitudes, values, and beliefs.

⁷ For empirical support of this claim, see Iacoboni's (2008) synopsis of Paula Niedenthal's experiments.

Emotions, Feelings,⁸ and Beliefs

Although some people ardently claim that their beliefs are based on factual information and sound logical thinking, this is likely not always the case; reason and logic are unlikely the sole arbiters of beliefs. Rather, as Frijda et al. (2000) posit, "emotions can awaken, intrude into, and shape beliefs, by creating them, by amplifying or altering them, and by making them resistant to change" (p. 5). If our emotions can create, modify or stabilize our beliefs, this also applies to emotions that we "catch" from others, for example by viewing a theatre performance. McConachie (2008) argued that embodied emotions, including those which have been "socially transmitted by others, shape subsequent cognitive processing and generate meanings. . . .Emotions generated through simulation can change how people think" (pp. 68-69).

Emotions are able to influence our beliefs in part because, as Clore and Gasper (2000) articulated, "they provide information and guide attention" (10). Remembering that, as Iacoboni (2008) noted, "MNs seem to have nothing in common with deliberate, effortful, and cognitive attempts to imagine being in someone else's shoes" (para. 7), but rather induce empathy automatically, we can see how the empathic process could be manipulated by theatre artists to guide audience members' perspectives. However, though empathy may help direct attention, it does not necessarily dictate people's reactions to whatever it has brought to their attention because empathy, as defined here, is not synonymous with sympathy. Spectators may or may not agree with a character's assessment of a situation. Although spectators *experience* a character's emotions, they may not or may not feel that those emotions are justified. Rather, after spectators *empathize* with a character, they usually make more conscious decisions about whether to *sympathize with* or feel *antipathy toward* characters.

Susan Feagin explains that a spectator will make decisions based not only on what characters feel but also on her own extant values and beliefs (as cited in McConachie, 2008, p. 99). Thus, sympathy arises only after the spectator has "gotten to know" characters empathetically. However, if the spectator dislikes the characters that she has "gotten to know," she may feel antipathy for them. In this scenario, "instead of hoping for the best for an actor/character, antipathy constitutes *schadenfreude*, the enjoyment of another person's misfortune. . . .Similar to sympathy, audiences side with or against actor/characters on the basis of their desires and interests in the world of the play" (McConachie, 2008, p. 68). In both of these scenarios,

⁸ Cognitive scholars use the terms "emotions" and "feelings" in different and sometimes contradictory ways; confusingly, we lack universal definitions at this time. For my purposes here, I follow Antonio Damasio's distinction between emotions, which are *unconscious*, and feelings, which are *emotions made conscious*. See McConachie, 2008, pp. 98-100 for further discussion.

audience members unconsciously understand the characters (via empathy) and then choose how to feel about those characters.

Emotions can sometimes help *reinforce* existing beliefs, because the experience of emotions signals to people that important concerns are at issue. This leads them to pay greater attention to whatever is happening related to that concern, which further heightens emotion, causing them to pay even more attention, and so on. That is, emotions can draw people's attention to information that reinforces their extant values (Frijda et al., 2000). Feelings can also produce *changes* in values when they cause cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones, 2000). This dissonance can occur, for example, when a "good" character, with whom a particular spectator sympathizes, does a "bad" thing that conflicts with the spectator's value system. In order to alleviate the cognitive dissonance this causes, the spectator may shift her beliefs. In summary, *emotions and feelings have the ability to create, modify, and/or reinforce attitudes, values and beliefs. Further, they can focus our attention on specific information that is salient to our emotional concerns, thus affecting our conscious thoughts about our beliefs. Because theatre can unconsciously affect our emotions, it also has the ability to affect our conscious feelings and values.*

Analysis

The qualitative and quantitative data suggest that viewing this Childsplay's production of *Getting Near to Baby* did affect some spectators' attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding some of the themes and ideas assessed (e.g., judging others). However, the production did not seem to affect spectators' values with regards to other ideas (e.g., dealing with grief). Some students asserted that their values definitely changed because they saw the play, while others believed the performance had little or no impact on them. These findings align with the cognitive theories described earlier, which indicate that a variety of factors, including spectators' extant values, come into play to determine any effects that viewing theatre might have on audience members. I therefore conclude that *viewing a single Theatre for Young Audiences production has the potential to influence an adolescent's attitudes, values, and beliefs.* Further study may help clarify the conditions under which this is most likely to occur.

The data further suggest that viewing productions may homogenize spectators' views. Because all audience members focus on the same group of performers, their mirror neurons operate synchronously. That is, "members of an audience share [a form of] neural puppetry. Whatever happened in one viewer's brain occurred in lockstep in the others, moment by moment" (Goleman, 2006, p. 20). McConachie (2008) also suggests that "emotional contagion in a theatre is automatic and usually very quick. Audiences will tend to laugh, cry, and even gasp simultaneously. The more spectators join together in one emotion, the more

empathy shapes the emotional response of the rest" (p. 97). I observed the audience viewing *Getting Near to Baby* share a physical reaction when Little Sister spoke at the end of the play – the spectators uttered a collective gasp when she spoke her first words.

Survey data demonstrated that when audience members' values changed, they consistently did so unidirectionally. Specifically, most participants disagreed with all survey statements after viewing the production, regardless of how the majority responded before seeing the play. Similarly, participants in the focus groups generally agreed about the themes and ideas discussed. In fact, it was often the case that, once a perspective was stated by one participant, the others would agree or remain silent; it was unusual for debate to emerge between the participants. It is difficult to ascertain if the seeming consensus was due to genuine agreement or the participants' desire not to disagree in such a forum. It is also possible that the Mirror Neuron System played a role in generating similar responses. Just as respondents' mirror neurons fired during the performance, they influenced the focus group because as participants observed each other during the discussion, they empathized with their peers and, if they sympathized with each other, it is possible that their attitudes grew even more homogenous during the discussion.

Overall, although neither the quantitative nor qualitative research methods generated unanimous responses, *it seems very likely that the production contributed to the homogenization of spectators' values*. This is likely due in part to the audience members' empathic understandings of characters' attitudes, values, beliefs, intentions, and actions that they accessed via their MNS. These understandings led spectators to sympathize with specific actor/characters who had been written and performed in ways that encouraged audience members to identify with them and subsequently adopt their values.

Implications for Practice

This study has a number of practical implications for theatre artists who desire to influence the emotions, feelings, and/or values of their spectators. Practitioners who seek to motivate social change through their performances may employ the specific strategies below to increase the efficacy of their productions. Even artists who do not explicitly seek to influence values may better understand the potential effects their performances may have on spectators' attitudes, values, and beliefs by considering these findings.

Before setting out to write or direct a production that seeks to influence audience members' values, it would be important for artists to have a strong understanding of the spectators who will view their work. Specifically, artists should be aware of viewers' extant value systems, as these will play a critical role in how the spectators respond to a piece. While all theatre-goers

will empathize with characters in a piece, spectators choose to feel sympathy or antipathy for characters largely based on their relative "goodness" within the world of the play. Because goodness is relative to the arbiter, people who hold opposing values will likely disagree on how good various characters are, and thus may sympathize with different characters. Once a playwright, director, or actor understands her potential audience, she might write/direct/perform characters in such a way that some become likely targets of audience members' sympathy, while others will more likely be viewed with antipathy. From early in the piece, actor/characters ought to perform values that will likely align or conflict with those of audience members. Characters who perform values that align with spectators' values will likely be viewed with sympathy; characters performing values that challenge spectators' values will likely be viewed with antipathy. Once audience members have had sufficient time to establish a sense of rapport with sympathetic actor/characters, those actor/characters can begin to perform the target values of the performance, while the characters the audience feels antipathy for challenge those target values. Put simply, *once spectators have identified with a character, if that character begins to express the target values, there is a higher probability that audience members will adopt those values, especially if characters they do not identify with openly oppose those values.*

It may also be wise for sympathetic characters to hold the target belief throughout most of the performance. For example, the characters in *Getting Near to Baby* did not come to believe that the best way to deal with grief was to come together as a family until the last moments of the play. Throughout most of the play they thought it was better to keep their grief to themselves. When I asked the middle school viewers what the characters believed about dealing with grief, they responded that the characters thought it was best to keep it to themselves. Student viewers did not understand the change the characters experienced at the end of the play, or they did not accommodate it. Further, the spectators' own views about how to deal with grief seemed unaffected. It is possible that this may be due to the young people not having had sufficient time to accommodate the characters' value shifts, even though they identified with them.

Finally, my research suggests that *characters and situations should be realistic and believable in order to have the maximum possible affect on spectators' values.* As Green (2004) argued: "fictional narratives can change beliefs as much as factual ones" when those who are immersed in the narratives become transported and believe the story is plausible (p. 252). Thus, practitioners who seek to affect audience members' values may wish to employ the staging practices of realism or naturalism rather than theatricalism, expressionism, surrealism, or even Brecht's (1938) epic theatre, despite Brecht's belief that such non-realistic models would serve as better teachers than traditional Stanislavskian realism.

Future Research Questions

In line with my finding that audiences seemed unaffected by beliefs the characters held for only a short period of time (e.g., dealing with grief), future studies could explore the factors that lead spectators to adopt characters' values. These may include the length of time that the character holds the value, the value's importance to the character, how other characters respond to the value, and so forth. Studies might also compare how respondents' values are affected when they see multiple productions that espouse different values, or if values are more likely affected by live performance than by film or television.

We could also benefit from longitudinal studies of theatre's effects on spectators' attitudes, values, and beliefs, exploring how long changes in audiences' values endure, and what factors affect values over extended periods of time. Even short-term projects such as this study could benefit from additional rounds of data collection. My work would likely have been richer if I had had the opportunity to speak with students a second time after I had analyzed and coded the data from the surveys and focus groups. Follow-up interviews or focus groups may have helped me answer specific questions that arose only after initial data analysis.

Finally, future studies might benefit from the use of an even more diverse range of methods when studying theatre's potential effects on audience members. For example, a qualitative study that combined focus groups and individual interviews with audience members might allow participants to speak more freely their personal views on sensitive subjects (e.g., examples of how they have dealt with grief in their own lives). While the material circumstances of this study precluded time-intensive individual interviews with each participant, they may have provided further data not generated by focus groups alone.

Closure: On Ethics

I began this study by asking how viewing a single Theatre for Young Audiences production might affect the attitudes, values and beliefs of adolescent spectators. By combining quantitative and qualitative data with cognitive theory, I have concluded that *a single theatrical performance has the potential to influence adolescents' values if the production meets certain criteria*. Spectators' extant values and the values performed by actor/characters play a critical role in the process of value adoption. Specifically, audience members first empathize with characters through their mirror neuron systems. Based on the visceral pleasure or pain they experience *vis a vis* those characters, the spectators then develop feelings of sympathy or antipathy for them. These feelings, along with the spectators' extant values and life experiences, may strengthen or change the spectators' beliefs.

I believe that future research should move from a focus on *if* theatre can influence adolescents' values to developing more nuanced understandings of *how* and *why* it does, and under what specific performance and audience conditions. We must also explore the ethical implications of theatre's power. If performances can alter spectators' values, sometimes without their conscious awareness of the process, we must endeavor to establish the ethical parameters of this practice. As Stephani Woodson (2006) notes, adults generally control the content of theatre for young people, selecting what ideologies will be performed for children (pp. 20-21). Moreover, with few exceptions, these adults are members of the dominant class. The perspectives of people of color, people with disabilities, and non-heterosexual orientation are frequently omitted from mainstream TYA. As such, young people attending performances may be repeatedly exposed to material that promotes particular attitudes, values, and beliefs to the exclusion of others. This leads to a number of questions for us as theatre practitioners.

Given that theatre may unconsciously influence young people's beliefs, is it ethical to predominantly produce works from a limited canon that primarily presents the ideologies of the dominant class? Should we deliberately focus on producing work that promotes a plurality of perspectives? If so, how can we discern if we are doing so successfully? Are companies obliged to attempt to present all perspectives, even (or perhaps especially) those that conflict with the values of the local community or the company itself? What rewards (and repercussions) might this yield?

Many scholars and practitioners have advocated broadening the scope of values represented by relying on alternatives to traditional TYA. They point to forum theatre and other tools from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, devised youth theatre performances, community cultural development practices incorporating deliberative democracy, and educational theatre methods such as process drama as opportunities for young people to have a say in representation. While these practices promise to expose a select number of adolescents to alternative theatre practices, for the foreseeable future the majority of young people will primarily encounter the art form in more traditional settings. Given the potential impact of such performances on young people's attitudes, values, and beliefs, we must challenge ourselves to think critically about the content of our work and strive to ensure that theatre's potentially transformative power is wielded with the highest regard for ethical practices.

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