

Title: 'If you can't beat them, be them!' - Everyday Experiences and 'Performative Agency' among Undocumented Migrant Youth in South Africa

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Abstract:

This article explores the challenges and coping strategies of undocumented migrant youth in Cape Town, South Africa. Drawing on a theatre-based case study conducted with a core group of 10 participants the article shows firstly that participants' lives are affected by emotional, legal and practical challenges such as loneliness, discrimination and fear. Secondly, the article develops the concept of 'performative agency' to illustrate how participants cope with and contest their challenges. Specifically, the article shows that the young people's theatrical performances draw on stereotypical notions of vulnerability and victimhood as a means to denounce the discrimination and oppression they experience. In public interactions with others, by contrast, the young migrants use performative agency to emphasise their strengths and positive attributes, thereby enhancing their integration in a hostile environment. The insights provided by this study can help strengthen policy responses to better support undocumented migrant youth in South Africa and elsewhere.

Keywords: undocumented migrant youth, South Africa, performative agency, xenophobia, theatre-based research, James Scott

Introduction

‘South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.’ This powerful statement in the preamble of the South African Constitution exemplifies why the country is hailed as having one of the world’s most progressive legal frameworks. Its inclusive character aims to prevent discrimination and guarantees fundamental human rights to everyone in the country, irrespective of their nationality (Republic of South Africa 1996).

In line with the inclusive character of its preamble, the South African constitution affords all children the right to adequate care and protection (Republic of South Africa 1996, art. 28). In practice, however, some categories of children struggle to access these provisions. One such category are foreign children who are in the country without their biological parents.¹ These so-called unaccompanied and separated children are affected by a gap in the law that prevents them from obtaining a legal immigration status.² This gap derives from a legislative provision that allows unaccompanied children to be documented exclusively through the asylum system. Outside of the asylum route, the immigration status of children depends on the status of their parents. Foreign children who do not qualify for refugee status and who are in the country without their parents are thus left in a limbo, unable to legalise their stay (Sloth-Nielsen and Ackermann 2016; Willie and Mfubu 2016). This problem similarly affects children who are accompanied by parents who do not have a formal immigration status. While these

¹ A note on terminology: I use the terms ‘foreign’ and ‘migrant’ as well as the terms ‘children’ and ‘youth’ interchangeably. In order to avoid notions of pity and dependency sometimes associated with the term ‘migrant children’, and to acknowledge migrant children’s agency and independence, I use the terms youth and young people when referring to the participants of this study. I use the term children when referring to the generally accepted legal age of childhood until 18 years or when referring to other sources that speak of children.

² According to General Comment No. 6 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, ‘unaccompanied children’ (also called unaccompanied minors) are children, [...] who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so. ‘Separated children’ are children, [...] who have been separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members. (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2005)

legal inconsistencies have been pointed out in various studies (Sloth-Nielsen and Ackermann 2016; Willie and Mfubu 2016; van Baalen 2012; Bertha Chiguvare 2011; Schreier 2011; Fritsch, Johnson, and Juska 2010; van der Burg 2006), the lived experiences of migrant children have been little explored so far. This article contributes to filling this gap by focusing on youth caught in this limbo.

In addition to experiencing the effects of a deficient legal framework, migrant youth in South Africa also live in a context characterised by high levels of xenophobia. Directed predominantly against black African migrants and refugees, common stereotypes include allegations that African migrants import diseases and crime, ‘steal jobs and women’, drain the health care system and other state resources (Crush and Tawodzera 2014; Enoch 2016; Kabwe-Segatti and Landau 2008; McDonald et al. 2000; Peberdy 2009). Governmental institutions such as the South African Police Service and Defence Force frequently intimidate, arrest and deport unwanted migrants through targeted operations (Washinyira 2014; Bernard Chiguvare 2015; Sonke Gender Justice 2015). The institutionalised and physical expressions of this particular kind of xenophobia have been widely documented (Crush, Ramachandran, and Pendleton 2013; De Wet 2015; Pugh 2014; Maedza 2017, 2018; Matsinhe 2011; Solomon and Kosaka 2014). Due to its persistence and brutality, some have described the violence against foreigners in South Africa as an unacknowledged genocide (Maedza 2017, 2018) and as crimes against humanity (Gevers 2015). Against this backdrop it becomes particularly important to look at the lived experiences of young migrants in South Africa.

The article is divided in two main parts. The first part briefly lays out the research project and presents the findings concerning participants’ everyday challenges. The second part illustrates how the young people confront and contest these challenges through a deliberate use of public and hidden transcripts (Scott 1985; 1990). In particular, I will make the case that participants used their theatrical performances in the project to depict stereotypical notions of vulnerable migrant youth as a means to denounce the discrimination and oppression they

experience. Similarly, I will demonstrate how participants apply ‘performative agency’ in their ‘real life’ interactions with others in order to emphasise their strengths and level of integration. The article ends with a conclusion summarizing the main arguments.

1. Everyday Challenges of Undocumented Migrant Youth

This article draws on a research project that took place in Cape Town in 2014. The project comprised a series of 29 workshops, implemented over a four-month period. The research aimed to explore how undocumented migrant youth experience their lives in Cape Town and how they are affected by the above-mentioned legal inconsistencies and hostile attitudes towards African foreigners. Participants were recruited with the help of the Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town, an NGO that advocates for migrants’ and refugees’ rights. The core group of the project comprised 6 male and 4 female participants aged between 13 and 18. One participant who joined later was aged 21. Participants were Angolan, Congolese, Rwandan and Zimbabwean nationalities. All participants were undocumented and unable to legalise their status.

At the time of the project most participants were living in South Africa without their biological parents but were staying with other relatives. Two sibling participants were living with their biological mother who was undocumented herself and one participant was staying in a Child and Youth Care Centre based in Khayelitsha, the largest township outside of Cape Town. The other participants lived in various other areas across Cape Town such as Green Point, Maitland, Athlone and Parrow. Most of these areas can be described as working-class residential areas. The weekly workshops took place on Sunday afternoons in a centrally located venue that was accessible by public transport for everyone.

To explore participants’ experiences of their lives in Cape Town, I applied a theatre-based research method that included role play, improvisation and miming but also group discussions, writing and drawing exercises. Participants’ performances were always followed

by post-performance conversations with the whole group to discuss how the actors and other group members interpreted the scene and whether they agreed with what was portrayed. The project ended with a final performance in which participants presented selected scenes that they had devised to family members, friends and civil society representatives.

Throughout this project, three main themes stood out as affecting participants' everyday lives most strongly. These were the absence of their parents, their undocumented legal status and experiences of violence. The following three sub-sections shed light on these experiences by drawing on participants' oral, written and performative contributions to the project.

Missing Home

As mentioned above, during the time of the research most participants were staying with a relative who functioned as their de-facto caregiver. The role of extended families in child care arrangements in Southern Africa has been discussed widely, above all with regard to poverty (Bray and Brandt 2007), HIV/Aids (Young and Ansell 2003; Ansell and Van Blerk 2004; Mathambo and Gibbs 2009; Zagheni 2011) and in relation to legal frameworks (Assim 2013). Kinship care arrangements create what can be described as 'communities of belonging and interdependencies' (Meloni, Vanthuyne, and Rousseau 2015). This notion recognizes the existence of social connections even in the case of separated children and young people who appear to be 'on their own'. In addition to the valuable support provided by extended families the literature also recognizes challenges that extended families experience when providing care within contexts of poverty. These include housing issues, unemployment and physical and mental health issues among others (Young et al. 2003; Ansell et al. 2004; Mathambo et al. 2009).

In this study, participants' integration into existing family networks posed practical and emotional challenges for themselves and the families. In some cases, the young people did not know their new caregivers before their arrival or had not seen them for many years. While most participants described the relationship with their caregivers as good, many also repeatedly

reported having arguments and disagreements. The fragility of these informal care arrangements became apparent in two examples where participants were at a risk of being abandoned. In one case the caregiver threatened to send the young person back to their home country against her will, in the other case the family intended to move abroad and leave the young person behind on her own.

Potentially because of such challenges and uncertainties, many participants had an ambiguous relationship with their caregivers, characterised by a dependency on the one hand and a lack of trust on the other hand. In confidential writing exercises, role play and improvisations participants also repeatedly expressed a feeling of loneliness and longing for their absent parents. In the second workshop, for example, participants were asked to write down what makes them feel happy and what makes them feel bad or sad. Responses included 'it makes me happy when I speak to my friend from Congo and to my mum', 'it makes me feel bad that I have no mother or anyone to support me' and 'I miss my friends at home'. Since the issue of family had come up repeatedly, I asked participants to discuss in small groups whether they agreed with the statement 'I miss my family'. These group discussions around personal statements were a form of joint data analysis that we conducted throughout the course of the project. On the basis of this exercise three participants developed the following scene.

Scene 'Missing home':

Two siblings, a boy and girl, enter the stage, both physically weak and tired. They stop and the girl uses her scarf to prepare a bed for the boy. They fall asleep, but both sleep restlessly. The boy turns around in his sleep and eventually wakes up with a scream.

Girl: What happened?

Boy: I had a bad dream.

Girl: What did you dream?

Boy: Mummy died. I want to go home.

Girl: You know that we can't go home.

The scene ends as the two wrap up their belongings and exit the stage.

The scene portrays participants' longing for home and their absent mother. It also transmits a sentiment of uncertainty and fear that something bad may happen to their parents in the young people's absence. This is compounded by a feeling of helplessness due to the inability to simply return home. Post-performance conversations and written exercises confirmed that other participants shared similar sentiments of loneliness and longing for their absent parents. The significance participants attributed to this issue became apparent when they selected the scene to be part of the final performance at the end of the project.

Legal Status

The second aspect that stood out in this research was that participants' everyday lives are strongly affected by their legal status. In this sense, all participants recounted situations in which their legal status created practical obstacles in their daily lives. Several of the young people were for instance unable to formally join local soccer clubs, obtain library cards or participate in school excursions. One participant who wanted to become a professional actress described not having documents as a hurdle that prevents her from pursuing her dreams. As she was unable to even apply for training courses without a legal status, she described her lack of a 'paper' as 'an enemy of progress'.

Besides the practical challenges, participants emphasised that their legal status exposed them to discrimination and harassment. One participant who loved working as a model recalled how her colleagues tend to react upon finding out that she is undocumented:

When I go and do acting [i.e. modelling], some others see that I don't have a paper and then they start calling me makwerekwere³ and foreigner. That's when I feel like I'm a foreigner. I'm not happy.

³ 'Makwerekwere' is commonly used as a derogatory term for foreigners in South Africa.

Another participant recounted a similar experience when his teacher asked for birth certificates in class:

When the teacher asks for birth certificates in class I don't know what to say, I just say nothing because I have nothing to say. Then after class another boy asks me 'why are you here, why do you come here without birth certificate ...?'

The teacher's request to see the students' birth certificates put this young person in a position in which he was expected to justify not only his legal status but also his presence in South Africa. The participants' statement "I don't know what to say" indicates his uncertainty of how he should react to the teacher's request in front of the class. His conscious decision not to respond to the teacher's request also shows, however, that even in a situation of apparent vulnerability he maintains control over what he says and does not say.

The classmate's provocative question 'why are you here?' reflects the xenophobic rhetoric generally applied by adults and illustrates that discrimination against migrant youth in both accessing and attending school is common in South Africa. A study based on interviews with Zimbabwean parents and guardians found that the frequent policy by schools to request birth certificates as an admission requirement for foreign children reveals the institutionalisation of xenophobic attitudes and a push for schools to identify and report undocumented children to the authorities (Crush and Tawodzera 2014).

The examples presented above show that undocumented migrant youth are at constant risk of having their legal status exposed, not only in school but also in their free time. The risk of being exposed is distressing as it can lead to verbal insults by peers and colleagues. It may also destroy the image and role the young people have established within a group. Due to recurring references to such experiences, I asked participants to discuss whether they agreed with the statement 'my biggest challenge is that I don't have papers'. Most participants agreed

with the statement and following their discussion, three of them created the following scene to reflect their own experience:

Scene 'Model agency':

A girl enters a model agency and introduces herself to the agent. The agent seems happy to employ her.

Agent: Let's get down to the business. What's your name?

Girl: Says her name and surname.

Agent: Your ID number?

Girl: I don't have an ID number.

Agent: You don't have an ID number?

The girl shakes their head slowly.

Agent: Then I can't help you. Please leave my office.

The scene is based on several participants' dream of working as models and on their frequent experience of being rejected when looking for jobs. It powerfully shows how their undocumented legal status frequently shuts the door to opportunities. In the scene, the abrupt end to the conversation, which had started off in hopeful terms, illustrates how hopes are easily being shattered, leaving the young people with no recourse to negotiate or address the injustices they experience.

In addition to practical challenges and discrimination, participants also expressed how their legal status caused them to live in fear. As mentioned earlier, the South African Police Defence Force regularly conduct operations to detain and deport undocumented persons. The following quote illustrates how one participant feared being caught in such a raid:

I'm not free because I don't have my paper [...] I can remember like last week they are [sic] catching those people who don't have papers. Everywhere in Cape Town, in Parrow, everywhere [...] and I'm not so happy, I'm not free.

Participants' fear of being identified and detained by the police was augmented by the perception of the police as using disproportionate force against migrants. Participants also expressed these fears in performances as the following sub-section on 'Experiences of Violence' shows.

The examples presented here illustrate that participants' undocumented legal status affects their daily lives in a pervasive way. It prevents not only their integration, but also their general wellbeing and future aspirations. Repeated mentions of 'not being free' indicate that the lack of a document limits the young people's sense of personal freedom and prevents them from pursuing their goals. Most scenes transmitted a stark power inequality that amounted to a sense of vulnerability and victimhood. The following section reflects on this power imbalance further.

Experiences of Violence

The third theme that stood out from the workshops was participants' recurring reference to violence. These references were expressed in improvised scenes, roleplay and group conversations. For the purpose of this analysis I distinguish between two forms of violence: xenophobia and crime. Both forms can be expressed through direct physical violence as well as through more subtle hostility and structural violence (Galtung 1969).

Xenophobia

The previous section revealed how participants related experiences of discrimination and hostility to their undocumented legal status. This section shows how the young people sometimes perceived xenophobic attitudes to be unrelated to their legal status. The following scene illustrates this and also points to the above-mentioned fear of disproportionate police violence. The improvised scene was performed by three participants after they had discussed the statement 'I am scared to get arrested' and concluded that they agreed with it.

Scene 'Police patrol':

Two police officers interrogate a foreign man. While talking to him, they hit him.

Police: Where's this guy from?

Foreigner: He's from Tanzania.

Police: I don't like this kind of people in my country! This is South Africa! Do you hear me? Did you hear the new rules of South Africa? We don't take foreigners.

The foreign man tries to defend himself, but the police only hit him harder.

Police: Let's take him to the aeroplane.

They push him out.

Police: We take you back to your country with broken bones!

The police officers in this scene openly display their dislike of foreigners through words and violent actions. While they do not provide reasons for their xenophobic attitudes, they justify their aggression by referring to the 'new rules'. These rules refer to new South African immigration regulations that came into force in 2014 and significantly tightened the immigration regime (Republic of South Africa 2014). As the new regulations had been introduced shortly prior to the project and were making headlines at the time, participants repeatedly referred to them in conversations. It was clear that the apparent tightening of the immigration regime increased the general sense of anxiety and vulnerability among participants. This scene, as well as others, point to this anxiety which derives from the widespread criminalization of migrants on the basis of their foreign nationality.

The following scene raises the same complexities within a civil context. It was created in an exercise in which participants were asked to improvise a spontaneous encounter between a South African and a foreign person.

Scene 'Flippin' foreigners':

A foreign man is offering drums for sale. A local woman comes and chases him away.

Foreign man: You can come here and buy your drum sticks, five rand, five rand!

Local woman: Eh eh, sorry, this is not your country [...] You are a refugee and you are busy making noise here! My children need to sleep, you know that!

Foreign man: I'm just trying to make a living by selling this. [...]

Local woman: You want me to call my gangsters? You better just get out of this area!

He packs his stuff and starts leaving.

Local woman: Flippin' foreigners!

Foreign man: I don't like how South Africans treat us people coming from other countries.

Local woman: Can you show me that you have a paper, an ID? No, you don't!

Foreign man: But ...

Local woman: But what?

Foreign man: At least I'm trying to make a living, but you, you always go and kill people.

Local woman: We don't kill people, it's called survival of the fittest.

In this scene, the foreign man is initially being harassed for being in a country that is not his. According to the local woman, this situation denies him the right to sell his products. By asking the man to show her his papers in order to 'control' his immigration status she emphasises that she is in a position of power. This is further reinforced when she threatens to call on gangsters to chase the man away. The man's statement that he is 'at least trying to make a living' instead of 'killing people' speaks to the perception that foreigners are hard-working and honest whereas South Africans are said to be lazy and violent. The local woman defends her position by referring to the harsh socio-economic competition in which only 'the fittest' survive.

The two scenes presented here draw on common stereotypes concerning 'foreigners' on the one hand and 'South Africans' or 'locals' on the other hand. The stereotypes portray generalised notions of 'good' versus 'bad' whereby the South African characters usually display a clear power dominance over the weaker and vulnerable foreign character. Part two of this article on 'Performative Agency' deconstructs participants' portrayals of vulnerability and

power and argues that these stereotypes are used as a way to critique and contest experiences of injustice and oppression.

Crime

Besides portraying xenophobically motivated violence, participants repeatedly made reference to more general forms of crime. In another improvised encounter, for example, a musician arrives in Mannenberg, a suburb of Cape Town with a notoriously high crime rate (Lambrechts 2012). He asks for help, but nobody responds. At the end of the scene the man gets shot by gangsters. Similar to the previous 'Flippin' foreigners' scene, the foreign character's behaviour and body language here reveal his insecurity and fear of being attacked in a new place and thereby inadvertently expose his vulnerability.

What distinguishes this scene from the previous one is that the foreign character here is identified and targeted because of his apparent insecurity rather than because of his nationality. Post-performance conversations confirmed that participants identify with this character's feeling of insecurity, fear and vulnerability. They also shared the notion that this sense of insecurity makes them a target for gangsterism and crime. Several participants, for example, had their cell phones stolen, one witnessed how someone else was attacked and beaten on the street and another participant was assaulted on her way home from church. One participant recounted how a man sitting next to him on the bus loaded a gun with a bullet. When asked what he did when this happened, the participant responded: 'There is nothing you can do, you just have to be quiet and cry inside.' His response reflects a distrust towards others as well as a sense of helplessness.

In a different conversation the same participant explained that he feels unable to ask South Africans for help:

You know, here, you don't even know where to run when you get attacked. At home at least you can ask someone for help, but here you can't even knock on someone's

door because they will be scared of you and think you are bad. So you just run and don't know where to hide.

His statement illustrates that he feels unprotected and more vulnerable in South Africa than in his home country. According to this statement, this seems to be the case not only because he distrusts South Africans but also because he perceives them to be distrustful of him.

While this section points out that the portrayal of insecurity can make people vulnerable to crime, it is also important to be aware that foreigners are often identified on the basis of a perceived 'physical otherness'. In this regard, Matshine writes:

"Bodily looks, movements, sounds and smells are legible as evidence of imagined citizenship and foreignness. Deviation from bodily ideals of citizenship or conformity [...] warrants strip searches, arrests, detentions, deportations, humiliation, tortures, rapes, muggings, killings, etc." (Matsinhe 2011, 302f).

Similarly, Human Rights Watch already reported in 1998 that "suspected undocumented migrants are identified by the authorities through unreliable means such as complexion, accent, or inoculation marks" 06/01/2021 10:51:00(Human Rights Watch 1998, p. 2). With this in mind it is therefore possible that a person's insecurity could also be interpreted alongside and in addition to these stereotypical notions of 'physical otherness' and subsequent assumption of foreign nationality. Whether a criminal act is committed due to one or the other or a mix of both may be hard to tell, yet what counts here is participants' perception that it is their portrayed insecurity that attracts crime.

In addition, it is also important to acknowledge here that many South Africans have similar experiences of crime, vulnerability and distrust since the high crime rates not only affect migrants, but also and perhaps predominantly South African citizens. Certain areas of Cape Town such as the so-called Cape Flats are particularly affected by crime, with gangs paralysing entire communities (Kynoch 1999; Lambrechts 2012; Dougan 2018; Pather 2018). Much has

been written about the effects of crime on South African children and youth, especially in contexts of poverty (e.g. Shields, Nadasen, and Pierce 2008; Bray et al. 2011; Swartz, Harding, and Lannoy 2012; Otwombe et al. 2015; Mathews 2014). This literature points out, for instance, how South African ‘township youth’ are excluded from society due to structural violence and the impossibility of realizing their dreams (Swartz et al. 2012). This exclusion, the authors argue, makes those young South Africans “the primary victims of the wounds of South African history” (ibid., p. 36). This argument could be extended to migrant youth who also live in contexts of extreme structural and physical violence and lack of opportunities.

In addition to acknowledging this overlap in lived experiences, this paper suggests that there is value in looking at migrant youth’s realities more specifically. This is because migrant youth face additional levels of exclusion from citizenship and belonging in South Africa that previous research has largely overlooked. As this section has shown, these particular circumstances include experiences of xenophobic violence and a sense of insecurity that derive from their foreign nationality.

Many scenes created by participants transmit a sense of victimhood and suffering experienced by the foreign characters. These notions correspond to general stereotypes of migrant children as vulnerable subjects in need of help. In contrast to this interpretation, however, I will demonstrate in the following section that these performed vulnerabilities as well as participants’ everyday conduct in fact constitute an explicit affirmation of their agency and a resistance to the oppression they face in their daily lives.

2. Performative Agency: Contesting Challenges and Fostering Integration

This section reflects on participants’ portrayal of themselves as victims on stage and contrasts this with their conduct in public. To make sense of these observations I will draw on James Scott’s concept of ‘hidden and public transcripts’ (Scott 1985 and 1990). Building on this, I

will develop the notion of ‘performative agency’ to illustrate how participants contest their challenges and foster their own integration.

Hidden Transcripts

Considering that open displays and denouncements of injustice and oppression can potentially cause security risks for undocumented migrants, it may seem surprising that participants of this project were keen to expose themselves to a public audience in the final performance. This conduct, however, corresponds to James Scott’s observation that public disclosure of oppression is common in ‘authorized ritual occasions when it is possible to break the rules’ (Scott 1985, 287). Similar to carnivals, theatre constitutes such an ‘authorized occasion’ where the powerless ‘insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct’ (Scott 1990, preface xiii). On the basis of this I argue that the young people deliberately used their performance on stage as an opportunity to publicly expose their ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott 1990).

Scott describes hidden transcripts as a form of critique of the oppressed against the power holders (Scott 1990). While hidden transcripts typically take place ‘offstage’, ‘behind the back of the dominant’ (Scott 1990, preface xii), this study created an ‘authorized occasion’ that enabled participants’ hidden transcripts to become public. Interpreted in this sense, the performative portrayal of the young people’s vulnerabilities, weaknesses and pains on the one hand and the portrayal of South Africans as powerful and dominant on the other hand can be seen as an explicit critique of the oppression and injustice participants are exposed to. In some instances, participants portrayed South African characters committing kind and caring acts, indicating the young people’s nuanced understanding rather than an outright condemnation of ‘South Africans’ in general. Considering this, I suggest that the predominant and explicit use of stereotypes concerning ‘South Africans’ and ‘foreigners’ on stage may have served the purpose of highlighting and contesting their negative experiences.

The performances also allowed participants to portray and denounce oppressive ‘facts’ in a safe way. This is because performances may blur fact and fiction which prevented the audience from holding individuals accountable for the exposed injustices, rights violations and physical violence. The performances were also safe in the sense that the displayed suffering and pain could not be attributed to individual actors, thereby maintaining a degree of anonymity despite the exposure on stage. In this sense it was impossible for the audience to tell whether an actor portraying a particular incident has experienced this incident themselves or whether they merely portrayed another cast’s experience or a general sense of this experience.

Having said this, it is important to keep in mind that performances are never authentic representations of ‘reality’, but mediated interpretations thereof (Bottoms 2006). Furthermore, we may not have physically experienced a particular situation ourselves, yet the knowledge thereof may impact our wellbeing and the way we perceive our surroundings. For instance, the perception that the police use disproportionate force against foreigners affects migrant children’s sense of safety and wellbeing even if they have not been victims of police violence themselves. A similar point has been observed in a study on the effects of community violence on children in Cape Town which found that “hearing about violence from others had almost as strong an effect on distress as actually observing it” (Shields, Nadasen, and Pierce 2008, 599). For this reason, I suggest that perceptions and experiences cannot and need not be neatly separated in interpreting participants’ performances.

A note on positionality here. I am of course aware that participants may have had other motivations to depict themselves as vulnerable victims. It is for instance possible that participants had hopes that I, as a white European, would be able to assist them through resources or strategic contacts and that they exaggerated their performed experiences for this reason. Perhaps they also simply had fun portraying violence and mean behaviour on stage or they wanted to increase the dramatic effect of their performances for the audience. While I don’t intend to establish nor believe in the value of trying to establish a ‘truth’ here, I hope to have

shown through references to group conversations and participants' other contributions that participants did identify with the subject matters they have chosen to portray in the scenes.

Public transcripts

It was interesting to observe that, unlike their theatrical performances, participants' public transcripts emphasised positive aspects such as their physical beauty, their knowledge of local habits and languages, or their confidence in knowing their way around. I argue that these public transcripts also have a performative character. In this sense I propose to view the young people's lives as a stage on which they appear as actors who display and apply 'performative everyday agency'. 'Everyday agency' refers to an implicit portrayal of agency that children themselves do not perceive as extraordinary, but as a normal part of their everyday lives (Payne 2012). The way in which participants handle and perceive the complexity of their daily challenges constitutes an expression of everyday agency in this sense. Significantly, I furthermore propose that their agency is performative.

'Performative agency' can be understood as the deliberate use and display of fact and fiction in public conduct and communication with others. Performative agency allows the young people to navigate through their daily lives in a way that emphasises their achievements and strengths. In so doing, their challenges, weaknesses and vulnerabilities remain largely hidden from the general public. I will present three examples to illustrate this point in more detail: the young people's dress code, their use of language and their conduct in public.

First, the performativity of participants' conduct became apparent in a comment by one participant who suggested that crime can be avoided by pretending to be a gangster: 'Dress like them, act like them, speak like them [...]. If you can't beat them, be them!' According to this statement, 'being like them', that is like gangsters in this case or like South Africans more generally, can serve as a means of self-protection and integration. The attempt to 'be like them' translated for instance into participants' dress code. Most participants were highly fashion conscious, loved wearing fashionable clothes and having their hair done according to the latest

fashion. A love for fashion can be considered a part of any teenage culture. In the case of undocumented youth, however, the aim to be recognized as fashionable and stylish becomes a survival mechanism in a hostile environment. It serves to be perceived as ‘belonging’ and to be recognized and admired by others. Mahati’s research on unaccompanied working migrant children in the border town Musina also revealed that migrant children there attempt to blend in the local context and culture by learning local languages and dressing like locals (Mahati 2012b). In both cases, the ‘fact’ that the young people are well dressed or dressed ‘as locals’ is performative in the sense that it conceals other aspects of their reality such as their foreign nationality, their precarious legal status or the fact that they are not attending school. As illustrated earlier on, the performative nature of this curated image is easily uncovered as soon as their legal status gets exposed.

Second, the attempt to ‘be like them’ also applies to the use of language. In this regard, all participants were keen to learn English. Those who already spoke it adopted local accents and in addition attempted to learn other South African languages predominant in the suburbs where they were living, such as Afrikaans and IsiXhosa. One particular incident demonstrates well the significance that the choice to use or not use a particular language can have in demonstrating belonging.

One day, a participant was asked by a South African guest facilitator to sing a song. Claiming to have forgotten her home languages Lingala and French, the participant responded by singing the South African national anthem. Considering that this participant was in fact fluent in both her own languages, her choice to sing the South African anthem in that moment was significant in various ways. First, it was significant because she had never before claimed not to speak her home languages, in fact she often spoke to other participants in either French or Lingala. Second, it was significant because of the fact that she chose to sing the *national anthem* rather than any other song in English or any other South African song for that matter. The third significance lies in the fact that none of the other participants exposed her or

commented on her behaviour in any way. By keeping quiet they implicitly supported her in keeping up this performative conduct.

It is telling that this situation occurred in the presence of a South African facilitator who was the first and only South African to join the group in the course of the project. The participants' act of singing the South African national anthem thus constituted an expression of performative agency, consciously applied in the presence of the South African facilitator to demonstrate her belonging and successful integration in this society. For can anyone be more integrated than having 'forgotten' their mother tongue and feeling at ease to sing the national anthem of another country?

The third example concerning the performative nature of participants' everyday lives is demonstrated by their conduct in public. By walking around and using public transport, the young people appear to navigate their way through Cape Town in the same way as their South African peers. As previously discussed, however, participants are highly alert to the risks of moving around in public without 'papers'. As a precautionary measure they therefore limit their movements based on their own understanding and interpretation of safety threats, including the belief that "on Sundays the police take a break". Following these self-created rules, they avoid direct contact with the police or even stay at home if they perceive the threat of police raids or controls to be high on particular days. Since their fears and self-imposed restrictions on their movements remain unseen and unknown to others, their actual movements, though displayed as normal everyday tasks, become performative.

Assuming that performative agency is applied deliberately, the concept can be related to the notion of "strategic invisibility" which emphasises the element of choice in making oneself unseen or silent in order to "create safety in a time of vulnerability" (Lollar 2015, 305). 'Strategic invisibility' is often used with reference to persons in socially stigmatised positions such as female migrants, sex workers, refugees, the homeless or persons with mental health problems (e.g. Lollar 2015; Ham and Gerard 2014; Rojas-Wiesner and DeVargas 2014).

Undocumented migrants in particular have been found to apply various mechanisms in order to protect themselves from risks. These include restricting social interactions, avoiding particular urban areas, dressing in a particular way or even collaborating with the police (e.g. Bloch, Sigona, and Zetter 2014; Gonzales 2011; Mahati 2012b, 2012a; Negrón-Gonzales 2013; Willen 2007).

The concept of performative agency as developed here can be applied to various of these strategies. Importantly, however, I suggest that the purpose of applying performative agency goes beyond coping and the avoidance of risk. Specifically, I argue that the denial or hiding of weaknesses and the deliberate emphasis of positive attributes in public interactions constitutes a contestation of everyday experiences of injustice and oppression. This is because rather than giving in or simply coping with constant setbacks and challenges, performative agency increases undocumented migrants' confidence to interact, communicate and move around. By emphasising their familiarity with local languages and habits, performative agency thus ultimately serves as a mechanism that enhances integration in a hostile environment.

Conclusion

This article shed some light on the experiences of undocumented migrant youth in Cape Town as identified through a theatre-based study. First, it became clear that participants miss their families at home and experience a sense of loneliness. This is despite their embeddedness in extended family networks that cater for their basic material needs such as housing and food. Second, the study revealed that participants' precarious legal status increases their insecurity and lack of freedom as they fear being exposed by their peers or caught in police raids. Their legal status also prevents them from participating in social activities and from pursuing further education. Third, the results showed how xenophobia and crime pervade the young people's lives and affect their wellbeing. The constant threat of becoming the target of verbal and

physical violence creates a sense of fear, vulnerability, insecurity and distrust towards others. This was compounded by a perception of the police as being both inefficient and xenophobic.

Considering that the South African Constitution and the Children's Act technically guarantee legal protection and basic rights for all children, it is possible to describe these young people's situation as one in which rights that were 'supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable' (Arendt 1966, 291f). Because of the 'unenforceability' of the young people's rights it can be argued that unaccompanied, separated and undocumented migrant youth in South Africa are 'functionally stateless' (Bhabha 2009).

While this situation limits the young people's freedom and hinders their personal development, the second part of the article showed how participants apply performative agency as a means to confront their challenges. Specifically, I illustrated how the young people strategically use hidden and public transcripts in their conduct and interaction with others. In particular, I argued that participants' performances on stage revealed their hidden transcripts and openly critiqued the injustices and oppression they face in their daily lives. In contrast to this, participants' public transcripts emphasise their personal strengths and belonging in South Africa. This became apparent in their use of local languages, dress code and movements in public. While these acts appear to be casual, they are performative in the sense that they are conducted according to particular perceptions of what it means to be integrated or 'local'.

Performative agency adds a further nuance to understandings of how undocumented migrants navigate and negotiate their daily lives. In addition to being a coping mechanism or means to avoid risks, performative agency also constitutes a contestation of injustice and oppression which can ultimately enhance the integration in a context of hostility, fear and discrimination. This understanding does not deny or overlook the many difficulties undocumented young people face. In order to offer appropriate responses to their challenges, however, policy makers and practitioners should recognize and draw on the young people's

capacities to cope, contest and integrate. Paying attention to performative agency can be a useful starting point in this regard.

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