

Book review

Jackie King reviews *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* by Stanley Cohen. Polity Press 2001.

In his preface, Cohen reflects on the early origins of his interest in denial — in his native South Africa, his family had paid for a Zulu working for a private security company to act as a ‘Night Watch Boy’ - young Cohen lay in his warm bed wondering why the black man was out there in the cold, watching over them. The psychological unease he felt in this situation — “knowing that something was deeply wrong, but also knowing that (I) could not live in a state of permanent awareness of this knowledge” — sets the tone for the rest of this book, which in many ways describes a personal journey.

The book is a good read, scholarly and well constructed but accessible to the general reader. It provides an original theory of denial and acknowledgement, spanning different historical and geographic regions and different kinds of subject matter, ranging from the personal — poverty, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse — to the international — the Holocaust, Somalia, Bosnia, the Middle East.

While the first few chapters set up the psychological, theoretical and methodological issues, the other chapters deal with the following themes:

- Denial at work: mechanisms and rhetorical devices
- Accounting for atrocities: perpetrators and officials
- Blocking out the past: personal memories, public histories
- Bystander states
- Images of suffering
- Appeals: outrage into action
- Digging up graves, opening up wounds: acknowledging the past
- Acknowledgement

Cohen examines how people react to unwelcome knowledge, particularly to knowledge about atrocities, and the differing ways in which victims and perpetrators see these atrocities. According to Cohen, denial of responsibility inevitably follows one of four paths: obedience to superiors, conformity with society, necessity or splitting of the personality. He provides deep and clear insight into the psychology, ethics and sociology of acting as a bystander, a dissenter, a whistleblower and a rescuer. In the pages specifically dedicated to hate crimes, Cohen deals with the subject by categorising it in

the following manner, under the heading ‘legal compulsion’. He states that regulation and control are manifested as either:

- denial as crime — as in hate crimes legislation, for example legislation against denial of the Holocaust.
- duty to remember — as in truth commissions, political trials and inquiries.
- duty to rescue — to intervene on behalf of strangers, especially to save their lives.
- duty to know about even distant atrocities.

While these elements provide for lengthy moral and ethical debates both at the domestic and international levels, their theoretical discussion is very timely in the current global context. He believes that denial is the normal state of affairs and cases where the outsider is asked to take action are the exception, “Why people don’t shut out is more interesting than why they shut out.” This book compels readers to look at their own responses and judge their own behaviour when faced with the atrocities and suffering of others.

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Book review

Julia Braggins reviews *The Geese Theatre Handbook* edited by Clark Baim, Sally Brookes and Alun Mountford. Waterside Press.

For anyone who has seen the Geese Theatre Company in action, their work will need no introduction. For anyone who has not, it is a treat in store. Geese Theatre UK was formed in 1987 to work exclusively within the criminal justice field. Members of the company devise and perform issue-based plays within prison, probation and similar settings. They also conduct workshops and training sessions with offenders to develop self-awareness and communication skills.

This is a generous book. Not only does it explain the thinking behind the company's work, it also provides a treasure-chest of games and exercises for any group setting. I defy any trainer or group facilitator across the social and communication skills spectrum not to find some stunning new off-the-peg idea to lift a jaded session on a wet Thursday.

There are some timely health warnings about boundaries, however, and about knowing your own professional limitations. The authors are at pains to distinguish between the generally 'therapeutic' uses of drama-based exercises, and personal therapy, or psychodrama. They caution wisely against rushing into personal level work without the appropriate training. Knowing what you are doing is crucial –

There is a wealth of food for thought in this book, for trainers of all kinds.

for group leaders as well as for participants – as powerful forces may be unleashed.

The rationale for the company's work is spelled out. Social learning theory, cognitive-behavioural theory (widely cited as being one of the most effective approaches in offending behaviour programmes) and role theory all underpin their approach. The first two may be familiar to practitioners working on offending behaviour programmes: the latter less so, perhaps. We are all role players in our ordinary lives, though most of us don't think of it this way. Daughter, son, parent, friend, student, teacher, employee, employer: these are all roles we might play, sometimes serially, sometimes at one and the same time. When we know how to perform a role it is in our 'role repertoire'.

Part of the Geese approach is to encourage participants in their training sessions to 'expand their role repertoires'. An equally important objective is to develop a felt experience of what it is to take other roles: to 'climb into another person's skin and walk around in it' (to paraphrase the quotation from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, which prefaces chapter four.)

There is a wealth of food for thought in this book, for trainers of all kinds. The authors urge, above all else, that you make sessions memorable. How? By

ensuring that your training 'involves the whole person, physically, mentally and emotionally'. For instance, you could attempt to start a discussion on victim awareness in a group of male burglars by asking members how they'd feel about someone taking their wallet. Or alternatively you could ask them to stand in a circle, put their wallets on the floor in front of them, move several places round the circle so that they are standing in front of someone else's wallet (and several places from their own). Then ask how they would feel, if you asked each one to pick up the wallet in front of them. (The authors recommend that you do not actually ask them to do this!) The point is made.

Masks, the hallmark of a Geese performance, are the subject of the final chapter. The company uses masks to explore the various roles we play in our lives, and to highlight the notion that the 'front' we display to the world is not necessarily in sync with the thoughts going on inside our heads. 'Lifting the mask' is a device they employ to explore the hidden thoughts, feelings, attitudes and beliefs of the characters in the drama, and, by extension, the audience.

The eight 'fragment masks' (e.g. The Fist: 'Don't mess with me!'; Mr Cool: 'Everything is sweet as a nut') represent key self-protective strategies we can adopt to avoid facing difficult issues by blaming others, playing the victim, or using charm to get by. The focus is on the behaviour, not the mask. Don't try this at home: these are Geese copyright. They all look like male masks: here, and elsewhere, I have wondered how far the Geese approach is geared to working with women. There are few examples in this book. Perhaps they leave that territory to the excellent Clean Break Theatre Company?

There are enlightening nuts-and-bolts chapters on structuring drama-based sessions, on processing techniques to enable participants to know what it is they have learned, and on building new skills to see how they might start to apply it. And there is a stunning chapter on analysing the theory and practice of the constructive use of role play, for which trainers (like me) can only be grateful. There are tips and templates for a range of assessment and evaluation techniques in the accompanying appendices.

As you may have gathered, I am a big fan of Geese and of this book. The handbook, respectfully and thoughtfully written, is an invaluable addition to the Waterside list. If you are responsible for group work, and are sympathetic to the drama-led approach, you won't need me to urge you to put in your order. Better still, if you can, ask the company in. We are lucky to have them. ■

Geese Theatre UK: www.geese.co.uk

the centre for crime and justice studies