

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

**Failing Together:
How Improv Theater Strengthens Communities and
Helps Us Meet Our Need to Belong**

By

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July 2023

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts degree in the

Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the political implications of improvisational theater as a means to learn how to navigate emotionally heightened or difficult conversations, build community, and create a sense of belonging. These experiences manifest due to the inherent expectation of vulnerability and trust in other improvisers. Thus, I will analyze the tenets of improvisational theater and relate them to different psychological theories that intersect with the need to belong. Through interviews, I will explore the communicative practices within an improv classroom/during performances. Then, I will argue that the interactions being had in an improv space teach social skills that help with uncertainty tolerance, mental flexibility, and subsequently create a positive impact on one's self-esteem and ability to interact with others.

Why Should We Care About Improv?

“Improv teaches you a little more about how to love the people around you and how to enter a room or a conversation heart-forward. You know, with eyes of love. That’s something I’ve learned how to appreciate more and more in my life.”

In our daily lives we may encounter the inability to have discussions about politics and social justice issues with individuals who reside on the opposite side of the political spectrum from us. Given the stakes of these discussions, it can feel impossible to even begin to navigate these conversations without feeling like we are betraying our deeply cherished convictions or moving towards irreversibly fracturing our relationship with whoever we are interacting with. These conversations can often feel frustrating, exhausting, or frankly, unsafe. With our current political climate, it seems that now more than ever is the time to be having these conversations, but many of us feel ill-equipped to handle them—we haven’t been given the proper tools to help guide these interactions.

How can we work towards moving past or suspending the political polarization in our country?¹ While talking about the issues our country faces might not be the cure to all of our problems, it certainly seems like a step in the right direction. This inability to communicate about our differences impacts us in more ways than one, and can make it difficult to engage in relationships with others that may be very important to us. It's also a problem that many DEI efforts aim to resolve because it can be the cause of conflict and misunderstandings within the workplace. Due to the fact that this feels like an impossibly large issue to tackle—one that might take years to resolve in a meaningful way—let's instead begin to approach it by focusing on one aspect of our social world: our hobbies—more specifically improvisational (improv) theater.

While this may seem like a hobby that has nothing to do with DEI efforts, many experienced improvisers have taken advantage of the communicative skills they've learned through improv and have used it in corporate workplaces to teach what's commonly referred to as "business improv."² This practice is aimed to supplement corporations' existing DEI efforts and teach individuals the art of play in order to encourage better workplace interactions and relationships. While business improv is a useful way to assist with DEI efforts, there is something unique about hobbies that gets frequently overlooked. Our hobbies are special to us. We choose to actively integrate them into our worlds. We engage in them for the joy they bring us—not out of necessity. They have a larger impact on our personhood than we typically give them credit for.

¹ Dean, Claudia; & Gramlich, John (2020). 2020 Election Reveals Two Broad Voting Coalitions Fundamentally at Odds. Pew Research Center.

² Kulhan, Bob (2017). Getting to "Yes And": The Art of Business Improv. Stanford University Press.

The practice of improv is unlike most other hobbies one might engage in. Some of the key rules of improv rely on unconditional cooperation with scene partners (“yes, and”), the acknowledgement that vulnerability is key, and that “there are no mistakes.”³ Through studying these practices, I will attempt to discern if a space in which failure is an expectation—a sign that you are doing something *right* instead of something *wrong*—is a space that might assist in shifting an individual’s perspectives about the social world around them. In particular, through analyzing improv theater, I hope to gain insights into the communicative skills that one may acquire through this hobby, how psychological safety is created and maintained within an improv troupe, and how this hobby helps individuals meet their innate need to belong. When referring to the need to belong, I am referring to our basic, innate need “to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships.”⁴ These relationships must be stable across time and there must be a level of concern for one another’s well-being that is maintained. Individuals must also frequently engage in positive interactions with others in order to help meet this need to belong.

Through this examination, I aim to understand if improv is a means to help individuals navigate difficult conversations about politics and beliefs in order to mitigate the polarization we are experiencing in our country. Perhaps these skills can help us engage in thoughtful and nonjudgmental conversations so we can strengthen our communities and work towards equity and inclusion in all spaces—no matter what our individual backgrounds and beliefs may be.

How Does The Theater Factor into Politics and Social Justice?

³ Taibbi, R. (2009). The tao of improv: Embracing life on the edge. *Psychotherapy Networker*, 33(1).

⁴ Baumeister, R.F., & Leary, M.R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909>. (p. 497).

“If everyone in the world takes an improv class, the world would be a better place. I really do believe that.”

I would be remiss to lack a discussion about Augusto Boal’s *Theater of the Oppressed* (1974) in relation to this study. This book, which is heavily inspired by Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), uses theatrical techniques to give a new language to oppressed groups. Boal challenges us to reconsider how we think about theater. He suggests that just as other art forms like photography can become a language which provides marginalized persons with new ways to express themselves and present their experiences, theater can do the same.⁵ Boal also believes that theater permeates our everyday lives, whether or not we are aware of it—that “we perform the play of breakfast, the scene of going to work, the act of working the epilogue of supper, the epic of Sunday lunch with the family.”⁶ Boal suggests to us that perhaps we’ve been thinking about theater incorrectly all along—there is something so innately human about the practice of theater that we take for granted. Through theater we are given the opportunity to *identify*—to see ourselves in whatever we’re witnessing.⁷ When witnessing a theatrical production, we as spectators are usually identifying something in ourselves that the characters on stage embody. They represent us in some way, and we give ourselves over to their world, their problems, and their journeys.

Why is this relevant? Theater (just like improv) gives actors the opportunity to try on different identities. It gives us the chance to step outside of the identity that we’ve been handed and into someone else’s shoes. To consider how they take up space, how they speak, how they

⁵ Boal, A. (1985). *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Theatre Communications Group, 1985. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=659884&site=eds-live&scope=sit e.

⁶ Boal, A. (1992). *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (A. Jackson, Trans.). London: Routledge. (p. xxv).

⁷ Boal, A. (1992). *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (A. Jackson, Trans.). London: Routledge.

dress, how they might even *feel*. Theater even gives us an opportunity to consider how we want to cultivate an identity that feels most aligned with how we see ourselves. Consider how this practice is useful in teaching us to approach others with curiosity instead of judgment. One of my participants—a straight, cisgender, white male—spoke about how growing up doing theater gave him a chance to learn about different cultures and ways of life. He explained that he grew up in a very conservative household in which black and white thinking was the norm, but theater helped bring color to his world.

So what then about the spectators? If actors are the only ones who are given the chance to explore these different roles and identities during plays, how are spectators supposed to be included in this experience in a meaningful way? Once again, Boal provides us with the answer to this problem—*forum theater*.⁸ This type of theater is meant to be entirely interactive—it creates a new role for spectators—they are a key piece in deciding the fate of the characters. Through forum theater, the audience is provided with a situation or problem that a character may be facing and are then asked to take turns coming on stage to play this character and test out different resolutions to their problem. Audience members are no longer simply spectators—they are the ones deciding the fate of the characters—to Boal they are now “spect-actors.”⁹ Spectators and actors all at once.

If you are unfamiliar with Boal, this approach to theater might seem out of the box and perhaps even controversial, however this approach is fundamental in efforts to use theater to drive social change and create dialogue for groups that have consistently been denied it. Another

⁸ Boal, A. (1992). *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (A. Jackson, Trans.). London: Routledge.

⁹ Boal, A. (1985). *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Theatre Communications Group, 1985. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=659884&site=eds-live&scope=sit e.

work that was heavily inspired by this approach is Micheal Rohd's *Theater for Community, Conflict & Dialogue* (1998). This book is a training manual for what Rhod calls the "Hope is Vital Training" which aims to teach us how to create opportunities for community dialogue and problem solving. Rhod explains that human beings learn not through being shown or having things explained to them, but instead through the process of *doing*. This work offers the opportunity to play out different scenes and test different resolutions in order to help with problem solving in the future.

Rhod's book is filled with different types of theater games and activities that are designed to build trust, practice improvisation, create a safe environment, and ultimately explore issues that are important to the community involved in the practice. In his book, Rhod discusses how this work was received within the communities he worked with—either with open arms and appreciation, or with disapproval and concern that it was introducing taboo topics and beliefs to young participants.

In a particularly inspiring chapter, Rhod discusses how he navigated facilitating a workshop that an outraged community member attended. This community member—an older gentleman was a vocal critic of the program because he worried it was encouraging premarital sex in his community. When this man attended the workshop, the participants happened to be exploring a scene in which a 17-year-old girl had to tell her father that she was pregnant. This was something the young people in the community wanted to explore because they felt it was realistic and relevant for some of them. The man angrily shared his disapproval in response to this but was met with curiosity by Rhod. He was given an opportunity to share what angered him and explained that the young woman should have never had sex in the first place—that the conversation she was having shouldn't be necessary if she didn't have sex. Much to his dismay,

the young actress brought the man into the scene so he could continue to express his concerns. The actress spoke to him as though he was her father and she was trying to tell him about her pregnancy. The scene played out—and the gentleman was clearly uncomfortable, but soon enough he stepped into the role of the father and stood on stage holding the crying actress playing the daughter. While Rhod never truly knows what impact this scene may have had on this man, he shares with us that after this instance, the man sat through the rest of the workshop without saying a word, and never publicly spoke against the workshop again.

Rhod goes on to explain that even though he doesn't know what this man learned after this experience, it proved to him the importance of the work he was doing. Rhod explains that this work “does not declare right and wrong. It does not seek single solutions. It seeks discussion, trust, and a step forward in each person's ability to take care of themselves and to look at the world with compassion.”¹⁰

Now that we've taken some time to talk about the history and importance of improvisational theater techniques to drive social change and create much needed dialogue about social issues, let us discuss the rules of improv to better understand their implications in this type of work.

What Are The Rules of Improv?

“I still get nervous and I feel like I have cultivated a sense of comfortability on stage, but I still feel going out there like I don't know what's going to happen, but I do know, and one of the most important lessons is—the people that I'm with are there to take care of me, to help me.”

While improv has a cult following, it tends to be a hobby that the average person might know very little about. In case you're a newbie to improv, let's begin by discussing the 5 core

¹⁰ Rohd, M. (1998). Theater for Community, Conflict & Dialogue. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. (p. 140)

“rules” that every beginner improviser learns.¹¹ I use the word “rules” here lightly because these rules aren’t ones that every improviser rigidly follows, rather they are guiding principles to help us understand how successful improvisers participate in a scene. They offer us a framework to better understand how one might approach improv as well as the relationships (artificial or real) that one navigates throughout scene work.¹²

Rule number one: “Yes, and.” This is the golden rule of improv—everyone who knows anything about improv knows the term ‘yes, and,’ and can probably tell you what it means. ‘Yes, and’ means that you accept whatever offer you are given and move forward with that.¹³ In my own experience I’ve noticed that introductory improvisers might struggle with this form of unconditional acceptance and will commonly deny offers because they might have the notion that conflict is more interesting. While this can be true in certain scenarios (think about how almost all TV shows and movies hinge on some sort of conflict), in improv however, you might instead get stuck in conflict and fail to move the scene forward if you don’t accept others’ offers. By committing to the ‘yes, and’ rule, you are also fully investing yourself in the scene and the world that you are co-creating with your fellow scene partners. This rule is the *acceptance* rule.

Rule number two: Act/React. Essentially what this means is that everyone who is on stage should be present and contributing to the scene in some way. Even if performers are on the “back line” (meaning they are not directly involved in the scene at hand), they should be present and ready to contribute at any time. Improvisation is a collective effort (even with a solo

¹¹ Taibbi, R. (2009). *The tao of improv: Embracing life on the edge.*

¹² By scene work, I am specifically referring to the scenes improvisers practice throughout classes or rehearsal. They are generally not done in front of an outside audience, and after each scene the improvisers who participated are given notes of things that worked well or things to improve on.

¹³ When I refer to an offer, I am referring to anything a fellow improviser might say or do which helps to drive the scene forward in some way.

improviser they usually refer to the audience for suggestions), so everyone must be ready to contribute and assist one another at the drop of a hat. This rule is the *responsibility* rule.

Rule number three: making your partner look good can make *you* look good. My favorite explanation of this is from a fellow improviser that I worked with who said this rule means that “everyone is the supporting actor.” Your goal is not to be the main character or be the best, it’s to work with your partner and support them. This rule is the *trust* rule. By knowing that all improvisers are responsible to help each other when they are struggling and that we all aim to make one another look good, we can build lasting trust with other improvisers.

Rule number four: be truthful, be vulnerable. Meaning, don’t aim to be funny, aim to be vulnerable. The funniest and most interesting moments come from vulnerability and will always help to move the scene along. In an improvised scene we may feel the need to hide our true feelings or perhaps we might get stuck in our head and not know how to move forward. By staying in character and being truthful about whatever feelings or thoughts are coming up, we can acknowledge this and continue to drive the scene forward. If we aren’t present and in the moment with our partner, we aren’t being genuine. This rule means, *believe your partner has your best interests in mind and keep your partner’s best interests in mind.*

Finally, rule number five: there are no mistakes. Every mishap is an opportunity. In other words, you work with what others offer, and trust that you’ll all somehow figure it out together. This rule means that *you’re not alone in this and it will work out.*

With our newfound knowledge of these rules, we can already begin to clearly see the implications that they might have in creating a collaborative, vulnerable, and safe environment for improvisers who use them as a guiding framework. There aren’t many contexts in our

day-to-day lives in which there are clear-cut rules in place that guide interactions in order to help us be successful like in improv. While these rules don't always need to be strictly followed, successful improvisers follow them—or break them in specific ways—in order to navigate through a myriad of different types of scenes. Some of these rules might also serve as a beacon which guides improvisers through other interactions outside of an improv context.

What Are We Hoping to Learn From Improv?

“I joined improv for three primary reasons—first, I’ve always had a passing interest in it. Second, I have ambitions of having a more artistic focused career. Third, and kind of the most important is that I just had a sort of suspicion that it might make me a better person. I suspected that there must be some sort of tools or skills taught in that environment that would just improve my ability to interact with people, which is something I generally struggle with. So I was really eager to see if improv could help with that.”

This project aims to analyze improv’s ability to create social change and teach communicative skills that allow individuals to engage in more thoughtful and genuine interactions with one another in spite of different backgrounds, experiences, or belief systems. Additionally, it aims to examine how improv influences the ways in which individuals meet their need to belong and its role in influencing self-esteem as well as self-disclosure. I will discuss psychological theories relating to the need to belong such as the dyadic trust scale, sociometer theory, social penetration theory, and psychological safety. These theories will be used to inform the study and better understand the significance of improv in improving one’s self-esteem and communicative skills.

My primary questions for this project are as follows: how can we better understand the significance of hobbies in creating a space that helps to meet our innate, human need to belong? How might the need to belong help give us insights into ways to address and understand some of the forces and systems perpetuating polarization in the United States? What communicative

skills are learned in improv that can be used in other contexts to cultivate belonging and allow individuals to better understand identities that do not intersect with their own? Does the inherent expectation of role-play and discovery in improv allow individuals the opportunity to understand identities that do not intersect with their own as well as explore sensitive topics that, in other contexts, might be off-limits?

Who Are We Learning From?

“I love the people in our troupe right now. We have such a great dynamic. Everyone is so caring and supportive and just so kind and so, so funny. It’s great having these people in my life that wouldn’t be there otherwise had I not done improv.”

For this study, I interviewed 8 improvisers in a mid-sized southwestern city who are in an amateur improv troupe together. These individuals have varying levels of expertise, but have completed most, if not all of the five improv courses that are offered at the theater that they study and perform at. This improv troupe recently wrapped up a round of live performances, but almost all of the participants began improv simply as a hobby. Some of the participants had no background in theater prior to beginning improv classes, but a little over half of the participants had previous theatrical experience. I want to point this out because I think there is something here to be said about the types of people who might feel comfortable taking an improv class without needing encouragement to do so.

The racial makeup of my participants consists of one Hispanic individual, one Hispanic-Italian individual, one Iranian-American individual, one Navajo individual, and four White individuals. The participants are also all generally spread out along the gender and sexuality spectrums respectively, and all of the demographic information I’ve provided was self-reported by the participants. I’ve chosen to focus on this group of improvisers specifically,

because I have taken multiple classes with them in the past year and a half prior to beginning my graduate program. It is crucial for me to work with a group that I have rapport with, because vulnerability is a key requirement in improv spaces and my best chance at success with this project requires a group that is comfortable being vulnerable in front of me.

My data draws from themes found within the 30-minute interviews that I conducted with each participant. The conversations were structured so that each set of questions provides different information about improv and the skills learned within it, as well as relationship dynamics between improvisers during scenes. My first set of questions asked about what led the participants to sign up for an improv class, if it had an impact on their self-esteem, what skills they feel they've learned through improv that are valuable to them and if they would recommend taking a class to others and why. This set of questions was aimed at learning more about each participant as well as their backgrounds and perceptions about improv classes and what they've learned through these classes that is useful in their day-to-day lives. I then asked them to think of specific instances in improv in which they either supported or were supported by their peers. This helps us gain insights into what interactions look like within an improvised scene and how support is offered and received. The aim of this was to learn some information about their problem-solving abilities as well as the communicative skills in improv that help when one faces uncertainty. Additionally, I asked questions about what types of decisions go into entering a scene, and if there are any specific characters or roles that they feel the most drawn to play. These questions were aimed at understanding how much of their true selves comes through during performances and scenes. It should help to give us a sense about if the characters they play or relationship dynamics that they explore mirror any roles or dynamics that are present in their lives outside of improv. Lastly, I asked them questions about what they like about their

improv troupe in the hopes of understanding a bit more about their relationships with other improvisers and how improv has helped them in creating vulnerable and intimate relationships with their fellow improvisers.

Additionally, I met with the founder of an improv-based consulting firm, which teaches techniques in the workplace to encourage adult play in order to “help organizations develop their leaders and achieve better results.”¹⁴ I met with this individual in particular because I was interested in how their company uses improv techniques not to have fun, but instead to teach employees how to yield to or match with one another in communicative choices, and how to adapt to a specific environment or context. This discussion brought to light the significance that these aspects of improv can have on a workplace environment and the role that improv techniques can have on providing a space in which members feel a sense of psychological safety (something which I wish to discuss outside of a corporate context). We also discussed the role that improv plays in assisting individuals with mental flexibility and uncertainty tolerance—two key aspects of improvisation that have been examined in previous studies by Felsman et al., 2020 & 2023, as well as Schwenke et al., 2021.

What Are Current Limitations of DEI Programming?

“Improv teaches you people skills. It teaches you how to be aware and cognizant that you are interacting with another human being. You’re not the center of attention, you need to listen, you need to empathize, to cooperate... And it’s all in the name of having fun, but those are very important things that you should do in life. They are very good at focusing on that empathy and about caring for the other person or persons.”

¹⁴ Ziksana (2021). <https://ziksanaconsulting.com/>.

If you're a fan of *The Office* (or if you've seen the first two episodes of it), you've likely sat through the painstakingly cringey Diversity Day episode in season 1.¹⁵ Dunder Mifflin Regional Manager Michael Scott's poorly thought through effort to create a more welcoming and inclusive work environment was an epic failure from the get-go. From claiming he is of "two-fifteenths" indigenous heritage, to forcing staff members to wear an index card with a specific race written on it and asking them to act out what that particular race sounds like, this diversity seminar is a master class on how **not** to approach DEI efforts in the workplace. While the episode is a dramatized version of misguided DEI efforts—something about it still unfortunately rings true almost 18 years after the episode's release date. Although we like to believe we are moving towards progress, if you were to scroll through news articles on your phone today, the chances of seeing something calling out racist, sexist, or homophobic practices in workplaces is unfortunately high.

In 2023, now three years after the death of George Floyd, which sparked nationwide protests, as well as many large companies releasing statements denouncing racism and pledging to make policy and structural changes to create diversity, equity and inclusion, it seems as though not a lot has changed.¹⁶ Some might even argue that the U.S. appears to be worse-off than it did three years ago. So how are these DEI efforts failing?

Kraus, et al. (2022) argue that narratives which push the idea that we have succeeded in making racial progress are partly to blame. They explain that:

¹⁵ Daniels, G. (Writer), Novak, B.J. (Writer), Kaling, M. (Writer), & Kwapis, K. (Director). (2005, March 16). Diversity Day (Season 1, Episode 2) [TV Series Episode]. In Daniels, G., Gervais, R., Hamilton, A., Klein, H., Merchant, S., Silverman, B. (Executive Producers), *The Office*. Deedle-Dee Productions.

¹⁶ Kraus, M. W., Torrez, B., & Hollie, L. (2022). How narratives of racial progress create barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion in organizations. *Current opinion in psychology*, 43, 108–113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.022>

“Specifically, members of the workforce, much like members of American society, adhere to beliefs that racial equality will naturally unfold across time, and it is this belief in the automatic unfolding of racial progress that makes actual organizational policy change in the service of DEI more unlikely to be competently executed.”¹⁷

This misunderstanding of the structural underpinnings of racism in America is a major obstacle that many DEI efforts are not equipped to face. Throughout the last decade, governmental officials have continued to push the notion that modern day racism is due to individual failings, which only further contributes to this misconception. Ming Francis and Dawson highlight this through discussing Obama’s promotion of marriage and stable families as a cure to the gun violence issue in the US, which disproportionately affects Black individuals. This proposed resolution illuminates the perspective that “government institutions are rarely the source of continuing racial inequalities; to move to a more just society, we must first address the pathologies of our own communities.”¹⁸

While this is a major driving factor that is continuing the perpetuation of racism in America, this is still only partly to blame. DEI policies can also face their fair share of push-back by advantaged groups who may feel threatened by these potential changes. In their article from 2021, Aarti Iyer breaks down each type of opposition that many DEI programs may face. These include:

¹⁷ Kraus, M. W., Torrez, B., & Hollie, L. (2022). How narratives of racial progress create barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion in organizations. *Current opinion in psychology*, 43, 108–113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.022> (p. 108).

¹⁸ Ming Francis, M., Dawson, M.C. “Black Politics and the Neoliberal Racial Order,” *Public Culture* 28, no. 1 (2015): 23-62. (p. 25).

“(1) resource threat, or concern about losing access to outcomes and opportunities; (2) symbolic threat, or concern about the introduction of new values, culture, and expectations; and (3) ingroup morality threat, or concern about their group's role in perpetuating inequality.”¹⁹

Additionally, many DEI efforts aim to correct beliefs, while lacking knowledge or even consideration about how different types of bodies exist in space and the non-cognitive aspects of racial exclusion or belonging. They fail to question who gets to take up space safely, and how this privilege of taking up space in specific ways can play a major role in the ways that individuals might exist in the workplace. Banakaou, et al. have used their research to point to how embodiment influences implicit biases towards Black bodies. Their research suggests that placing White participants in a Black body in a virtual reality setting successfully decreases implicit racial biases for up to one week.²⁰ While *The Office* shows us a terribly misguided attempt to create inclusion in the workplace, Michael Scott may have been onto something (bear with me here). While his approach was clearly the wrong one, he attempted to address something that many DEI initiatives lack by trying to unveil and correct false beliefs and stereotypes about marginalized identities through role play.

Programs that are oriented around simply correcting beliefs fail to acknowledge implicit bias and how our bodies respond to, move around and coexist with one another. This is where the practice of improv might be of assistance—since so much of improvised scene work is dependent

¹⁹ Iyer, A. (2022). Understanding advantaged groups' opposition to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies: The role of perceived threat. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 16(5), e12666. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12666>. (p. 1).

²⁰ Banakou, D., Hanumanth, P.D., Slater, M. (2016). Virtual Embodiment of White People in a Black Virtual Body Leads to a Sustained Reduction in Their Implicit Racial Bias. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, (10). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2016.00601>

on a thoughtful consideration of how one's body moves and exists around the other bodies on stage.

What, Then About Improv?

“Improv is very inclusive—especially at (this theater)... but I also feel like there’s not a lot of Indigenous individuals or Transgender individuals there. I feel like I’ve been the only one recently.”

No conversation about improv can be had without first acknowledging that improv spaces are also sites of racial and gender inequality. If you’ve watched *Saturday Night Live* over the last few decades, it is clear that efforts have been made to create a more racially diverse and female-friendly cast, however professional improv spaces can still be quite exclusionary towards marginalized groups. Many of the most famous improv theaters in the U.S. faced public outrage during 2020 about accusations of instances of racism and sexism.²¹

Actors and creatives like Abbi Jacobson and Sheri Flanders have both written about their experiences facing exclusion at famous improv theaters such as Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB) and Second City. Flanders, a Black comedian, actress, screenwriter, producer and critic, has shared personal experiences of microaggressions being lobbed at her during improvised scenes by White scene partners.²² While in her 2018 book *I Might Regret This: Essays, Drawings, Vulnerabilities and Other Stuff*, Jacobson, a Queer, Jewish comedian, actress, writer, producer and illustrator, explains that the consistent exclusion that she and other female improvisers faced at UCB was the root cause that made her turn away from improv and instead create the television

²¹ Flanders, S. L. (2020, July 3). *Inclusion in Improv: or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Use the Bomb*. Rescripted. <http://rescripted.org/2020/07/03/essay-inclusion-in-improv/>

²² Flanders, S. L. (2020, July 3). *Inclusion in Improv: or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Use the Bomb*. Rescripted. <http://rescripted.org/2020/07/03/essay-inclusion-in-improv/>

show *Broad City* with fellow improviser Ilana Glazer.²³ These two examples are just the tip of the iceberg of the inequality that has been maintained in improv spaces for decades.

Ironically enough (or maybe not ironic at all), improv got its start from a woman—Viola Spolin, who wrote the fundamental text *Improvisation for the Theater* (1963), which included over 200 theater games that she created. Spolin was also the mother of Paul Sills, the co-founder of The Second City theater.²⁴ In spite of its founder’s gender identity, improv theaters are spaces which have been dominated by young, straight, white men for decades.²⁵ Why mention this? Because it’s important to show how prejudice and discrimination are present in practically every aspect of our lives. Even spaces that have principles of inclusion woven into their fabric have their fair share of racial and gender bias and discrimination.

Now that we’ve taken some time to discuss the ways that improv theater has failed at being inclusive, let’s discuss the ways that it has also succeeded in working towards inclusivity. In the next section, I want to highlight some key themes from my interviews with amateur improvisers and consider how improv might be a key tool towards making progress in DEI efforts.

What’s So Special About Improv?

“Instead of feeling the pressure to have a whole scene planned already in my head, I just try to think: I have the next 15 seconds and that’s all I need. It feels really freeing to tell myself ‘you only need to have 15 seconds.’”

²³ Jacobson, A. (2018). *I Might Regret This: Essays, Drawings, Vulnerabilities and Other Stuff*. Grand Central Publishing.

²⁴ The Second City. *Viola Spolin*. The Second City. Retrieved June 6, 2023 from <https://www.secondcity.com/people/other/viola-spolin/>

²⁵ Pasulka, A. (2022, August 30). *Everything You Need to Know About Improv*. Backstage. <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/everything-know-improv-3218/>

Improv is *dynamic*—it is constantly changing (which is why it’s so hard when you first start). The dynamic nature of improv however is what makes it interesting and why it’s a good challenge of mental flexibility. There’s a level of unpredictability in improv—you don’t know exactly what’s going to happen next, you just have to play within the boundaries that are present and learn how to build off of what you’ve been given. While this may seem intimidating at first, it offers an opportunity to allow individuals to feel like they aren’t boxed in—either to a character, situation, scene, etc. There is always room to change something or shift away or towards or ask for help or offer it because nothing is static.

To beginning improvisers, the ever-changing quality of improv might seem scary. We are so used to knowing what to do in certain situations that being put in a scene in which there are no expectations is unfamiliar. The idea of ‘failure’ is intimidating to us and something we try to avoid at all costs. In an improv space however, there are no cut and dry rules and there’s no “correct” way to engage in a scene. You must be willing to be flexible and confront change head-on. If someone brings a different idea, you have to figure out how to work with that and drop the idea you may have had. You are crafting a scene with another person and have no idea how it will turn out, but part of the surprise is when you are able to cleanly execute a scene not in spite of, but because of the unexpected parts of it.

A good improviser doesn’t enter a scene with a fully formed idea of how it’s going to play out. They have to be willing to be adaptable—and a fully formed concept doesn’t allow for adaptability. This is also why improv is not something that one rehearses—instead you practice skills for being a good scene partner like active listening, supporting, taking care of your partner, approaching a scene with curiosity, etc. Through practicing these skills, you are preparing yourself to confront the unexpected and to do so with confidence.

Why Does Every Improviser Talk About Making A Strong Choice?

“I try not to come out with a concept in mind, but just sort of—an energy. That energy will lead into a big character choice—a voice, a physicality. It will direct what my emotional reaction to something will be, and then I let the scene play out from there.”

Because of the fact that improv is ever-changing, the most important thing any improviser can do in the face of uncertainty is to *make a choice* and really commit to it. Making a choice sets the tone for the whole scene and gives your fellow improvisers a foundation to build off of. Waiting too long to make a choice can create an uncomfortable environment that might make you feel stuck—if you aren’t making choices, you aren’t moving the scene forward.

A discussion of strong choices came up in every interview that I conducted. Each participant explained that when they enter a scene, they start with a strong choice— an emotion, a characteristic, a physicality, a want, a status, a situation, a place, a relationship. There are guiding principles to help make these choices, but you truly have almost infinite choices at the beginning of the scene. In what other contexts in someone’s life are they presented with literally *infinite* choices? Now this is not to say that making a strong choice always comes easy. Even to the most seasoned of improvisers, one of the hardest parts of improv is making that first decision. We as human beings seem to love planning, but committing to one choice automatically erases many other choices. Once that decision is made however, it's much easier to continue the scene and build off of it.

How is this relevant to working towards suspending political polarization? Even though a strong choice might imply that we’ve automatically removed a number of other choices from our path forward, improvisers are nevertheless capable of adapting to new and unknown scenarios. By making a strong choice, improvisers are showing that rigidity and flexibility can coexist in a scene and even be mutually beneficial. In one interview, a participant discussed that the ‘yes,

and’ nature of improv taught them that they can engage in conversations about politics with their family from a place of curiosity, but without betraying themselves in the process. This is just one real life example of how strong choices and ‘yes, and’ are two practices that can successfully coexist in spite of how opposing they may seem.

For a person who doesn't practice improv, making a strong choice about a political standing might be a death sentence during a conversation with someone who resides on the opposite end of the political spectrum. How can we meet someone halfway? How can we have a strong choice and still see someone else’s perspective? How do we best navigate the dichotomy between flexibility and rigidity? In improv you make a decision to give someone something to jump off of, but it is not necessarily the defining feature of the scene. You must meet the other person with curiosity rather than judgment and be prepared to let the conversation go in whatever direction it does without deciding what is right or wrong.

So I’ve Made a Choice... What Now?

“There was this one scene during practice that I went against the number one rule of improv, which is to not say no... We were in a store and my scene partner grabbed a can of tomato sauce and said ‘Does this look like blood? I think this is blood.’ And I said ‘No, that’s just tomato sauce.’ And then there was an awkward silence and he said ‘okay,’ and then we just moved on. He probably saw me freeze and watched my eyes get wide and he just had my back. We trusted each other in that moment and he had my back. It’s okay to make mistakes. Sometimes we make mistakes. Sometimes we go against the rules, but we can still roll with it and it’ll still be an okay scene.”

Obviously no conversation about choice can be had without talking about the golden rule of improv—yes, and, but what about the other rules? Yes, and-ing is important, but being a Yes-Man really only gets you so far. This is where psychological safety and communal support comes in.

If you're a fan of watching improv, perhaps you've watched the three-episode Netflix special *Middleditch and Schwartz* (2020)²⁶. If you haven't, let me give you a quick run-down. Thomas Middleditch and Ben Schwartz perform long-form improvisation in front of an audience based upon one life experience from an audience member. They ask numerous questions to get enough details from said audience member, and then create a one-hour scene that is somehow relevant to the audience member's experience. The two of them play a large handful of made-up characters—frequently switching off between characters based on whatever is happening in the scene. Sounds difficult, right? Absolutely.

So why am I telling you about this? Besides this being a not-so-subtle way to recommend the show, I also want to point out that it's a perfect example of improvisers providing one another with *unconditional* support and trust throughout their performance. Not only is it a near impossible feat to improvise a scene, remember somewhere between 8-12 random character's names and defining character traits, and *play* all these characters interchangeably—but to do all that along with simultaneously supporting your scene partner is something that even the best improvisers might struggle with. The rapport that Middleditch and Schwartz have throughout their performances shows the audience just how much the two trust each other. Even when they mess up character's names and have to stop the scene to verbally sort through who each character is—they do so with love, curiosity, and care.

Why is trust so important? By turning to the Dyadic Trust Scale, we can better understand why trust is so significant in cultivating strong relationships. The Dyadic Trust Scale is generally used to understand romantic partnerships, but in this instance I want to apply it to

²⁶ Middleditch, T., Schwartz, B., Irwin, J. (Executive Producers). (2020). *Middleditch and Schwartz*. [TV Series]. Netflix Studios.

other types of close relationships. This scale assumes that trust is important to us because it increases our sense of security within our relationships as well as making us less defensive and lowers our inhibitions.²⁷ Larzelere & Huston found in their research that there is a correlation between trust and love felt for one's partner. The implication being that the more one feels they can trust their partner, the more their love grows for their partner. This also works the opposite way—the less one feels they can trust their partner, the less they love them. Think of the implication this can have in other relationships in our lives—the more we build trust with one another, the more we can feel love or care for these relationships. They also found that there is a correlation between trust and self-disclosure. This supports the notion that the more we trust someone, the more we feel safe to self-disclose.

Even in amateur improv spaces, the same level of care is given towards learning how to support one's scene partners. In my interviews, improvisers spoke about looking towards their scene partners with curiosity and trying to understand something about them in order to validate whatever offer they've given to help move the scene forward. They also discussed a careful consideration of the fact that even though improvisers are playing a character on stage, they are still real people outside of the characters. How one acts and what they say is coming from the real person *and* the character.

During improv classes there are activities that are meant to bring about intentionality in getting to know other improvisers. Teachers create activities with the goal of creating a safe space for mutual self-disclosure in order to learn more about one another. Through this, improv classes turn into a space for community, where strong relationships can flourish outside of the

²⁷ Larzelere, R. E., & Huston, T. L. (1980). The Dyadic Trust Scale: Toward Understanding Interpersonal Trust in Close Relationships.

classroom. This space is one that implies trust and vulnerability—it encourages improvisers to know that their scene partners will always see them (as both the actor and the character they play) and support them.

What is Psychological Safety?

“I feel safe with them... They make me feel really safe when I’m in a room with them.”

Business Improv is grounded in the psychological theory aptly named Psychological Safety. This is used to describe group perceptions of safety to share ideas or actions or take “interpersonal risks” in particular contexts such as in the workplace.²⁸ When a group feels psychological safety it allows them to shift focus away from protecting oneself from harm from other team members or supervisors, and instead allows individuals to work towards group goals, collaboration, and preventing future problems. Psychological safety facilitates how individuals interact within a group and their willingness to share without fear of consequence. That said, positive interpersonal environments do not emerge out of thin air, they must be cultivated. It requires effort from all levels within an organization, which is why this is a key element of DEI efforts that turn to Business Improv to address this issue. If we were to take psychological safety out of the workplace context however and translate it into other contexts, such as in our hobbies, we might then use it to better understand why improv as a hobby is successful at creating a highly collaborative and inclusive environment to those who exist within it.

In every improv space—amateur or professional, psychological safety is something that is being actively sought out. It may not be something that is directly discussed, but there is a level of care and commitment in these spaces put towards creating a welcoming, safe, and vulnerable

²⁸ Edmondson, A. C., & Lei, Z. (2014). Psychological safety: The history, renaissance, and future of an interpersonal construct.

environment that improvisers can both safely fail in and thrive in. Improv encourages less judgment and more curiosity, and many improvisers believe in the idea of “building rather than taking away,” as one participant put it, which we can directly link to the ‘yes, and’ rule.

In my interviews, improvisers also discussed the importance of finding the humanity and empathy in every scene they enter into. In practice scenes in which improvisers are given some sort of real-life worst-case scenario and have to act out how they’d respond to it, they are challenged to think about how one might approach the most difficult circumstances with empathy. Improv gives individuals a chance to explore these circumstances in a low-stakes way. This creates a space in which psychological safety can thrive. Because of the fact that improvisers are taught to enter into a scene with support and care in mind, they can also be comfortable assuming that other improvisers are doing the same thing—that everyone has each other’s best interests in mind as they play. This means that improvisers are safe to make mistakes or challenge themselves without fear of failure or negative consequences.

Imagine how useful this exploration can be in giving individuals the tools to navigate complex and emotionally heightened situations without having to face any real consequences if they fail. Adam Blatner, MD., a psychiatrist, did just that. He used improv and theater techniques in therapeutic practices which he referred to as “psychodrama.”²⁹ These techniques were aimed at helping individuals explore psycho-social problems which they were facing in their lives and allowed them to explore these issues in a low-stakes way.

²⁹ Blatner, A. (2003). Psychodrama. Title of chapter. In C.E. Schaefer (Eds.), *Play therapy with adults* (pp. 34-36). John Wiley and Sons.

If you watched Nathan Fielder's *The Rehearsal*, perhaps this approach to problem-solving or exploring ways of navigating uncertainty in life sounds familiar.³⁰ If not, let me give you a quick synopsis of what Nathan Fielder does for participants in his show. With a huge budget (courtesy of HBO), Fielder provides individuals who have encountered some sort of conflict or uncertainty in their life with the chance to practice or *rehearse* how they might approach this situation. He builds exact replicas of houses, apartments, bars and restaurants and hires actors to play the parts of friends or family members of these individuals in order to allow them to test out different ways of navigating whatever difficulty they are facing. He even gives himself the same opportunity to rehearse how to engage with the individuals who he is working with. In true Nathan Fielder style, the show ends up going off the walls and soon it becomes unclear what is reality or what is rehearsal (so obviously take what you watch with a grain of salt), but it still shows us how rehearsing situations from everyday life might be a useful practice.

How is Support Offered in Improv?

“In improv, everyone has each other’s backs. They notice when you’re stuck in your head about something. When we shifted towards doing long form improv, there were so many instances when someone would notice that I hadn’t stepped out to do a scene and they would subtly gesture, like ‘This one’s you! Go out there!’ Or I’ve even had people grab my hand and pull me out onto the stage and start a scene with them. We’re all very aware of everyone in our group and how we’re all interacting and feeling. We all immediately jump in and take action when we see that someone needs help.”

By nature of the hobby, improv is a place in which everyone takes care of one another—seemingly whether or not they know each other well. In my interviews, I asked each participant to consider both an instance in which they received assistance when they were struggling, and an instance in which they offered assistance when someone else was struggling.

³⁰ Fielder, N., McManus, D., Smith, C., Paige, D., Reinking, C. (Executive Producers). (2022–). *The Rehearsal* [TV Series]. HBO Entertainment.

These two questions showed me just how common it is to struggle with a scene and receive support from others in order to get through it.

Participants discussed the importance of helping scene partners or fellow improvisers when they appear to “no longer be having fun.” This is a common teaching at the theater in which my participants took classes—that improv is meant to (generally) be fun, and if people don’t look like they’re having fun, then there is a collective responsibility to help change this. Some of my participants also discussed that this almost automatic urge to assist others when they are struggling can cause them to ‘edit a scene’ (meaning ending a scene a beginning a brand new scene) before they are actually ready to get up and do something themselves. They have grown so accustomed to ensuring that they are supporting other players before it becomes obvious that other players are struggling on stage, that sometimes they do so without having any ideas to begin a new scene. Once again, this is where collective responsibility comes in. In instances like this, scene partners can help one another if they're lacking energy by making a strong choice that helps to drive the scene forward. Some of my participants referred to offers as ‘gifts’ to one another—that by giving each other an offer, they are giving each other the gift of something new to play with in the scene that helps it move forward.

Even so, it is a fine line that improvisers walk along to be able to contribute without overshadowing. This is where trust comes in—in improv, collaboration means trusting yourself and others—you should not be focused on making yourself look good, but instead making your scene partner look good. One of my participants shared that his favorite way to play in a scene is to “fall on the sword.” Meaning, he jumps out prepared to fail and with no real ideas in his tool kit so that other improvisers have a chance to breathe and think before it’s their turn to go. Why

might he do this? Because improv is a collective effort. You share the credit—there is no one creator, no one person in charge.

So then, how do we create close relationships with others in which we feel trust? By turning to Social Penetration Theory, we can better understand how this occurs. When referring to “social penetration,” I am referring to the process of bonding with others through disclosing things about ourselves.³¹ Carpenter and Greene compare social penetration to the onion model which helps us to visualize the idea through comparing our personal information to the layers of an onion (*hello, Shrek reference*). According to the onion model, the outermost layers of our personal information consist of shallow information that we readily share with anyone, such as our name, perhaps where we’re from, or our pronouns (if it is safe to do so), etc. The middle layers consist of information that is not highly guarded but may not be information that everyone knows about us, while the innermost layers are the most private to us, and are only shared with significant others in our lives. The norm of reciprocity helps guide us in deciding when it’s safe to share our most personal information with others, which is generally when they have also begun to share intimate things about themselves with us.³²

Due to the fact that improv is an inherently vulnerable practice, improvisers are likely to share layers of themselves either purposely in order to build strong relationships with others, or unconsciously simply through the act of playing a certain type of character. My interview question about whether or not participants believe there are specific characters that they are most drawn towards playing ended up being one of the most interesting and enlightening questions that I asked. Even though I received different answers to this question, there seemed to be a sort

³¹ Carpenter, A., & Greene, K. (2015). Social penetration theory.

³² Gouldner, A. W. (1960). The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement.

of general consensus—character choice reflects something about the improviser (whether they are aware of it or not).

So How Do Improvisers Pick What Character They Play—Or Do They?

“I think what’s really enjoyable about those kinds of roles for me is that they’re real. I think I play the weird girl very well because that’s who I am a little bit. I think the audience recognizes that within themselves, so it’s really easy to get an audience on board and be like ‘oh my god! That’s relatable. That’s funny. I’ve totally been there.’”

During my interviews, each improviser had something interesting (and often profound) to share about what influences their own choice in the characters they feel most drawn to play on stage. Many of my participants spoke about a tendency to play characters that feel easy to play. They felt that they subconsciously played characters that can easily move the scene along or give room to further develop either the character or the relationship or heighten the scene. Some participants also spoke about their character choice reflecting something about where they are at in this moment in their life—how choices for characters look different now to them than they used to.

Participants also discussed how choices about the way their bodies exist on stage work as a driving factor in determining what type of character they may play. That if they step onto the stage with a nervous energy in their bodies, perhaps they might play a nervous or awkward character, or if they enter the stage with a specific way of walking or carrying their bodies that it will determine so much about their character choice. One participant who has years of experience in improv and theater discussed that for him, everything is energy-dependent. His energy helps decide how he engages in a scene. Some days he may enter a scene with lots of energy, feeling ready for whatever is thrown at him, but other days he needs more support from his fellow improvisers in driving the scene forward. This participant explained that improv

provides him with an opportunity to flex his creative muscles and challenge himself in new and different ways. The characters he plays reflect this—either he plays characters that he feels are easy to play (maybe on low-energy days), or he steps outside of the box and tries out different things that may not come as easily for him. Improv naturally provides a safe and supportive environment to test out these new characters without the fear of failure lurking around the corner.

All of this said, there is no one way for improvisers to figure out what character they are playing in a scene. It's not something that always comes about through embodiment or energy alone. Other participants discussed that improv provides them with the opportunity to play dramatic characters that they cannot play in real life. In one instance, a female participant spoke about being drawn towards playing the stereotypical “valley girl.” This participant explained that because of preconceived notions about how one should act in the workplace she feels as though she cannot explore this side of herself in a safe way in her daily life without being met with judgment from others. In improv however, she has the space to explore this identity safely and really lean into it and find enjoyment in putting on a new identity that she can later take off. While this is true, some female participants also explained that gender roles in real life can influence the types of characters they play in their scene, especially because of how many men are in their improv troupe. They discussed that this can create a tendency for female participants to fall into specific types of characters.

While we may see dynamics from our real lives depicted in improv scenes, improvisers also have the opportunity to step outside of these dynamics and try new things. Some participants spoke about feeling unafraid to be the “weird” character in their scenes because the weird character is relatable. From a young age, the average person was likely taught that being weird wasn't necessarily a good or desirable thing, but in improv we're given the opportunity to

explore the sides of ourselves that we might hide from others for fear of judgment. The audience might even feel they can relate to the weird character or situation in some way because perhaps they've been there themselves or experienced something similar.

Above all, in my interviews it became eminently clear that an improviser's personal journey influences how they engage in improv and if they feel comfortable playing a certain character or being the first person to step out on stage to start a scene. In improv the character and actor are connected always—while you may be playing a character, there are certain elements of yourself that always come through, whether or not this is intentional.

Again, how is this relevant to navigating the murky waters of political polarization in our country? Improv offers us a unique opportunity to step into roles and identities that we may otherwise never have the opportunity to think critically about. If we regularly engage in the practice of stepping into someone else's shoes it can help us flex our empathetic muscles towards others who we feel we don't understand or have anything in common with. If we can step into their shoes—even just for a moment, we can learn about them and perhaps feel like there is less pressure to drive the conversation in a specific direction. We can practice meeting people where they're at and approaching them with curiosity rather than judgment. We can save ourselves the emotional and mental energy of trying to change people, and instead truly see them as they are—and hopefully we can learn how to accept that and work with it.

Why is Belonging So Important?

“Improv is such a vulnerable practice. You get to really know your troupe and watch everyone grow from a place of starting something together. It's a beautiful thing to be with people through their life journeys. But on stage you know, I think there's something about failing together that just makes you closer.”

Another common theme I found is that there's safety in numbers on stage. Sometimes just being present on stage is enough—even if one isn't actively adding much to the scene, they are still supporting their team mates just by being present. This is one of the reasons why cultivating a sense of belonging is so crucial in improv. It's a team effort, and all team members are contributing at all times—even if that contribution is only being an additional body on stage.

Baumeister and Leary's research on the need to belong, and the implications of that need in how we navigate life and relationships, is a critical piece of research to help understand fundamental human motivations.³³ This research is based on the Belongingness Hypothesis which I discussed earlier. We will maintain this assumption that as humans we have a basic need to belong which can impact our well being and plays a key role in influencing our motivations and how we interact with others.

The strong sense of community in improv spaces is invaluable at helping ease feelings of embarrassment or judgment in scenes. What might normally be "embarrassing" in another context is met without judgment in an improv class—in fact, weird and out of the box thinking is highly encouraged because it gives other improvisers more to work with. During a scene, the group engagement works to help mitigate the feelings of embarrassment that one might otherwise feel. During an interview one participant spoke about how important trust is in creating a safe environment in which she doesn't have to worry about feeling embarrassed. She explained that trust is “what makes improv so unique and really builds the dynamic when you're on stage.” She stated that when improvising, even if you're playing a character, it's still “...you.

³³ Baumeister, R.F., & Leary, M.R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>

It's your brain—that everything you're saying is coming from you, so you need to feel comfortable. And you need to know that the people on stage like you—weird brain and all.”

As we've already covered, improv allows one to be outlandish or silly in ways that are unacceptable in other contexts. It creates the rules that weird is good and audience members abide by this. Consider how spectators in other contexts would respond differently to seeing people create outrageous scenes that in improv are completely acceptable. Even with its out-of-this-world content, improv encourages real reactions from audience members and asks them for a certain amount of trust to allow improvisers to guide the audience through their scenes.

What About Self-Esteem?

“I think that on a small scale my self-esteem and confidence have increased just in performances themselves. I've had instructors and teammates tell me recently that they've seen my confidence grow, which is a really nice thing to hear. It's always nice to hear that you're actually improving in something. But I think, just like in life in general, so much of what improv requires—being honest and real and having really real reactions is important. I'm somebody who's a chronic overthinker all the time, and I feel like improv has really allowed me in my day-to-day life to just not worry about whether what I'm about to say is something that should be said or if it's the right thing to say. I can just say what I have to say and not make myself small or more digestible to people. I can be big and weird and it's cool and fun. I'm able to explore that so much more in my life because of the comfort that I have found doing that in improv.”

Another critically important theme that came up in each of my interviews was the impact that taking improv classes and being a part of an improv troupe had on participants' self-esteem. Many participants spoke about how much taking classes affected their confidence in regards to their conversational skills as well as their ability to be personable. They also spoke about how much they felt that improv helped them step out of their shell and feel more comfortable being themselves in front of other people.

One of the most interesting comments a participant made was that they felt as though improv offers them an opportunity to improve their life on some level because it provides them with a space to lean into the parts of themselves that they may be feeling disconnected from. Perhaps it offers them an opportunity to better understand the aspects of their identity that might be looked down upon or that they don't like. Several participants also mentioned that they chose to begin improv (either for the first time, or once again) during a point in their lives when they felt they were struggling, or transitioning, or generally just felt like they wanted to find some community. Improv provided something novel and fun, but also gave a chance to stretch their creative muscles and make some new friendships in the process, all while offering them an opportunity to learn more about themselves.

So, how is the need to belong relevant to self-esteem? By turning to Sociometer theory, we can gain some insights into this. Sociometer theory suggests that people don't aim to maintain their self-esteem, instead they work to "increase their relational value and social acceptance" and use self-esteem as a way to gauge their success.³⁴ According to this theory, self-esteem is not necessarily something that one focuses on, it is instead, certain aspects of personhood (like our relationships) which are our primary focus because they influence how we feel about ourselves.³⁵ I wanted to take a moment to discuss this theory because it has clear intersections with our need to belong. Several of my participants discussed how trust and community were key features in feeling like you are doing well during a class. If you trust the people around you and feel safe around them, you feel less afraid to be your authentic self and to show the weird parts of yourself that others might not get to see. The relationships one gains in

³⁴ Leary, M.R. (2005). Sociometer theory and the pursuit of relational value: Getting to the root of self-esteem. (p. 75).

³⁵ Leary, M.R. (2005). Sociometer theory and the pursuit of relational value: Getting to the root of self-esteem.

improv can then help to positively influence one's perceptions of their social value and acceptance.

Some participants also discussed that when they do well at improv, the good feeling they get is something that they can carry with them for a little while. That even though improv is *just* a hobby, it is something with real noticeable impacts to their emotional wellbeing and self-esteem. That's not to say that everyone always does great at improv and always feels good about every scene or performance they do. Improv, just like any other hobby or sport comes with cycles of being good and bad, but because of the nature of the hobby, it doesn't actually matter if you're good or bad. You are always learning and trying new things, even if sometimes what you try might flop. Most importantly, you're doing it with people you trust and care about, who also trust and care about you.

So, What Am I Supposed To Do With All of This Information About Improv?

"I think that it's important to keep doing the things that you really like. And it doesn't really matter at what level. It's just like the exercise, the practice of doing it—like if it's something that is enjoyable to you, it's really an important thing to keep doing."

All of the information I've just given you is not in the hopes that we will someday soon find peace as a country, or that we'll magically be able to convince individuals who are committed to misunderstanding us to see our perspective. No—the hope for this project is to show how important improv is in helping us navigate the myriad of (inevitable) difficult conversations that we are sure to encounter with friends, coworkers, or loved ones. My hope is to show that we as individuals should be more thoughtful about the hobbies we engage in, and that making time in our busy schedules to do something simply for *fun* is just as important as all of our other priorities. Our hobbies offer us an opportunity to find community, boost our self-esteem,

navigate difficult times or transitions in our lives, and most of all—learn something about ourselves.

Improv in particular provides us with a chance to step outside of our own identities and exist in someone else's shoes for a while. Think about how useful this practice is in strengthening our empathetic muscles and practicing curiosity rather than judgment. While this won't solve the countless issues our country is facing, it might give us a chance to learn how to be better to one another—how to be more kind, caring, and considerate. As one participant put it: improv “teaches you a little more about how to love the people around you. How to come into rooms and conversations heart-forward, with eyes of love.”

So here's the last question I pose for you: why on earth, have I asked you so many questions throughout this paper? Because I want you to see—asking questions leads us to interesting answers. Asking questions allows us to create the space for new interests and new ways of understanding the world around us. The practice of asking questions teaches us to be curious—perhaps rather than being judgmental. So, if you take anything away from this (even if you know that improv isn't the hobby for you), my hope is that you will create more space for fun in your life because as we've learned, it has actual impacts to our wellbeing! I also hope that as you move forward in your life, you find yourself entering spaces with curiosity rather than judgment, recognizing that we all are responsible for creating the environments we inhabit, and that really, truly mistakes aren't the end of the world—they're an opportunity to learn and grow.

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