THE ART OF IMPROVISATION FOR SOCIAL WORK RELATING:

A NEW APPRECIATION OF INTERDEPENDENCE AND CONTROL

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Lay Abstract

This thesis involves efforts to theorize moments of relating – of being with others – in improvisation.

A group of hospital social workers and a group of PhD social work research students participated in the study. The participants took part in improvisational workshops designed specifically for the study, as well as one-on-one and group interviews.

This thesis explores what was created between research participants in improvisational workshops: the response-ability to and for others; an experience of grappling with the desire for control; and an embodied apprehension of interdependence.

The study demonstrates an embodied and uncomfortable experience of the dominance of individualism in our relating and provides an analysis of engagement in improvisation as an alternative to a framework of independence in social work. The study contributes potential for arts-informed research, teaching, and practice, as well as social work pedagogy as it demonstrates ways in which the art of improvisation can allow us to take up the transformative promises of social constructionism in social work relating.

Abstract

There is very little theoretical literature about theatrical improvisation as it connects to ideas and practices of relating and specifically to ideas and practices of social work relating. This thesis involves efforts to theorize moments of relating – of being with others – in improvisation.

A group of hospital social workers and a group of PhD social work research students participated in the study. The participants took part in improvisational workshops designed specifically for the study, as well as one-on-one and group interviews.

This thesis explores what was created between research participants in improvisational workshops: the response-ability to and for others; an experience of grappling with the desire for control; and an embodied apprehension of interdependence. The study demonstrates an embodied and uncomfortable experience of the dominance of individualism in our relating.

The study also demonstrates ways in which the art of theatrical improvisation can allow us to take up the transformative promises of social constructionism in social work relating. The thesis aims to make living space for central social constructionist concepts such as mutual

constitution and interdependence – to explore and consider what happens when we fully recognize and carry these out in our practices of relating. Providing a different way into these central social constructionist concepts, this study contributes to arts-informed research, teaching and practice. More specifically, the research shows how the art of improvisation can provide transformative possibilities for social work pedagogy and the social work classroom.

Acknowledgements

This journey has been long, challenging, and filled with different kinds of incredible support. I will attempt here to articulate some of my gratitude, knowing that these conversations do not end on the page.

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It is difficult to know where to begin in thanking my supervisor, Chris Sinding. I could happily write forever about Chris, her role in my thesis and, her qualities as a person. Chris helped me shape and complete my work while remaining in tune with the things that were important to me about this work. This was not an easy task as those things were often slippery and inarticulate-able. Chris came to our relationship with a willingness to converse intensely with me— with the presence and attentiveness that the ideas in my work asked for. In finding ways to be flexible and creative and to continuously create space for me and my work within the school, Chris helped me build the confidence that I needed in order to remain in the program, complete my thesis, and grow in my practice. As a kind, curious, and, interesting person, Chris is also

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Introduction

Topic and Focus

This thesis is about the art of improvisation and the *active and living, complex, ephemeral, human experience that is relating*; it is an exploration of **what happens when** people engage in improvisation, specifically in improvisational theatre techniques, **what goes on within this process**, and how those 'goings on' connect to and activate aspects of relating that are meaningful and have important implications for social work. These aspects of relating include roles, acceptance, listening, joining in, control, risk, trust, exposure, and support.

The research is not framed as an 'impact of' study—i.e., looking at what happened in the improv exercises and then making links to social work relating in the 'real world' (weeks or months later). Rather, it is the meaning *within* the moments of being with others in the improv and the implications of *that* space—what is being created there, the forms of relating, and especially the response-ability to and for others that is activated in the real time art of improvisation—that I am trying to get at and articulate in this thesis.

The temporal aspect of this project is integral to exploring participants'
experiences with, for example, different yet simultaneous happenings,
pace of change and transition in activities, and requirements of in-the-
moment presence. It is also integral to the context of the writing of the
thesis: the ongoing building, constitution, and disassembly of both ideas
and my experiences as a researcher/improviser, finding ways to work with
words that are happening (vs. already finished) and that can somehow
speak to the ongoing constitution of the present. The significance of time-
orientation has been and continues to be a unique challenge to
demonstrate and articulate in the research.

Vision, Motivation, and Location in the Wider World of Social Work

The vision for this research springs from and is generated by the art of
improvisation itself, emerging from the potential that improv holds for
relating and the ways in which this art form bumps up against and
challenges ideas within social work about how relating and relationships
happen.

My work also draws from the writings of social work scholars who critique
some of the key ideas about relating in social work as static and

essentialist, i.e., relating as a set of skills that can be learned, achieved, and replicated (Todd, 2012).

Through its orientation to time, improv foregrounds movement and thus renders visible the lack of movement and capacity to shift that characterize some social work understandings of relating. Furthermore, the time orientation helps us consider how this deficit shapes what we bring to and how we understand our practice as social workers. Distinct from but in tandem with the temporal orientation of improvisation, the art form calls for a reimagining of (our notions of) response; by cultivating trust in our capacity to respond from an intentional stance of unknowing (Wehbi 2015), the art form makes space for and constitutes responsiveness to that which is being created in a moment. This bumps up against more scripted and/or habitual responses that shape our understandings and practice in social work.

Building upon a critique of the technocratization of relating in social work (Moffatt, 2001), this thesis draws attention to what it is to take seriously the claims of social constructionism for social work relating. What happens when we allow for, make space for, and are conscious of, what it is to *create one another*? What happens when we carry out, in practice, the challenge that social constructionism as theory offers to the notion of an

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individual self (Burr, 1995) through the process of rendering visible the ways in which, through our social interactions, we shape one another (Burr,1995; Witkin, 2012; Gergen, 2009)? What does this mean to how we know the world and each other and to how we *do relating*? Within these activated claims lies the vision, comprehension, and possibility of an alternative approach to relating.

The research is motivated by a goal of social transformation through our ways of being together. It questions how we come to know one another in relationship and how that process (of coming to know) is shaped and shapes our being with others. This attention to knowledge-creating facilitates *a pushing up against* our western, linear notions of relationship, providing ways of *getting at* a practice of relating that is moving, continuously created and creating, and all connected.

As an improviser/researcher, I am also motivated by the joy of the practice. An improvisational way of knowing and being in the world has transformed how I understand, how I look, and how I move through social interactions. I have a great appreciation for the role of improv in my life and in the lives of those around me. This practice emphatically cultivates and nurtures a "stance of unknowing and uncertainty" (Wehbi, 2015, p.51), and I treasure the encouragement in taking this stance.

I am motivated by my experiential understanding—an improvisational comprehension of interdependence that I have seen disrupt habits of relating (both my habits and the habits of those around me), especially in regards to habits that have meaningful implications for power dynamics that I understand as informing social work relationships.

I have experienced improv as profoundly challenging to my modernist understandings of individuality, giving me an opportunity to exist in a space outside of my own independence and to feel how different that is from the ways in which I have been (and continue to be) socialized/trained to exist.

Whereas social work values like collaboration previously shaped my *intellectual grasp* of a (certain) fight with individualism, improv provides me with continuous access to 'what becomes possible when,' or regarding interdependent relational understandings, ways of seeing, and habits. For instance , improv allows for an exploration of the shape of risk/how risk can change shape, the importance of being trustworthy, the capacity to listen and the quality of listening, and presence and readiness as presence. Further, improv provides a space to experience these things outside of a moral obligation to do so, i.e., outside of being a *good* person or a *good* social worker.

I have found that this profound disruption of individuality has major implications for my ways of relating, and specifically for social work relating, including the disruption of core ideas like 'the client as the expert of their own life.' I am motivated to be part of bringing this disruption, a different way of both being and looking, into the world and specifically into social work practice, research, and education. I am contributing to the movement among many educators to introduce more experiential and embodied ways of knowing and learning in social work classrooms.

Through this research process, I have realized that to *seriously* take up interdependence is indeed a radical undertaking; it is a multifaceted, nuanced, practice as opposed to a value, skill or ideology. This undertaking is particularly radical and challenging within academia—a place that is often immersed in and lead by static knowledge and individualism.

Understanding Theatrical Improvisation

Improv Theatre is an unscripted form of theatre. This means that improvisers begin with no prepared materials. An improv audience watches this process take place. The ability/capacity to develop scenes, characters, and stories in the moment and in relation to others in the scene involves certain premises and process. For the purposes of this

thesis, I focus on the yes, contribution/participation, awareness, and listening.

The yes - This means that we accept, acknowledge, and move from the reality that ourselves or a scene partner has created—the contribution that has been made. An example I use to describe 'the yes' involves a scene partner being my very good friend (in a scene) and threatening to jump out the window. Saying yes to the relationship that we have developed and of which the audience has knowledge means that I do not want my scene partner to jump or get hurt. In saying a verbal or physical 'no' to her jumping out the window, I am saying 'yes' to the reality she is creating.

Contribution/participation – This is part 2 of 'the yes,' as it is the action or manifestation of the acceptance**.** Contribution/participation involves stepping into the playing space, either as a first move or in joining your scene mate(s) in an 'already happening' scene and being 'available' to join in at any moment.

Awareness – This entails awareness of yourself and your scene mates , what are they doing, what has been said, how you are standing, how you enter, who is looking at whom and how, etc.

Listening – What is my scene partner saying? How are they saying it? Can I listen to the body? How can I listen to things that are not being said?

In Appendix 1, I give a step-by-step explanation of several of the improvisational exercises that I used in the research (workshops – see below). These exercises included: Thank you statues, Yes move, The Drawing exercise, and One word at a time story. The Results chapters also discuss the ways in which the exercises draw forward both the art form's processes (the yes, participation) and the relational gestures specific to each group of participants (see The Research Approach for an explanation of relational gestures).

Throughout the Results chapters I have provide improvisational understandings, orientations, and definitions of central concepts. The content of these sections is developed out of my own experience as an improviser and through my discussions with other improvisers. I have included these with the hopes of helping the reader more fully orient themselves to the art of improvisation and as a way of including my voice as an artist alongside my voice as a researcher.

The Research Approach

The research involved facilitated workshops that included theatrical improvisation techniques. The exercises used were created to engage people in the techniques that make improvisation work – the emphasis was neither on performance nor on becoming an improviser, but rather on

engaging in the art of improvisation, i.e., engaging in the stuff that needs to happen in order to improvise and in the activities that bring us into this 'stuff'.

The workshops were also developed around key 'relational gestures' — communicative/social behaviours that are clear or real to people while they are with others/in interaction with others. These were specific to the two separate groups of participants: a group of hospital social workers and a group of PhD social work students. The workshops were designed to bring forward the relational gestures relevant to each group at the time we worked together. I outline the relational gestures and the process of figuring out what these were in the Methods chapter.

Another part of the research process involved one-to-one interviews/discussions between myself and participants and a group discussion/focus group in which participants reflected on what had happened in the workshops. I describe the components of this process in greater detail in the methods section.

In the Results chapters, I draw in and discuss improvisational artistic practices as a way to more deeply understand participants' experiences and insights gained through the exercises. Highlighting the defining characteristics of improv throughout helps clarify how and why these

exercises 'work' as catalysts for deepening and complicating (ideas about) relating in social work.

This thesis is also informed by my continued praxis – the work that I do in this world, paying attention to how this shapes my research, how this continues to be a part of how I understand my research in a real and meaningful way. This work has included workshops with interdisciplinary students, social work faculty, and an improvisation theatre company's teaching faculty (who are also its performers).

Thesis Structure: Triangle of Social Constructionism, Improv, and Relating

The **conceptual framework** involves an exploration of social constructionism and its promise in the social world. The conceptual framework provides a way of discussing mutual constitution, intersubjectivity and social constructionism—concepts and theories that inform and provide ways into imagining relating differently.

The conceptual framework also provides an introduction to the things that you need to have in order for improv to happen, and it explains how engaging with these things provides a different way into relating. This, in turn, allows us a deepened, moving, and different comprehension of social constructionism in social work relating.

The conceptual framework starts from the well-accepted assertion that in our interactions, human beings affect and shape one another. Social constructionism takes this further. The three ideas I take from social constructionism are that in engaging with one another we are *exposed*; that in interacting we *create* one another; and that this process of creation is *continuous.* I further discuss the ways in which these key ideas can help us understand improv as a practice that makes our ongoing createdness-by-interactions, visible. The idea that we are created by interaction, and that improv as a practice requires (or allows) us to understand this in an embodied way, is central to this thesis.

There are two Results chapters in this thesis. These chapters begin with descriptions of the improv exercises used and then speak to the experiences of participants with the exercises.

In the **discussion,** I explore improv as a practice and how improv practice is tied to the theory of social construction, articulating the slippery and complex idea that the artistic lens of improv *is* social construction. I also reflect on my role as an artist researcher and how this informed and shaped this project.

I discuss the reasons for the choice of specific improv exercises in the workshop, delving into the 'what is it about improv', that I aim to activate

and bring forward. Further, I explain where these intentions went and how they shifted and grew as participants took up the exercises and engaged in knowledge creation through relating.

I also discuss where this work can fit in the world of social work education and its implications for social work practice and pedagogy.

All of the moving parts of the research, from the questions, to the method, to the 'data generation,' are constituted through and shaped by the art of improvisation itself. I hope that my commitment and openness to this process are visible, comprehensible, and accessible to you, the reader.

A Note About Writing Style Choices

While writing, there were times when I realized that the one word that I had used to describe something, had grounded or landed (my articulation of) someone's experience, and I was uncomfortable providing *only* one word to do that. As this is not a new experience for writers, I use the slash (/) as a writing tool. However, my supervisor brought my attention to the fact that my specific and frequent use of this tool might be unfamiliar or distracting to readers, and might merit explanation.

Here are examples from the Control chapter: "Consciously engaging in the verbal expression of naming things emphasized/made visible/brought attention to the role that the verbal plays in our own relational processes/journeys/aspirations." In this passage I offer a few words to describe one thing as a way of offering choices to the reader, as a way of articulating different participants' myriad of experiences, and to articulate the possibility of more than one meaning or description being true for someone (reader, writer, or participant) at the same time. Being or meaning more than one thing at one time has particular relevance to my work as a time-oriented concept in relating that came forward within the improv exercises.

As someone whose work and life are very much shaped by social constructionism, I am continuously thinking about the ways in which language shapes our realities. In writing, this is of course particularly salient. My use of the slash throughout the thesis helps me reflect my social constructionist orientation to both the world and the work.

Conceptual Framework

Interweaving – Social Constructionism, Intersubjectivity, Address, and Recognition

In her introductory text, Burr (1995) describes the ways in which the theory of social construction understands the individual. Burr speaks to social construction's challenges to the traditional (psychological) approach to the concept of personality. Traditional approaches define personality as something that is within each person and that has developed from within. In contrast, social constructionist framings of personality assert that "…each version of 'you' is a product of your relationships with others. Each 'you' is constructed, socially, out of the social encounters that make up your relationships" (Burr, 1995, p. 27-28). This social or relational understanding of the individual, as both socially constructed and plural, is a salient piece of social work analysis and of the analysis of social work relating; it is a central place to begin an exploration of the foundational concepts and artistic practices that inform this thesis.

Building on this social constructionist analysis, we find many social work writers (Hall, 2012; Gergen, 2009; Miehls & Moffatt, 2000; Smith, 1997; Witkin, 2012) speaking to the implications of a social construction of people. These writers ask what a social construction of people means for

social work practice and identity, what its implications are for social

responsibility, where this fits in terms of recognition and of the Other, and

its implications for power, oppression, and social transformation. This

thesis revolves around the relevance of improv for creating embodied

insight and furthering dialogue about the promise of social constructionism

for social work relating.

The literature on social constructionism takes us beyond a conventional

focus on the individual, calling for a 'rethinking of the singular' as Butler

(2001) suggests. In her discussion of relationship with the Other, Butler

refers to Cavarero's (2000) understanding of self that only exists in relation

to the Other:

> "I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I
> have lost the conditions of address, if I have no "you" to
> address, then I have lost "myself". In her (Cavarero's)
> view…one can only reference an "I" in relation to a "you":
> without the "you", my own story becomes impossible" (p.24).

Cavarero shows us/explores a need for the Other in one's own existence,

i.e., in order for the narrative of my existence to happen, I have a need for

you. This can be understood on a philosophical or existential level.

However, both Cavarero and Butler refer to the concept of inevitable

exposure to the Other as inherent to our embodied lives (as humans). In

the social lives we live in our own bodies; through a social constructionist

analysis, there is no possibility of remaining individual or remaining only within ourselves. As Butler states "…there is no staying inside" (p.23). Cavarero and Butler's discussions of self and the Other include both the existential and the corporeal.

In this thesis, we come to see how these key themes and concepts of social constructionism—and their implications for relating in the social world—are both revealed and confirmed in improv practice. In a social constructionist analysis, the personality and/or self does not come from within as a stable enduring entity, but is rather always created and emerging through social existence and embodied interactions in the world (Burr, 1995). Improv as a practice makes our created-ness through interaction visible in the way that it calls for certain kinds of interdependence. The realities (worlds, identities, geographies) that continuously develop and shift in this art form are built through the ways in which participants interact and rely on one another.

In building on this interactional understanding of self, we then move on to consider the social relation to the Other (existence and interactions) not as a choice, but as an inevitable exposure, "I am compelled and comported outside myself" (Butler, p23). In improv, when we choose to engage in an exercise, we commit to a process of exposure/opening to others and to

what comes next. We choose to enter into a process that, if it is going to work, requires and generates exposure. Once we've committed, improv makes the inevitable exposure of daily life vivid, visible, and visceral.

We can begin to see the frame through which improv helps to make visible the foundational, conceptual aspects of social constructionism of self/other/relating in social work. Within this frame, the research shows improv's potential to help us understand and articulate the promises of social construction in social work.

At the same time, the theoretical orientation of social construction helps to articulate the relating that is going on in improvisation in ways that could be generative for social work. The participants in my research bring insights about relating to light; they draw forward and help us to comprehend some of the social construction concepts in social work relating, for example, as in Gergen's (2009) theory of relational being.

In his analysis of social construction, Gergen (2009) claims that our existence as people is fully constituted through our relationships. In his theory of relational being, Gergen contends that nothing that we think, do, feel, or communicate is done independently; it is *always and continuously* done in relation to others.

'Always and continuously' are italicized here to emphasize an ongoing thread of time throughout processes of social construction. In this emphasis, I attempt to create an understanding or perception of the movement of relational practices. The ongoing-ness of Gergen's theory of relational being is an active and fluid characterization of what it is to be *with,* what it is to relate. This thread of time is also essential to understanding how improv works and what it can reveal for us about relating. I address this in detail in the discussion section of this thesis.

Gergen argues that from this theoretical (and practical) understanding of relational being, we are responsible to and for others as much as to ourselves. We are never separate from one another, and in bringing our attention to this inseparability we can allow for more compassion to others and come to more highly value others. Gergen contends that to see us as all interconnected and constantly creating one another leaves less (or no) room for any sort of violence towards ourselves and one another, including comparison, competition, and oppression.

Bringing Intersubjectivity to the Discussion

In applying the framework of social construction to social work relating, we bring our attention to what happens when we understand social workers and service users as creating one another. In this way, neither social workers nor service users are in static positions of giving or receiving help/support. Bringing intersubjectivity to this discussion helps us explore such an understanding (in which we create one another), as it implies a more active, nuanced, mutually responsible, and vulnerable stance.

Phillips and Bellinger (2010) discuss their use of photographic images as a pedagogical tool. In a social work education context, Phillips and Bellinger used this tool to invoke understandings of vulnerability and difference and to explore the social constitution of our lived realities. The writers contend that as we bring our attention (and theoretical lens) to our own vulnerability and difference, we make visible our role in the *inter* of intersubjectivity, humanizing relationships between service users and social workers. They state, "…both service users and social workers are humanized and can therefore both be understood and encouraged to be active subjects" (P.102).

In understanding ourselves as active subjects and engaging us in our own

humanity, this perspective challenges and surpasses traditional ideas of

relating where these two positions, social worker and service user, remain

separate, playing limited roles and possessing distinct (and unchanging)

characteristics. This intersubjective perspective has implications for

disrupting and challenging power within social work relationships.

Butler's Concepts of Recognition and Address

In an embrace of the analysis of a socially constructed self, another door

opens to us – it is the opportunity to resist a final knowing of the Other

through openness in address (Butler, 2001). If we are in a process of

continuous constitution of one another, we never really claim to 'know' the

Other. This has implications for power, particularly in social work where

claiming expertise and static knowledge of the Other has historically

haunted the profession, creating oppressive us/them dichotomies between

social workers and service users.

In the context of this research, I consider Butler's (2001) version of

'address' as a particular way of relating—a quality of interaction between

people. The participants' experiences and reflections with improv will help

us to comprehend such a way of relating.

I take this concept of open address from Butler's (2001) work "Giving an

account of oneself."

> "As we ask to know the Other, or ask that the Other say,
> finally, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an
> answer that will ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction,
> and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we
> let the Other live, since life might be understood as precisely
> that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it… So
> if there is, in the question, a desire for recognition, this will be
> a desire which is under an obligation to keep itself alive as
> desire, and not to resolve itself through satisfaction. "Oh,
> now I know who you are": at this moment, I cease to address
> you, or to be addressed by you". (p.28)

In this passage, the endurance of remaining open[1] is essential to how we

are *with* the Other. Butler (2001) suggests that as soon as we claim a

static knowledge of who another person is, we not only change the

connection between us—the address—but we end it. Butler also includes

that the problem is not in the asking, but rather in the expectation of

response; that is, if I ask, Who are you?, and continue to ask the question

without any expectation of a full or final answer, then I am relating in a

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[1] The endurance of remaining open is another process that involves a
consideration of time – I want to bring attention to the continuous and in
motion aspect of remaining open; that what I am referencing/reviewing
here, about what becomes possible while remaining open [conversation
about the Other…], is so much about the way that remaining endures in
time/in a time context.

different way than if, in my asking, I expect a final representation of the Other's self.

We can see here the way in which the social constructionist analysis of self allows for Butler's fluid or moving understanding of how we consider/recognize/know the Other, and further, how we relate to the Other.

Butler's (2001) phrase 'desire to keep itself alive as desire,' has multiple salient implications for this conceptual framework. In one way, as has been discussed, it is salient in the context of a continuous constitution of one another—a process that becomes visible through the improvisational exercises included in this research. In these improv exercises, as a person joins in, comes into the playing space, there is a shift. Participants experience ongoing joining in and shifting of the reality they are creating. This necessitates the asking "What is happening now?" and "Who are you now?" without an expectation of a finished response, an answer that is going to end there.

There is also as a bigger picture that comes with the work of this research and with improv as a way of understanding or improv as theory of a particular kind of recognition: recognition that 'keeps desire alive as desire.' In this bigger picture there is a quest for generative knowledge

that does not satisfy an interventional need getting us from a to b to c (as a finished accomplishment). The quest for generative knowledge does not move us from problem to intervention to predefined outcome, but rather brings us into an ongoing development of understanding, i.e., when a and b interact they both change shape, necessitating new ways of being in and understanding the world.

Locating Improv Within These Concepts/Understandings/Ways of Thinking

Improv points us to a way of relating, a quality of interaction that is both immersed in and provided by the enduring necessity of remaining open to the other and to the situation (Butler, 2001).' In this way, Butler's 'address' helps us understand and conceptualize participants' experiences in this study.

My study helps to make visible a way of comprehending interdependence through improvisational experiences with joining in, swinging roles, trust, risk, unknowing and relinquishing control. In addition, engaging with the requirements of improv creates such experiences in a real time, ongoing process; the time-orientation and continuousness of this process is made visible and visceral.

'Keeping desire alive' is a relational quality in this study. It requires space for the unknown and that we release our grasp on the finished outcome. These requirements of improvisation bump up against the mastery and independent competence of current professional social work expectations (Rossiter, 2001; Todd, 2012).

In order to comprehend the requirements of improvisational understandings of interdependence in real time, we must simultaneously engage with unknowing and rely on one another within that engagement. Within the literature on social constructionism, and where social constructionism and social work come together, there are movements towards embracing exactly these kinds of requirements.

What's to Come

The insights from participants, their experiences of improv and relating will help us comprehend what it is to take up the promises of social construction in social work, but to do this seriously. Providing a different apprehension of these promises, the improv exercises allow the participants to see the promises as something other than claims or having potential—to see and experience them as real, moving, and holding constitutive meaning.

Methods

Study Design, Participants, and Recruitment

Participants in this study took part in improv workshops that I designed, facilitated, and debriefed. Following the workshops, I explored their experiences of and reflections on the improv exercises in a range of ways. Two groups of people participated: a group of social work PhD students and a group of hospital social workers.

The four graduate students who took part in my study participated in three improv workshops: two as part of graduate research courses and one specific to my study. Each participant was also invited to journal about their experience of the workshop, and each participated in two individual interviews: one following the course-based improv workshops and one following the workshop I created for them as part of my dissertation study. Four graduate students completed interviews after workshop #2 and those four graduate students went on to participate in workshop #3 and the second set of interviews.

The five social workers who took part in my study participated in one improv workshop created for them as part of my study. Each participant

was invited to journal about their experience of the workshop, and each participated in a focus group following this workshop.

Since I facilitated the workshops, I realize that honest accounts of participant limitations are more difficult to achieve. Throughout the workshops and interviews, I consistently constructed aversion to the exercise as being helpful to my study. I invited participants to bring their attention to/reflect on their own experiences of the exercises and to explore their own (potential) discomfort and/or aversion to the exercises. This consideration and response also applied to the group of social workers.

Below I describe the workshops involved; how they were created, the improv skills I intended to draw forward as a facilitator, and the stepwise process of the workshops. I then describe in detail the study methods specific to each group and their associated ethical complexities.

What the Improv Workshops Involved

I designed the improv workshops specifically for each group. The first step in designing the workshops was discovering which 'relational gestures' the participants found relevant and wanted to address in their processes of relating. Relational gestures are communicative/social behaviours that are clear or real to people while they are with others/in interaction with others. I include details of the relational gestures chosen by each group, below. The identification of relational gestures happened in a scheduled meeting between myself and either the group of participants or their designated leaders/representatives. These meetings were important to my goal of making the workshop relevant for participants and to therefore have the potential to impact their understandings of relational processes; I needed to engage with their understandings. In short, I needed to know where participants were at in order to know what I intended to impact. I then created a workshop plan using improv exercises that I believed would most effectively draw forward the relational gestures relevant to each group.

I designed the workshops in ways that would engage participants with improvisation, with the in-the-moment relating that happens within this art-form. At the same time, the aim of the workshops was to bring to the fore the relational gestures that interested participants. I used exercises that

are often used to train improvisers—to teach them how to gain the skills that let improvisation happen. For the purposes of this thesis, I focus on the improvisational skills of the yes, participation, awareness, and listening.

The yes - This means that we accept, acknowledge, and move from the reality that ourselves or a scene partner has created—the contribution that has been made. An example I use to describe 'the yes' involves a scene partner being my very good friend (in a scene) and threatening to jump out the window. Saying yes to the relationship that we have developed and of which the audience has knowledge means that I do not want my scene partner to jump or get hurt. In saying a verbal or physical 'no' to her jumping out the window, I am saying 'yes' to the reality she is creating.

Contribution/participation – This is part 2 of 'the yes,' as it is the action or manifestation of the acceptance**.** Contribution/participation involves stepping into the playing space, either as a first move or in joining your scene mate(s) in an 'already happening' scene and being 'available' to join in at any moment.

Awareness – This entails awareness of yourself and your scene mates , what are they doing, what has been said, how you are standing, how you enter, who is looking at whom and how, etc.

Listening – What is my scene partner saying? How are they saying it? Can I listen to the body? How can I listen to things that are not being said?

The unknown often creates discomfort. Since improvisation is a performance art-form that has no script, it can be discomforting by nature. In improv theory, discomfort is a source of important insight. Since improvisation is central to my research, I knew that for the workshop portions of my research, I would be engaging with participants in somewhat uncomfortable contexts.

In order to minimize the risk of discomfort, I chose exercises that required very little self-exposure on the part of participants. There were no requirements for workshop participants to act in 'scenes'. I tried to minimize the discomfort in order to also minimize social risk. Although participants were engaging in activities with which they were unfamiliar in front of their classmates/colleagues, these were exercises that required very little self-exposure.

In process terms, the workshops began with a brief explanation of the workshop, reiterating the relational gestures specific to each group, assuring participants that there would be no scene work (no one would be getting up in front of others and needing to be funny – something that often comes to mind when people hear the term 'improv'), and that people could

opt to sit out of any exercise if they needed to. I lead the group in taking a few deep breaths to begin, to release some of the tension associated with this workshop.

I then led the group through the improv exercises I had chosen to draw forward the relational gestures specific to that group. (Some of these exercises were undertaken as a whole group, some in smaller groups.) Following each exercise I posed questions to debrief, such as: What was it like for you to [do this particular step of the exercise]? Or, what did you notice when [this part of the exercise] was happening? Students discussed these questions in their small groups. At the end of the workshop we had a wider collective debrief to reflect on what came up in their small groups, shared experiences, differing experiences, and things that they noticed. The workshops lasted between two and three hours. Following each workshop, as I do in my own improv practice and teaching, I took notes about what happened during the exercises and conversations including what participants talked about in small groups and in the larger group debrief, how participants interacted with one another, what I noticed about the group as a whole, and how I felt about the experience as a researcher/facilitator/artist. These notes and the interviews provide the content presented in the Results chapters.

Choosing the Improvisational Exercises

There is a lack of theoretical work on improvisational theatre. Much of the

theoretical literature on improv is focused on music and, more specifically,

on jazz (see www.improvisationinstitute.ca for research and other

resources). As improv in a theatre context is often taken up as an

approach to warming up for acting (Lecoq, 2002; Schechner, 1988; Spolin,

1999), it is seldom theorized as an art form itself.

In this study, I draw on my training and experience in improvisation. This

experience includes: training in improvisational theatre as a student of the

art form; participating in skill-building workshops as a performer; teaching

courses in improvisation; coaching improvisational performance groups;

and performing as an improviser (on stages, in front of audiences).

In reflecting more deeply on the pieces that informed the creation of the

research workshops, I realized that I must include in my training Augusto

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (see Barnes, 2014; Boal, 1985; Howard,

2004). This theatre practice uses improvisational exercises and integrates

social justice and community mobilization into the art form. Boal's (1985)

body of work specifically informed how I shaped the workshops in terms of

thinking about participation and meaning making and considering the

implications of being a non-actor within a performance context.

Closer Consideration of How the Workshops were Created

An important piece of writing the dissertation has been in closely considering/thoroughly breaking down *how* I created the workshops and *what* I was paying attention to when I decided to include *which* exercises. Much of my experience with bringing improv exercises into social work contexts was dominated by the unknown – I needed to try the exercises out and see what would happen. To be clear, this does not imply that this work was uninformed; I had the experience of the doing (learning, teaching, performing) improv, and of the orientation to social work both academically and as a practice. However, with the context of unknowing in improv, I could not really know what would happen.

In trying to consider *why* I chose *which* exercises, I was resistant to saying 'I chose this because I knew it would do this.' In needing to articulate my decisions further, I understood my practice as a kind of balance in motion – bringing in the art form, the art form that I knew within the performance context, and making it accessible, something to learn from in the context of relating, specifically, social work relating.

With the knowledge that I was not going to have many weeks to train participants in improvisation, I had to consider that 'getting good at improv' was not the point of the workshops. Rather, the very engagement with and

exposure to it, if done well, needed to be enough. I needed to get that engagement with the art form (introduction to it, exposure to it) right for those particular participants.

In deciding which improvisational exercises to use, I drew on my knowledge of exercises that I had engaged with in the context of training to improvise on stage/in a performance context. I drew on this experience of knowing how to do and explain the exercises, their purposes (in improvisational performance contexts), and the tensions or reflections that they tended to invoke (within the context of training for improvisational performance).

I chose exercises that required relatively little exposure, although exposure is inherent to the art form (as discussed throughout the rest of the thesis) I paid attention to the fact that most participants had never improvised or engaged in any kind of theatre.

Before designing the workshops for the research study, I had experienced developed similar workshops within academic social work contexts. Early in my experience, I learned that in order to increase accessibility to the work and to what I was trying to do with it, exercises were much more effective than scene-work. Bringing scene-work into the mix proved much more complicated, setting off the balance in integrating the performance

perspective of improvisation while engaging in a context outside of performance, within social work.

Both within and outside of the research, I have been consistently surprised about the things that people take from and/or that get activated within the exercises. The debriefing discussions following the exercise always present things that I have not heard before as well as some things that I have heard before. I am also consistently surprised about how the exercises happen/play out/are engaged with for different groups and different individuals. I did not include improvisational exercises with the intention of evoking experiences of control and/or interdependence, yet these are the most prevalent relational concepts illuminated through participants' experiences of the workshops and their reflections on those experiences.

Articulating the Performance Context of the Art of Improvisation

Within the research workshops, I spoke to the major pieces of improvisation (the 'yes', acceptance, listening, awareness) within the context of improvisational theatre. For example, I explained the 'yes' with an example from a scene on stage. I felt the need to find a meaningful balance, bringing the art of improvisation into the workshop from a performance context while also making it accessible to a non-performance

context, specifically a social work relating context. I asked myself about

how people can learn from the workshop experience, what would make it

possible or less possible for people to take things away from the

workshop, and how I could engage participants in ways that allow them to

reflect on their experiences.

Another way that I brought attention to the performance context of

improvisation in the workshops was in talking about 'the playing space'. In

the thank you exercise, the back line faces the playing space which is

essentially the stage. I also described being on the 'back line' as the

equivalent to being at the sides of the stage (similar to the theatre term 'in

the wings' but in an improv performance context improvisers are usually

on the actual stage, at the sides). The participants' consciousness of these

elements played a part in shaping the ways in which they took up the

exercises, and in this way (among others) the performance context is part

of the art form that this study pays attention to.

My understanding of what was going on for participants in the exercises

was also (partly) informed by my understanding of improv in a

performance context. For example, I can grasp the weight of people's

discomfort with not knowing what will come next. In the early stages of

creating and facilitating (non-research) academic workshops, while I was

still using scene work, an instructor asked me if, ahead of the workshop, I could provide them and their class with roles to consider and practice. Reflecting on this, I considered that this request may have reflected, first of all, a need for a better description of the workshop, and further, the instructor's assumption that one can know and/or prepare for (at least in part) that which would be created within and/or come out of the workshop.

Graduate Students: Details on Workshop Design, Recruitment, Gathering Reflections, and Ethical Considerations

In January 2013, I was invited by three university instructors to facilitate two workshops with their social work PhD students. These workshops would incorporate improvisation into their PhD research classes on research methods and social change. They were intended to bring those pursuing research into a different way of understanding their approaches, including their relationships with participants, themselves, and their work. I asked these three instructors to describe 'relational gestures' that they thought were important for qualitative researchers to attend to and develop. Together, we identified openness, consciousness, and intentionality as the relational gestures that would anchor the workshops. I created a plan for the workshops, carefully choosing exercises that in my view would most effectively draw these gestures forward. The final workshop plan involved the exercises, 'Yes Move', 'The Drawing

Exercise,' and 'Thank You Statues.' These exercises and the reasons I chose them are described in detail Appendix 1.

It is important to note that the workshop with PhD students was not initially connected to my thesis study. However, reflecting on Workshop #1 with my supervisor, we realized how rich the experience and conversation had been and how relevant it was to my emerging research questions. We considered the possibility of including the next workshop, Workshop #2, as part of my research. This idea posed an ethical challenge in that these workshops were a requirement for the students' course completion. I had to ensure that it was clear to students that participating in my study as a research participant would, in no way be required, expected, or attached to their class grade.

I discussed with the instructors the possibility of including Workshop #2 as a data gathering opportunity for my dissertation study and inviting students who were taking part in the workshop to participate as individuals in my study. The instructors agreed to allow me to approach their students, and together we worked out a process intended to ensure that students' participation was informed and fully voluntary. This plan was also laid out for and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB).

Students were invited to take part in the research in an email that I sent to the three instructors who then passed it on to their students. This email was approved by the MREB. The invitation to students made clear that the workshop and the research were distinct, and they were in no way required or expected to participate in the research.

I also sent the 'Letter of Information/Consent' form to all students in the classes. In this letter, I clearly articulated that I was going to conduct the workshop regardless of students' agreements to participate in the research. This letter also outlined what agreeing to participate would entail: reflecting on their experience, possibly engaging in reflective journaling, and participating in an additional workshop and in two semi-structured interviews.

One ethical consideration was my connection to some of the potential student participants. Some of the potential participants were students with whom I was familiar from the PhD program in social work at McMaster. None of the students were in my cohort of the program, and I did not have a relationship with them outside of being a fellow student. In recruiting, I emphasized that students may choose to take part or not, and that their choice had no bearing on our connections outside of the research. I made

this clear in the initial research explanation, the consent form, and all communications that occurred between myself and the participants.

An additional ethical piece to consider was regarding the students who did not choose to participate in the research but who were present in Workshop #2. These students were part of the experience for the students who *did* choose to participate, i.e., they were involved in improv exercises together. Thus, I needed to consider this in deciding how information about participant experiences would be shared. None of the names of students who were not participating in the research were used, and names of those students participating were changed to protect anonymity.

Although I could not guarantee that the participants would not share the discussions from the workshop outside of the research, in order to increase the potential for confidentiality I asked all participants to refrain from discussing the research outside of the workshop and interviews.

Students who responded to my invitation to the research were invited to take part in a three-part process of journaling, individual interviews, and an additional workshop (Workshop #3).

Journaling: Participants were invited to track their own reflections on workshops #2 and #3 and on how the improvisational techniques (and our discussions around them) impacted their understandings of social work

relationships. They were invited to choose whether or not to let me read these reflections. The option of sending me an email with their reflections was also presented.

Individual, semi-structured interviews: The first set of interviews lasted approximately one hour each and closely followed Workshop #2. I introduced the study, addressed any questions, got consent, gathered reflections on Workshop #2, and introduced the journaling part of the process.The second set of interviews were approximately two hours each and were intended to further explore the participants' understandings of social work relationships in relation to the workshops. These took place a few weeks after Workshop #3. The journals were meant to be used as a potential reference tool for participants, helping them to remember the details of their experience.

With participants' permission, both sets of interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

The interviews were semi-structured and included the following questions:

- Could you tell me a bit about your experience of the workshop?
- What were you anticipating?
- How did it feel to take part?

- Are there particular exercises or moments that stay with you? Can you say more/why?

- Are there exercises/moments that were difficult, awkward, that didn't feel relevant? Can you say more/why?

- What were the most engaging moments/exercises/discussions/ interactions? Can you say more/why?

Workshop #3 and final individual interviews: Workshop #3 was designed specifically for the people who were taking part in my research as individuals. This workshop was developed after the first interview process took place and was designed to engage further with the relational gestures that had resonated with participants.

The following questions were included in the second set of interviews, after Workshop #3:

- Have you had any experiences since the workshop that you feel you've approached differently than usual? If so or if not, say more/why.

- Are there ways in which you feel the workshop has impacted your understandings of social work relationships? How you engage in them? How you feel about them?

- How, if at all, do you envision bringing forward into your work, what you've experienced in the workshop? If this does not apply, say more/why.

Social Workers: Details on Workshop Design, Recruitment, Gathering Reflections, and Ethical Considerations

The second group of participants were hospital social workers. My supervisor, Chris, knew this group to be a self-reflective group that came together regularly to think through their social work relationships and to provide one another with support. Chris thought they might be interested in and excited by my study. Once the MREB had cleared my proposal I emailed a member of this group who further contacted the rest of the group, forwarding them an email invitation and a letter of invitation (both approved by MREB). From here, those who were interested got in touch with me and we arranged a time to meet.

Individuals who responded to my invitation to the research were invited to take part in a three-part process: a workshop, journaling, and individual interviews.

I met with this group before the workshop as this workshop was not part of a course and there was a less formal process for articulating relational gestures to bring forward in the workshop. In our meeting, themes of

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support, collaboration, and creativity surfaced, and I built the workshop around these themes. This workshop was three hours and the key improv exercises used were Thank you Statues, The Drawing Exercise, and One Line at a Time Stories. These exercises are described in detail in Appendix 1.

This group did one workshop and then, in a separate scheduled session, I facilitated one group discussion/focus group.

The initial plan with this group was to conduct individual interviews, and all participants consented to this as part of their involvement in the study. However, after the workshop took place I decided that a focus group could be more helpful to the study. I chose to hold a group discussion as opposed to individual interviews with this group, because I knew that in a group discussion I would get to see and work analytically with the interaction between people. As this was a group that worked together in an ongoing way, this group dynamic seemed salient to the study.

I asked the group via email if they would be willing to make this change and participate in a focus group rather than an individual interview. I clearly articulated that there was no pressure to agree to this change and that the study would continue either way. I asked them to respond to me individually (emphasizing to not 'reply all') via email with their preference

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regarding this process. All participants expressed consent to a group interview rather than individual interviews. This change was also approved by the MREB.

This group was also invited to journal independently in order to engage in self-reflection and as a tool for recalling their experiences when we later met for the focus group. With participants' permission, the focus group interview was audio taped and transcribed.

The interview was semi-structured and included the following questions:

- Could you tell me a bit about your experience of the workshop?
- What were you anticipating?
- How did it feel to take part?
- Are there particular exercises or moments that stay with you? Say more/ why.
- Are there exercises/ moments that were difficult, awkward, that didn't feel relevant? Say more/ why.
- What were the most engaging moments/exercises/discussions/interactions? ? Say more/ why.
- Have you had any experiences since the workshop that you feel you've approached differently than usual? If so or if not, smore/why.

- Are there ways in which you feel the workshop has impacted your understandings of social work relationships? How you engage in them? How you feel about them?

- How, if at all, do you envision bringing forward into your work what you've experienced in the workshop?

- If this doesn't apply say more/why.

As with the group of students, although I could not guarantee that the participants would not share the discussions from the workshop outside of the research, in order to increase the potential for confidentiality I asked all participants to refrain from discussing the research outside of the workshop and focus group.

Participant Groups and the Setup and Intention of the Study

Each of the Results chapters focuses on a particular improvisational exercise and most of the responses from one of the participant groups. The Interdependence chapter focuses on The Drawing Exercise, with responses from the group of hospital social workers; The Control chapter focuses on the Thank you Statues Exercise, with responses from the group of social work PhD students. The exception to this setup comes in

the Interdependence chapter, as this includes a few responses from JoAnn, who is one of the graduate students.

The decision to organize the chapters in this way comes from working with all of the participant responses, listening to the stories and then drawing out relational themes that were focused on relational gestures. The exercises were not introduced with the intention of illustrating or elaborating specific relational gestures. The relational gestures were activated within participants' experiences and further reflected upon within the interviews. For further discussion about which exercises were chosen and why, see the Methods chapter.

I have considered that, in order to gain a more detailed understanding of who is involved in the study, the reader might want more information about the participants; specifically, the reader may be curious about different learning that may have come out of the workshops according to different groups of participants. However, a closer look at the intention of the study explains why I chose not to include certain kinds of outcomes and comparisons in the study.

The intention of the workshops and interviews was to engage and explore the experiences of participants; to activate and learn about what went on for participants both within moments of improvisation and upon reflection

on these moments; and to learn about this within the framework of relating.

An important piece to clarify here is that the study was neither intended to compare and/or contrast the experiences of participants in relation to their roles/identities as students and social workers (or by any other identity marker), nor to compare and/or contrast participants' experiences of different improvisational exercises (e.g., in exercise A participants experienced B, while in exercise B participants experienced C). The study intended to emphasize what it was about improvisation that did what in terms of relating—i.e., to bring attention to which relational gestures were illuminated by the art of improvisation and how this illumination happened and got taken up.

The study was also not intended to be replicable. There were many differences in how the research was done with the different groups. For example, the workshops were not identical in terms of the exercises used, and the approach to interviewing varied from group interviews to individual interviews. With these and more variables in mind, the more traditional understanding of potential limitations to the study, in which I would need to consider the question 'if x had been different would your conclusion, y, still work?' does not apply; the answer to the question is consistently 'no.'

Results of Analysis: A New Appreciation of Interdependence

Introduction

In artistic practice, improv requires that the group relate in a way that involves positively accepting interdependence as a condition of achieving things together. In the context of this research, reflections on interdependence set up the foundational understandings of what improv can do in terms of challenging and providing a different way of knowing and doing relating, specifically relating in social work.

Improv exercises can make interdependence—its complexities, our draw to it, our fear of it, the self-other tension of it—**visible/available to us**. The noticing, making visible, and steps and aspects of interdependence are fundamental to the potential of improv to develop more nuanced appreciations of possibilities for relating. These nuanced approaches to questions and gestures of relating are directly salient to social work education and practice and also hook into the very basic premises of social constructionism.

In this chapter I reflect on participants' experiences and commentary about an improv exercise called *Thank You Statues*. In this exercise the range of individuals' relationships to 'the group,' came to the fore/ were brought into focus in an experiential way. This chapter considers key themes raised by participants as they engaged this exercise: *Joining In, which considers roles, relationships, giving and receiving; Perceiving people as "in need," which considers what happens when we are aware of someone else's need; Existing in Different positions and shifting between them; and Enabling Risk, which considers building a supportive interdependence, becoming trustworthy, and the process of feeling more secure.*

Within each section, I draw in and discuss improvisational artistic practices as a way to more deeply understand participant experiences and insights of the exercises. Highlighting the defining characteristics of improv helps clarify how and why these exercises 'work' as catalysts for deepening and complicating (ideas about) interdependence and relating in social work. For example, in improv, there is a persistent quick swinging between roles and positions familiar in social work (dependent/supporting; receiving /giving, etc.). This quick swinging between two roles complicates each of them and can prompt us to experience and imagine many aspects of relating as more fluid and shared than we typically do. I elaborate these

points with reference to broader ideas of social constructionism, mutual constitution and subjectivity.

Throughout this chapter, I highlight many examples of reflection that provide insight into a continuous construction/constitution of individual and group understandings. In the continuity of this construction, we also see the way that time is a component of relating that the experience of improv allows us to come to know differently; that is, a particular relevance of time in how we relate to one another is made visceral, visible and comprehended through the art of improvisation.

The following is a step-by-step explanation of the Thank You Statues Exercise:

The exercise involves individuals in the group taking turns stepping into the playing space and creating images with their bodies – at first alone, and then joined by one other person. As there is no given order to the turn-taking, each person who makes a pose waits for someone to join them in that pose. This is a silent exercise, except for the word "thank you," which is delivered throughout/at specific times. This is how it works:

- The participants form a line along one of the walls in the room; this is called the backline. The backline 'faces the audience' - all participants are at the 'back' of the stage (upstage), facing the

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playing space. In the context of the workshops, there is no audience, but the idea is to 'play to the audience'. [The significance of this is in the physical way that the exercise plays out, with participants performing/contributing/sharing in the playing space, facing outward/away from the backline]

- One person (A) steps away from the backline and into the playing space and makes a physical pose. This pose can be anything – abstract or literal, any physicality that the participant chooses.

- Once A is in the pose, another person (B) steps in and joins A, making a physical pose that complements A's pose. Again, this can be anything to fill in the negative space that A has created, mimicking A's pose, doing the 'opposite' of A's pose, or anything that adds in some way to A's initial choice (pose).

- A then steps out of the pose, says thank-you to B and returns to the backline.

- B remains in the pose alone, awaiting the next person to join and continue the cycle.

Joining in: Roles, Relationships, Giving, Receiving

In the following section, participants discuss their individual desires or impulses on the backline and the relationship between those individual

desires and the needs of the group. This involved reflection on a

negotiation of space and the tension in the places between self and group.

I consider participants' comments on the impetus/choice/motivation to

'leave the back line' – a step in the exercise that requires a shift from

being with the group *as a whole* to being with only *one other person,* and

eventually being *on your own*. As participants stood on the back line, what

was it that made them join their colleagues in the playing space, and how

did that choice reflect and shape their understandings of themselves and

the group? How did they experience being in the playing space, and how

did this shape their understandings and actions?

In the following quote, we begin to see how the choice to leave the back

line shapes and reflects Petra's understanding of the group. Petra

describes the sense of alertness and engagement that she experienced as

she participated/that accompanied her participation in the differing and

fluid roles within the exercise:

> "…whether I was posing or whether I was in the back …you
> had to be conscious and alert and watching what was
> happening to either jump in or to stay back and watch what
> the next person's doing. So I felt fully engaged in the
> process." -Petra

In choosing to jump in or stay back, Petra references the negotiation of:

the space, the expectations and the needs of the group, with the group.

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The choice (jumping in or staying back) involved paying attention to a bigger picture of what was going on. As a group, participants discussed the ways in which they negotiated 'going in' to the playing space in the context of, from the perspective of, and with an awareness of, the needs and actions of others in the group.

Another piece of this quote that draws our attention to a continued discussion of alertness and availability and that connects to the research discourse around relating is Petra's discussion of consciousness and alertness: the 'full engagement.' Petra notes that from the back line, an alertness is required to remain on the line and also to jump in. This is interesting, because it describes a particular way of understanding engagement, Petra could feel fully engaged both on the back line in the 'inactive' space or in the playing space, in the more obviously active role.

An Improvisational Orientation to Time

Within an improvisational orientation to time, in which my contribution is at the same time my response, I am forced to occupy more than one space at once. My 'nonparticipation' —the space that I take up on the back line— is still space taken in relationship to the action in the playing space. This complicates a dichotomous understanding of nonparticipation and participation.

Further, this orientation to time becomes visible through the movement, the continuousness of many elements of the exercise: the switching of roles; being ready; and the tension in thinking about you, me, and us creating another context in which the line between participation and non-participation blurs. As soon as we are on the back line which is as soon as this exercise begins, these reflections and experiences are activated.

This understanding of participation has implications for how Petra related to the group and for shifting understandings of roles in relationship. From the back line, Petra was relating to the group from a space of readiness. Paying attention to this space of readiness, as improv training encourages, can unsettle a traditional understanding of roles in a relationship. Conventional representations of dialogue contain the idea that, at any one time, one person is the speaker while the other is the listener – one the giver of information or a message and one the receiver. As we question and/or push the boundary of what this can look like, we have the experience of seeing familiar roles as less known.

The shifting between the role of being on the back line to being a more obvious contributor is significant here. Participants' comments can allow us to take up interdependence as continuously giving and receiving care and attention from both positions, not as alternately giver and receiver of

care or attention (the traditional framing of interdependence). In this context, interdependence can be framed as both always giving and receiving care and attention from both 'positions'. In this way, we see that the familiar [social work] roles of giver and receiver become less known; the distinction between these roles blurs and becomes more complicated. The topic of swinging roles is a relevant thread throughout the chapter and will be discussed explicitly in section 5.

From Zabeena's comments, we begin to get a sense of the relationship between the impulses to join, support, and rescue and responsibility for others and the group. As people are positioned to respond, participants began to reflect on/narrate a visceral experience of the interrelation of those impulses.

In the following quote, Zabeena refers to the awareness and attention she was paying to the needs of her colleagues in the context of her own actions: "… is someone else jumping in? I don't want to jump in if someone else is jumping in". - Zabeena

Zabeena speaks to making a choice that is integrated with/interdependent to/interwoven with the choices of others in the group; this is also a clear decision-making factor for her.

Allison expands on this idea, reflecting on her own impulses and reactions and also on the ways in which values (respect and not taking the lead) influence and/or motivate her choice: "… it was like a need to hold back…And make sure everybody had an opportunity. And just out of respect and not taking the lead and all of those things, yeah." - Allison.

The 'need to hold back' indicates the tension, the space between Allison's impulse and her desire, her responsibility to the group, and her values. 'Holding back' implies that there was something drawing her forward – perhaps the impulse to join combined with a desire to save, as discussed in the next section. The tension involves negotiating this impulse within the context of the opportunities and actions of other individuals in the group, as the space is shared and negotiated by group members.

Elizabeth further breaks down her perspective on the reason for 'holding back,' addressing/including the personality and professional training of individual group members as things that impact and/or shape *how* the space was being shared:

"We wanted to make sure everyone had their turn and that we were sharing space and I think maybe that's because of our training and probably personality traits that led us to do this work. I mean we're just wanting to make sure that there's equitable you know sharing and all of

that stuff and so yea at times worried about taking up too much room or saying too much or those things." —Elizabeth

We see Elizabeth's perception of how this group wanted to be and respond—that equity and sharing are parts of what they bring to their social work roles. Zabeena, Allison, and Elizabeth were concerned about both the space that they were taking up and ensuring that their colleagues got equitable chances to take part.

In the following quote, the tension between individual needs and needs of the group shifts as we see another layer added onto needing to take care of the self on the backline. We see the tension between the desire to join, a fear/sense of risk, not wanting to go first, and not wanting to end up in the limelight. The combination of all of these factors provides a different texture of tension and anxiety: "Yes it was a bit more, for me a bit more of a personal anxiety in that exercise. Yeah cause, yeah I didn't want to leave somebody hanging but I didn't want to be first… "—Elizabeth

The anxiety that Elizabeth experienced helps to explain the experience of sitting in the tension (a cause for anxiety). There is a negotiation taking place between Elizabeth's individual needs and the expectation and needs of other people in the group. We see Elizabeth continuously taking stock of

both places and her personal anxiety rests/develops between these differing needs/wanting to meet these differing needs in the same moment.

As these differing needs are being called on, tension is created. **With improv exercises, we are prompted to notice how time and you-me distinctions matter in such tensions.** Within the context of a traditional understanding of relating, there is a linear way of addressing needs, e.g., I can take care of me *now* and you *next.* In this exercise, as differing needs are being called on in one moment and because a response is required 'right now,' another way of understanding 'addressing needs' is called for. We are called to consider ways, in time, that we can respond to multiple needs.

Over the course of the exercise, the position on the back line becomes more complicated but also more meaningful in terms of considering relating.

Although she was experiencing anxiety, Elizabeth was able to play, participate, and continue within that anxiety. According to Miehls and Moffatt (2000), in social work education we are often taught to locate ourselves as social workers outside of that anxiety—negotiating the self in ways that try to seem 'cleaned up'. They suggest a need to work in 'messier' spaces and spaces of unknowing, arguing that we do not

necessarily need to rid ourselves of anxiety in order to do social work and that this 'less known' space allows us access to possibly transformative ways of understanding.

There is potential link here for understanding improv as providing such messier spaces – giving us more chances to find and engage with unknowing and to transform ways of understanding. The concept of improv providing messier spaces gets further taken up in the discussion section of this chapter.

Perceiving People as "In Need" and What Happens When We Are Aware of Someone Else's Need

In this section, participants' stories delve further into what it is that creates both pressure and a desire to respond to the needs of others; what participants consider when the exercise requires that they 'leave someone hanging'; and the way that the continuity and simultaneousness of these things shapes how participants consider certain elements of relating.

Perceiving Need and Being Called to Respond

In the following quote, a combination of the setup of the exercise and the group's engagement with that setup creates a particular understanding/experience of a call to pay attention to/intervene with a perceived [unmet] need.

"[In the Thank You Statues exercise] I felt more pressure not to leave somebody hanging either. Like I never wanted somebody never to have someone go up… I was always like 'if it's not me… oh good somebody went up' because I didn't want that person being left there for a long time. I always felt that pressure to make sure that … person had somebody go up and support them." – Allison

Allison's quote urges us to look at the setup/rules of the exercise, the perception of a need, and the social expectations of the group in order to understand what it is about improv and the group's engagement with the improv that creates a kind of call to respond.

The setup referred to above is a rule/expectation of the exercise; when one participant (A) steps off the line and creates a pose, another participant will step off the line and join them (becoming B).

Allison expresses feeling relieved when her colleagues were no longer 'left.' Her language of 'leaving somebody hanging' and a 'person being left there', describes/points to/paints an image of a person needing something, i.e., to be left hanging, to be left there paints a wanting picture of someone in the exercise or an image of someone in need of support or who is perhaps vulnerable. We imagine what it is like for the other/what it would be like for me in their spot, and feel urgency to intervene to change this for them, hoping others will do same for our future selves.

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Allison also highlights the desire/social expectation to be (seen as) helpful and contributing (or not to be seen as unhelpful and not contributing). She speaks to pressure created by the fact that if you do not move you are seen to be doing nothing, not responding to an individual/not contributing to the group.

This quote is significant, because it tells the story of how Allison developed/experienced a certain personal awareness of another person's vulnerability/need for support and also experienced and became aware of her need and desire to respond.

This discussion raises questions about 'what goes on' for people in moments of encountering/experiencing another's need/ vulnerability/ exposure/ 'dependence' on us. These are the questions that interdependence/ being part of 'the social' activates and that are especially salient to social workers, 'positioned' to define someone as needy, to witness need, positioned to respond.

Response, Rescue and Joining In

Zabeena furthers this discussion, commenting on the context in which her colleagues were being 'left hanging' and her experience and response within that situation: "… I felt too that they were hanging, I almost had to

rescue them. I wanted them to feel that they belonged and when they were sitting up there, you were just exposed." – Zabeena

The setup of the exercise left Zabeena's colleague alone in the playing space. Zabeena interprets this as her colleague being left 'hanging.' Attributing this precarious state, Zabeena names the step of joining in is as 'rescuing.' She also seems to perceive her colleague as feeling alone or even estranged from the group. Reflecting on her responses in that moment, she says she wanted them to feel 'that they belonged.'

The exercise and participants' experiences in it brings up many questions relevant to social work:

- What makes us define someone as in need?
- What desires of ours get activated in those moments?
- How do we understand and enact our own responsibilities (when we understand someone as being in need)?
- How do we understand the group, what we want, need, and expect from the group (in the context of responding to perceived needs, i.e., it is not necessarily me that has to respond, but someone has to)?

Zabeena's language also shifts from 'they' to 'you' when she says "…when they were sitting…, you were just exposed." This points to the fact that

Zabeena had already personally experienced that space of exposure (within the exercise), giving further reason/cause for her response, her desire to save. She knew what it was like to be alone in the pose, and therefore, she imagined how her colleague was feeling in that moment.

The shift in pronoun use also shows a fluidity between me as individual to me in group; what we worry about and want for others/what we worry about and want for ourselves—a perspective-and reality-swinging that is vital for creating an understanding of interdependence that draws on improv practice.

Improv helps us to bring an awareness to how we perceive people in need and to what happens when we do this. It also shows us that the idea of 'in need' is familiar (specifically to social workers) as improv's movement and orientation to time make the concept of 'need' less known, allowing us the opportunity to perceive this concept differently.

Thinking About Power Through Need and Rescue

Zabeena points out a tension between someone feeling that they belong and someone being exposed. She wants to assist in generating feelings of the former and easing the latter. The exercise created/demonstrated/made visceral the creation of and tension between these two spaces (exposure

and belonging) and also (inadvertently) indicated the power that participants perceived they had to shift someone's experience between these two spaces.

In the context of social work, there are places in which we routinely/habitually/are positioned to define people as being in need. In this exercise, this group's call to respond to individual vulnerability, points to an interesting discussion of our relationship to 'need' and what we want for others/for people who we perceive as 'in need' (the aversion to another being 'left hanging,' exposed, in need).

Defining people as in need and the capacity to do such defining/labelling (and further perceiving) engages us in a particular relationship with power. Noticing this raises questions about *when* and *why* we offer help. Further, as power is inadvertently implicated in the capacity to shift someone between exposure and belonging, it is also implicated in the term 'rescue,' i.e., I have the capacity to 'rescue' you; you need me.

The following investigation of some of the specific elements of the artistic practice of improvisation allow us to see why the exercises have potential to provide a different way into our understandings of relating and of what it means to rescue.

An improvisational Understanding of 'Rescue'

In the context of improv practice, joining in is assumed. The question is when and how I will join, not whether I will join, hence the orientation to and importance of readiness. Improv practice assumes everyone is always already part of what is happening in the scene.

This differs from a worldview that assumes a more distinct 'in the action'/ 'not in the action' division. The latter assumes it is possible to be a non-participant. It also connects to a more conventional idea of relating; you are doing this on your own, but if you need someone I will be here for you. In line with a social construction perspective, improv encourages us to recognize that we are all always doing this and—from a 'relational' or mutual constitution perspective—we are all always doing this together.

In this way, improv has implications for how we can understand relating. As the joining in involves seeing the self as part of what happens/can happen/what gets created, we also see the scene (the relationships, the story, the characters) as being constantly created. This is in line with central concepts in social construction in which we create our own reality as we move in and through it.

A rescue is premised on two distinct locations, getting from here (e.g., exposure/danger) to here (e.g., belonging/safety). This premise contrasts

with the improvisational joining in where we are already here, in both

places, together. In improv, we are creating together, developing this

moment in time together, while we are also always ready to join. This

changes the premise of a rescue, making non-viable and therefore visible

the premise of moving a person from one pre-existing location to another

pre-existing location. Put another way, since in improv we assume

participation and engage in the continuous movement between danger

and safety, we make less-known, and possibly obsolete, our

understanding of rescue.

**Existing in Different Positions and Shifting Between Them:
Implications and Reflections**

We continue to see the positions, roles, and perspectives that come to the

fore in these exercises. There has been engagement with familiar spaces

and assuming positions and/or being positioned (e.g., positioned to

respond) in these spaces. The exercise provides a unique experience of

swinging between familiar roles/perspectives/realities, which complicates

them and makes them less known. In the following section, the quotes

further explore some of these spaces and the implications of a process of

shifting between them.

On one side of this exercise is the experience of being in a pose with a colleague and then left alone – a position often experienced/referred to by participants as 'being exposed.' In interviews, participants discussed this experience. As the participant stands in her pose, she is awaiting the decision-making of the people on the back line: whether and when they will come forward and add to the statue she has created. This is an experience of being left – a visceral experience of being with to being without.

As participants stand waiting, they experience being at the mercy of their colleagues, wanting the moment in which they are alone to end and wanting the moment in which they are the centre of attention to be over.

("So a few of you were mentioning the feeling of wanting to help people and save people. Did you have the same feeling when you stepped out that you needed to be helped or saved or…when you took the risk to make your pose?" - Cathy)

"Yeah definitely feel (that for me?) because I was there and I just was hoping I wasn't going to be there too long because I don't like attention on me." –Allison

In this quote, Allison reflects on the moment of being exposed, where she was standing in the 'playing space' on her own after her partner had left.

She is reflecting on how it felt to be in that space in which the 'attention' was on her. Allison answers "Yeah definitely," to the question of whether or not she felt that she needed to be rescued or saved. A similar experience was discussed by a few participants when they were on the backline. For Allison the experience is not as much about the solitary aspect, but about the attention being on her.

From another perspective, the experience of this step in the exercise—in which someone is alone and someone joins in—is not only of the waiting to be saved by someone on the back line. JoAnn focuses on the 'permission' that someone on the backline gives to *move out of* the centre stage. JoAnn is struck by the fluidity of these roles and the movement between layered states of being—from a powerful state (pressured, responsible and urgent) to a hopeful, waiting state—and what goes along with occupying each of these different, fleeting spaces:

> "I felt when I was waiting for someone else, [someone else] was coming to complete you know like 'hurry up' and yet, when it was my turn to add, I had no awareness of that. You know I was just going to add and it seemed sort of fun and I could take my time because I was you know, I was choosing. Yet that other person is 'uhhh' … so after I had done it I had that awareness that 'ooh what does that feel like for that exposed, waiting person?" –JoAnn

An awareness of another's need continues to come in and out of the picture. When JoAnn was on the contributing end, she did not think about

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the needs of the other person. This came into her awareness when she was in the waiting position. This helps us notice how little we sometimes perceive of another's experience, especially from a place of relative power – how unaware we are of another's need, even if we are 'right next to it.'

JoAnn experiences the realization that occupying the space of 'adding on' can be quite powerful. In this discussion, JoAnn articulates the constant shifting of power, creating, deciding, waiting, feeling exposed, and how all of these things are evoked/experienced in this exercise. JoAnn did not come to this conclusion until after she had been on the 'vulnerable' end of the exercise where she needed someone to add on to her pose. "You're exposed and um someone else has to come and complete the work to allow you to move on and so you're very dependent on someone else, so that relationship is—you know, yeah—it's a, there's relationality but in a very different way" – JoAnn

 JoAnn's experience of needing someone else to 'complete the work' implies that the person in the playing space is depending (in a difficult/ uncomfortable way) on someone on the back line to allow her to move on. In this way, when someone leaves you in a pose, they are leaving you waiting for further social engagement, for what will be next, and for what will shift that which is already there. As JoAnn speaks to the idea of a

different way of relationality, she highlights the value of the experience of

need and dependence to one's ability to notice and imagine that position.

> "… it was very, um provocative in some ways you know I, I
> would get into a position I mean and it was fun and it was
> exciting and it was full of energy and yet I would get into it
> you know if I was the person in the position I would be
> feeling very anxious that 'someone hurry up and get here
> because I'm in the limelight now and I don't want to be' and
> also um not sure 'what is that person going to add on?'" —
> JoAnn

Consider the following description of some of the artistic practices of

improvisation as a way of expanding an analysis of JoAnn's and other

participants' experiences of swinging between roles, subjectivities, and

identities.

**An improvisational Understanding of Swinging Between Roles,
Subjectivities, and Identities**

In improv, a player stepping on stage contributes something, anything,

e.g., their most confident body language. This contribution simultaneously

takes up two very different subjectivities that both hold and lack power.

At once, the contribution (and therefore role/identity/subjectivity that the

player takes) is going to be changed, as it is going to be further created by

others in the scene and the player does not know and cannot choose how

the creating will happen. In this way, the contribution

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(role/identity/subjectivity) is also vulnerable, risky, and open to all possibilities.

At the same time, whatever the player contributes (and thus takes on) constitutes their partner's understanding, choices, ways of doing, and what the partner has access to (in terms of who and how they will play), This contribution opens, closes, and creates doors; it is highly impactful and an integral part of the ongoing process.

As the partner responds, they contribute in the same relative moment. For example, as a player puts one confident foot on stage and receives an angry glare from their partner, the glare is the simultaneously vulnerable/risky and impactful/integral contribution. The swinging then continues.

This serves to demonstrate the continuous movement that constitutes an improvisational understanding of interdependence. Through this lens, we can potentially perceive interdependence as a moving concept; we continue to build a perception of interdependence that is in continuous motion and that is simultaneously risky and integral.

Enabling Risk and Building a Supportive Interdependence: Becoming Trustworthy and the Process of Feeling More Secure

The moment in which participants are indeed making decisions about what they will do in the playing space is filled with questions about **how** they will join: Will they complement the pose? Will they do something that looks like what the other person is doing? Will they try to imagine what the person could be doing and then relate to that? This line of questioning is sometimes connected to a desire to play in a certain way, but it is also often connected to a fear of judgment.

Throughout the following section, Zabeena speaks to the idea of humour and its relationship to risk. In this context, Zabeena refers to a fear of judgment (i.e., a joke judged as going badly), which further unpacks a specific understanding of how a sense of risk was eased within this exercise.

> "Anytime you try to make a joke it can go really well or it can go really bad. So you're taking a risk and sometimes you're not sure if you want to do that. But I think we were kind of more willing to do that towards the end." —Zabeena

Zabeena reflects on the potential of a joke going badly which carries the risk of judgment and failure; if it is not funny, you have failed. Furthermore, if you are telling a joke and you are trying to be funny (not always the case) and no one laughs, then you have failed. Zabeena sees

the willingness to take chances with humour, to risk making jokes, to

engage in poses that feel or look funny as the results of having worked

through the exercise long enough to be able to take these risks.

Keiko comments on the way that risk is enabled as trust develops as we

know others will move in and that they'll move in quickly:

> "And I thought 'Wow! People are still willing to go in there
> and take that pose because they know they don't have to
> hold that pose too long because somebody else, somebody
> will move in, because they trust that somebody will move in
> and I watched it so I was willing to take the same risks".—
> Keiko

Again, seeing this happen and being a part of this process happening

repeatedly created a situation in which Keiko trusted the process and the

group within that process. This created a context in which all kinds of

gestures/actions became possible, even silly ones.

The experience of feeling trust and support that this exercise generates,

allowed participants to use humour. This is important, because that which

is accessible throughout the cycle of the exercise, i.e., earlier on in the

exercise compared to after it has been experienced for a while, shifts.

Furthermore, this shift has implications for group cohesion, which we will

see in the following section.

Experiencing and Easing Risk for the Group/as a Group

As Zabeena continues to discuss humour, she also speaks to the ways in which possibilities for risk and cohesion were informed by both the repetition in the exercise and the role shifting:

> **"…**the walking and the statues the more we did it the more cohesive we became one, but two, the more riskier, like the more risks we took. So I think towards the end of the statue ones we were trying to add in more humour whereas at the beginning it was a bit more serious…"—Zabeena

Zabeena observes that as the exercise went on, as they worked together in this way of giving and receiving over a period of time, the group found itself more able to engage in risk. The repetition of risk, trust, support, etc. allowed these things to become expected and trusted as a pattern. Zabeena links the repetition in the exercise, developing a process of cohesion, the experience of encountering risk and the implications of using humour.

This experience of risk and trust has significance in the context of social work relationships, in which we are called on to provide people with experiences of trust and where mistrust has often been central in their lives.

Although the motivation in improv is not to reduce suffering the exercise provides a context in which we might notice and experience how this could

happen and how we might better perceive our roles in it. In this example,

the exercise **makes available an understanding of risk and trust** and

its link to cohesion.

For Keiko, the risks that the group engaged in the exercise were reflective

of the group's support for one another:

> "… you don't know what to expect and you don't know what's
> coming so you can't really plan for it but you know that when
> it comes and you intervene and you move that your partners
> and your comrades are there with you, they're rooting for
> you, they're supporting you and that even if what you do
> puts, brings a risk they are there to help you through that risk
> and there to make that risk, to minimize the risk and turn it
> into a strength you know and that's what I felt especially in
> the movement exercises that we were doing was that sense
> that it was fun, it was a lot of fun, it was great but I watched
> people take very risky poses, right?"—Keiko

Keiko points out that the risks that individuals took in the poses were

noteworthy – they were taking place within the context of something she

enjoyed, but they stood out from that context as significant and

meaningful.

Further, Keiko is referring to the experience of not being able to plan. In so

much social work, there is no way you can be 'ready' in the sense of

having a plan or a map; however, you can be 'ready' to act, move, and

take risks when there is a strong awareness of support.

Furthermore, Keiko's quote shows that the risk is not merely eased or made possible, but also turned into a strength. The risks taken resulted in creativity and the risks were transformed in a positive way.

Risk Going Against the Norm (of the group)

Risk is more specifically explored within the discussion of specific gestures, such as poses that are outside of usual behaviour, scripted movements, and conventional "social worky moves." As the exercise progressed, the moves became 'riskier' and/or moved further away from what was expected and/or what participants were used to. I prompted the group for a further explanation of what was at risk in the context of the exercise:

> ("When you say risky what does that look like in that … like what does taking more risks look like…?"— Cathy)

> "Maybe positions that are uncomfortable. Maybe positions that are outside of the norm. So typically we were doing kind of what I thought were kind of social worky type … ones but then we kind of strayed away from that periodically too. So maybe what was outside of the norm of what ties us together."—Zabeena

Zabeena expands on the idea of what is significant to her about taking risks. She refers to the idea of something being 'outside of the norm of what ties us together.' Within this context, that which ties this group

together is being social workers. As the group engages with this exercise

and they come to a point where they are no longer 'acting like' social

workers—where their actions no longer reflect (only) their roles—then they

are engaging something that is outside of the norm. In this instance, this is

what Zabeena identifies as risky. When group members know and relate

to each other in the context of social work/being social work colleagues,

this is something that they know and are comfortable with (i.e., the norm).

This became apparent at the point in the exercise where the participants

made decisions about the positions they took. They joined another person

in a pose, making a decision to do something 'social worky' or something

other than 'social worky'.

The concept of 'the norm' can also be connected to ideas about the use of

technique and relying on the things that we know while we are relating to

one another. Where does the familiar take us in our relationships?

Perhaps the familiar is helpful at times, and at other times, it is less

helpful.

The experience of the improv exercise which included the trust and

support built through the repetition of the pattern of doing a pose, being

joined, being left alone, adding onto a pose, and being added onto, the

group saw ways in which they were creating one another differently than

they typically do and differently from what the discourse of being social work colleagues allows.

Keiko points to the idea that regardless of how far away from the norm the poses stray, the support from the group is consistent: "And knowing that when the other person left boy did it ever look kind of silly and you kind of had to hold that but you know the other person who moved in moved in in a very supportive role to that movement." – Keiko

The idea of providing a 'supportive role *to* [that] movement' brings attention to the way in which the act of joining the other person was significant and to how the movement that the person joined in *with*/ contributed to also provided support.

The improv exercise brings us into a dynamic space where the give and take is essential to being together and sharing the playing space. Cycling through the exercise cultivates a certain kind/process of relating. The quotes tell a story of the person in group phenomenon/dynamic and what this experience does to people. The awareness and reflection activate *a certain kind of knowing,* bringing an awareness to an experience of trust and support that happens through vulnerability, exposure, and awareness of the self as powerful. In this integrated and moment-to-moment

experience, the vulnerability, exposure, and trust happens simultaneously within moments.

Keiko articulates an appreciation for, the support and cohesion that she experienced within the exercises, which motivated her to return to the second part of the workshop;

> "So that was what brought me out was the sense of support and the sense of people moving together as one despite the uniqueness in each person that that uniqueness just kind of made it … really special. You know all the things we did because it was in so much unison, so much support."— Keiko

The unison and support to which Keiko refers developed within the repetition of the exercise, as did the risk. The element of surprise that emerged as the group began to move further away from the 'social worky' gestures demonstrates what becomes possible and that which, at the same time is required as the exercise progresses and brings participants further into unknowing/engaging the unknown.

An Improvisational Understanding of Risk

In improv practice, part of being 'experienced' is trusting that all will be ok. It requires trusting colleagues, trusting the self, and being familiar with and ok with failure or having a 'bad' show. Since nothing is predetermined in improv practice, everything that comes next is unknown. From this

perspective, risk is consistent; an improviser can never be certain of what their partner will do with their choice or contribution.

On a performance level, this means that going further outside of what is known and what is expected, moving physically in ways that are unfamiliar, not relying on stereotypes or well-known narratives creates tension for both performers and audience members. Improv can be more interesting to watch when the unknown is more fully engaged. This level of engagement also requires specific things (and a specific type of relational gesture) from performers.

One such essential piece of risking the unknown in improv performance is commitment. In addition to doing things (contributing, making choices…) where improvisers are uncertain of the response, they also (train to) do these things with confidence and commitment. In so doing, they create a deeper risk and require a different texture of trust. This trust feels known physically, emotionally, cognitively, and intellectually. Rehearsing and training in improvisation involves repeating activities in which the unknown is engaged and support is consistent, allowing performers to navigate accordingly. A kind of confidence in one's capacity to respond emerges; not the confidence that emerges from formula or stereotype, but from knowing you can respond to and commit to a significant range of realities.

At the same time, it is not always necessary for improvisers to push to the furthest edges of the unknown in every aspect of performance. There can be mystery and tension (and therefore something interesting to watch) in what is being created between two very familiar characters or within a very familiar narrative; however, within these contexts an unknown is still being created and engaged.

At first glance, this may seem like a simple process of engaging with the novel. However, in improv performance risk and trust are present not simply because someone does something that one has never thought of or tried in the past, but because of the presence and continuous creation of not knowing what the other or yourself will do. Training in improv gets performers in touch with experimenting and with seeing where, in combination with support and trust, and continuous change, the performers are capable of going. In this unknowing with others and the self, improv opens performers to transformation.

Discussion

In this chapter, participants' reflections demonstrate, help us understand and make visible the ways in which the joining in and the readiness to join in are vital to the conceptualization of interdependence as a (time-oriented) process. The joining in helps us to think about being an active part of this process through making the initial choice to be exposed – that is, being on one's own in front of the group, taking the chance to engage in the risk of being in the spotlight, the risk of exposure.

As the *thank you statues* exercise progressed, a bigger picture of relating unfolded and participants experienced less of a straightforward choice (to join in) and more of a sense of responsibility to the group. Tension arose in participants' experiences of pressure, desires to respond and the perception of 'leaving people hanging.' The sense of responsibility was also complicated by individual needs, fears, and perceptions of risk.

Joining in is one of the ways participants give in this exercise. Being ready on the back line also allows us to contribute our support. Participants experienced this giving as risky, given the knowledge that as they joined in to support, they would also be left alone. Joining in left them exposed to

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doubt, self-criticism, and fear of judgement. Participants also risked engaging with the unknown, as they did not know what would be added to their pose, what that would be like, and how they might respond.

At the same time, they also experienced this giving as necessary. Their visceral apprehension of the role of being exposed/at the centre of attention created a need to support and sometimes rescue their colleagues.

The joining in is also the beginning of/offers an apprehension of/makes visible, the role of receiving in this exercise. As participants were left exposed and needing rescue, they were at the same time assured that they would (eventually) be joined by their group mates, receiving their contribution of presence and support. As the exercise went on, this became clearer and more trusted by participants, allowing their risk-taking to grow and eventually change shape. For example, risk-taking was no longer experienced as risk. As the risk-taking changed shape, so did experiences of vulnerability and perceptions of rescue.

Participants did not depart from the experience of unknowing – they were still engaged with the unscripted as they did not know what pose their colleague would add. The shift in experience did not come from knowing

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what would happen next, but from knowing and trusting that they would be joined and in that joining they would be supported.

In the Thank you Statues exercise, participants had, on one level, a choice regarding the exposure they experienced. This choice seemed to happen in their decision to step off of the backline and join the playing space. However, we see that there is already a sense of exposure, implication, and responsibility while on the backline while simply *being* in the exercise/ the space.

We can see a connection here to the ways in which Butler (2000) takes up Cavarero's understanding of constant and necessary exposure or fundamental sociality: "Cavarero argues that we are beings who are, of necessity, exposed to one another, and that our political situation consists in part in learning how best to handle this constant and necessary exposure." (Butler, 2000, p.24).

The ways in which participants, through the improv exercises, accessed the concept that we are relational even when we are not necessarily choosing sociality or relationality, brings our attention to relating beyond or outside of achievable skills (Todd, 2012) and the (more straightforward) gestures that we 'choose' to activate while in intentional encounters.

As participants shifted between the giving and receiving, as they moved

through the perspectives, experiences, and ways of knowing inherent to

and evoked by the joining in, they noticed the shifting of their roles,

subjectivities, and identities within the exercise. The familiar idea of

experiencing and responding to the vulnerability of others, an aspect

of relating that is especially salient to social work, was complicated by this

shifting, swinging between roles, and occupying more than one role at a

time.

The ongoing-ness of improvisation, necessitates the movement, swinging,

and shifting; It helps us notice certain kinds of things, like being able to

take up space in two different roles/being two different things at the same

time, e.g., the giver and receiver of support. The swinging of roles further

makes visible and helps us comprehend the continuous constitution of self

and others. We are shaped by our experiences and interactions in ways

that require us to shift roles, and these processes are continuous. The

continuity and generative nature of this process helps us consider the

continuity and generative nature of the creation of self.

As we consider the constitution of self and others, we can come back to

the 'messiness' to which Miehls and Moffatt (2000) refer. We can

apprehend a lack of having the 'self' figured out in order to do social work

differently through improv, because we are immersed in the messiness
(non-linearity) of the ongoing constitution of the self through interaction.
The ongoing-ness of this process disrupts and renders impossible the idea
that we should somehow land on a 'figured out self' – that the figuring
would be finished and we could achieve a somewhat static self before
trying to navigate our relationships with others, or in particular, with service
users. While reflecting on the self, developing self awareness and trust in
self are important and relevant processes that are particularly salient to
social work, considering that the constitution of the self is helpful in
disrupting the idea that we must have 'finished figuring' and possess a
'finished self'.

The literature on social constructionism helps to deepen our understanding
of what is going on when people are with one another. The theory makes
the claim that we are creating one another. Exploring this idea further
through improv, learning to *look* at the process of continuously constituting
the self, is perhaps an alternative, exploratory, and generative approach to
navigating such human experiences as anxiety. A more thorough
discussion of the implications of learning to *look,* will be taken up in the
Discussion chapter, articulated as the concept of tuning in .

Results of Analysis: A New Appreciation of Control

Introduction

As I noted in the last chapter, improv as an artistic practice requires that members of the group accept their interdependence as a condition of achieving things together. This requirement is linked with an improvisational understanding of control. In improv, control of the outcomes of situations is something to continuously let go of; satisfaction and comfort are to be found in responding well to what is happening in the moment. This chapter speaks to the discomfort that can emerge when people are required to 'depend on' one another in each moment, and thus to relinquish personal control over what happens next.

Within this context, the chapter focuses on participants' experiences of control: the need for control, the desire for control, the visibility of control, and a wrestling with wanting to not want control. Throughout this battle with control, the chapter uncovers a certain rejection of interdependence/ a firm grasp on independence. Through the participants' stories, the chapter explores the tensions that arose between social work identity, expectations around professional roles, values, and skills, and the ways in

which these aspects of social work were made visible as they bumped up against a critical, relational experience of interdependence that happened within the improv exercises.

In various forms, control became visible and garnered attention throughout the workshops and interviews, as it was prominent in the relational experiences of participants. The chapter focuses on *how* control was activated and engaged within the context of improvisation. This involves telling the participants' stories of control as a specific relational process. In general, participants wanted more control than the exercise allowed, and this caused dismay with themselves for wanting so much control and, when they conceded to control.

This chapter includes workshop and interview reflections from participants from the PhD student group.

Many facets of control appear in this chapter: **shame and discomfort**, linked to participants' need for independent ownership of an idea or a way of doing things/a desire for the pursuit of their own vision; **researcher/social work identity**, as participants questioned what the need for control said about their roles as researchers, their [intellectual] commitment to collaboration, responsiveness and sharing and their critical stances on positivist research; **conforming to control**, in feeling the need

to resist control and the repercussions of 'going against and/or with the flow'; the **invisibility** of the persistence of control, in a lack of awareness of its role in the relating processes of participants.

This section covers two prominent and intersecting ideas. One idea is about making use of and the desire for control visible through improvisation (linked to themes of discomfort and shame). The second idea is that control surfaces in social work research in ways that are particularly relevant to the researcher's identity. This idea can conflict with intellectual commitments to collaboration. Throughout the chapter, we learn about the ways in which a need for control created an embodied resistance to interdependence.

In the final section of this chapter and in the Discussion chapter of the dissertation, I link participants' ideas and experiences in relation to control to literature about: **mastery -** valuing our capacity to ensure certain outcomes and/or prevent other outcomes/the draw to social work skills that promise to have specific effects; **relational engagement and uncertainty** - the link between giving up control of outcomes and the improved quality of our relationships with others/our practices of relating; and literature about **creating one another** - efforts by researchers and clinicians to draw critical attention to our 'modernist conditioning' (how we are trained

to resist our interdependence) and to move towards constructionist-informed practices**.**

To begin, I describe an improvisation exercise called "The Drawing Exercise". I used this exercise with all participants in the study. The Drawing Exercise is particularly relevant to this chapter, as it generated much reflection on and experience with control as a relational gesture.

The Drawing Exercise

The premise of this exercise is that the group works to create a picture together, line-by-line, person-by-person. Individuals take turns, but there is no given order to the turn-taking. This is a silent exercise. The group is given one marker and a large sheet of paper on an easel (or on the wall). The instructions that I give are minimal:

- Draw ONLY one line/mark at a time.

- No talking.

- Make your mark and then wait, facing the group, until someone takes the marker from you.

- The final drawing should appear to be drawn by one hand.

- Find your ending; when the group feels that the picture is complete, you agree to this (non-verbally) and stop drawing.

The group stands back about two metres from the paper, forming a semi-circle facing the paper. I make a single mark on the paper and then stand by the paper with the marker held out in my hand until someone in the group (A) takes it from me. 'A' will proceed to make another mark on the paper, stepping away from the paper with the marker in hand and standing until someone else takes the marker and continues the activity. The process continues until the group feels that their picture is complete.

Shame, Frustration, and Discomfort: Out of Control – An Embodied Experience of Wanting/Needing Control

Participants outlined precisely the moments when they were frustrated and annoyed at their 'lack' of control in the drawing exercise. Some participants went outside of the 'rules' or expectations of the exercise because their need for control went further than their desire to 'follow the rules'.

In the context of the research, shame accompanied the desire for control; it later became clear that shame was linked to participants' worries that they were replicating dominant understandings and models of social work research.

A complex experience of control was demonstrated as Sylvia went against/ignored the particular instruction of 'waiting with the marker.' She discussed the process of altering/shaping the waiting, unknown moment as she spoke to her desires and/ or needs within the exercise. She described that what she needed and/or wanted after she added her contribution was for someone to continue with her own process—someone who understood what route she was intending to take and who could extend her own vision of the drawing. She also changed the moment of waiting with the marker before it even happened, as she made her marks with the particular intention of 'setting up' the drawing.

> "…I would try to complete pictures so that another person would complete it and at one point someone noticed that. I'd give my marker to people who would complete the same picture as me… the person actually called me out 'I saw! You were actually giving your marker to someone else!'"—Sylvia

As the other group member pointed out, Sylvia was evading the instructions. She found herself giving the marker to someone specific and explained that this was in an attempt to control what was being drawn in the moment, and further, to control the outcome of the exercise.

As Sylvia and I discussed her experience of the Drawing Exercise, she repeatedly brought up her desire for control and her frustration with that desire. **Control was the gesture she used in interaction with others,**

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that came through most for her in the exercise. Frustration was a significant component of Sylvia's experience of control in the exercise; "whenever someone did something different to the drawing I'd try to make a mark so they couldn't make any, like 'You have to look at it this way!' come on!" —Sylvia

Sylvia described how in the Drawing Exercise she had the opportunity to see how she related to the other participants in a situation where she was lacking control. She reflected upon the specific ways in which she attempted to gain control. Her inner dialogue expressed her own desire for control. She spoke of this in surprise and with some alarm: "I can't believe how controlling I was! I couldn't stop it even when I was noticing I was doing it" – Sylvia. As Sylvia expressed needing control, she also noted that at the same time, that this need seemed to be out of her control, adding to her frustration. Sylvia seemed to have an embodied experience of wanting control.

Sylvia and other participants reflected upon their discomfort with their own desires for control of the situation. A conflict occurred within participants as they found that they simultaneously experienced 'I want more control' and 'I am uncomfortable with and/or ashamed of this feeling.' "I think people were recognizing their own selves you know 'ugh, I want to control

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this' or 'I better just go along with the flow.' you know, so sort of bumping up against our own shortcomings or our own challenges"—JoAnn.

JoAnn uses the word 'shortcomings,' as she recognizes that people weren't happy with their own tendency to want to control the picture. She brings us to the concepts of self-reflection and critique, which focus on what is inside ourselves that we do not necessarily like. As JoAnn refers to 'bumping up against,' she gestures towards a point of reflexivity where the need to control or concede already exists for us, and the exercise brings us to somehow actively engage with that need. JoAnn's use of the word 'recognize' paints a picture in which we do not often confront our own instincts or orientations to control so directly (either our desires to be in control or our inclinations to concede or relinquish control). Sylvia notes a shift towards the visibility of control

Needing control is something that was made clear within the exercise specifically through the act of doing in the moment—without scripts, without an order, participants were in a place where they did not know how their collective drawing would turn out. They did not know who would take the next step in adding to the creation or what the consequences of the next step would be, and these things created discomfort. What happens when we are confronted by our need for control? What happens when we

are able to reflect upon our need for control? Why is it surprising and frustrating to us that this need exists for us as social workers and researchers?

An Improvisational Understanding of Control

An improvisational understanding of control creates or is created by the value and practice of not knowing outcomes. This involves giving up the desire to know outcomes and/or requires not being controlled by such desires. In the context of improv practice, the disruption of control can be a source of comfort and joy. As improvisers are trained to allow their actions to be shaped by others, the environment, and the relationship(s) happening on stage, this *allowing* is a letting go of control of these things, i.e., we cannot allow the shaping (as a real time process) while also controlling the shape.

Further, improv can activate a noticing of how much our decisions and choices (on stage and in life) are continuously shaped by things and people other than ourselves. Tuning in to that *noticing* has the potential to move us away from (or inform a critique of) a valuing of or reliance on relational processes that are premised on individual mastery over situations and over others.

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Improvisation can help us shift our traditional understanding of a *lack of control* from being a deficit to being something that enables responsiveness and a recognized and valued interdependence.

As improv is created in a moment, through the adding on and through the relationship as it emerges in time and space, attempting to assert control bumps up against the act of creating. The instruction of 'getting out of your own way,' sometimes used by improv instructors, refers to navigating our need for control. As we assert our quest for personal mastery and attempt to decide where the scene will go, we move our attention and awareness away from all the pieces of the moment, i.e., our scene partner, character, and environment. To ease or dismantle this need to control, an improviser might be instructed as follows: allow the first eye contact you make with your scene partner to determine what words or sounds come out of your mouth.

Improv performances often begin by making sure the audience is aware that what they will see is truly 'all made up', and that there is nothing already known about the content of the upcoming scenes. This brings the audience's attention to the lack of control and simultaneous capacity to respond to what happens on stage. The audience and improvisers experience the social construction of the scenes and entire performance

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interdependently, in real time. In this way, improv has implications for how we can comprehend social construction beyond a cognitive understanding.

Critique of Positivist Research, the Desire for Our Own Vision: The Critical and the Reflexive Potential of the Exercise

The PhD students who participated in this workshop were aware of how a critical research stance decentres the researcher as the only legitimate knower or generator of valid knowledge. However, in the course of the exercise, many came up against their own persistent attachment to being 'the centre.' In Tara's case, the drawing exercise prompted her awareness of her desire to be the originator of 'the picture', a desire that others follow her lead in creating their 'shared' picture:

> "… as I said, annoyed is the wrong word but I felt 'you should have done it this way!' Without saying it, but what was interesting for me was I saw the potential in what they were seeing but because that potential didn't start with me, I felt like 'why?' " —Tara

There is a shift in focus here with Tara's experience of the drawing exercise. We see the desire for control and the need for group members to be on the same page. However, Tara adds a reflection upon the roots of this desire, as the exercise engaged her with her own desire for control. 'The potential didn't start with me' – if the idea had been hers, it might have been fine, but since it was not her idea, she questioned why her

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fellow group members would contribute in the way that they did. It is as if t

the potential disappears and only judgment remains. Tara is offering a

particular 'reason' for her dismay at her lack of control.

Tara found herself wanting the behaviour of others to be a certain way.

She had expectations about what marks they would/ should make, and

when this did not happen, it caused initial frustration. However, digging

deeper, going beyond this, Tara was intrigued by the fact that she still saw

good in their contributions. The ideas themselves were not judged overall,

but rather it was the origin of the ideas (the fact that they had not begun

with and built on her ideas) that proved problematic.

Tara points out this focus – this place that she was seeing/ sensing/

feeling that she was coming from. The exercise allowed her to engage with

this concept, to ask 'Why wasn't their mark ok with me? I thought it had

potential, so what was wrong with it?' The answer she got was about her

own investment in being the originator of things, of experiencing people

'following' her, of being someone who defines what happens. These

particular manifestations of power, control, and dominance.

In other words, the exercise created space in which Tara actively and

deeply reflected on power. She saw the presence of control and

dominance while simultaneously seeing herself moving and relating within

the context/presence of these particular manifestations of power. The critical reflexivity that is demonstrated in Tara's discussion emphasizes both the critical and the reflexive potential of the exercise.

(Non)-Verbal Language; An Embodied Experience of Wanting Control

In the exercise, participants lacked their tool of verbal language, which could have helped them 'skip to the spot' at which they could (more easily) have controlled the outcome of the drawing. Participants were lacking control in a corporeal and visceral way.

Participants made their way through the exercise, line by line, and in this quiet space it seemed that they could hear their brains writhing/arguing/ managing with this lack of control.

Since people lack verbal control over the behaviour of others in this exercise, they find other ways to assert control. In this exercise, as in other improv exercises, participants can feel the efforts they make to control, through their bodies. For example, Sylvia handed the marker directly to a specific person rather than waiting for someone (unknown) to take it. Sylvia spoke about feeling ashamed for doing this, but she still did it. Her own want, her own need for control, superseded her shame and her

(clearly articulated) understanding of what was right and wrong in that moment.

> "both of us later said that 'oh my, I'm so ashamed of how controlling I am' cuz how does that reflect in terms of research work. Oh my god! I feel so ashamed still…I thought what was interesting though, was listening to other people talk about their own drawings and how there was a semblance of control in different ways"—Sylvia

As Sylvia expresses shame here, she begins to connect this to her own work as a researcher. As PhD students in social work put on the lens of critical research, trying to be aware and constantly conscious of our discipline's positivist origins and how dangerous they are, the idea of control becomes increasingly complex.

The non-verbal nature of the exercise activated experiences of reflection for several participants.

Non-Verbal Activating Reflection

> "When I wasn't allowed to do it [talk] I had to improvise and I had to think about ways of communicating what I'm seeing and this is where I was observing myself: how am I interacting with this process of limits to my ways of communication, my easy access to communicating through words. What was happening was that every time I made a line I would see how my way of communicating that line was shaping what came after and building on what came before" –Tara

Here we see Tara reflecting on the communication tools that she accessed in the exercise and how this altered her experience of self-reflection. Furthermore, Tara notes her own understanding of how she was able to relate to others in terms of her own self-awareness. Tara reflected on the process of shifting from the experience of wanting to control the behaviour of the group members (a desire that even when nonverbally expressed has specific social repercussions contributing to our ways of relating) to observing and experiencing a different way of communication and further, how her contribution was part of a bigger whole of the before and after, of the process. This reflective experience was valuable for Tara and demonstrates a relational shift in her engagement with the exercise. "I would see how my way of communicating that line was shaping what came after and building on what came before."

Tara's experience and comments can be linked to some of the foundational premises of social constructionism, particularly those that have to do with control, and reveal how these premises can be apparent through engagement with improv exercises. I expand this point in the discussion section below.

Dorothy also spoke to the experience of a difference in vision and the embodied experience of this difference within the drawing exercise, "…to

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have that really sort of like embodied experience but silent of how vision

can be so different in a group of people and how prickly not being on the

same page can feel" —Dorothy

Dorothy uses the word 'prickly' to describe the tension participants were

experiencing in their different intentions, goals, and desires for the

drawing.

Conflict and the Movement Between/Relationship Between Non-Verbal and Verbal

Some participants felt that conflict between workshop participants had

arisen during the drawing exercise. Being 'on different pages' was

experienced differently and furthermore held different meanings for

different participants. The verbal debrief helped to reveal both sides of this

experience: the control vs. the confusion, the uncertainty vs. the

(perceived) knowing. JoAnn sates:

> "We did [have the chance to talk]…the ones that were sort of
> on this path [creating a particular picture] … I think they were
> saying that they knew where they were going [with the
> image] and then when I came and messed it up it was very
> frustrating for them. And others sort of similar to me saying
> 'we were just sort of feeling a little uncertain, what was going
> on, where you guys seemed to be going, you seemed to
> know'… "—JoAnn

JoAnn speaks to the feelings that were articulated after the [perceived] conflict arose during the drawing exercise; this is when it was actually identified as a conflict. JoAnn demonstrates the ways in which some people seemed to be in control, taking control, and/or wanting control, while others related differently, feeling confused regarding their group members' behaviour. According to JoAnn these feelings had already been articulated during the exercise, nonverbally, "It was interesting to me too, how much communication was going on without verbal communication… you know eyes rolling or body language or positioning or passing the pen directly to other people…a lot of emotion and conflict, lots of conflict but you know very underhanded sort of conflict"—JoAnn

Verbal Debriefing; (Experiences of) Relief from the Non-Verbal

Sylvia refers to the comfort in having shared her experience with others in the larger group. There was a relief in learning that finding a need for control within themselves was a shared experience for several participants. She goes on further to say, "And I even noticed there was a change in the group because other people started saying certain things they did where 'I didn't like how people did these lines' " —Sylvia

The desire for control became apparent through the exercise in a range of ways. This desire was addressed and the shame about it somewhat eased for some participants in the verbal debriefing.

In our interview Dorothy reflected on her experience of sharing: "I do find the process of talking through the exercise to be the really sort of most interesting or useful piece. Things sort of come up as you're talking about it."—Dorothy

Dorothy expresses the weight, the importance of being able to talk through the exercises. She experienced a development of ideas in further reflection generated through communication. Cissna and Anderson (1998) discuss the concept of dialogic communication highlighting the impacts and importance of dialogue in the context of making shared meaning and knowledge. They refer specifically to Shor and Freire's work "Dialogic Learning"(1987): "Dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it" (Shor & Freire, 1987, pp. 98-99).

The shift between the non-verbal and the verbal facilitated a reflection on the significance of a shared understanding. Consciously engaging in the verbal expression of naming things emphasized/made visible/brought attention to the role that the verbal plays in our own relational processes/ journeys/aspirations.

The ability to share verbally with the group was a very important relational

piece for several participants. After experiencing themselves in relation to

others in silence, the debriefing circle came as a relief. This time of

sharing might have brought about a welcome change in the group,

because – unlike in the exercise –participants could arrive on the 'same

page' or articulate the experience of being 'on different pages.'

The shift from engaging in the exercise in silence to verbally

sharing/debriefing with the group created a different experience of relating

for participants. The former activated a personal reflection on themselves

in relationship, while the latter gave the (potential) opportunity to share that

reflection, changing it (for some) from something shameful experienced as

an individual to a shared experience. However, the sharing was an

opportunity to build on the introspective experience as well, reminding

participants of their own active reflections.

Being or feeling alone in the embodied experience of wanting control and

being able to see control in a particular way, as out of their own hands,

was in some ways, isolating for participants. Sharing this experience was

a relief and being able to *share in the seeing* has importance, as it takes

the shame out of an independent experience and shifts it into something

that happens together, in relationship.

'Going With the Flow': Conceding and Resisting

Participants responded to the improvisational understanding of control, in which control is to be (relationally) surrendered. They noticed moments of resisting control and conceding to control and both of these responses generated discomfort and reflection on their own desires within those uncomfortable contexts.

JoAnn and I talked about feeling the need to resist and/or mess things up in an exercise. As discussed earlier, she felt that during the drawing exercise a few people in her group (not including her) were on the same page. Initially, she tried to assert her own 'vision' in the way she marked the page. However she perceived the group's dismay at this action:

> "…at first I went against the grain and I guess I felt maybe a bit reprimanded for doing that and then…it seemed that a picture was coming, it was coming together and everyone was sort of working on it and I felt that that [doing something unexpected or discordant with the emerging picture] would - might just be too naughty, too sort of nasty…"— JoAnn

JoAnn came to feel that it would not be right to go against the grain and mess up their 'flow,' even if she wanted to:

> "We had that interesting dynamic in the group where two people were kind of on a roll, they kind of knew what was going on and then I drew something and they went 'ughhhhhh' and so there was both that resistance of ' Oh, well I have a different idea' but then also that feeling like 'I need to go carry on and follow the [their] path'. So that was

> really I think the awareness, and it's nothing new, but sort of feeling that 'Oh god I must be wrong then', taking that on as my own… 'they know what they're doing! I don't, so therefore I must be wrong and they must be right…' I sort of felt angry after 'Why did I?' and so I ended up kind of getting 'Oh, ok. This is the picture, and I'd better just go with the flow' So I ended up going with the flow and kind of feeling angry at myself after 'Why did I do that?'– JoAnn

Looking at JoAnn's experience, it seems she cannot win! She either disappoints the rest of her group by resisting and/or disrupting what she understands as their collective route, or she disappoints herself by going *with* said route.

JoAnn is describing the system of control to which Sylvia was referring. We see the way that Sylvia's desire to control/ approach to controlling the exercise/drawing was experienced as effective. JoAnn felt like she had little choice; she needed to follow the route that was being created. In this way, JoAnn seems to be on the receiving end of control. On the other hand, JoAnn's choice caused her to be disappointed in her own self .She chose to follow the direction of others in her group.

Another way to understand/conceptualize this is that JoAnn is letting go of control here, or, if we take another perspective, she is letting go of her own power. JoAnn sees the result of going 'against' the flow. The result is that people seemed disappointed in her. She found it interesting that within the exercise there were people who seemed to be on the same page and that

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she was not on that page. JoAnn describes feeling as though her ideas were different and therefore did not seem acceptable. She felt as though she did not know; she did not have a clear idea of what 'the thing to do' was, so she ultimately thought she should try and *go with* as much as she could. For JoAnn, the drawing exercise was "about... restraining myself." This was uncomfortable for JoAnn and in retrospect,she was angry with herself for *going with* rather than resisting.

We see the 'damage' of the battle over outcomes and what happens when one or a few assert control over outcomes in what is set up as a shared, collective process. The sense of being an outsider or of being 'wrong' in some important sense emerges. Our value or capacity to ensure certain outcomes and/or prevent other outcomes can be connected to professional, social work values. I take up this concept further in the discussion section of this chapter.

Awareness of Control and Prompting Reflexivity: Connecting the Exercises to Identity, Intention, and Action (as People, and as Researchers)

Thus far we have discussed the ways in which participants' stories focus on their observations and experiences of themselves in relation to others. While in this very active, present space, and while lacking verbal control of

this space, the desire for control was made visible. This was the first step

in engaging with this desire. Once participants were conscious of the

presence of control in their processes of relating, they then questioned

control and furthermore, deconstructed it. This was a shift began with not

noticing control, moving into seeing a desire for control in themselves, and

further being critical of this desire.

Participants felt that the exercise drew to their attention how commonly we

walk around in daily life unaware of our desires for control, and this was an

additional layer of learning and discomfort. It suggests that desire for

control (and thus controlling action) is likely manifesting all the time and we

are unaware of it. It was alarming to participants that there was this much

need for control 'lurking' inside, invisible to them. The worry surfaced: How

does this need for control manifest when I come to the research table?

A quote from Tara speaks to reflection on consciousness of control in the

drawing exercise; particularly in moments where Tara felt a lack of control

in the development of the image that her group was drawing.

> "… I think this is what was important for me… at the time
> though there was a feeling of …why don't you do it this way?
> And it allowed me to see, to question, could I be a control
> freak and I never knew about it? So that allowed me to think
> critically about myself and question myself" —Tara

Tara points out here that her experience 'allowed [her] to see' control and also that she might not have known how prevalent this was in her life before this experience.

Sylvia reflects on her expectations about the workshops and the ways that her experiences, specifically her experiences with control and researcher identity, surprised her:

> "I thought it would be about 'Oh, this is going to help me open up our minds in terms of doing research'. I didn't see it as being a reflection on how I perceive myself within the research construct; how I perceived my positioning as a person who needs control…" —Sylvia

Sylvia expressed surprise at both the fact and the way that the exercises brought her into a reflective space. As we saw before, Sylvia was surprised at the way her desire for control impacted her behaviour and her ways of being with others.   Her surprise shows us that this is something that she had not seen or considered (or at least not in this way) before; her desire for and enactment of control was made visible in a specific way through the exercises.

Reflexivity Specific to the Research Process: The Limits of an Intellectual Commitment to Social Work Research Ideals

The implications and/or meaning of the shame attached to control

unfolded as participants made connections between their experience of

control in the workshop, their own research, and their roles as

researchers. In drawing connections between the exercises and their

research projects and research relationships, participants were both

curious and concerned, wondering if they were wanting to have too much

control. Am I controlling my research to the point where my participants no

longer share what *they* feel is important? Am I controlling the research in

ways that disallow discovery, exploration, and co-creation/collaboration?

In these ways, the participants reflected on how the exercises made them

question their commitment to genuinely collaborative research processes

and genuinely shared knowledge production.

> "I realize that I need to really get in touch with what I want to
> see if it's imposing something that maybe isn't true to the
> type of researcher I want to be. I think that shame comes
> from 'I want to be a co-learner a co-sharer' of - I hope my
> research will be given back in some way or be collective in
> some way even though I have to do the doctoral work on my
> own. Yet if I have a desire to hold control am I really wanting
> that?"—Sylvia

Dorothy also speaks to her researcher identity and how the exercise spoke

to the challenge of holding the value of collaboration and then seeing what

this bumps up against in the process of working with people other than

herself.

> "It's kind of spilled into - I was working on something, co-writing with somebody else and this is making me think more about that process and why I find that process irritating, really profoundly irritating sometimes. If it doesn't go the speed that you want it to go but also is it about whose words? It's definitely drawn my attention more to what's happening there" —Dorothy

Dorothy wants to co-write, but she is irritated by it, in part because she really does want her own words to define the project. Despite her deep commitment to the 'co'—co-writing, collaboration, and shared work—the experience drew Dorothy's attention to her frustration with being unable to control her project.

Participants found that the Drawing Exercise forced them to break up or deconstruct their own reactions and/or programmed responses. They found themselves needing to take the moment to ask 'why' about control, a prominent component in their processes of relating. Participants found themselves critiquing, questioning and being curious about, control: *Why* do I want to have control here? When the answer was something they did not like, they did not want to want the control.

Discussion

In their requirement for embodied commitments/'yesses'/agreeing/ going along with, the improv exercises discussed in this chapter exposed the limits of intellectual commitments to following, depending on, and sharing.

The exercises revealed participants' actual desires to be much more at the centre of the work and their discomfort with those desires. Participants' needs for control **created an embodied resistance to interdependence.** A robust tension unfolded between an intellectual, habituated understanding, i.e., the imperative to give away or share control in the context of collaboration, and an embodied desire to maintain control within that same context.

The participants' stories demonstrate the uncomfortable distance between knowing intellectually that relationship requires interdependence and experiencing our resistance to that which interdependence requires: that we relinquish control. In the context of the improv exercises, in which the outcomes are always unknown, tensions around maintaining control became particularly visible and felt by participants.

The participants' stories showed us a process of experiencing interdependence – not necessarily as a linear process but in a constellation of the following experiences:

- Confronting assumptions around my commitment to collaboration: the assumption that I value collaboration and 'know how' to collaborate

- *Seeing the limits of an intellectual commitment to sharing*, or how

  this possibly 'stands in the way of' interdependence or a specific

  kind of relating

- *Feeling the tension* between the desire to relinquish control and the

  ingrained (or socially constructed) draw to control or mastery

- *Experiencing the consequences* of the limits of an intellectual

  commitment to sharing or the lack of alternative ways of doing

  relating—i.e., the idea that if we follow, we are sacrificing and how

  this understanding impacts our relating.

In this chapter, I drew on participants' narratives to show how engaging

with improv exercises can highlight and trouble our habits of relating – the

things that we are used to doing while with others. Sinding, Warren, and

Paton (2014) research metaphors used to talk about what the arts *do* in

social work. One of these such metaphors is "breaking habits of

seeing/knowing" (p.8). Within this metaphor, the authors discuss how

"…art has the capacity to interrupt our habits of seeing, to challenge and

alter what (and how) we know, and thus how we act and relate to one

another" (p.8, Sinding et al., 2014). Participants found that the Drawing

Exercise forced them to break up or deconstruct their reactions and/or

programmed responses to collaboration, and sharing.

In an effort to control the image in the drawing exercise, participants were trying to make it theirs, to reflect their vision, and to have certainty in that vision. it troubled them to be at the whim of other people having a hand in creating because they wanted their vision to prevail. There was discordance between what was happening and what their vision was, and that was problematic.

That we must rely on one another for the image to be created is specifically challenging to our traditional practices of relating. Through our reliance on one another, the exercise bumps up against separatist forms of thought (Shotter, 2012) that would otherwise (potentially) allow us to remain independent. As Gergen (2009) notes, we are trained to resist how interdependent we are:

> "…with the 17th century rise of modernism the individual began to replace the collectivity in significance…we now fall heir to several centuries of prizing the capacity of individuals to think for themselves, to find and develop themselves, to follow their own star." (Gergen, 2009, p.161).

Although as social work researchers we are intellectually committed to interdependence [if we believe that we are researchers who are participatory, and collaboratively paying attention] we are still faced with *the resistance to relinquishing our own independence,* resistance to letting go of our own vision.

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The improv exercises allow us to experience the tension between wanting

to hold onto our own vision, resisting interdependence, and our own

intellectual commitment to collaborative and participatory relating in ways

that make it possible for us to be more conscious of that tension.

As participants have told their stories of craving control, we still see the

deeply ingrained, modernist conditioning, the link between power through

'knowing', and the determined pursuit of our own visions. The improv

exercises help us to feel and notice this tension— the draw to the known

and to assertions of our independence and mastery.

Within participants experiences, tensions, and discomforts, we can see the

valuing of our capacity to ensure certain outcomes and/or prevent other

outcomes. This valuing that can be connected to a wider discussion in the

literature about mastery in social work practice and education. One

example of this is found in Miehls and Moffatt's (2000) discussion of the

prevalence of an ego model within social work practice and learning

contexts. The authors call for an alternative way to address social workers'

(students', teachers', practitioners') anxieties through a method that goes

beyond mastery of a theory or skill. Miehls and Moffatt suggest (specific)

alternatives to this kind of ego mastery, advocating for ways of

understanding that make more space for respecting differences and for

more equally distributed power relations between service providers and service users, teachers and learners.

Rossiter (2001) and Todd (2012) speak to the importance of challenging a context of professionalism that relies on, expects, and values certainty, mastery, and independent competence, specifically within the social work classroom. They argue that the emphasis placed on mastery steers students towards trying to 'get it right' and 'say the right things' and away from deep engagement with relational aspects of social work practice and education.

A focus on mastery, certainty, and independent competence stands in stark contrast to an improvisational commitment to relinquishing control over outcomes, and further points to our limited ways of *doing* interdependence within social work contexts. For example, holding tightly to an idea of a mastered and skilled self, shapes our understanding of following. In this example, following is viewed as sacrificing this mastered self, denying us the space required for interdependence, for leading and following simultaneously. This denial that is closely tied to JoAnn's experience of getting left out in the Drawing Exercise.

At the same time, we cannot simply tie mastery to independence and collaboration to interdependence. Within the participants' experiences of

embodied resistance there were certain forms of collaboration happening; even in their mastery/assertion of control over the outcome, there was collaboration; their *commitment to the outcome occurred in conjunction with others.* From this perspective, we cannot simply say that when we are pursuing mastery and committed to an outcome, this is done independently. As we saw in JoAnn's story, the group working towards a (known or predictable) outcome was doing this collaboratively, even as JoAnn was excluded. This is important to note, because simplification here (tying mastery to independence) denies us the relational nuances of collaboration and further, a complex understanding of interdependence.

The drawing exercise helps us comprehend the requirements of improvisational understandings of interdependence in real time: we must simultaneously engage with unknowing and rely on one another within that engagement. Within the literature on social constructionism, and where social constructionism and social work come together, there are movements towards embracing exactly these kinds of requirements. I take up these themes in the discussion section of this thesis.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was generated by the art of improvisation itself. The transformative potential that improv holds for relating bumps up against and offers a challenge to ideas within social work about how relating happens. Through its journey into an improvisational understanding of interdependence the study offers a profound disruption of individuality and thus has major implications for how we understand and potentially take up relating, and specifically, social work relating. The study contributes to the movement among many educators to introduce more experiential and embodied ways of knowing and learning in social work classrooms.

In social work literature that connects to improvisation, scholars tend to explore improvisation as a place from which to extract lessons for social work, i.e. in learning how to be adaptable and spontaneous (Schön, 1995). There is also social work literature encouraging those learning social work to be able to improvise in general. Improvisation, in this view, would enable social workers to 'go with' while working with service users (Spolin, 1999), accepting the ideas of service users and adding on from there, thinking on our feet, and responding in the moment (Harris, 2014; Seligson, 2004, Walter, 2016), rather than having pre-set or standardized ways of addressing people's concerns/problems. In her discussion about

social work education, Walter (2016) explains that she "…conceive[s] of teaching as improvised performance…" (p. 158). Another angle of this literature encourages people to use improvisation in order to collaborate more effectively (Spolin, 1999; Steitzer, 2011).

However, there is very little theoretical literature about improv as it connects to ideas and practices of social work or more broadly to ideas and practices of relating. This thesis attempts to theorize moments of being with others within improvisation. Such moments are created between improvisers/participants, as are the forms of relating and especially the response-ability to and for others. This thesis involves efforts to theorize the relating that is activated in the real time art of improvisation.

The concepts from literature about social constructionism are a key resource in this work. The thesis aims to make space for and bring consciousness to certain central social constructionist concepts such as what it is to *create one another.* The thesis also aims to explore what happens when we carry out in practice the challenge that social constructionism as theory offers to the notion of an individual self (Burr, 1995). This happens through the process of rendering visible the ways in which, through our social interactions, we shape one another (Burr,1995;

Witkin, 2012; Gergen, 2009). Further, the thesis aims to theorize around the meaning of our shaping one another, how we know the world and each other and how we *do relating,* including how we do relating in social work and otherwise.

Also important to this work is the art form's orientation to time. The continuousness of the creation of self and others is vital to both disrupting static understandings and recognition of the Other, and to celebrating a deeply interactional way of moving through the world. Improv also foregrounds movement in the swinging of roles, in the joining in, in the taking up of ideas and response. The constant movement of improvisation shapes the way that participants take it up, specifically in the context of relating as theorized through social constructionism.

Below I summarize the results of my study, and then I elaborate the results by connecting them to the premises and process of improv practice and to selected concepts in social constructionist literature. I use the concept of 'tuning in' as a way of articulating the practice of theorizing through engaging and to aid in understanding a theory of relating that is activated in improv.

The Interdependence chapter highlighted an inspiring process of engaging with improvisation as participants experienced the support, trust and risk

inherent to the art form. In this chapter, we learn about participants'

experiences of joining in and the readiness to join in – the ways in which

the requirements of the exercise made the backline a space of being 'on'

already and of participation happening before the choice was made to join

a colleague in the playing space-before the choice was made to contribute

to the pose/statue in play. Participants' experiences showed us the layers

of tension and relief in this experience and the relationship between being

ready and a sense of responsibility to the group.

Partial relief from tension came in the Thank You Statues exercise when

participants were joined by their colleagues in their pose. However, this

relief was again complicated by the tension of not knowing what their

colleague would 'do to their pose.' Participants found themselves unable to

leave the space of vulnerability as engagement with the unknown

persisted.

As the exercise progressed, a different experience of relief came as trust

in their colleagues developed. As participants trusted that they would be

joined, they were able to see what was made possible from that trust.

Further, we see how experiencing trust also contributed to their wanting to

be trustworthy themselves.

One of the things made possible through trust that (at least partially) developed within the exercise, was risk. Taking risks in the poses allowed participants to physically explore, trying out movements that were not necessarily what they would have imagined or expected themselves to do. The idea of risk was also transformed as trust and support continued to be given and received throughout the exercise.

Participants' experiences in the Thank You Statues exercises also necessitated/allowed for a swinging between roles, complicating the positions and accompanying assumptions of occupying space as both giver and receiver. Such role-swinging generated reflections on relational habits, disrupting ways of thinking about professional roles and expectations within those roles.

The chapter on control led us through a particularly challenging aspect of engaging with improvisation. Participants found themselves continuously bumping up against improv's requirement to relinquish control.

In reflecting on the Drawing Exercise, participants explored their discomfort with relinquishing personal control over outcomes. They found themselves trying to make the image in the drawing their own, to control the outcome of the image. The visibility of such a desire for control created shame and frustration among participants.

One of the reasons that a visible desire for control was disconcerting was a personal sense of professional commitment to collaboration and sharing. The friction between such commitments and a desire to control brought to the surface questions about how this desire surfaces in their roles as social work researchers and in their personal lives.

Another aspect of control that was uncomfortable for participants was the invisibility of the role of control in their lives. The idea that an aspect of relating that holds such salient implications for power and dominance, something that requires attention and care in critical social work, could potentially go unnoticed in our processes of relating.

In order to elaborate the results of the study in connection to social constructionism, I will now describe the idea of 'tuning in' as a way of articulating how improvisation does what it does in the broader context of relating. In reflecting on the many ways participants engaged with the improv exercises and considering the connection between improv and social constructionism, I have come to perceive that improv can be a way of 'tuning in' to the promise and premises of social constructionism. According to Parton and O'Byrne (2000), a strength of social constructionist perspectives is in providing a vocabulary for understanding

and using the substance of process – in this study, improv then provides a way to take up this vocabulary, to tune into the substance of relating as a process.

Themes of mutual constitution, and thus mutual vulnerability, are central to many accounts of social constructionism. In this study, improv offers a way to engage mutual vulnerability outside of the framework of either an idea or a practice. Participants' narratives suggested that, through improv, mutual vulnerability can be something we 'tune into'. For example, Butler (2001) discusses how our being exposed to one another or vulnerable to one another happens beyond our choice, by the very nature of the social. If this is the case, then interdependent relating is *not something we take up but rather something that we tune into, embrace, notice, and reflect on*. The question then is what becomes possible when we are aware of this phenomenon? Improv helps us tune into this phenomenon, and the Results chapters show us participants' experiences of tuning in.

As we 'tune in' through improvisation, we actually *disprove* modernist notions of the self, of independence. We can really experience the harm in this way of thinking and the possibilities that it hinders. However, we already *know these things intellectually*; in social work education, we already theorize about the harm of modernist notions of self. Instead, **the**

tuning in gives us a way out and a new, transformative world in which to engage. In this way, tuning in can be understood as an alternative way of knowing or comprehending, and an alternative to intellectual comprehension.

Vital to an alternative to intellectual comprehension, tuning in provides something more than the current ways we have to live out some of the values of social work— i.e., collaboration, sharing, and recognition. Tuning in is perhaps another way of articulating (in writing) the process in which the promise of social constructionism becomes more apparent through improvisation. It not only becomes more apparent, but we tune into this promise as an alternative and experience it as a way of doing, as a practice.

Outside of theorizing, another contribution of this study is to inform the practices that social work educators take up in the classroom. In the following two sections, as I elaborate my results, I also include the messages that I hope the reader will take away. These messages are meant to encourage educators to lean towards a different appreciation of participation, trust, risk, unknowing, mutual constitution, and independent competence. Each of these points is also intended to bring some clarity to the question, 'What about improv does what?' – a question that,

throughout the dissertation, I have been struggling to answer in ways that separate ideas enough to comprehensively communicate while simultaneously getting across the interconnectedness of the art form as a whole process.

Bringing Improvisation and Social Constructionism Together: Implications for Ideas and Practices of Interdependence in Social Work Teaching and Learning

The joining in and the readiness to join in are vital experiences in the conceptualization of interdependence. As the research progressed, participants' stories of both the joining in and the readiness to join in, helped us put together an understanding of interdependence that extends beyond a cognitive comprehension of this concept (i.e., being able to understand relying on and being relied upon). Through the experiences of tension, conflicting needs (our own vs. perceived needs of others), the self in relation to the group, and shifting roles—all within the context of building trust and support while simultaneously engaging with the continuousness of unknowing—we are able to appreciate/recognize/apprehend interdependence in a way that is much more alive and in motion.

As a vital part of comprehending interdependence in this way, the joining in and readiness to join in brought participants to a place where they

eventually experienced a responsibility for trustworthiness, to being intentionally trustworthy. A responsibility for trustworthiness is a vital piece of learning for social work students.

An important point here is that joining in and readiness to join in are part of a bigger picture than something we choose to do independently. The development of a responsibility to be intentionally trustworthy helps us see the bigger picture of relating and is further helpful in shifting thinking about participation. Having a sense of bringing intention to our trustworthiness towards whomever we are with, and of wanting to be trustworthy from this place, offers something different than, for example, wanting service users to trust us as social workers – something that is often taught in social work classrooms. This different way in, accessed through the joining in and readiness to join in in improvisation implies a mutual vulnerability and an alternative to certain power dynamics; i.e., a social worker's idea or decision that a service user should trust them.

Improv prompts us to know differently what it means for us to trust, what becomes possible when we do this kind of trusting, and what becomes possible when we are trustworthy. Knowing trust in this way helps us to differently (and perhaps more thoroughly) access interdependence and helps us understand relating as a profoundly vulnerable and responsible

phenomenon. Improv points out the weight of this vulnerability and responsibility, helping us pay attention to the quality of our relating.

The art form calls for a reimagining of (our notions of) response: By cultivating trust in our capacity to respond from an intentional stance of unknowing (Wehbi 2015), improv makes space for and constitutes responsiveness to that which is being created in a moment. This bumps up against more scripted and/or habitual responses that shape our understandings and learning in social work classrooms. In this way, through improv we are able to tune into a stance of unknowing, a point I expand upon later in this discussion.

At the same time, improv allows us pleasure in our capacity to take more risks and experience the certainty of feeling supported and ability to respond. Further, improv encourages us to 'say yes' more readily, with an awareness, recognition, and celebration of, and a commitment to, interdependence. Through improvisation we are able to recognize the *significance* of both developing our capacity to respond and building trust in our capacity to respond. These pleasures provide a kind of balance to the weight of vulnerability and responsibility that improv (simultaneously) makes apparent.

As risk is a salient concept within social work relating, the shift in experiencing risk as articulated in the stories of participants, has potentially meaningful relevance, specifically within the social work classroom. The participants' experiences of risk within improvisation help us take a step back to reflect on our understandings of risk in relating in social work. Again, we see a less static version of risk (as a relational gesture) that, as we take it up in the context of trust in improvisation, transforms into something we can no longer define as risk. This has relevance in encouraging students to reflect on our understandings of what is risky, how risk can shift and change, and what becomes possible in relating when risk has the space and fertile context in which to change.

Participants' experiences also point out *how* creating one another happens. Social constructionism as a theory helps us to put a frame on the creating one another (i.e., with the foundational idea that our social interactions create our reality), but then improv (and its orientation to time) allows us to be much more alive to what this creating takes, what it involves, how it feels. This liveliness offers social work learners a different way into a theoretical concept such as mutual constitution.

The improv exercises and the way participants took them up makes apparent the promise of theories and ideas of social constructionism.

Participants acted from a place of awareness of creating one another, and further, they paid attention to that awareness. They saw what goes into that creating and then they articulated that awareness in the interviews afterwards. The entire process, including all of these dynamic steps helps to make apparent the promise of social constructionism as a set of ideas about people and the world. The different availability of the promise of social constructionism potentially presents an enriched and exciting prospect for social work educators in bringing forward an awareness of creating one another in the classroom.

As the promise of social constructionism becomes more apparent, this has implications for how we treat one another. Participants were trying to relate well to one another while also protecting themselves. In disrupting the concept of a static self, we further disrupt an understanding of how we relate to one another. McNamee and Gergen (1999) argue that this alternative understanding, one in which we reframe individual actions as relational ones, calls for and creates a relational responsibility. Participant experiences with improvisation, demonstrate such a relational responsibility. The pursuit of 'protecting oneself' is further disrupted as we explore interdependence in relating.   As the Discussion chapter continues, I take up alternatives in relating that are needed and provided by the interdependence of improvisation.

As an art form steeped in experiences of unknowing, improv provides a space for the certainty of support and capacity to respond well. The unique combination of unknowing and the certainty of support provides nuance and adds a layer to our conceptualization of engagement with uncertainty. Considering the call for uncertainty in critical social work, social work scholars emphasize finding ways to approach relating through a framework of unknowing and questioning static knowledge. Perhaps supporting students to reimagine our relational gestures through improvisation, perhaps reimagining our relational gestures can create *ways into* unknowing for teachers and learners as an approach or practice.

Uncertainty is increasingly proposed as a positive position from which to practice social work. "A position of uncertainty means that social workers will approach each situation respectful of difference, complexity and ambiguity" (Parton, 2012, p.143). Writers discuss sitting with and learning from the discomfort of not-knowing (rather than immediately trying to get rid of it) (Fook, 2007, Miehls & Moffatt, 2000); the centrality of uncertainty in social work (Fook, 2007; Todd, 2012); using discomfort to question the role of the expert (Wehbi, 2015); experiencing the tension of not-knowing (Moffatt, 1996); and taking a 'not-knowing approach to therapy' (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992).

In the current study, participants' experiences with unknowing while being supported in the improv exercises, gives us insight into possibilities for what could be helpful in pushing forward the idea of uncertainty as a positive position from which to teach the practice of social work. Rather than a deficit understanding of the knowing that is not there, we are provided with insight into the generative opportunities that emerge when we engage with this more nuanced, lived unknowing in our relating.

In connecting unknowing to a social constructionist analysis (specifically of the socially constructed self), we come back to the opportunity to resist a final knowing of the other through openness in address (Butler, 2001). If we are in a process of continuous constitution of one another, we never really claim to 'know' the Other. This has implications for power, particularly in social work where claiming expertise and static knowledge of the Other has haunted the profession creating oppressive us/them dichotomies between social workers and service users.

As we explore the unique combination of unknowing and support, we see how improv gives us another way into unknowing in social work – a space that is often desired but difficult to pursue within social work education. For example, we see Rossiter's (2001) frustration as she comments,

> "Social work forms - professional, educational, personal,
> work to poison the use of doubt and uncertainty as resource.

As a profession we spout nonsense about "competencies"; in the classroom we test whether students have indeed "got it"; and personally we feel vulnerable to criticism that we are "not teaching social workers who know how to practice." (p.7).

Improv holds the potential for engaging with uncertainty in social work in ways that are structured as grounded in the reality of relating interdependently. The important piece here and a potentially helpful piece for educators, is that the tuning into interdependence as improv allows us changes the shape of the space that uncertainty takes up in social work relating. As improv allows us to take up the unknowing in interdependence, in a much more alive sense, we see how this is very different than approaching unknowing theoretically – as something that is firmly grounded in social constructionism theoretically and seen positively as a way of taking us away from the oppressive potential of pre-formed ideas about people and problem solving.

The swinging roles in improvisation provide a way of tuning into the implications of disrupting, reflecting on our own subjectivity, and acquiring a profound experience of the co-creation of ourselves and others. In the Thank You Statues exercise, as participants continuously shifted positions—from readiness to join in, to joining in (positions of giving), to waiting to be joined, and being joined (position of receiving)—we saw how these shifts allowed for reflection on saving and vulnerability, on power

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and vulnerability, and on the feelings that came with moving and being

moved from these various roles. Learning about this experience has the

potential to disrupt the ways that we understand our own roles and their

connection to the roles of others, and helps us pay attention to the idea of

creating the Other while being created by the Other— a key concept in

social constructionism and in understanding our own subjectivity.

As Todd (2012) brought improvisation into her social work classroom she

made observations about the learning that happened around creating one

another:

> "…the improvisational context gave us an opportunity to
> discuss how our identities are manufactured through
> relationships…We explored how students work to create
> themselves as professionals when interacting with clients
> and how, in the very same relationship, clients work to create
> themselves as legitimately in need of support." (Todd, 2012,
> p.310).

Although Todd's example does not speak specifically to a shifting of roles,

it demonstrates an apprehension of creating and being created

simultaneously, accessed through improv practice. Further, she speaks to

the implications of this comprehension for students learning social work. A

social constructionist analysis understands the personality and/or self as

always created and emerging through social existence and embodied

interactions in the world (Burr, 1995). We can see how the swinging roles

and other relational role disruptions in improv practice can make our createdness through interaction visible and alive, giving us a way into a social constructionist comprehension of the self, an alternative to self as something coming from within as a stable enduring, entity (Burr, 1995).

Improv can help us bring our attention to what happens when we understand social workers and service users as creating one another and in this way, neither social worker nor service user are in static positions of giving or receiving help/support. In understanding ourselves as active subjects and engaging us in our own humanity, this perspective challenges/goes beyond traditional ideas of relating where these two positions, social worker and service user, remain separate, playing limited roles and possessing distinct (and unchanging) characteristics. This intersubjective perspective has implications for disrupting and challenging power within social work relating.

Phillips and Bellinger (2010) discuss the importance of finding ways to generate student awareness and reflection on their own subjectivity in the social work classroom. The authors use the work of photographer Diane Matar, whose images of those seeking asylum bring to light conversations on social constructionism—that those seeking asylum are socially constructed by the professionals with whom they are in contact. The

authors discuss the impact of images in the 'visual reading' of

"…ourselves into this construction of 'an individual'" (p.97). The visual

reading was used as a way of tuning into how we are implicated in our

own process of looking; in not paying attention to this, we leave ourselves

out of the construction of others.

Phillips further connects these ideas of constructing one another to a

suggestion of "… teaching through modules that are built on concepts that

inform and invite conversation on mutual constitution." In agreement with

Phillips, I suggest that through the swinging roles in improvisation and

specifically, through the disruption of the static positions of giving or

receiving help/support, educators can bring students into and invite

conversation on mutual constitution.

**Implications for Social Work and Professionalism: Implications for
Ideas and Practices of Control in Social Work Teaching and Learning**

In the Control Chapter, we learned about participants' embodied

resistance to interdependence. As participants bumped up against a

desire for control, the invisibility of control, and the implications of control

in their relating, the value of being able to ensure certain outcomes

became clear. However, there is more to the participants' discomfort with

relinquishing control than we can understand from this perspective. The

following exploration provides some complexity in looking into our resistance to interdependence.

Participants' experiences of the drawing exercise demonstrate a desire for control over outcomes, and I suggest that this desire is a value shaped by our social context. This value is what is made available to us in a context created by a drive towards independent competence and mastery. The wider social system within which we relate, and within which we practice and learn social work, is maintained in ways that define us as individual and/or separate. With a reliance on our independent selves, we lack access to ways of relating interdependently. In the Control chapter, we see the tension between interdependence and the *value of the capacity to ensure certain outcomes*.

Looking into social work's emphasis on mastery and independent competence helps us to develop more of a picture of a narrow context of relating. This narrow context that creates a limited set of ways to live out the values of interdependence.

As Miehls and Moffatt (2000) describe, "Social work students, teachers and practitioners have historically attempted to gain a sense of ego mastery and control by the acquisition of theory to enhance skill-based practice expertise" (Austin, 1952; Zetzel, 1953; Bandler, 1960; Memmot

and Brennan, 1998 as cited in Miehls and Moffatt, 2000, p.339). Within this historical context, we can understand the difficulty of getting outside of a more independence-focused way of understanding and approaching, relating in social work.

Rossiter (1995) speaks to the implications of a reliance in the social work classroom on a set of independently achievable skills and the pressure on social work instructors to teach such skills. Rossiter argues that "indeed they play their part in creating a culture of experts who cannot make their expertise congruent with the progressive goals of social work" (p.14). An emphasis on achieving social work skills moves students away from reflection and critique and towards demands for knowing what to say and when to say it.

In her discussion of the challenges of anti-racism education, Jeffery (2005) grapples with professional expectations of mastery within helping professions: "…if students cannot be taught to demonstrate competence and mastery over program content, then what purpose does it serve to processes of professional preparation?" (p.420).

Jeffery discusses the ways in which anti-racist social work are seen as theoretical. She suggests that content that cannot be 'mastered' (the 'it' referenced in the excerpt) is not seen as serving a purpose. If this is true,

an understanding of relating that involves an ever-shifting and ever-developing self would not serve a purpose, as it is impossible to master.

Jeffery further discusses the dangers of reliance on competence and mastery; "A sense of competency and its performance allows the students to maintain the difference between themselves and others" (Schick, 1997, p. 227 as cited in Jeffery, 2005, p.415). This example brings forward the ways in which a drive to independent mastery involves a particular way of understanding difference that creates an imbalance of power. This example further illustrates the need for a challenge to the demand for mastery and an alternative way to conceptualize professional preparation for learners.

The remaining open that we tune into through improvisation poses a challenge to an idea of independent competency – a challenge being faced by many social work educators. In the Thank You Statues exercise, as a person joined in there was a shift, and as the joining in continued, participants continued to shift the reality that was being created. This necessitated the asking, What is happening now? Who are you now? without an expectation of a finished response, an answer that would end there. In this way, improv points us to a way of relating, a quality of interaction that is both immersed in and provided by the 'enduring

necessity of remaining open to the other and to the situation' (Butler, 2001

). This way of relating poses a living/enduring/embodied challenge to a

reliance on independent competence and mastery; perhaps a helpful

framework for challenging these things within a social work classroom.

Taking up interdependence in a way that makes visible the impossibility of

achieving mastery and independent competence has the potential to

dissolve students' capacity to maintain difference between self and others.

Here we find encouragement to lean towards generative knowledge in the

classroom – knowledge that does not satisfy an interventional need, or

that does not get us from a to b to c (as a finished accomplishment), i.e.,

problem, intervention, predefined outcome. Rather, we seek ongoing

development of understanding, i.e., when a and b interact, they both

change shape, necessitating new ways of being in and understanding the

world.

In discussing improvisation and the work of Sally Gadow, Bergum (2004)

suggests that relational engagement gives us an alternative to the need for

independent ownership of an idea or a way of doing things. Here, we can

see that the tension between 'control' and 'relinquishing control' might be

false. Perhaps the real issue is our relatively limited set of ways to live out

the value of collaboration. As Bergum says,

"Teachers and nurses, as improvisators, realize that the opposite of believing that 'my way is the best and only way', is not 'freedom to do as I please' but through relationships with others we can listen for some new tones, new ideas, new music." (2004, p.125).

We can understand Burgum's new tones, new ideas, and new music as alternatives for social work education. Through relationship, we find alternatives to understanding our being in the world as an independent endeavour. The depth of challenge of 'relinquishing control' that we find in the Control chapter has led me to both further investigate a drive to independent competence in social work learning and from there, to continuously seek out and bring forward alternative ways to live out the value of collaboration.

Amongst the stories of participants within the study, I saw a need for a sense of freedom from a framework of independence. Reflecting on the whole study, I more thoroughly apprehend how tuning into a reliance on one another through improv can offer a path beyond the dichotomy of control vs. relinquishing control—a dichotomy that comes up in social work debates around competence and mastery.

As the relating in improv moves us beyond achievable skills, we see how engagement in improv also allows for a tuning into the relational outside of

our own choosing. In her desire to emphasize co-creating with social work students, Todd (2012) brought improvisation into her classroom. Todd observed the ways in which engaging in improvisation allowed students to venture beyond the skills that they were anxious about achieving. "…the relational dynamic of how minds build on the others with whom they are in dialogue became more visible. The focus of the class shifted from concern over self-mastery to attention to the relationship" (p.9). Here we see the co-creating aspect of improvisation as providing a way in to an emphasis on a more nuanced and vulnerable version of relating. In accessing these ideas in the classroom, students struggled with disrupting the value of ensuring certain outcomes that are promised through a checklist approach to social work skills.

As Todd's students engaged further in the concept of co-creating one another through improvisation, their stories extend into helping us look at how much choice we have in our own relationality. Improv allows us to feel this necessary relating as something alive and present and to reflect on the implications of this different understanding and/or experience of relating. A shift to a focus on relating in this way, taking us away from the idea of a set of achievable skills, and providing us a focus on relating as an alternative in which we acknowledge that the relating that is always

already happening, brings us into touch with our inevitable exposure of sociality.

Cavarero (2000) and Butler (2001) refer to the concept of inevitable exposure to the Other as inherent to our embodied lives. In the social lives we live in our own bodies. Through a social constructionist analysis, there is no possibility of remaining individual or remaining only within ourselves. As Butler states "…there is no staying inside" (p.23).

Our continuous exposure to the Other in improv practice helps us understand the inevitability of relationality and further, our responsibility in this relationality. From such an inevitable place, we are responsible to and for others as much as to ourselves. According to Gergen (2009), such responsibility renders incomprehensible forms of violence towards ourselves and one another including comparison, competition and oppression. Improv can provide us with a way in to such promises as those in Gergen's social constructionist theory of relational being – the promises that allow for transforming our ways of treating others and ourselves.

Challenges Arising During the Research

Issues of articulating the practice

One of the problems that arose throughout the research was the challenge

of trying to articulate the movement of the practice – to find words to

describe an art form that relies on the present moment to continuously be

created—to have existence. I came up against this challenge continuously

in the writing process when I needed to find words that left room for

discovery, choice, and exploration. I searched for words and ways of

saying that helped to communicate the practice as living rather than as

something already completed and for words that could impart effectively

the real-time orientation of improvisation. One of the ways in which I found

myself tackling this challenge in writing was with the use of the slash,

which I explain in the introduction of the thesis.

Another way I engaged with these writing challenges was through paying

a particular kind of attention to my use of language throughout my

analysis, being conscious of the ways in which words can and do shape

understandings of concepts. I was intentional about articulating the

multiplicity and social construction of ideas. Allowing my commitment to

social constructionism to shape my writing seemed like the closest I could

get to having my words be artfully informed by improvisation.

I also faced issues of articulation in providing verbal descriptions of the

work, at conferences, in the thesis proposal, at committee meetings, and

in describing the workshop to potential participants and within workshops themselves. This is another challenge that I will address this in the section 'Articulating the practice with participants.' Audience participation has been most helpful in describing this work. My committee members had seen this work in action, participating in at least one of my workshops, and this gave them a more active and comprehensive way into my research. In arenas outside of my thesis committee, I often presented my ideas through exercises. As this kind of live participation has not always been accessible, I have found ways to give a sense of creating as a presentation progresses, to bring attention to the unfolding process of a presentation rather than relying on a more formulaic process (I.e ,I set this up, we did this, and then this happened). I do this by visibly linking ideas and concepts as they arise during a presentation, encouraging dialogue as much as possible, and being deliberate in my use of dynamic language.

Articulating the practice with participants

Another important area of articulating the work was with participants. The following describes some of the aspects that I believed important to pay attention to in bringing participants into the art form and into the research.

Discomfort and/with unknowing

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I needed to give enough information to participants so that they would feel

present, and I had to set up the work such that participants were not

worrying or trying to figure out to the extent to which they could be present

in the experience. I also needed to articulate the research in a way that

allowed people to give informed consent—to know what they were

agreeing to participate in. The necessity of informed consent bumps up

against the impossibility of informed consent in the context of engagement

with an art form steeped in unknowing. This clash presents an ethical

tension both in my work and in other arts-informed research. In order to

address this tension, and for participants to begin to engage with

improvisation, I sought to demonstrate trustworthy support as the

researcher.

Building trust in the process and in me as a facilitator

At the beginning of each workshop I talked about what the workshop

would involve, i.e., working together and sharing together. I addressed the

fact that we would be doing things that the participants probably were not

used to doing. I talked about this as a way of acknowledging potential

discomfort – not to get rid of that discomfort necessarily, but to say I knew

that that discomfort might be part of the experience and that discomfort is

okay. In saying this I aimed to build on a sense of trust. Hopefully this trust

had already started to develop with previous steps taken, i.e., the invitation

to participate and the consent form/description of the research. In this live step, at the beginning of the workshop, I aimed to bring forward an understanding presence, to communicate that I anticipated some discomfort, and to convey that I was comfortable with what I was planning to offer and to bring them into. I aimed to demonstrate that I had confidence in the work and at the same time that I would be paying attention to their experiences as they were created.

Claiming unknowing

It was important for me to convey that I did not know how participants would experience the exercises and that the experience varies between individuals and groups. I further communicated that this stance of unknowing also meant that I was not looking for something in particular to unfold during the exercises. In short, I articulated the fact that I could not tell participants what was meant to happen or what they were meant to get out of the workshop, and that I could tell them that this unknowing stance was intentional.

I also felt it important to articulate that it was not necessary to be familiar with or to like an idea or exercise in the workshop in order to reflect on their own experiences.

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Autobiographical Reflection and My Contributions

As an artist I came to engage ideas about social construction that give me language and concepts to further articulate what improv does in the world. Throughout the research process, the perception of improv shifts from a thing to do into a way of understanding social construction. This shift aids in understanding relating as something that is not a set of achievable skills and that is not simply 'relationships.'

I came across a personal challenge of stepping back enough to be able to differentiate between the relational aspects of improvisation and artistic merit, i.e. where does 'good improvisation' fit within my understanding of the research and in my role as a facilitator? In attempting to be cautious about this, and not wanting to allow my personal joy in the art form to take precedence in the research, I found myself stepping back from artistic facilitation and not pointing things out to participants during the improv exercises that I would in my role as an improv instructor or coach. I soon realized that these things were often important to the research and to the experiences of participants.

An example of this happened during the Thank You Statues exercise. While using this exercise in an improv class, I would ordinarily coach learners on the back line, saying things like "Don't leave them there! Get in

there!". During the research workshops, while participants stood on the

back line, I hesitated to call these things out. I was worried these things

were about doing 'good improv' and that this was separate or contrary to

somehow experiencing the exercises for what they are. However, as I

reflected on this process, I came to understand that 'good improv' is

inseparable from the relational pieces of the art form that I was bringing

forward in my research. Instructions like the ones that I was avoiding are

meant to nurture the ways of doing that help the improv to happen – the

support, the readiness to join in, and the responsibility to the group.

The learning that I experienced in this example has further implications for

my approach and understanding of *how art fits* in the context of bringing

arts-informed practices into the social work classroom. Since undertaking

this research I have had the opportunity to continue to develop

improvisational workshops—both one-time sessions and multi-week

series. I have also had the opportunity to teach social work courses at

both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The research allowed me to develop an approach to the study of arts-

informed research and practice in social work. I had the opportunity to

create and teach a graduate course entitled "Arts informed approaches to

research and practice." In this course, I sought to bring the attention of

students to the question 'What about the art does what?' in their study of arts-informed practices in social work. This emphasis was meant to bring students beyond the concept of art as a tool or an intervention – to encourage ways of thinking and practicing that critically investigated method/approach and to experience a difference in paying attention to ways of doing from this perspective.   The question 'What about art does what?' was also meant to lead students in their major project – to develop or work with an existing arts-informed practice in connection to their own social work research or practice.

Engaging in this research helped make visible my own social constructionism-informed approach to teaching, learning, and knowledge. The visibility of my own approach allowed me to more clearly articulate the importance of disrupting and challenging what it is to learn and the ongoing creation of knowledge. I also take seriously the importance of providing alternative ways to live out the values of interdependence for myself and in the classroom, and to see the ways in which a different comprehension of interdependence allows us into transformative ways of relating in social work.

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Directions for Future Artistry/Research/Education

In theorizing relating through the art of improvisation, the study demonstrates/brings forward/makes a case for the usefulness of the art form for social work practice. Throughout the study and simultaneously in my artistic practice I was able to dive deeply into the art of improvisation. The academic social work context of the PhD program as well as my background in community practice, allowed me to do this from a critical perspective that is steeped in the values of social work. At the same time, my artistic engagement as a learner, teacher, and performer of improvisation informed (and continues to inform) how I understand this research and the concept of social work research more broadly.

The study demonstrates some of the meaningful possibilities that arise when we allow improvisation to disrupt and shape our understandings of different aspects of relating in social work. Our social work understandings also inform the possibilities we can comprehend for the relational potential of the art form. From a broader perspective, we can extend this potential from improvisation specifically to considering the place for art practices in general in social work. As the relationship between art form and social work is mutually constituted and that process of constitution is made visible, we can potentially strengthen both our approaches and capacity to

envision how art can fit within classrooms, research projects, on stages, within communities, and beyond.

However, as I broaden this consideration to include arts practices outside of improvisation, I do so with the precursor that my suggestion not be confused with the idea that using art in social work is good or useful simply because it is art (for a discussion of this see Sinding & Barnes, 2014). As I consider future research that I am drawn to I am highly in tune with this study's challenge of what it means to artistically and relationally take up the question 'What about the art does what?'. The application of this question has the potential to seriously engage the premises and promises of social constructionism.

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APPENDIX 1

Improvisational Exercises

Exercise Descriptions

The following are step-by-step descriptions of some of the improvisational

exercises that were included in the workshops.

The Drawing Exercise

The premise of this exercise is that the group works to create a picture

together, line-by-line, person-by-person. Individuals take turns, but there

is no given order to the turn-taking. This is a silent exercise. The group is

given one marker and a large sheet of paper on an easel (or on the wall).

The instructions that I give are minimal:

- Draw ONLY one line/mark at a time.

- No talking.

- Make your mark and then wait, facing the group, until someone

  takes the marker from you.

- The final drawing should appear to be drawn by one hand.

- Find your ending; when the group feels that the picture is complete,

  you agree to this (non-verbally) and stop drawing

The group stands back about two metres from the paper, forming a semi-circle facing the paper. I make a single mark on the paper and then stand by the paper with the marker held out in my hand until someone in the group (A) takes it from me. 'A' will proceed to make another mark on the paper, stepping away from the paper with the marker in hand and standing until someone else takes the marker and continues the activity. The process continues until the group feels that their picture is complete.

Thank You Statues Exercise

The exercise involves individuals in the group taking turns stepping into the playing space and creating images with their bodies – at first alone, and then joined by one other person. As there is no given order to the turn-taking, each person who makes a pose waits for someone to join them in that pose. This is a silent exercise, except for the word "thank you," which is delivered throughout/at specific times. This is how it works:

- The participants form a line along one of the walls in the room; this is called the backline. The backline 'faces the audience' - all participants are at the 'back' of the stage (upstage), facing the playing space. In the context of the workshops, there is no audience, but the idea is to 'play to the audience'. [The significance of this is in the physical way that the exercise plays out, with

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participants performing/contributing/sharing in the playing space, facing outward/away from the backline]

- One person (A) steps away from the backline and into the playing space and makes a physical pose. This pose can be anything – abstract or literal, any physicality that the participant chooses.

- Once A is in the pose, another person (B) steps in and joins A, making a physical pose that complements A's pose. Again, this can be anything to fill in the negative space that A has created, mimicking A's pose, doing the 'opposite' of A's pose, or anything that adds in some way to A's initial choice (pose).

- A then steps out of the pose, says thank-you to B and returns to the backline.

- B remains in the pose alone, awaiting the next person to join and continue the cycle.

Yes Move Exercise

The premise of this exercise is that you need a *yes* in order to move. There is constant movement in this exercise, and as it progresses groups often find a 'flow' in this movement—a sense of rhythm in the pace and spacing of turn-taking and movement.

- The participants form a circle (everyone facing middle of circle)

- One person (A) begins by pointing to someone in the circle (B)

- B must say *yes* before A can move towards them and take their spot.

- As soon as B says *yes,* B needs to point to another person in the circle (C).

- Before A reaches their spot, B needs to receive a yes from C so that they can move to C's spot

- This process continues until facilitator ends the exercise.

One Line at a Time Stories Exercise

In this exercise, groups are instructed that their task is to create a story together. Sitting in a circle, each person contributes only one sentence when it is their turn. Turn-taking goes around the circle, person-by-person. Groups are also instructed to find a way to end their story.

After the exercise has been going on for a few minutes and the group has finished a story, I instruct them to start again, but this time to 'really listen' to what is said before their turn. I invite them to try not to figure out what they will say next, but rather to tune into what is being said in the circle, and specifically to the person that speaks directly before their turn. I tell them that their task in this exercise is not to be funny or creative or to have

a 'good story,' but to listen to their group-mates, to accept, and to respond to what has been said.

It is important to note that I facilitated this exercise closer to the end of the workshop. For this exercise to activate the pieces of relating that I was trying to get at, the group needed to have some understanding of the 'yes' in improv – the requirement that we accept, acknowledge, and move from the reality that has been created, the contribution that has been made.

In some workshop contexts, I facilitate this exercise with an added element. In the first round of stories, each person must start their sentence with the words 'yes but' and in the next round of stories, each person must start their sentence with the words 'yes and.' The follow-up questions that I ask are about the differences between these stories (storyline, memorability, cohesiveness) and the difference in the experience of contributing to these stories (listening, acceptance, co-construction).