THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THEATRE AS THERAPY FOR IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT DISTRESS IN THE CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES:
A DRAMATURGICAL MODEL AND TOOLKIT FOR EVERYDAY COPING

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

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To Dedushka Misha,

to Naum,

to Ksenya,

to Babulya

to Mila.

Навсегда.

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PREFACE:

On the Subjective Lens of this Ethnographer

I immigrated to the US as a child and because of this grew up with a double perspective: the outsider perspective of immigrant which served as a kind of counterpoint, certainly a distancing akin to the ethnographer. Also not unlike the ethnographer I was socialized into the way of life and its specific sociocultural perspectives and practices. You could say, in a broad sense, that I'm working with about 30 years in the field. That double perspective, and the opportunity to both experience and distance myself enough from the experience to observe it, has never gone away.

I both empathize with and am sensitive to observing the stigma-mitigating practices of my interviewees. "Which one of these is unlike the others?" In American grade school, no one wants to stand out. In more grown-up life, standards of ideal, normalizing Americanness continue, even if standing out in certain ways is rewarded. Even if this is supposed to be the land of the ambitious dreamer, or immigrant, like my own family; no one wants to talk with an accent they can't control, or in any way fail in what is a very complicated system of self-presentation and image management. Through an interdisciplinary, person-centered approach, this dissertation addresses the complexities of performing, living up to, and coping with the psychological challenges of this ideal Americanness with its embedded contradictions.

The final writing of this dissertation has occurred during the Covid-19 Pandemic, during which the typical challenges of everyday image maintenance have likely in a myriad ways been upended, compounded, and rewritten, as individuals have not been able to communicate in person. What has colloquially been referred to as the "new normal" has resulted in new modes of communication and self-understanding as well as renewed attention to the urgent and pervasive

problems of anxiety, identity, stigma and the challenges of daily impression management, often referred to as face-work in this dissertation. Selfhood and identity, belonging, realness and authenticity, success, competence and adequacy, the primary emergent themes in this study, are called into question in a time of crisis, with tensions between image-oriented strivings and acceptance of present realities at the crux of contemporary psychosocial understanding on both individual and group levels. The onus to find well-developed strategies, particularly for in-person engagement, is particularly high. Arguably, the room for interpretation and misinterpretation of authenticity during interaction is only becoming vaster and more difficult to predict in such precarious conditions. This gives the present work a renewed urgency. My hope is that its insights will aid with the challenges ahead.

ABSTRACT

This study uses a combination of qualitative and ethnographic methods to interrogate the phenomenon of “identity distress,” redefined here as a coping process initiated by a threat signal during social encounter to an individual’s objectives around identity and image. More broadly, this study is an investigation of the relationship between mental health and identity in the contemporary, other-directed, image-oriented modern[1] United States. This relationship is studied through examining performance pedagogies i.e.,particular theatrical training methods aimed at cultivating specific performative skills. I examine the image-management, performance, and self-enhancement practices of young to middle-aged adults at specific theatrical training programs and classes in Chicago. The dissertation analyzes non-stigmatized coping in theatre spaces where psychologically-oriented and therapy-like talk (open verbal exchange and analysis of emotional, psychological, and wellbeing processes) is normalized as part of the theatrical training, in response to the threat and suffering of everyday social encounter. Performance pedagogies necessarily confront the work of drama in everyday life, incorporate and therefore destigmatize psychologically-oriented and even therapy-like talk as part of the training, and thus offer useful sites for examining American identity distress as a dynamic and non-stigmatized process.

The dissertation provides an examination of detailed case studies of individuals training in the performance pedagogies of Neo-Futurism and Clown Play, both offered by the performance studies department at an elite, private university, and Social Anxiety Improv, a semi-clinical and semi-commercial program run in collaboration with a local improv school and

[1] The image-focused aspects of the contemporary United States fit what James E. Côté described as late modern prefigurative society, a society that is other-directed (Riesman et al., 1950/2001) and characterized by mass consumption. (Côté, 1996)

venue. Neo-Futurism is an autobiographical, nonfictional, short form, and time-compressed theatre training and practice designed by Greg Allen to cope with his own performance anxiety in traditional theatrical settings. Social Anxiety Improv Bootcamp is a semi-clinical, semi-commercial hybrid of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy—particularly Exposure Therapy and improv training games—offered by a clinical psychologist in collaboration with teachers at an improv school and performance center as an alternative treatment for a variety of DSM diagnoses. Clown Play is a combination of clown training methods taught by Jay Torrence which concentrates on tuning into authentic self-experience of emotion, positive connection and trust of the audience and one's play partners, social-psychological inhibitions, and everyday anxieties around failure in front of an audience, as an origin point for creating an exaggerated clown version of the self.

Each performative method is explored in terms of the performance strategies it offers for one's "dramaturgical toolkit," or their personal assortment of performance strategies to adapt in unpredictable social encounters and to contemporary life overall. James E. Côté described the need for modern individuals to be "intelligent strategists," which meant:

> …a more 'diversified portfolio' that includes psychosocial skill may be necessary if an 'intelligent strategist' is to be at the helm of behaviour. The key is for the individual to form and sustain an identity with other actors. To do this in a complex, shifting social milieu requires certain cognitive skills and personality attributes that are not imparted by human or cultural capital, and are certainly not imparted by mass/public educational systems. With this portfolio, an individual should be in a much better position to move at will through the dimensions of place and space in the late-modern world, and may do so by engaging in tactics like self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974) and using situated identities (i.e.,adjusting one's behaviors to suit those of others in particular situations, Gecas & Burke, 1995). (Côté, 1996, p. 425)

The concept of a dramaturgical toolkit is an expansion of this idea in terms of particular dramaturgical skills and methods that are applicable and helpful in everyday life scenarios; and this idea includes but is also beyond the idea of sustaining an identity with other actors. It means

using dramaturgical tools that help an individual both adapt as well as mentally and emotionally cope in response to various social encounters and life events.

"Dramaturgical distancing metaphors" emerges as one such key strategy in the identity distress coping process. Two relevant self-actualization movements are examined with such metaphors in mind: the "Get out of your head" gurus and the "Be comfortable in your skin" movement. While the complex, therapeutic versus training aims of some of these practices are often intentionally ambiguous and confusing, some students are nevertheless able to take up certain insightful and transformational strategies for coping with various iterations of identity distress.

Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork and case studies with students in these three performance pedagogies, this dissertation analyzes how individuals use dramaturgical tools to make sense of, navigate, and cope with identity distress in everyday life in America. I analyzed dramaturgical face-work and identity distress coping processes as both in-the-moment events and longer term threats and memories impacting identity distress-related meaning-making processes.

Kay, a trans, non-binary individual and Neo-Futurism student, transforms into the paradoxical "helpless barista," Zainab, a mixed race American Muslim woman, mobilizes distancing metaphors from improv and exposure therapy to reframe her sense of agency from "turf" to "yes and," while Alex, an autistic, face blind clown play student, enacts an absurdist persona and stance that fits with the illogical nature of American interaction culture. Through a novel synthesis of face-work theory, emotional labor, stigma management, clinical literatures, theatre theory, and more, combined with the new empirical data presented around identity distress coping in everyday life, this study offers a new framework and perspective on everyday

mental health coping, distress, and impression management. Thus a non-exhaustive set of coping and intervention tools centered on everyday, real-time, identity-threatening, mental health management are described in detail based on the ethnographic observations and case studies; this approach means understanding the relationship between identity and mental health as a process during and through the everyday dramaturgical work of social encounter. This everyday mental health process is fraught given the tensions between individuals' strivings for successful self-image versus authentic identity acceptance within the socio-historical context of mental health, values, and image management in the United States. A six-stage model of how identity distress coping processes operate in everyday interaction is presented drawing on the case studies and participant sample to map coping trajectories which differ depending primarily on levels of authenticity, awareness, synthesis, dramaturgical distancing, and social communion; play and reimagining emerge as successful dramaturgical strategies for an identity distress coping process that leads to decreased identity distress and an increase in face-work-relieving conditions, or face-ease, as well as an enhanced dramaturgical toolkit and attunement for future coping.

INTRODUCTION

The General Research Problem and Its Significance

The general research problem this project addresses is the complex nature of contemporary mental health concerns and how they are proliferated, addressed, understood, and experienced in the United States. In unpacking identity distress (both the DSM category and Stephen Berman's work, analyzed in detail in Chapter 1), qualitatively and ethnographically, this study offers a new framework for understanding the grey, often hidden area of everyday mental suffering in its relationship to everyday social encounter. The hard-to-pinpoint, at times contradictory relationship between success and wellbeing is at the crux of this complexity. The more specific research focus is on identity development and self-actualization strivings among American college students and post-college adults in Chicago; how these strivings increasingly center on problems of successful image management and identity-related stress and coping; and how opportunities to address these problems are supported by a variety of markets and other societal institutions, including a variety of theatrical, performance-based practices. Image-making practices of this type thus allow insight into the interplay of image, identity and distress for many American adults actively seeking self-development today and provide a window into understanding contemporary mental health as a dynamic process. Traditional mental health approaches using standardized assessment inventories, often developed in an earlier era, are unable to capture the importance of these emerging psycho-socio-cultural dynamics. A new framework is thus revealed through ethnography: identity distress is unpacked as a process wherein individuals can choose multiple coping trajectories in response to their experienced psychosocial tensions. This novel understanding of identity distress process also offers insight into how mental health "events" are socio-cultural, dynamic, and may exist in a grey area that

doesn't have to necessitate crisis-level alarm and yet does necessitate preventative attention and perhaps most importantly, communion and inclusive, communion-oriented practices.

General Approach to the Problem: Theories and Methods to be Used

The present work examines the complex identity distress process through an interdisciplinary approach using a range of methods. Theoretical approaches and concepts draw from history, cultural analysis, developmental psychology, mental health research, sociology, sociolinguistics, psychological anthropology, metaphor studies, cognitive linguistics, theatre and performance theory, and pedagogical precepts. The original theory, analysis, and argument of this dissertation are built and developed from the foundation of earlier approaches which combined offer a system of analysis for managing impressions, face, and stigma (Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967; O'Brien, 2011), imagination and boundaries of the self (Stanislavski, 1954; Tust-Gunn, 1995; Burgoyne, 1999), emotion expression and stress (Hoshchild, 1983/2012), a self-system (Hermans, 2006), and the possibility of social defeat (Luhrmann, 2007 and the original empirical data gathered by this study through interdisciplinary methods.

Methods include pilot interviews, ethnographic participant-observation, analysis of media and literary artifacts, and extensive follow-up interviews over time. In particular, image-making, performative, and identity distress coping practices are studied here using an empirical approach that involves both participants' self-report of their experiences and reflections and my own direct participation in and observation of organized group interactions. In this work, theatre pedagogies and classrooms provide key sites to examine specific and deliberate image-making, performative, and identity distress coping perspectives as they are explicitly taught and taken up by participants in terms of re-imagining the self and characters or personas of everyday life interaction rules, perspectives, and the relevant metaphors involved.

Theoretical and Applied Aims and Methodological Overview

This study has four theoretical and applied research aims described here.

The primary theoretical research aims are the following:

1. To qualitatively and ethnographically locate the everyday phenomenon "identity distress" in group interactive contexts as well as on an individual meaning-making level, thus establishing and clarifying the relationship between identity and mental health in the contemporary United States in the city of Chicago, among American college students and post-college adults, ages 18-52, of a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds including Asian, Latin American, Caucasian, Mixed Race, African American, including US-born individuals (from first generation and on) and immigrants, and from low income to upper middle class socioeconomic backgrounds. Notably, while there was a range of ethnic backgrounds in all of the classrooms, the majority ethnicity in the focal classrooms was Caucasian and all of the teachers and facilitators were Caucasian. To locate identity distress, the study will describe and analyze the "identity distress" phenomenon from both an etic perspective as well as in relation to emic idioms of distress as described in the vernacular in relation to relevant sociocultural and historical movements.
2. To establish identity distress as a dynamic socio-cultural-psychological process phenomenon that occurs regularly in everyday interactions and demonstrates that mental health exists on a spectrum of experience, or within a nuanced "grey area" rather than on a binary of "well" and "ill" as implied by the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, currently on its 5th iteration (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). To achieve this, the process will be studied through identity

distress-related coping processes. The study will thus detail how strategies from group practices are taken up by individual participants in their coping processes for mediating everyday suffering as well as the histories and philosophies of these practices in order to demonstrate the socio-cultural underpinnings of identity distress.

The complementary applied research aims include:

3. Addressing the urgent societal problem in the United States around the grey area of everyday mental suffering and the rising numbers of mental disorders in general by indicating potential intervention strategies and offering a non-pathologized language for such everyday suffering by incorporating and clarifying the relationship with identity issues.
4. Employing a qualitative methodological approach for studying this mental health phenomenon which was previously limited to Likert scale studies and postulation without evidence about the social, psychological, cultural, and historical implications of the distress (Berman et al., 2004; Hernandez et al., 2006; Berman et al., 2009; Kamps & Berman, 2011; Gfellner et al., 2011; Wiley et al., 2011; Wiley & Berman, 2012; Berman & Montgomery, 2014; Berman & Weems, 2016[2]).

[2] In the *Encyclopedia of Adolescence,* Berman and Weems (2016) offer:

> It has been suggested that Identity Problems may be on the rise because of factors such as immigration and globalization leading to a possible clash of cultures and resulting in identity confusion (Arnett, 2002), modern society becoming more complex, diverse, and pluralistic (Berman et al., 2004, leading to an increase in options regarding values, behavior, and life-styles, as well as an increase in conflict between adolescent peer values and parental or societal values (American Psychiatric Association, 1987). Greater attention to the role of identity issues and identity distress in clinical research and practice is probably warranted.

This wide range of unexplored arguments an example of the need for qualitatively rigorous research on identity distress.

Chapters Overview and Central Argument

Chapter 1 provides an historical and theoretical overview of the focus on self-image and the role of image management in contemporary mental health and its historical underpinnings in America. The problem of "happiness" in the US is first presented. The primary aim of the study is first established for developing a new framework for understanding mental health as a social and interactive phenomenon closely tied with image-making and impression management in the contemporary United States. The discussion reviews the literature on identity distress as a construct and presents other relevant supporting research and theory on contemporary understandings of identity and idioms of distress. Existing mental health theories pertaining to everyday mental health experience and suffering, including the existing identity distress theory, are argued to be too pathologizing, narrow, and overlooking the impactful component of social interaction processes.

The primary theoretical groundwork of the study is set up by building on Goffmanian impression management (1959), face-work (1963), stigma theory (1967) and O'Brien's stigma management theory (2011), which offer a system of understanding and analysis around the maintenance and performance of positive impressions of the self in everyday life interactions with interlocuters in relation to various potential social statuses and stigmas, expanding on Hoshchild's (1983) engagement with Stanislavkian acting pedagogy in her emotional labor theory which locates dramaturgical, stressful efforts around the performance of emotion expression in everyday public and private social interactions, combining it with Hubert Hermans' (2006) self-system which proposes the self structure as a hierarchical theatre of voices reflected both in one's mind and externally in social relationships and interactions, extrapolating on work from Tust-Gunn (1995) and Burgoyne (1999) on boundary blurring which examines the

relationship between an actor's everyday life identity and the embodiment of an imagined character, and drawing on Luhrmann's (2007) work on social defeat which demonstrates social defeat as a feared outcome in everyday interactions locatable in the described speech events of her interviewees and contributing the concept of "identity objectives" as encompassing what is important to an interlocutor at a particular interactional moment. These processes are also socio-historically contextualized in relation to American values and mental health history which tends to focus on the image of wellness and happiness as success. Thus, when identity objectives are threatened, we feel identity distress, experience fight or flight symptoms, and attempt to correct for perceived social missteps which may include hiding our distress at all costs. While the work of managing the self system is compounded by stigma management (O'Brien, 2011) and the individual has to do more strenuous dramaturgy to cope, "face-ease" in communion with others is a key factor in identity distress mitigation and coping process: it means the individual is able to embody an authentic sense of self that is validated by interlocutors. "Face-ease" is a way to counter the stressful realities of everyday face-work, emotional labor, and stigma management, all potential contributing factors to identity distress and participants transferred certain face-easing practices and perspectives into everyday life because they lightened the pressures of stressful everyday social encounters. A role developed in a face-easing context with supportive interlocuters is thus ideal for a dominant, secure self-position which is important as a protective factor in moments of social and stigma threat. In such a moment, an individual can reimagine and even transform the social encounter from their empowered self-position and protect their mental health. Dramaturgy offers sophisticated tools for image management and wellbeing in the everyday.

Chapter 2 examines the continually developing and emerging, at-times paradoxical relationship between theatre and therapy (as well as theatre and therapeutic pedagogy) as a way to address the emotional labor, stigma, self-actualization, face-work and overall image management concerns which comprise identity distress management and coping. Theatrical safe spaces and teaching practices are argued to be prime sites for studying the relationship between mental health, identity, and culture through identity distress given the American cultural contest in which image and audience approval is paramount. The three primary theatre pedagogy field sites where the ethnographic study is conducted are introduced: Neo-Futurism, an autobiographical, nonfictional, short form, and time-compressed theatre training and practice designed by Greg Allen to cope with his own performance anxiety in traditional theatrical settings, Social Anxiety Improv Bootcamp, a semi-clinical, semi-commercial hybrid of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy—particularly Exposure Therapy and improv training games offered by a clinical psychologist in collaboration with teachers at an improv school and performance center as an alternative treatment for a variety of DSM diagnoses impacting the ability to interact successfully in everyday life, and Clown Play, a combination of clown training methods taught by Jay Torrence which concentrates on tuning into authentic self-experience of emotion, positive connection and trust of the audience and one's play partners, social-psychological inhibitions, and everyday anxieties around failure in front of an audience, as an origin point for creating an exaggerated clown version of the self. Each of these three pedagogies demonstrates how theatre practices may facilitate coping with everyday identity challenges, particularly for anyone with stigmatized or marginalized identit(ies).

Each performative method is introduced as offering strategies for one's "dramaturgical toolkit," or their personal assortment of performance strategies to adapt in unpredictable social

encounters. “Dramaturgical distancing metaphors” emerges as one such key strategy in the identity distress coping process. Two relevant self-actualization movements are examined with such metaphors in mind: the “Get out of your head” gurus and the “Be comfortable in your skin” movement. While the complex, therapeutic versus training aims of some of these practices are often intentionally ambiguous and confusing, some students are nevertheless able to take up certain insightful and transformational strategies for coping with various iterations of identity distress.

Chapter 3 uses preliminary interview and questionnaire data from a purposive, theoretical sample of 37 college students to explore the concept and experience of identity distress and the “face-easing” practices for coping with it. The phases of research, sample sites, and emergent themes particularly authenticity and acceptance versus actualization are explained and a few preliminary cases analyzed in detail. A descriptive chart presents results around identity objectives which divide into the two primary categories of acceptance versus actualization-oriented objectives. Face-easing strategies that individuals used for coping with identity distress associated with not achieving specific objectives are also listed. This preliminary work revealed the salient contemporary use of theatre concepts and practices in both addressing and offering insight onto identity stress issues. This in turn ultimately shaped the theoretical focus of the thesis and motivated the deeper ethnographic research described in the next three chapters, which examine individuals who actively use theatre concepts and practices in their self-actualization and image management.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 thus present case studies of individuals actively using theatrical concepts and practices as a form of self-therapy, helping them cope with particular mental health challenges and achieve their self-actualization goals. Chapter 4 presents the ethnographic field

site and practice of Neo-Futurism and examines the case study of Kay, a non-binary, transgender person. Kay is an everyday activist yet one who adapts to frequent misgendering in a cis-normative work environment through an adapted archetypal character, “the helpless barista” and a set of emotional displays that are authentic to Kay and to the character. The powerless character allows customers to keep certain stereotypical gender binary ideas intact. Kay does a kind of life-adapted *perezhivania*: they create a character to match the authentic emotional experience they are already having in a way that is socially acceptable.

Chapter 5 presents the ethnographic field site and practice of Social Anxiety Improv and examines the case study of Zainab, a first generation, Muslim, mixed-race woman of color from a family that gave her two names, one American, one Muslim, and an identity conflict that shows itself in her mind freezing in high stakes social situations. Zainab uses the playful stance from SAI of “it’s not that serious” along with the concept of “exposures” to throw herself into situations she finds terrifying from talking to her landlady to accepting social invitations. When she removes her hijab to work as a hostess at a non-Muslim American restaurant where her boss trusts her decisions, she discovers that she can survive without her mind freezing and the complicated character and self-position of the competent hostess is born.

Chapter 6 presents the ethnographic field site and practice of Clown Play and examines the case study of Alex, a neuro-atypical, autistic man who can’t see faces. Clown Play is a university performance course that gently helps students with their social skills, including holding eye contact, through clown performance exercises. As one’s clown is founded on the authentic emotions and personality of the performer, students are invited to showcase their defenses and proclivities in an exaggerated manner. For Alex, this means developing a bouffant version of himself to make light of his own tendencies to over-control. The bouffant is an

excellent fit for Alex who already uses a combination of comedic and improvisational techniques to deal with the unpredictable absurdity of everyday logic.

Chapter 7 presents the final results and analysis, tables and figures demonstrating the emergent overall model, concluding thoughts, and recommendations for future research and intervention on the effective mitigation of identity distress surrounding the challenges of stigma (e.g., the islamophobia, racism, transphobia, autism labeling, and numerous other potential stigmas and sources of bias dealt with by interviewees), emotional expression, and overall image management experienced by self-enhancement focused adults in contemporary America, which in the present work include both college students and post college self-enhancement seekers. Final theoretical conclusions include two non-exhaustive tables (Tables 2B and 3), describing identity objectives, and corresponding face-easing or coping strategies from specific performance pedagogies, as well as a diagram (Figure 8), illustrating the dynamic model of the identity distress process as it occurs along a series of decision points. Identity distress coping trajectories are theorized along two stages of decision-making: in the moment of the identity distress encounter and post-hoc. Levels of authentic connection with one's interlocuters versus camouflaging one's identity or identity distress through fictional characters and backstories, as well as longer-term coping decisions, determine whether individuals experience greater face-ease or perpetuated identity distress. The importance of face-easing spaces, de-stigmatization, the understanding of everyday mental health as an interactive phenomenon, and a non-pathologized language for everyday mental health and suffering are emphasized in the conclusion along with suggestions for future interventions and research.

CHAPTER 1

“Fear of Fears”
Pinpointing American Distress:
Identity Development and Mental Health in the Contemporary US

Introduction

In 2016, I conducted a series of exploratory interviews in Chicago with a range of college students around identity distress and was struck by my interviewees’ focus on the dramatic work of identity performance in everyday encounters, in the settings of greatest importance to their identities which included academic, professional, and social contexts. “If they ask what my parents do, you know, I’d be like, ‘oh you know, my mom’s a secretary,’” because “…you don’t want to show any form of weakness. No form of inferiority.” Explained, Robert, a low-income Latino scholarship student at an elite and predominantly white, high-income university. Robert typically omitted where he’s from or even made up a fictional story about his parents when speaking to his college peers.

Like many of my interviewees, Robert was a practiced manipulator of image and success in social encounter. Suffering and hardship were forms of stigma to hide under a well-curated façade because college had taught him that “…the United States, it’s a very unequal place for a lot of the population…there’s a very small percentage of people that are very well equipped.” Robert’s performance of a “very well equipped” character version of himself is reflective of the complex mental and social dramaturgy that success-driven young people often find themselves having to engage in in everyday American life. This early discovery of complex dramaturgy around image for college students, and most explicitly for theatre majors, led me to a series of ethnographic studies in performance classrooms (both in college and in a semi-clinical commercial setting). Surely examining pedagogies of drama as they are taken up by students

could help address the everyday drama management that appeared embedded in everyday contemporary American life.

This path did prove fruitful and what became evident in both students' classroom sharing and one-on-one interviews was that this complex dramaturgy can become distressing to the point of mental breakdown while in other instances it can provide possibilities for authentic self-development and social connection. It is indicative of the fraught nexus between identity, the specific processes of performance and negotiation of identity in everyday social encounter, and mental health in the modern United States, the focal point of this study. This first chapter details the relevance and background of the theoretical and social problems to be examined, namely the need to develop a better understanding of the relationship between identity, culture, stigma, performance, and everyday mental health in the United States. The chapter establishes the historical and theoretical groundwork for the proposal of a novel framework centered on non-stigmatized, everyday mental health processes for understanding this problem. The aim is to establish this framework by first exploring and then redefining the mental health phenomenon of "identity distress."

Challenges of Current Theories and Research to Identity and Mental Health Processes

Introduction

This section provides an overview of challenges, gaps and inadequacies in previous theories and research relevant to this study including previous studies of identity distress, identity development, emerging adulthood, identity and emotion, identity and suffering, identity and mental disorder, possible selves and the paradox and assumptions of the self-actualization framework on which the construct and diagnosis of identity distress was based. The goal is to proceed with a critical eye to discourses that are embedded in the institutionalized frameworks

around self-understanding in America in order to move towards a more effective paradigm for understanding identity distress. In examining the relationship between mental health and identity, this study is in conversation with what has been understood as an ever-increasing mental health crisis in the US particularly in relation to (but not limited to) anxiety.[3]

The main problem this study engages with is that the acknowledged wellbeing, identity, and distress crisis faced by individuals in the contemporary United States is not well encapsulated by existing theories. They are too technical, narrow, and quantitative to capture the problem. We'll review these theories and take them into account in building a more thorough understanding of what we'll refer to throughout the dissertation as "identity distress" a term initially coined by the DSM and studied quantitatively. In contrast with mainstream American psychiatric understandings of mental health, this study traces everyday mental suffering and experience through a broader, qualitative, and non-pathologized lens.

Origins and Assumptions of Identity Distress as a Construct

The construct "identity distress" was generated by psychologists in various editions of their standard guidelines in the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual* (American Psychiatric Association, 1980; 1987; 1994), commonly referred to as the DSM,[4]and studied by a number of psychologists quantitatively through Stephen Berman's (2004) Identity Distress Scale. Berman's (2004) scale and the Identity Disorder diagnosis assumes one knows what identity and identity-related distress means to modern Americans. "Identity Disorder" was first defined in the DSM-III as "severe subjective distress regarding [the] inability to reconcile aspects of the self into a

[3] "Anxiety" was the most common vernacular diagnosis named by this group of participants, but many others came up as well in relation to everyday distress experiences, "depression" is another common term in the vernacular for everyday distress.
[4] There have been 9 editions of the DSM, starting with the DSM-I published in 1952. The most recent edition is the DSM-V, published in 2013. The editions most significant in terms of Identity Distress as a diagnosis were the DSM 3-R in 1987 in which it was categorized as an "Identity Disorder" and the DSM-IV in 1994 in which it was categorized as an "Identity Problem."

relatively coherent and acceptable sense of self" (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, p. 65). The initial DSM-III and DSM-III-R diagnosis of Identity Disorder was based on excessive distress symptoms in relation to major areas or markers of modern American success, adulthood, and adjustment. In order to be diagnosed, symptoms had to last for a least three months and they had to cause impairment in social or occupational functioning. It was understood as an existential crisis in that Identity Disorder was "epitomized by the individual asking the question 'Who am I?'" (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, p. 65). In the DSM-IV, it was reclassified as Identity Problem and listed under the heading of "Other Conditions That May Be a Focus of Clinical Attention," in part because clinicians were not using it very much but also because there wasn't enough empirical research to help clinicians understand Identity Disorder in their patients.

Berman (2014) lamented the resulting lack of attention in recent years to identity distress having been demoted to a "V Code"[5] in the DSM-IV, meaning it was now more likely to be understood as only an additional descriptor rather than the primary diagnosis.[6] The diagnosis has altogether disappeared in the DSM-V, the latest iteration of the DSM. What is currently present in terms of identity in the DSM is an evolving definition of Gender Dysphoria as well as Cultural Identity. Both of these are relevant to the present study and its reformulation of identity distress as sociocultural and interactive process: Gender Dysphoria can be understood as identity distress around the authenticity of one's identity in interaction with others, while Cultural Identity is the current DSM understanding of how "ecological" factors influence mental health experience and distress in relation to race, culture and ethnicity dynamics.

[5] The V Codes are a back section of the DSM containing additional descriptive factors that clinicians can code in their diagnosis, these are not usually identified as the primary diagnosis and reason for the clinical encounter, however.
[6] Primary diagnosis indicates the official coded diagnoses sent to, recognized by, and funded by American insurance companies.

The DSM-V is even accompanied by a Handbook on the Cultural Formulation Interview (2015), a progressive but as yet insufficient attempt to understand the mental health-identity relationship. While the supplementary materials such as the Handbook detail a formulaic interview in order to encourage and train clinicians to be aware of culture as an ecological factor, including attention to cultural idioms of distress discussed later in this chapter, in the very structural layout of the DSM itself there is still a problematic disconnect in terms of comprehending everyday identity-related interactions in relation to distress and suffering. There is an insufficient understanding of the connection between the diagnosis of symptoms and how sociocultural processes are integral to everyday mental health experience rather than simply "factors" to take into consideration. In reality, these so-called (cultural) factors may represent a complete alternative to the default understanding and diagnosis presumed by the DSM.

Cultural psychiatrist Laurence Kirmayer points out in the Conclusion of the Handbook on the Cultural Formulation Interview, "One dilemma that the CFI [Cultural Formulation Interview] may not sufficiently address is that identity is a co-construction that emerges at the boundaries between different cultures, communities, and ways of being. Identity is always vis-à-vis another" (Kirmayer, 2015, [unpaginated])… While Kirmayer is correct in pointing out the interactive nature of identity, he unfortunately keeps the problematic "boundary" metaphor, reifying culture in spite of his own earlier warning against reification. This tendency to reify also feeds into the primary metaphor of the DSM: that mental "illnesses" are equivalent to biological illnesses which can be isolated in separate, bounded entities and categories, and identified by consistent and quantifiable symptoms. As Karter and Kamens explain, "On a relational level, the biggest problem with the DSM may be that the categories get in the way of actually listening to the lived

experiences of those they are intended to describe" (Karter and Kamens, 2019, p. 51).[7] This mentality may also influence individuals to understand themselves through this limited framework, inflicting a potential "nocebo" effect where "…self-stigma and identification with an illness following a diagnosis may have negative effects on individual patients" (Karter and Kamens, 2019, p. 51 referencing Rief et al., 2006 and Spiegel, 1997).

Psychologist Stephen Berman's array of studies have attempted to demonstrate the importance of identity distress by adhering to this modern culture of medical treatment and biology-like diagnosis of mental suffering. Further, in an attempt to measure distress related to normative development based on Erikson's model (Erikson, 1968), psychologists Berman, Montgomery, and Kurtine (2004), created a measure of "Identity Distress" or IDS in order to diagnose "Identity Problem," or "Identity Disorder." The confusion of the "Identity Disorder" model is embedded in the paradox that "identity crisis"[8] is somehow both normative and pathological and exposes the need for a more nuanced theory of everyday distress, eustress, and experience around identity processes. Nevertheless, the values embedded in the IDS offered a possibility for expanding on the phenomenon. The full list comprising IDS included a 5 point Likert scale of distress asking participants to rate whether they had been recently upset, distressed, or worried over the following issues: long-term goals, career choice, friendship patterns, sexual orientation and behavior, religious identification, moral value systems, and group loyalties.

[7] Karter and Kamens (2019) provide a literature review of the many critiques of the DSM over the years coming from psychiatrists, psychologists, scholars from sciences and humanities, as well as service users, families, and diverse stakeholder groups. The DSM has been critiqued on multiple levels and Karter and Kamens also provide an ecological model for categorizing them.

[8] The APA definition of Identity Disorder essentially institutionalized the Eriksonian identity crisis theory, the idea being that if an individual does not settle on a certain coherent and acceptable set of identifications, such as around friends, family, sexuality and religion, one is "in crisis."

Prior research on identity distress, though limited to quantitative studies, included some interesting psychosocial correlations with the IDS, demonstrating that groups societally expected to be working on their identities or at times of identity flux or change, had significant distress rates in relation to some of the identity development expectations represented by the IDS themes.[9] These correlations included: moratorium status among high school students (Berman et al., 2009), internalizing and externalizing symptoms and behaviors among at-risk adolescent high school students (Hernandez et al., 2009), body image concerns among college students (Kamps & Berman, 2011), post-traumatic stress symptoms among men and women aged 18-86 following Hurricane Katrina (Wiley et al., 2011), and social support appraisal and student adjustment among college students (Gfellner et al., 2011). These studies point towards identity distress as a relevant modern phenomenon worthy of further exploration.

In contrast to these prior approaches, the present study is not attempting to prove the importance of identity distress by providing evidence of it as a demonstrable medical pathology or to contribute to the Eriksonian crisis model of identity development. Rather, this study argues that identity distress is important even though it might not be a pathology nor limited to strictly individual development and experience. Rather identity distress as a non-pathologized process can illustrate mental experience as a fluctuating socially interactive and dynamic process in everyday life. This process is inextricable from everyday socio-cultural exchange and consists of a nuanced spectrum of positive and negative stress experiences for interlocuters. These experiences are often influenced by a myriad of cultural, social structural, and psychological factors and importantly by potential stigma or "spoiled identity" characteristics the potential "spoiling effect" of which may elicit distress. Performative strategies around maintaining

[9] These identity distress scale themes included: long term goals, career choice, friendships, sexual orientation and behavior, religion, values or beliefs, and group loyalties

(interpersonal) authenticity in these encounters will turn out to be key and will be analyzed carefully throughout this study.

Historical Background: What's a happy person in the US?

This section sets up the historical groundwork for exploring the intersection of identity, culture, and mental health in the United States. It is imperative to understand the historical underpinnings of distress in order to understand the modern American case, historically termed "American Nervousness," as it is manifest in contemporary everyday life.

"American Nervousness"

"Welfare" and mental health in the US is linked with historically-rooted expectations of an arduous striving towards personal and societal ideals of success and happiness. "The ordinary life of production and reproduction" (Taylor, 1989, p. 23) is anything but. The Puritans and Calvinists who provided much of the foundational framework of the American sociological imagination strove for an extraordinary level of production and reproduction in their identity strivings, never satisfied and never quite good enough for God:

> For the saints' everlasting rest is in the next world; on earth man must, to be certain of his state of grace, 'do the works of him who sent him, as long as it is yet day'….Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. (Weber, 1958, p. 157)

If rest is a sin, then the modern "restlessness" that is symptomatic of American ennui and striving, and inability to be satisfied or happy is part of this phenomenon. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed in 1835:

> In America I saw the freest and most enlightened men, placed in the happiest circumstances which the world affords: it seemed to me as if a cloud habitually hung upon their brow, and I thought them serious and almost sad even in their pleasures... [They] are forever brooding over advantages they do not possess. It is strange to see with

> what feverish ardor the Americans pursue their own welfare; and to watch the vague dread that constantly torments them lest they should not have chosen the shortest path which may lead to it. (de Tocqueville, 1835, p. 163)

This tortured pursuit of “welfare” or in contemporary terms, “success,” and its “feverish ardor” is a key historical underpinning of identity distress in the United States. Notably, Americans “…are forever brooding over advantages they do not possess,” *he wrote (de Tocqueville, 1835, p. 163).* Notably, this “torment” around falling short in the pursuit of happiness (claimed to be an unalienable right by the Declaration of Independence in 1776,) appeared to have a pattern of “feverish” comparing in the mind of the pursuer which prevented the possibility of being satisfied with the present “happiest of circumstances.” Tocqueville also observed that Americans had the most insanity of any nation that he had seen, perhaps especially visible in their “American nervousness” (Beard, 1881; Susman, 2003).

Toqueville’s observations imply that mental suffering in America has roots in the evasive pursuit of an image of happiness as success. This is a success reified in possessions and qualities that one does not currently have and is therefore restless, possessed of a “feverish ardor” in pursuit of these “advantages.” The onus is on the individual to take successful actions and to make successful choices. If every action or choice has the potential to lead to success and therefore happiness, then the success or failure of everyday performance becomes high stakes: the present focus is on performance and success versus failure in social interactions in particular. This focus allows for a dynamic and dialogic perspective on mental health and suffering and is well-suited to the study of identity distress which has to do with one’s sense of achievement versus lack thereof along a variety of potential social identity parameters (Berman et al., 2004; American Psychiatric Association, 1980; 1987; 1994).

In neurologist George M. Beard's 1881 manuscript on American nervousness, he describes a "nervous diathesis" that he linked to developments of modern civilization, everything from the perfection of clocks and watches to the increase in the mental activity of women. Beard's claims, while questionable, notably took into account significant cultural and historical developments. Of the page and a half of symptoms described by Dr. Beard, they include

> …fear of lightning, or ***fear of responsibility,*** of open places or of closed places, ***fear of society, fear of being alone, fear of fears,*** fear of contamination, ***fear of everything,*** deficient mental control, ***lack of decision in trifling matters, hopelessness,*** deficient thirst and capacity for assimilating fluids…." (Beard, 1881, p. 7, emphasis mine)

This grouping together of fear symptoms, notably fear types that sound boundless and self-generating in the diagnoses like "fear of everything" and "fear of fears," demonstrates an idiom of distress that is socio-culturally broader and still locatable today under both anxiety and depression symptoms. "Fear of society" sounds akin to fear of social failure or defeat (Luhrmann, 2007), as well as potentially fear of not achieving an image of success and happiness through one's actions indicated in "fear of responsibility" and "lack of decision in trifling matters." This early connection between mental health and identity is mostly lost in the DSM's narrow diagnostic categories, with the identity distress diagnosis representing a rare exception.[10]

Increasing Mental Health Problems Pinpointed Among "Emerging Adults" in Contemporary America

Recent studies have made the pervasiveness of identity distress and everyday suffering in America evident, particularly among emerging adults. Much of the recent work on coping among college and "emerging"[11] adults focuses on alarmingly high or increasing rates of anxiety[12] and

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[10] The makers of the DSM do attempt to incorporate contemporary cultural developments for new diagnoses (e.g., "Internet Gaming Disorder" in the DSM-V) but even these historically-specific diagnoses are limited to a set of symptoms and not clearly connected to broader sociocultural influences around American distress idioms or identity and identity development in the US.

[11] From age 18 until the late 20's, or early to mid 30's depending on the study.

[12] Anxiety disorder prevalence in the US population overall is 18.1% and was found to be the most prevalent class of the disorders in a sample of English-speaking adults ages 18-44 across the Côtérminous United States (Kessler et al., 2005).

depression, and self-destructive behaviors like self-injury, alcoholism, sexual promiscuity, and transmission of STDs (Duncan et al., 2005; Zivin et al., 2009; DeSimone 2010; Bersamin et al., 2012; Armey et al., 2012). From the more phenomenological and somewhat less pathologized perspective, terms like "meaninglessness" and "emptiness" have been commonly used to describe the psyche of individuals between the ages of 18 to 29 (Adams et al., 2001; Berman et al., 2009; Côté, 2002) pointing towards a grey area of everyday suffering that is not well understood.

Journalists catalyze these studies into a worry that is publicly proliferated: "Why are more American Teenagers than ever suffering from Severe Anxiety?" (*New York Times*, October 11, 2017).[13] "Anxiety has overtaken depression," the article exclaims "as the most common reason college students seek counseling services." This anxiety about anxiety is arguably a self-perpetuating American nightmare, or the flipside of the American dream but what's especially notable is how common the term "anxiety" (and other mental disorder terms e.g. depression, PTSD), have become in the vernacular.[14]

The American mental health challenge as represented in the popular imagination is twofold and inextricably tied to achievement and image: First, what if the so-called perfect life and audience-ready version of oneself is impossible to achieve? And second: what if it is simply impossible to control the symptoms of distress that come with imperfection? The existing quantitative work is a hapless if standard way of handling an ambiguous, hard-to-pinpoint psycho-socio-cultural problem. The self-help movement, the contemplative science movement,

[13] This recent *New York Times* piece by Benoit Denizet-Lewis declares how anxious American teenagers are and attempts to gain insight on the source: is it having to present a perfect image of oneself on social media, is it grades and pressure to succeed in school, societal pressures, terrorism, over-coddling, smart phones?
[14] A Google news search on the term "anxiety" yields 84,700,000 hits (November 22, 2019). One of the articles of the day that appears on November 22nd is titled "20 IG Cartoonists Who Totally Get Your Anxiety (And 5 Who Inspire You to Power Through)."

and other emergent alternative therapies are arguably a response to inadequate solutions and therefore sites to pinpoint identity distress coping processes and impression management concerns "in the wild" while paradoxically these self-enhancing and self-actualizing movements are themselves arguably a continuation of Americanitis worries and desires.

The Paradox of Self-Actualization

"Self-actualization," a construct relevant for understanding objectives relevant to identity distress, was first coined as a term by American psychologist Kurt Goldstein and understood as the ultimate goal of all organisms, and then developed in various iterations by other humanist psychologists in the United States with a consistent focus on human potential (Goldstein, 1939; Maslow, 1943; Rogers, 1963). Abraham Maslow wrote of self-actualization as the highest in a hierarchy of needs, and one that presupposed a kind of authentic, essentialist potential:

> A musician must make music, a poet must write, an artist must paint, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man *can* be, he *must* be. This need we may call self-actualization…It refers to the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming. (Maslow, 1943, p. 382)

Twenty-six years after Maslow's first paper, humanist psychiatrist Frederick Perls identified one contradiction in actualization ideology (both in the theory and its everyday uptake). He pointed out that actualization theory was being taken up as "self-image actualization" rather than "self-actualization:"

> Shall I now draw the conclusion that self-glorification is the genuine interest for which I live, that I slave and labor in the service of the image of the Great Fritz Perls? That I do not actualize my *self*, but a self-*concept*? (Perls, 1969, p. 14)

Maslow himself eventually agreed with Perls' critique regarding self-glorification as a potentially harmful interpretation of actualization. Whereas his initial 1943 paper placed the esteem needs as a prerequisite to the actualization needs, later in a 1971 paper he argued that the

most actualized people were in fact beyond many of these needs: “they do not need or seek for or even enjoy very much flattery, applause, popularity, status, prestige, money, honors, etc." (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1971). In tension with placing the most actualized people beyond the esteem needs, Maslow presented an explicit hierarchy of who he claimed were the greatest and most accomplished self-actualizers in his 1971 paper. Maslow includes in this list of “great men” Albert Einstein and Aldous Huxley and calls them “the transcenders:”

> Not only are such people lovable as are all of the most self-actualizing people, but they are also more awe-inspiring, more ‘unearthly,’ more godlike, more ‘saintly’ in the medieval sense, more easily revered, more ‘terrible’ in the older sense. They have more often produced in me the thought, ‘This is a great man.’ (Maslow, 1971, p. 288)

Maslow himself admits in the same book to the “…deep conflicts of elitism inherent to any doctrine of self-actualization” (Maslow, 1971, p. 289), which identifies superior and inferior self-actualizers. Maslow’s description also includes the superior actualizers’ sensibilities towards music and art, so that there is echo here of Bourdieu’s (1979) typology of taste in that it regiments a hierarchy of actualizers.[15]

Frederick Perls’ critique of an image-oriented uptake of actualization by individuals in their everyday lives[16] can be viewed as a precursor to “possible selves theory” almost 20 years later which signified the continued focus on self-image actualization in American society. Possible selves theory hinges upon the success or failure of the self-image without any noticeable reflexivity on the embedded moral judgments:

> Possible selves are the ideal selves we would very much like to become. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming. The possible selves that are hoped for might include the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thin self, or the loved and admired self, whereas the dreaded possible selves could be the alone self, the depressed self, the incompetent self, the alcoholic self, the unemployed self, or the bag lady self. (Markus and Nurius, 1986)

[15] This actualization paradox was a consistent theme for the participants of the present study as will be evident in Chapters 3-6.
[16] Perls studied himself and his own self-contradictory strivings as well as that of his psychotherapy patients. His book, written in a stream-of-consciousness style, reads as a critique of the contradictions embedded in his own thinking processes.

Unsurprisingly the studies exploring possible selves theory have examined elite, career-oriented individuals such as professional athletes (Hickey and Roderick, 2017). It seems that possible selves theory takes a popularized self-concept or *self-image focused actualization ideology* for granted as the primary self and identity objectives that define psychosocial development. The present study aims to correct the short-sightedness of theories such as "possible selves" in their limited focus on self-concept or self-image by examining individuals' identity stresses with an eye towards the uptake of culturally available discourses and practices aimed at shaping psychological development including those propagated by popular psychological theorists. Self-actualization (and its offshoots) as a popularized framework will be examined in the analysis of meaning-making as it relates to identity distress, particularly in relation to identity objectives detailed in a later section.

The Rise of the Image

"The world, in truth, is a wedding," wrote Erving Goffman (1959, p.23) in his seminal work, *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, in which he employed the dramaturgical metaphor for analyzing everyday social interactions and identity-construction within those interactions in his studies of American social life and identity presentation in the late 1950's and throughout the 60's. Contemporary reality as portrayed on social media oftentimes does seem like a wedding as far as the moral values of a society being portrayed in its public performances: perfect "wedding-type" boasts displaying happiness as social, professional, and personal success are on display for audiences of thousands these days frequently including announcements and images of "happy" life events such as weddings, births, etc. (Wesch, 2009; Marwick & Boyd, 2010; Sorokanich, 2014).

The importance of maintaining an image of success during everyday social interactions was evident throughout Goffman's detailed findings while Arlie Hoshchild's sociological research revealed the stress and suffering that often accompanied apparently "successful" image maintenance particularly for individuals expected to hold submissive power positions in interaction in American society, such as women. Hoshchild's (1983) study with female flight attendants demonstrated the effort, what she termed "emotional labor," of hiding uncomfortable and distressing emotions and mental experiences from public view in spite of blatant discrimination and harassment from passengers.

I argue that the early relationship of American nervousness to ambition and achievement appears to manifest in its contemporary form as the relentless shaping of an image of success, editing out anything that could indicate otherwise and transmitting this image through social media platforms. Who represents the ideal type in such a society? Historian Warren Susman suggests that the ideal personality had become that of the celebrity with the birth of the movie star in 1910 (Susman, 2003). We can see this dynamic play out with the celebrity pop star such as Taylor Swift who becomes a character that lives in the popular imagination and notably the popular imagination takes over their own until a kind of breakdown or disillusionment occurs: "I was so fulfilled by approval, that that was it. I became the person who everyone wanted me to be" (Taylor Swift, *Miss Americana,* 2020). In terms of mental health and suffering, celebrity is a coveted and yet famously fraught position in the contemporary US, with highly publicized nervous breakdowns and even suicides[17] revealing their apparent, publicly-pleasing happiness as a well-constructed façade of success the inauthenticity of which can lead to mental health crisis.

[17] Famous examples include Marylin Monroe and Britney Spears.

And who better to display ideal life experience as coveted success than a performer or an actor? Adept performance and acting arguably represents face-work at its most effective. Originally the American term “actor” in the late 18th century referred to one with immense agency and power such as a public speaker or a politician (Fliegelman, 2005) and the term appeared to keep some of its original meaning to refer to an individual with sway far beyond Hollywood: “Indeed, it is now essential that the politician, the man of ideas, and the non-performing artist become performers so that they may become celebrities so that in turn they may exert genuine influence on the general public” (Schickel quoted by Susman, 2003, p. 315).

The importance of success as continual self-enhancement and proving one’s worth to a human public (rather than primarily before God as with the Puritans and Calvinists) is evident in the American history of public speaking and performance wherein public speaking and fame was the ultimate agentic position and yet one in which face must be constantly managed and improved through performance and celebrity no less (Fliegelman, 2005). Beyond strategies for public figures and intellectuals, emotion historian Peter Stearns argues that acting has been built into American everyday coping:

> The importance of emotional release through leisure highlighted the role of actors in twentieth-century American culture. Deft at taking on others’ emotions without venturing their own, actors represented emotional vigor and thus provided contrast with normal constraint. In the new emotional culture, the idea of acting also appealed to the strong impulse to conceal. Indeed, acting was built into normal emotional interchange. (Stearns, 1994, p. 296)

Interestingly, Stearns describes acting as a vicarious form of emotional release aimed at the audience in the early 20th century that also permeated everyday “emotional interchange.” He suggests that there was already the idea that on stage anything goes, and any emotion can be

expressed: a source of catharsis for the "cool" demeanor and restraint on the internal experience which may be "hotter"[18] than what is pleasing to one's public in everyday American life.

In honor of this well-constructed façade of social and mental wellbeing, self-help and image-making are fused in contemporary America:

> Ultimately, Facebook is a narcissistic playground where the best, the funniest, the most charming aspects of our lives are publicized and the shitty stuff, the boring stuff, the beige that is most of our daily grind almost never gets posted. All those walls are *edited* at some level and that makes them, at best, a deformed mirror image of real life or, at worst, nothing more than a fictional movie of how we want people to see us. (Sorokanich, 2014, [unpaginated])

Vernacular concepts like "the Facebook Life,"[19] "catfishing,"[20] the prominence of Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat in communication with friends and celebrities alike, or the primacy of photos over text when posting online, highlight a pervasive modern need to construct identity in as socially desirable a light as possible for a variety of publics. In response, social theorists have come up with constructs to understand these image-centric practices such as micro-celebrity (Marwick & Boyd, 2010) signifying the potential for anyone with a social media account to achieve a certain level of fame compounded, Wesch (2009) argues, by "context collapse," the infinite audience possible online or the paralyzing pressures of "...at once the biggest and the smallest stage" (Wesch, 2009, p.22). These micro-fame and approval-seeking, image-enhancing strivings are also apparent beyond social media such as in the continued popularity of the body alteration and plastic surgery industry, with plastic surgeons often using social media to advertise (Sorice et al., 2017), or the growth of eating disorder rates (Berg-Cross, 2013; Gould & Mosher, 2017; Signorielli, 2017).

[18] Stearns distinguishes between "hot" emotions and cool pose. The idea is that "hot" emotions, particularly anger, are not to be expressed in most public contexts in the US.

[19] The effort to present a perfect-seeming life online.

[20] The creation of a fake online identity in order to lure someone into a relationship.

Importantly, the "strong impulse to conceal" noted by Stearns is a complex and possibly distress-inducing one as demonstrated by Hoshchild (1983/2012). It indicates the potential social failure and resulting stigma of inadequate emotional display and positive image management. An integrated understanding of emotional, face-work, and stigma management dynamics can help bridge the theoretical and applied gaps between identity and mental health.

Social Stigma

In his 1963 book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman demonstrates that there were few in the US who didn't have to contend with the "impulse to conceal:"

> …in an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports. Every American male tends to look out upon the world from this perspective, this constituting one sense in which one can speak of a common value system in America. Any male who fails to qualify in any of these ways is likely to view himself--during moments at least--as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior; at times he is likely to pass and at times he is likely to find himself being apologetic or aggressive concerning known-about aspects of himself he knows are probably seen as undesirable. (Goffman, 1963, p. 128).

The rule of only one narrow and exclusive category of un-spoiled, un-stigmatized and accepted "normal" in the United States, one that Goffman points out is nearly impossible to achieve and likely to cause feelings of inferiority and incompleteness, continues to live in on a variety of ways. This exclusivity is evident in the standardization of American English for example, where any accent or dialect signifying non-white or foreign status is a historically stigmatized language register (Bonfiglio, 2002) or in the narrow category of "cool kids" [21] in American high schools (Crosnoe, 2011) or in the narrow, binary understandings of mental health and wellness presented

[21] Stephen Berman's findings of high levels of identity distress among adolescent populations in the United States are therefore not surprising, as the narrowness of the "cool" category is distressing.

in the DSM. Navigating image and stigma-management is a critical and challenging part of individual development in the United States from early adolescence.

Globalized/Modern Pressures on Image Management: Individuals and Authenticity

Maintaining and constantly enhancing positive face value can be a complex burden for the American adult. The American adult is expected to self-optimize like an economic enterprise, (Rose, 1999; Weiner, 2011; Brockling, 2015) while displaying characteristics of success such as creativity and authenticity through new media platforms (Gershon, 2014). Yet "authenticity is about itself, not about others," (Lindholm, 2013, p. 364) writes historian Charles Lindholm in his description of the emergence of a self-focused expressive authenticity that took shape in the chaos of modernity: with no clear social order to organize individual lives, an essential, expressive truth was sought from within. Authenticity materialized as an ideal orientation: that of being true to one's inner essence (Lindholm, 2013). A seeking of an authentic self[22] is foisted upon the modern individual by the popular imagination as a necessary aspect of successful self-making and image management (wherein the difference between self-image and self-making is seldom clear,) and is part of the challenge of managing identity distress.

Self-Work Consumerism and Identity Distress Coping

There are currently many "markets" focused on consumer desires to perform self-driven work from self-help to self-care, etc. What I am terming "the self-actualization market" capitalizes on the presumed self-optimizing, development, and enhancing objectives of modern Americans particularly in terms of enhancing social encounters and skills as this area is relevant to identity

[22] Seeking authenticity can range from seeking truth for the sake of alleviating the pain of inauthenticity as in the display of authentic gender (Bialystok, 2013) or as in pure show of the self as an enticing, original product as through self-branding (Gershon, 2014).

threats and distress. The market is embedded with promises of ideal American social selfhood through artful self-image actualization and management. This is reflected in the most popular self-help literature from the bestselling *The Subtle Art of Not Giving A F*CK* by Mark Manson to Shonda Rhimes' *Year of Yes*. In telling readers what to care (and not care) about as social entities, including ideal and sanctioned identity objectives, or the driving objectives of individuals in their identity processes, are built into such guides.

Lauren Berlant warns that the fantasy orientations of contemporary individuals may often become one of "cruel optimism" when a desired object or imagined way of being, always seemingly just out of grasp, may in fact be an obstacle to their flourishing and growth (Berlant, 2011).[23] Endless self-enhancement products and practices are part of what psychologist Barry Schwartz (2004) argues is the paradox of modern consumer decision-making wherein the sheer number of possibilities is so high as to be overwhelming. These seemingly endless and therefore impossible choices include the oversaturated self-actualization market, with its plethora of possibilities for self-guidance arguably both trying to make up for and ironically perhaps contributing to "the systemic inability of [modern] societies to offer individuals within them consistent guidance" (Greenfeld, 2013, p.28). These consumer choices are particularly perplexing when it comes to wellness. Scholar of medical rhetoric Kimberly Emmons explains that modern consumers have responded to the plentiful yet ambiguous array of self-care and self-help choices with the self-doctoring drive:

> …we are all doctors, or at least dispensers of medical wisdom, in this new age of self-care. Whether we research potential ailments online, note particular pharmaceutical advertisements in favorite magazines or on television, or consult health-care

[23] "…whatever the experience of optimism is in particular, then, the affective structure of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way." (Berlant, 2011, p. 2)

> encyclopedias and self-help texts, we are preoccupied not only with our potential self-diagnoses but also in sharing the results of our investigations. (Emmons, 2010, p.3)

These drives towards self-management in what Jennifer Silva calls "an age of uncertainty," or to construct notions of "therapeutic personhood" (Silva, 2012) point towards evolving ways to organize and control one's mental experiences: "Talk of panic is part of a larger cultural ideology of the person that emphasizes self-control, emotional containment, and rational self-direction" (quoted in Kirmayer & Blake, 2009, p. 42).

McAdams (2001; 2008) offers that ideally American identity is organized around the hero's journey, allowing for meaning-making in a landscape so ambiguous wherein a successful process of meaning-making is itself redemptive. As I will argue, these meaning-making strivings are directed towards controlling not only individual mental experience, but unpredictable and uncertain social encounters around positive self-image and identity as well, as reflected by the self-actualization market[24] with its focus on image management and social success. Attempts of individuals to self- and image-organize, manage, and narrate more broadly as they draw on self-care and self-enhancing possibilities to mitigate identity threats will be analyzed in order to understand identity distress processes in relation to broader meaning-making and self-organizational frameworks.

Conceptual Framework: Identity Processes of American Adults within a "Messy" Ecological System

Introduction

This section presents the major identity, development, and sociocultural theories and research that were foundational to this study. It then presents a novel dramaturgical theory and framework through which to understand identity and mental health as a dynamic process in everyday life in the contemporary United States.

[24] The self-actualization market and its relationship to identity distress will be analyzed in detail in Chapter 3.

Modern American Dreams: Socio-historical Context and Identity Frameworks

We've seen that the self-making and path-finding process of self-enhancement and self-actualization focused adults in the US can be stressful overall, potentially triggering severe psychological distress. This study applies the "cultural meaning making" approach proposed by Bruner (1990) in order to connect macro sociocultural frameworks to individuals' personal ones about identity strivings and suffering. This approach allows for the exploration of "identity distress" as a self-organizing process in a dynamic psycho-socio-cultural system. It builds on the perspective of studying emotion, identity, and the self as a process in dialogic and relational ways (Bosman & Kunnen, 2001) and perhaps most significantly, on the metaphor of the self as a theatre of voices as proposed by Hubert Hermans (Hermans, 2006).[25] Identity distress as a process will be imagined as part of a dynamic, and often "messy" ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Larson, 2010).

Emotional Adaptation and Feeling American/Adult: Potential Underpinnings of Distress

Whether one feels comfortable in modern American society depends on negotiating successfully the potential vulnerabilities or risk factors as well as the protective factors or supports (Stevenson, 1997; Hettema et al., 2005; Harpalini et al., 2006; Hernandez et al., 2006; Castro et al., 2007; Spencer, 2008). Coping with adversity in America is a key consideration in contextualizing identity distress. Whether one can establish a sense of belonging versus feeling like an outsider is important for wellbeing and this is true for individuals from a variety of potentially marked and othered identities.

[25] "…by integrating emotions into the study of self and identity, a direct link between the individual and the context is guaranteed" (Bosma and Kunnen, 2001, p.5).

Overall, it is clear that being in a socially stigmatized outsider group may be disadvantageous (Stevenson, 2003, Spencer et al., 2006). For example, the research on American children's adaptation has demonstrated that immigrant children's strong sense of academic agency encouraged by their family members, explains much of their academic and career success (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009), while marginalization and social stigma (e.g., related to phenotypic or linguistic markers) can be highly debilitating for American students with marked identities (Stevenson, 2003, Spencer et al., 2006). Likewise, Bonnano (2012) showed the importance of flexible coping and adaptation particularly with adversity for adults navigating college and post-college life, and all the more so if faced with adversity based on class, ethnicity/race, gender, weight, sexuality, etc. Finally, gender distress is a further potential compounding factor: gender differences for the Identity Problem diagnosis have been found among a sample of at-risk high school students, with 23% at-risk high school girls meeting the criteria for Identity Disorder and 0% of at-risk high school boys meeting the criteria (Hernandez et al 2006).

Relationship to Social Understandings and Cultural Idioms of Distress

While in the DSM "idioms of distress" [26] are relegated to understanding "other," i.e., Non-American, cultures and placed in a separate glossary,[27] here the idea of "culturally patterned ways of talking about distress" (Kirmayer, 2001) is helpful for understanding the American everyday mental health process itself. Kirmayer explains cultural idioms as operating through a "cultural shaping,"

> The implication of this cultural shaping of illness experience is that symptoms cannot simply be interpreted as indices of dis-order or disease but must, instead, be understood as inter-personal communications by the clinician and also, often, by the patient's support group. (Kirymayer, 2001, p. 25)

[26] Many culture-specific terms refer to "idioms of distress"—culturally patterned ways of talking about distress.
[27] In the DSM-V cultural idioms of distress are listed and described in a "Glossary of Cultural Concepts of Distress."

It's helpful then to examine the DSM as an American cultural document which shapes individual and group meaning-making around mental health, coping, therapy, and policies.

Further, a likely reason why "cultural idioms" are kept in a separate volume from the primary manual, is because these perspectives on distress typically don't pathologize it in their meaning-making, instead identifying community, spiritual, and other causes for distress that may be resolved through social means rather than through individual clinical treatment. Thus embedded in "cultural concepts" and "idioms" of distress is a questioning of the entire basis of what is understood in the West as individually-based disorder and pathology. It points to the problematic binary system of "well" versus "ill," the need for a more nuanced understanding of mental experiences, and the importance of connecting individual and social aspects of mental process. This is not to say that these experiences, if severe, cannot result in deep crisis but that a more nuanced and complex understanding of them may help mitigate and prevent such crises in the future.

Indeed, as Kirmayer writes,

> Many culture-specific terms refer to "idioms of dis- tress"—culturally patterned ways of talking about distress. Most of these idioms, although they may refer to bodily distress, also imply social and interactional problems. For example, *hwa-byung*, a Korean term mean- ing "fire-illness," refers not only to symptoms of epigas- tric burning and other forms of somatic distress but also to anger due to interpersonal conflict and a wider sense of collectively experienced injustice. For the clinician knowledgeable about cultural meanings, the somatic symptoms of patients who label their distress *hwa-byung* point to psychological and interpersonal issues. The impli-cation of this cultural shaping of illness experience is that symptoms cannot simply be interpreted as indices of dis-order or disease but must, instead, be understood as inter- personal communications by the clinician and also, often, by the patient's support group (Kirymayer 2001, 25).

Thus, just as non-American cultures such as Korean have been analyzed for culturally-patterned meaning making around mental health in relation to major DSM diagnoses, this same level of analysis will be applied to meaning-making around mental health symptoms and experiences in

US interactional contexts. The culturally patterned ways of talking about distress, cultural meanings, and cultural shaping of illness experiences described by Kirmayer is key to understanding the cultural shaping of Identity Distress as are its institutional (Erikson, Marcia, Stephen, the Diagnostic Statistical Manual, and others) and historical influences.

As for previous work on contemporary US distress patterns, Luhrmann's (2007) research with the American homeless population provides important data and theory describing everyday American life and mental health-impacting interactions around the phenomenon of social defeat. Luhrmann's study builds on psychiatrist Jean Paul Selten's work on social defeat which illustrates what is at stake in social interactions: "In humans, the chronic experience of social defeat may lead to sensitisation (and/or increased baseline activity) of the mesolimbic dopamine system and thereby increased risk for schizophrenia" (Selten and Cantor-Grae, 2007, p. 1). Cantor-Grae and Selten hypothesized that schizophrenia may result from "chronic long-term experience of social defeat" (Selten and Cantor-Grae, 2005, p. 21). Luhrmann also builds on insights from anthropology (e.g., Scheper-Hughes, 1979) to postulate about social defeat in the "devastating American social context" which she studies (Luhrmann, 2007, p. 151).[28] She explains that social defeat is "…an actual social encounter in which one person physically or symbolically loses to another one," and that the encounter must be experienced at least as "contested" (Luhrmann, 2007, p. 151). Social defeat is the experience of failure in a social encounter, just as identity distress is the experience of threat in a social encounter:

> …in this anthropological theory of social defeat, anomie, demoralization, and helplessness are the subjective consequences of a particular social interaction, consistently repeated and consistently re-experienced when individuals have repeated

[28] The American social and cultural context is perhaps less obviously "devastating" than a case like the Brazilian mental health landscape as described by Joao Biehl (2013) where he describes life in a "zone of social abandonment" where individuals with severe mental illness are discarded and forgotten. Nevertheless, Luhrmann makes an excellent case based on a plethora of studies (as well as her own empirical work) of schizophrenia, stigma, and homelessness, that severe mental illness is subject to a socially defeatist system in the United States as well in which the "mentally ill" individual is repeatedly demeaned in their self-worth and essentially abandoned.

> social interactions in which they subjectively experience failure…Stigma can be understood as an internalized correlate of social defeat (Corrigan, 1998; Goffman, 1963), but the stigma must be activated in an encounter to generate the emotional experience of loss, the phenomenon Steele and Aronson (1995) call 'stereotype threat.' Social defeat is not so much an idea that someone holds but a human encounter—an important distinction, because to alter individuals' ideas you can use psychotherapy, but to alter their encounters, you must change their social world. (Luhrmann, 2007, p.151-152)

This subjective specificity of identity threat is key for understanding mental health experience in everyday encounters. Luhrmann (2007) pinpointed specific interactive failures in the homeless population she studied which typically meant being identified as "homeless," or "crazy" during a social encounter and the repeated, chronic struggle with these encounters were the social conditions that contribute to schizophrenia as a cause, she argues.

Identity distress may be conceptualized as a psycho-socio-cultural phenomenon of distress that exists in a variety of forms in the United States. In order to call identity distress an "idiom," following Kirmayer and Blake, it would need to be named after a common vernacular expression such as the "get out of my head" or "get comfortable in my skin" idioms. On a broader scale, these contemporary American idioms are arguably linked to an underlying threat of social defeat. This can mean never quite living up to coveted images of success or happiness, which compound one's sense of ability to engage in everyday interactions. Yet the striving or pursuit towards images of success or happiness are also embedded in this idioms. It's important to note that these idioms do not exist solely in an individual's mind and are part of social movements which value certain kinds of self-images.

A New Definition and Understanding of "Identity Distress"

I expand on and redefine the institutionally-generated term "identity distress" for several reasons:

1. "Identity Disorder" (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) and "Identity Problem" (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) represent attempts in the American mental health system to institutionalize identity distress and to link developmental identity issues that are not necessarily pathological and yet are ideologically-generated positions with mental illness. In the DSM,[29] identity distress was presented as a confusion and difficulty to settle on certain identity statuses wherein the inability to meet the Eriksonian standards of development predicates pathology. This means the term is positioned precisely at the disconnect in current understandings around mental experience, identity, and social process in the contemporary United States.
2. Its ambiguous status between an institutionalized concept and yet one that has a lack of broad use or recognition makes it a strong candidate term to expand upon in a novel way. Importantly, choosing an existing somewhat institutionalized term will hopefully help foster dialogue and critique around existing psychiatric and psychological standards and understandings with this kind of transdisciplinary work wherein the study of mental health is informed by anthropological, dramaturgical, sociolinguistic, and sociological insights.
3. There is often a lack of clear differentiation between local and institutionalized understandings, terms, and speech patterns around mental health in America. "Identity distress" is both expanded here as well as connected to several potential cultural idiom manifestations.
4. Identity distress as a broader, non-pathologized phenomenon is reflected and expressed

[29] In DSM versions -III, III-R, and IV.

in various culturally-patterned idioms depending on what an individual's identity objectives are, thus resonating with the American cultural landscape.

5. Identity distress can also be understood as Identity Stress, more broadly, and Identity Eustress or positive stress,[30] helping to facilitate a non-pathologized and broader understanding of a range and nuance of valences which could be attributed to it: hopes and fears, excitement and despair, or perhaps ennui, daily stress, agitation, worry, joy, etc.
6. Another apt name for the way in which identity distress as phenomenon will be examined and theorized in this study is "impression management distress," as ultimately it will be explored in terms of dramaturgical, relational, and everyday interactional process drawing frequently on impression management theory.

Identity Distress as a Dynamic and Dramaturgical Process

Introduction

This section presents the identity distress process as part of a dramaturgical framework, *a dramaturgy of the self in everyday life* for understanding mental health and identity within the dramatic process of everyday social encounter in the contemporary, modern United States. Relevant definitions and concepts are described, particularly around identity distress, identities, identity objectives, identity distress coping, dramaturgical reimagining and metaphorical reframing, and the organization of the self-system in which identities are envisioned as operating. Identity distress is theorized as part of the "work of drama" in everyday life; self-management and relevant dramaturgical concepts are presented.

Identity Processes and the Self-System

[30] While positive stress isn't the primary focus of this study it is worthwhile to note and to potentially explore further in future work.

I offer the concept of "identity objectives" as a key component of the identity distress process. As Charles Taylor wrote "Our identity is what allows us to define what is important to us and what is not," (Taylor, 1989, p. 30) building on Taylor's definition, the term, "identity objective" encompasses goals that are important to an interlocuter at a particular interactional moment and the broader values reflected by these goals. These objectives help direct the emotional work, face-work, and meaning-making around encounters for individuals living within the subjective bounds of modern American personhood. When identity objectives are threatened, we feel identity distress, experience fight or flight symptoms, and attempt to correct for perceived social missteps.

Meanwhile, "identities" in this study are conceptualized as part of what Hubert Hermans (2006) terms the self-system, a hierarchical and dialogical organization of both our internal and corresponding external self-positions. Based on a combination of Herman's model and Goffmanian theory, identities in this study are understood as the roles we play in everyday life in how we present ourselves. Some of these roles or ways of being, which can also be understood dramaturgically as characters, feel more authentically representative of ourselves (or our internal positions) than others and this is important because greater authenticity can mean greater ease, empowerment, and agency in everyday encounters.

Building on Herman's theory which emphasizes the importance of a clear organization and hierarchy in the self-system, I argue that it's important for an individual's self-system to have an organizing principle and hierarchy in which a dominant, empowered, and authentic self-position (or perhaps a few dominant positions which take precedent in different contexts) are the ones from which we manipulate, adapt, and make meaning in self-presentations. Otherwise we may lose a sense of agency over the self-presentation, and the external image and the interactions

(whether painful, enjoyable, or otherwise) may become our whole reality, potentially resulting in distress symptoms. A strong, agentive, and dominant self-position is therefore the key to effective Stanislavskian *perezhivania* or “living with” the roles one is playing, in everyday life. Perezhivania in an everyday application can thus help mitigate issues of boundary blurring[31] between the self and identities with which one does not feel fully comfortable or authentic, thus helping to mitigate aspects of identity distress.

The work of managing the self-system is further compounded by stigma management (O’Brien, 2011) concerns and emotional labor (Hoshchild, 1983/2012) or the difficult and potentially distressing work of emotional regulation and expression during social encounter (elaborated in Chapter 2), in relation to both stigma and face-work expectations particularly in various public and professional settings. When discrimination occurs or there is the threat of it occurring, the individual has to do more strenuous dramaturgy to cope and to not let the discrimination define their reality or sense of self. Thus “face-ease,” a novel concept of the framework presented here, wherein the individual is able to embody an authentic sense of self that is validated by interlocuters, is a key factor in identity distress mitigation and coping process. I will argue that a role developed in a face-easing context is ideal for a dominant self-position (Hermans, 2006) because it is empowered and protected by the validation and recognition from others and this secure self-position is important as a protective factor in moments of social threat.

This study is predicated on the argument that the focus on image is a dominant aspect of American selfhood, development,[32] and mental health. Spoiled or threatened identities are

[31] A concept borrowed from acting research signifying the blurring of boundaries between the actor and the character , elaborated further in Chapter 2.

[32] It appears that the importance of self-affirming group niches which Robert Crosnoe (2011) found in his study of American high school students, continue on in a sense in American post-high school life. In order to feel validated, supported, and to develop a

dangerous as they create a heightened vulnerability—identity distress in response to stigma threats thus requires a particularly adept set of re-imagining tools such as the performative ones adapted by some of the participants in this study. Understanding the at times harmful image-centric processes in modern American society can help those caught in the loop of erasing their own suffering in order to project success.

The Work of Drama in Everyday Life and Identity Distress

Dramaturgy of the self in everyday life and identity distress pertains to both imaginative and performative dramaturgical phenomena describing participants' literalization and application of drama in everyday life. The etiology of "dramaturgy" translates roughly to "the work of drama" which is fitting as here we are examining the work or labor of drama in everyday life.

This dramaturgical perspective expands on and integrates Goffman's face-work (1967) and *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), with theories of emotional labor (Hoshchild, 1983/2012) and stigma management (Goffman, 1963; O'Brien, 2011), Stanislavskian acting theory (1954), as well as American culturally patterned meaning making processes to understand the complex dramaturgical work of identity distress management. Goffman states, "I shall be concerned only with the participant's dramaturgical problems of presenting the activity before others," (Goffman, 1959, p.8) whereas the present work is concerned with not only with the activities and dramaturgical problems of presentation, but also with the impact that the work of presentation has on mental health and coping processes.

The points of conjunction as well as distinction between Goffman's dramaturgical sociology and the present framework is that dramaturgy, or the work of drama is understood as

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sense of confidence in everyday life encounters and pursuits, at times in the face of stigma and discrimination, face-easing practices and spaces are critical.

1. performative – and not only for the sake of impression management but also for keeping an authentic impression of self that is less taxing and more beneficial for one's mental wellness.
2. imaginative – (or both presentational and cognitive-emotional), different from Goffman in terms of *perezhivania.* Which is not simply performance "out of character," or "contrivances" wherein Goffman describes such backstage dynamics as "service specialists" (Goffman, 1959, p. 96) who learn of backstage aspects of an individual's performance not in line with frontstage goals and ultimately work to maintain a successful frontstage performance. Rather, *perezhivania* entails an authentic "living with" and "worrying with" a character presented to others; thus presenting an alternate character version of oneself (alternate than what one has presented in public contexts in the past, for example,) that is based in authentic emotional experience. This created character is thus not just about the front and backstage aspects of a social situation, or components that are meant to maintain face, though certainly those factor in, but rather in *perezhivania,* the psychological and identity needs of the individual partially dictate the performance. The performance is thus not only for successfully maintaining the social tact and positive impression of self in the situation, which is the focus of Goffmanian dramaturgical theory: the importance of a sense of authenticity for the performer means that the interlocuter or individual in question is not just the performer but is simultaneously an important audience member. Beyond pleasing social standards and an external audience, one's inner, psychological audience must feel aligned with the authenticity of the performance. If one's inner audience does not feel aligned with the performance, no

matter how successful the performance may be from an (external) impression management point of view, this can result in varying levels of identity distress.

3. dynamic

and constantly in flux, therefore requiring space for improvisation and adaptiveness. Similar to Goffman at a broad level, yet different in its focus on the development of a *dramaturgical toolkit* wherein individuals may acquire and draw upon a variety of dramaturgical tools and strategies to manage face, augment *face ease,* and cope in everyday interactions.

Fourth, successful dramaturgy requires

4. group or audience attunement

with an ensemble that works well together and ideally, a successful, reciprocal relationship with the audience. In Goffman's description of "teams" (1959) he describes individuals who mutually benefit from holding up agreed-upon social rules. This is in partial alignment with the group attunement described here, however, in the present theory this alignment goes further into an emotional attunement and heightened empathy experience that occurs parallel to the alignment of social and presentational rules of interaction. It is a combination of Durkheimian *collective effervescence* (1912) when a group is unified energetically, emotionally, and cognitively by coming together and participating in the same thought and action, combined with Goffmanian team alignment and theatrical audience-performer and theatrical ensemble work that results in the social, cognitive, and emotional attunement that can occur in well-executed theatrical pedagogy and performance. Thus the rules of engagement (particularly in how to communicate with one another and share physical space) are understood, the objectives are shared, and

rather than an impression-managing competition, wherein being able to trust one's team (1959) as illustrated by Goffman (1959) is more a matter of convenience and strategy rather than trusting relationship, and the ideal theatrical performance is a mutual, supportive effort of ensemble work rather than a solipsistic solo[33] or comedy show. As will become evident in the ethnographies, the fourth dramaturgical component of group or audience attunement is often the most challenging one. Objectives are not always shared with interlocuter(s) and may even be in conflict, the rules of engagement are not always explicit or clearly defined to participants, and there are seemingly endless possible layers of complexity and separation representing the potential hierarchical and status differences of everyday life interlocuters.

In contrast with Goffman, these dramaturgical strategies are understood as part of

5. in-the-moment and long-term mental health coping

Identity-threatening encounters are threatening not only to positive impression maintenance, but to mental health. Identity distress is often indicated by an array of potential symptoms experienced by the individual during (and sometimes before and/or after) the distressing event. Once the distress event occurs, or profoundly impacts the individual, the individual initiates a combination of both face-saving as well as mental health coping processes. The mental health coping processes can be understood as dramaturgical as well. The ethnographies and case studies presented here present detailed data into how these processes manifest and are handled by individuals of several different intersectional identity configurations. Thus the data offers insight into how an

[33] This is not to disparage the attunement of solo shows, there are many wonderful and attuned solo performers out there, though this art is considered particularly hard to master for the very reason that it's much more difficult to produce a dynamic engagement on stage without other performers to engage with, a more precise metaphor here would be a comedian (or even worse, a clown whose insightful processes of attunement with the audience we will explore in Chapter 6,) who gets on stage and doesn't or isn't able to attend to the reactions of their audience.

individual's dramaturgical toolkit may be developed, assembled, and utilized to handle everyday interactions both in terms of impression management and mental health coping i.e.,for managing identity distress, in relation to their particular coping challenges.

By conducting fieldwork at performance pedagogy sites centering on the practices of Neo-Futurism, Social Anxiety Improv, and Clown Play, I analyzed the identity distress coping processes of individuals with identity distress at the intersections of race, gender, religion, disability, mental health diagnosis, and more. The intersectionality of identities in relation to everyday face-work and identity distress was insufficiently studied in previous work. Goffman alludes to the need to erase racial stigmas at the time and quotes Simone de Beauvoir in order to provide a "female perspective," (1959) while Hoshchild's (1983) work goes a step further to address emotional overload connected to managing expression for women in the workplace who are often discriminated against. The present work builds further on these paradigms to directly explore the relationship between mental health, face-work, and the vast potential multiplicity and intersectionality of identit(ies) that individuals identify with in contemporary everyday life, from non-binary and transexual identity, to the specific kinds of discrimination and stigmas associated with particular identities such as a transphobia.

The contribution of the present work is understanding that the management of these differences, coupled with unequal power dynamics around emotional labor and often representing potential stigmas for which one could be negatively judged and rejected in the interaction, add a level of constant threat to social encounter that can cause identity distress and at its worst, social defeat as well as deeper levels of suffering and mental health crises. The present work also expands on Hermans (2006) theory of a theatre of the self as a framework around which everyday encounters are responded to in in relation to one's own internal theatrical

hierarchy of voices of and self-positions. The present framework thus combines and expands on prior theories with new data of everyday lived coping process in the assemblage of individuals' dramaturgical toolkits through the ethnographies and case studies which illustrate identity distress as a dynamic everyday process.

Conclusion

This section has described theories and past work relevant for studying identity distress as a dynamic process and has concluded by offering insights on understanding American identity and everyday mental health through identity distress as a focal lens.

Demographic Focus

The demographic focus of this study is on college students and post-college adults. Individuals who are choosing to work on their social and identity skills as well as mental health coping outside of a clinical setting whether in college or in an alternative practice program are precisely seeking support for everyday suffering and are thus the focal population. Self-actualization and the pressures to succeed in a largely uncharted self-exploration process or "psychosocial moratorium" are an embedded and evasive goal of the American liberal arts college as well as post college life.

This study follows individuals' development and adaptation narratives to understand identity distress in the context of lifespan development. College students and "emerging adult," post-college individuals, are the primary target of institutionalized pressures to succeed, self-develop, self-actualize, commit, and achieve. A closer look at what Fraser and Marcia (1994) call "moratorium-achievement" or "mama cycles," shows identity stages of modern individuals as dynamic rather than static, constantly in flux throughout the life cycle, with regressions back to earlier stages being a typical part of life span development. For this reason individuals in middle-

aged adulthood were also included within the purview of this study. Participants were all either middle-class or middle-class-aspiring individuals who appeared to seek out a means to self-enhance or a transition-oriented counter-site or heterotopia (Foucault, 1984) for their identit(ies) and self-development[34] whether during college or at some point in their post-college lives.

Interdisciplinary Methodological Approach

The present work examines the complex identity distress processes and experiences of these individuals through an interdisciplinary approach combining surveys, preliminary qualitative interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and post fieldwork interviews. Theoretical approaches and concepts draw from history, cultural analysis, developmental psychology, social psychology, clinical psychology, mental health research, theatre therapy, sociology, sociolinguistics, psychological anthropology, metaphor studies, and cognitive linguistics, theatre and performance studies, education, and pedagogical precepts. The original theory, analysis, and argument of this dissertation are built and developed from the foundation of these earlier approaches and data sets as well as the original empirical data gathered by this study through interdisciplinary methods.

Methods include pilot interviews, ethnographic participant-observation, analysis of media and literary artifacts, and extensive follow-up interviews over time. In this work, theatre pedagogies and classrooms provide key sites to examine specific and deliberate image-making, performative, and identity distress coping perspectives as they are explicitly taught and taken up by participants in terms of re-imagining the self and characters or personas of everyday life interaction rules, perspectives, and the relevant metaphors involved. This study takes an

[34] "Safe space" and "anxiety-free space" were terms that came up among study participants and could at times for certain participants refer to the "third realms" studied here in the form of performance classrooms.

empirical approach that involves both participants' self-report of their experiences and reflections and my own direct participation in and observation of organized group interactions.

Performance Pedagogies as Sites of Alternative Therapies and Contemplative Science

The study of performance pedagogies as sites for understanding identity distress is fueled in part by insightful "alternative therapy" studies of cultural-specific mental health movements both inside and outside the United States. Examples of such promising work include a study of talk around the self in American addiction treatment, dissonant constructions of agency for members of a bipolar support group in an urban American city, and embodied self-understanding through yoga as an "alternative therapy" (Carr, 2011; Weiner, 2011; Goldwert, 2013). Goldwert writes of yoga as therapy:

> To be viable and compelling, a therapy has to resonate with the cultural landscape and offer hope within the terms of what can be imagined, but also what can be felt…Thus observing a therapy as it emerges at this historical moment reveals not only processes of healing but also ideologies and subtle or implicit cultural tensions that may be a factor in the very distress being treated (Draguns et al., 2004). Therapies can iterate broader cultural values, and they can diverge with dominant values, a general characteristic of the thusly named alternative therapies (McGuire, 1988, Fadlon, 2005, Kaptuk and Eisenberg, 1998). (Goldwert, 2013, p. 5).

As Goldwert points out, observing "alternative therapies" is a fruitful method for understanding the implicit cultural tensions that factor into the distress being treated. Similarly, Hampel's examination of the advent of speech clubs in China (Hampel, 2017) and the interaction of Western self-help and self-definition, similar to what we examine here, with Chinese values or Seligman's (2013) ethnography of *candomblé* as a self-organization strategy for highly distressed individuals in Brazil, open up onto cultural tensions that underlie particular forms of distress; our aim here runs parallel to these studies.

This research also fits into the goals of "contemplative science," which is aimed at "understanding the effects of various kinds of mental and physical training (such as mindfulness,

meditation, yoga, and tai chi) on the body, brain, and mind at different stages of the lifespan" (Roeser & Zelazo, 2012). The latest studies on mindfulness boast promising results for scaffolding the development of executive function, emotion regulation, empathy, and compassion (Roeser & Zelazo, 2012; Greenberg & Harris 2012; Goldwert, 2016). Art, music, and drama therapies, while typically studied through a more traditionally therapeutic rather than developmental lens, are geared towards many of the same psychosocial problems as "mindfulness" activities, including anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder in veterans, or even as an everyday "de-stressor" for individuals from all walks of life (Pavlicevic, 1994; Zarate, 2016; Ali & Wolfert, 2016). By contributing to the contemplative science field, the study also contributes to those applied fields that occasionally draw on it such as education, clinical psychology, stress studies, psychological anthropology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, social work, and performance studies.

A Gap in the Literature:
The Relationship between Identity and Anxiety Processes

At the foundation of this project is the question: How does the construct "identity distress" emerge qualitatively and what is its relationship to anxiety in the US--what does this relationship look like, how does it manifest, why does it exist, and what are possible ways to cope? Freud defined anxiety as a threat signal indicating a situation of danger, a kind of warning from the ego that a traumatic situation is imminent (Freud, 1936; Saragnano et al., 2013).

In spite of the qualitative basis of Freudian theory, contemporary research on anxiety, identity development, emerging adulthood and identity distress lacks a qualitative understanding of the relationship between anxiety and identity development processes. The manifestation of phenomena such as an Eriksonian identity crisis, Freudian hysteria, and more recently delayed adulthood or prolonged adolescence are arguably a response to the modern pressures to live a life

of self-discovery, self-actualization, and socially-recognized achievements and successes. Many researchers worry about why achieving adulthood is now taking so long (Côté, 2000; Arnett, 2004; Arnett, 2011; Luycks, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2011), and they write about such concerns as the lack of civic purpose in today's youth (Damon, 2011) and the rise of apathy (Smith, 2012).

Yet the institutional expectations for identity are complicated and perhaps conflicting: one is expected to experiment and go on a journey of self-discovery, while at the same time commitment is still considered important following the identity crisis, as detailed in Chapter 1. In the Eriksonian framework one is not supposed to explore endlessly but to attain the "achievement" status of being invested and settled in one's identity through having made various choices.[35] This may be particularly challenging in what many scholars call "the age of precarity"(Berlant, 2011; Vallas, 2015; Masquelier, 2019) in which nothing is guaranteed or this "late modern" society is "going through a shift away from shared, stable, explicit systems of social organization and towards forms of social participation characterized instead by individual choice accompanied by uncertainty, ambivalence, and risk" (Fein, 2018, p. 141).[36]

This dissertation will explore "identity distress" (Berman et al., 2006) with identity understood, following Charles Taylor (Taylor, 1989) as the locus or framework around which one worries (both negatively as an overactive fight-or-flight response and positively as excitement or eustress). As described in Chapter 1, identity distress is explored as a cultural phenomenon of (di)stress on the etic-level, with idioms like "get out of my head" and "get comfortable in your skin" representing the emic-level. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, the identity distress phenomenon is caught between two discourse: self-image

[35] For Erikson (1956) these choices consisted of Three Pillars regarding love, work, and worldviews. "Settled" is interpreted as "adult" in Benson and Furstenberg's (2007) Five Pillars of Adulthood: getting married, finishing college, having a job, etc.

[36] Cf. (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991)

oriented discourse and acceptance-oriented discourse. These two categories of American thought are representative of both life-affirming identity objectives (related to eustress) rather than only fears and insecurities (distress). Possible selves theory is an example of an approach that highlights this tension in the ideologies that meet to fuel identity-related distress and eustress. The dissertation explores distress in more detail than eustress, but note that this not with the aim to highlight only the pathological aspects of identity stress but rather because there are severe and urgent problem areas (e.g. stigma, insufficient coping mechanisms, etc.) to tackle when it comes to distress.

It has arguably become a marker of modernity to worry about an uncertain future or a regrettable past and the self-made individual carries the onus of self-determination on their shoulders, or identifying "what is important." Building upon Taylor's insight, "worry" here encapsulates both concern and care for one's most important life projects and ideals whether they be subconscious or explicitly known. Worry will do so in contexts in which one is expected to generate performances for a live audience, whether in everyday life or on stage, exploring dramaturgy as a metaphorical lens as well as potential intervention for identity distress.

Through analysis of rich ethnographic data gathered over the course of two years in a Midwestern American city, this study examines identity distress qualitatively through an ethnographic exploration of its semiotic underpinnings. It thereby fills an important gap in the literature. The only significant prior research on identity distress has been the research conducted by Steven L. Berman, discussed in detail in Ch. 1; and his research methods were limited to a purely quantitative approach. This project by contrast will provide the first qualitative and ethnographic look at identity distress as a qualitative psychocultural phenomenon. While Stephen Berman and a large and growing number of researchers building on his scale through correlation-

focused studies (e.g., Hernandez, 2006; Gfellner et al., 2011; Sica et al., 2014; Samuolis et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2018; Palmeroni et al., 2020, to name a few,) have argued for identity distress as an important issue to explore, little empirical work establishes exactly what the phenomenon is (beyond Berman's operationalization,) the symptoms and experiences constituting it, and how individuals cope with the difficult or problematic aspects of it.

A Transdisciplinary Contribution

The unique combination of approaches and perspectives provided here articulates a dramaturgy of the self and mental health in everyday American life and as a dramaturgy of identity distress as a performative, cultural phenomenon of distress. This dramaturgical approach to everyday mental health is necessarily highly specific in its disciplinary sources and contributions, thereby transcending traditional disciplinary constraints. The study draws most significantly on cognitive and sociolinguistics and dramaturgical sociology to demonstrate the use of metaphor in everyday self-management, face-work, stigma management, emotion management and social interaction, psychological anthropology to demonstrate idioms of distress as part of everyday American mental health process, acting and pedagogical theories to demonstrate their insight and potential application in everyday life performance challenges and complexities, and expands on dialogical psychology's "theatre of the self" perspective as a theoretical container for understanding everyday mental functioning and interaction processes. Finally, the research seeks to contribute to the applied elements of the fields of positive development and cultural psychology of development by showing how culturally specific intervention activities may be taken up by adults as alternative therapies (Hampel, 2017; Goldwert, 2013) and how these activities shape and are shaped by them (Hansen et al., 2003;

Diamond, 2005; Levine, 1982; Hollan, 1987) thereby further detailing the linkages between identity and mental health.

As this dissertation builds on several disciplines to propose a transdisciplinary perspective on the relationship between culture, identity, stigma, and mental health, the audience of experts who could most benefit from this research and recognize it as a contribution may include a diverse range of possible scholars and practitioners with a stance of open-mindedness towards traditional disciplinary boundaries. The approach presented here offers new possibilities for understanding the relationship between identity and mental health as an everyday, non-pathological and interactive process and this is relevant for a myriad of potential disciplines and sub-disciplines, both applied and theoretical. These potential disciplines include developmental and social psychology, psychotherapy, social work, psychological anthropology, sociology, education and development, stigma and discrimination studies, applied theatre, performance studies, sociolinguistics, and a broad potential range of identity and self-studies. The aim is that trans-disciplinarily-minded scholars interested in the intersection of mental and social experiences could find the study useful, interesting, and worth building upon in their own investigations and research at the overlap of identity and mental health.

Summary

This section described the research aims, demographic and site-specific focus, as well as transdisciplinary contribution of the present study.

Chapter Summary

This first chapter provided an initial historical overview of the focus on self-image in America and its connection with mental experience. The discussion reviewed the literature on identity distress as a construct well suited to the study of non-pathologized mental health and

identity and presented other relevant supporting research and theory for studying identity and mental health in the US through “identity distress.” Research aims of the dissertation were established. Relevant definitions for key terms were provided and the framework proposed by this study was introduced at the end of the chapter.

CHAPTER 2

Performance Practice as Therapy in Camouflage: Therapeutic Intervention or Image Management

“I’m an actor, so you gotta go to therapy, right?” – Sandra, 2015 interview

Introduction

As we saw in chapter 1, the DSM concept of “identity distress” as operationalized by Berman (2006), can be re-conceptualized as a cultural phenomenon of distress that is locally and institutionally shaped in the modern United States and unfolds through a pervasive, frenetic mechanism in public and private spheres, through a colloquial idiom like “get out of my head” syndrome, explored further in the present chapter. As evident from both colloquial speech and textbook terminology, the institutionalized language, from “anxiety” to “self-actualization,” has come to label and perpetuate phenomena of a local-institutional idiom of distress in the US. The American case presents a particular challenge to understand “locally”-produced knowledge as America positions itself as the globalized mainstream standard for medicine and mental health. This renders dominant institutionalized ideologies complicated to disentangle from alternative, counter-positional, or minor perspectives. However subtly at times, these perspectives, notions, tendencies, and desires exist and can be made evident through in-depth ethnographic work. I argue that these are pervasive cultural idioms of identity distress with a focus on identity adaptation and self-help issues, self-actualization strivings, and self-conscious efforts to belong and connect with others.

The aim of Chapter 2 is to recognize and explore certain performative practices and contexts as fertile sites for revealing insights about the socioculturally-specific understandings, practices, and processes of identity distress. In order to develop an expanded, qualitative understanding of their identity distress, this chapter provides a cultural analysis of the emerging

intersection of alternative and self-help practices, therapy, and theatre. The at-times-unorthodox and unexpected hybridity of this intersection presents challenges to traditional American mental health approaches that focus on universal psychological and developmental categories while ignoring the local cultural contexts and knowledge formation processes. In this chapter I will integrate insights from several disciplinary approaches: sociolinguistics, theatre pedagogies, psychodrama and theatre therapies, and applied theatre.

Theatre as a Space for Studying American Image Management and Everyday Dramaturgy

Theatre is a prime site for studying the relationship between mental health, identity, and culture through identity distress given the American cultural context in which image and audience approval is focal. The theatrical perspective and its applications of self-enhancement and self-doctoring will be key to the development of a framework for understanding everyday psycho-socio-cultural mental health processes in relation to image management. The fact that people experiencing image problems seek image solutions through various practices and offerings on the self-actualization market, gives us a good entryway into understanding image problems, from the self-help media and literature as referenced in this chapter, to the practices themselves.

Theatre as/or Therapy

Examining theatre pedagogy as a covert substitute for therapy or a novel form of self-help is a starting point for understanding the cultural configuration of self-actualization goals, mental health, and art among the self-actualizing adults who take it up under the pressures of contemporary American society. The growth of improvisation and acting courses in urban centers in the US has made performance methods previously reserved for professional performers available to the public in an increasingly widespread and quotidian manner and they

are being increasingly marketed and taken up as opportunities for recreation and for self-help or therapy. These hybrid theatre as/or therapy courses include everything from standup and theatrical improvisation classes, to empathy training through theatre, often targeting the American cultural ideals of being funny, happy, interesting, authentic, vulnerable, empathetic, and adaptive.

This complex hybridity is evident when examining contemporary performance training at recreational and/or pre-professional levels and in settings where it is offered under the umbrella of wellness programs and relatedly, in drama therapy practices[37]. The specific forms and sites that we examine in this study include three performance practices engaged as forms of self-help: a Social Anxiety Improv Bootcamp at an improv venue and educational center called Cheer Up; a Neo-Futurism course at an elite urban university; and a Clown Play course at an elite urban university. Performance classes like the one at Cheer Up (introduced briefly in this chapter's examination of self-help and in depth in Chapter 5) are sold as a normalized way to cope with the interactional and expressive challenges of everyday life: they most often target one's self-expression, wellbeing, and interactive skills in fast-paced professional business settings or social and personal life; combining and prioritizing genre types at various instances is also present in the pedagogies as serving at various times liminal functions between theatrical, therapeutic, and self-actualizing. In examining individuals' uptake of methods from these various theatrical approaches, "dramaturgical attunement" indicates an individual's level of adaptiveness and versatility in utilizing their individual dramaturgical toolkit[38] or their personal assortment of specific performative strategies to adapt in unpredictable social encounters.

[37] In drama therapy, the primary goal is expression, distance and artistic product rather than therapeutic treatment; only in psychodrama is the goal explicitly therapy (Kedem-Tahar and Felix-Kellerman, 1996).
[38] These strategies all can be further understood as part of what Côte would describe as the late modern individual's intangible identity capital skill set (Côte, 1996).

Regional[39] Theatre as/or Therapy Ad Examined

Acting, improvisation, and theatre have a history of delving into the psychology of their students as part of the training, while contemporary theatre as/or therapy practices have come to occupy a liminal space between creating "interesting" and/or healthy people who are simultaneously successful performers. I suggest that the conflicting language in the marketing of these practices reflects how tangled the purposes of these courses are: is it to cultivate highly skilled professional performers or to help people cope in their everyday lives? The focus is on a practice that conveniently blends multiple frames and keyings (Goffman, 1974; Gal, 2002) into one commodified resource. Pragmatically, these are businesses, and like any ambitious commercial enterprise they aim to make money by attracting the broadest customer range possible.

The kind of type-sourced interdiscursivity or "…normativities of form and function, such as rhetorical norms, genres, et cetera" (Silverstein, 2005, p. 1) that exists in theatre as/or therapy marketing language is typical of folk conflations around what performance training means in the contemporary, late modern US. That is, the relationships between activity types ("theatre" and "therapy") are structured by systematic cultural understandings and multiple standardized functions.

[39] A professional or semi-professional theatre company outside NYC (and in this case outside of Chicago as well, as that was the primary study site,) that produces its own seasons. It's why it's important that the ad examined her refers to Meisner, a famous NYC practitioner, as the theatre itself is not run directly by Meisner and yet carries the lineage. The idea was to examine a representation of the kind of theatre as/or therapy phenomena that exists in various parts of the contemporary United States, particularly in its urban centers.

Observe the conflicting language in the following ad for a Meisner technique class in Dallas, Texas advertised in the *Dallas Observer* (2005):

BEST PLACE TO OVERCOME SHYNESS

Terry Martin's Meisner Technique Acting Class WaterTower Theatre

Who needs therapy when you can study acting under local Meisner Technique teacher Terry Martin? Local actors, including standouts such as Regan Adair and Tippi Hunter, swear by Martin's 12-week course, which uses a step-by-step approach to breaking down emotional barriers and exploring dialogue through lengthy repetition. Martin, who is WaterTower Theatre's producing artistic director, trained under both Sanford Meisner (founder of New York City's legendary Neighborhood Playhouse) and Meisner protégé Fred Kareman. The class is tough, a real emotional boot camp, say former students. "I never cried so much in my life," says Contemporary Theatre founder and lead actress Sue Loncar.

Figure 1: Sample Theatre as/or Therapy Ad (*Best Place to Overcome Shyness*, 2005)

This course is offered as a "bootcamp" with the headline "best place to overcome shyness," which seems in part aimed at anyone with desires to overcome such psychosocial concerns as "emotional barriers" and "shyness." Yet the marketing of the course boasts having lauded local actors, teachers, and other prestigious pioneers such as the artistic director who trained under Sanford Meisner himself, emphasizes the high professional training value of the course. Thus, while the type-sourced interdiscursivity of the language signals both theatrical and self-help

genres, the way in which these genres are embedded prioritizes the prestige over the therapeutic purpose:

> Participants often erase their own experience of embedded practices; in discussions that favor referentially stable categories they can easily ignore the indexical character of the dichotomy. This regularly results in the conflation of several nested public/private distinctions into a single distinction. Hence the common illusion that there is only one division or distinction—and one shifting boundary to worry about—as the numerous levels of embedding disappear from view. (Gal 2002, p. 91)

That is, the erasure of one category as an aspect of embedding, in this case, the embedding of clinical work on the self may become erased by or conflated with the superordinate layer of a fun, entertaining, comedic class that the everyman would be interested in taking. Thus also potential deviance is subjugated under the category of normalized crisis which is subjugated under the category of fun, recreation, and even high-level self-actualization. This emphasis positions the class as something for a highly artistically evolved and high status aspiring person, rather than one marked by the stigma of mental health struggles in therapy, or one struggling to achieve markers of success or development. Successful human development and self-actualization are further embedded under success and successful fun. The acting student's self-actualization struggles and potential inadequacies are repositioned as typical obstacles of a great actor-in-training, thereby erasing the stigma. Therefore "overcome shyness," the self-actualization objective featured in large font at the top of the ad, is reimagined as an obstacle to being a great performer rather than an adequate everyday interlocuter with the latter goal subsumed by the remainder of the text which focuses on an offering of a prestigious acting training opportunity.

This paradoxical ad reflects not only the entrepreneurial spirit of American businesses to attract any and all potential consumers, but what is nowadays an increasingly prevalent idea in

terms of ideal personality traits and skills: that one must be a good entertainer to be a successful person. Further, being a successful emotional manager is part of the promised hybrid success of the course. The hybrid terminology evokes multiple genres: the term "emotional bootcamp" that is the generic mark of a successful acting class wherein authentic emotional experiences are mined is validated by the quote "I never cried so much in my life," by a lauded actress. Thus the genres of both psychotherapeutic and acting training success are signaled.

Notions of Catharsis in Theatre and Therapy

Tom Lutz suggests that in the US a majority of individuals believe in the benefits of crying, the "criers": "Most criers insist on the one hand that crying is a profoundly mysterious activity, and yet they are very sure about a number of things: they are sure that crying is 'good for you,' that it 'releases pent-up emotions,' and that "a good cry has positive health benefits" (Lutz, 1999, p.28). This understanding of the cathartic benefit of tears is widespread and goes back to early psychoanalysis wherein cathartic therapy was central[40] (Lutz, 1999). The cathartic and various "theories of crying" are described by Stougie et al. (2004): "Among both scientists and the lay public, crying, the shedding of emotional tears, is often assumed to be healthy, or at least to have a tension-reducing effect…" In a review of 70 articles published between 1848 and 1985 the advice was "…not to hold back tears, as this might lead to a variety of negative consequences ranging from unhappiness to ill-health or even death" (Stougie et al., 2004, p. 2)[41].

Another analysis attempting to dissect the purpose of crying uses common notions of acting craft as evidence for it as a powerful "honest signal" because "actors know it's hard to fake" (van Gilder Cooke, 2006, p. 44). Van Gilder Cooke attempts to unpack the "myth of

[40] The cathartic therapy developed by Breuer and Freud was actually focused on cathartic release of libidinal urges rather than emotions as it is popularly misunderstood (Lutz, 1999).
[41] Cf. Vingerhoets, 2000; Cornelius, 1986.

catharsis" and while she acknowledges Freudian origins, the Aristotelian notion of catharsis which predates that of Freud appears lost to van Gilder Cooke in spite of anecdotal references to acting. In the *Poetics,* Aristotle discussed *katharos* as a purification of the experience of emotions that audience members can experience when watching a drama (Aristotle 335 BC/2013). The idea of purification, as explained by *Poetics* translator Anthony Kenny, is that being outside of everyday life allows one to pleasurably experience emotions more purely through theatre and through the experiences of the characters and actors on stage.

Truth, purity, and even the learning of moral values were initially understood as a purpose of theatre. More contemporary hybrids of theatre and socioemotional learning create their own mixed ideologies of the authentic as the good. Here we see an interdiscursivity between markers of good acting craft and an attempt to understand how real emotions reflect therapeutic benefit: the implied dichotomy is that actors may be "faking" or lying and that real and honest equates with beneficial. This is a complicated assumption to make given our knowledge of boundary blurring, discussed in a later section. Nevertheless the complicated overlap is evident in these tangled interpretations of emotions, honesty, and cathartic benefit. The interdiscursive approach highlights the interwoven practices of performance study as a type of work on the self that is taken up not only for successful stage performance, but also as a kind of non-clinical treatment and socialization training for various life problems, mental health problems, psychosocial skills, and other types of work on the self that are useful for everyday life.

The idea that actors are in a normalized position to deconstruct themselves psychologically, creates a non-stigmatized opportunity for therapy-like work on the self. This interdiscursivity between performance training and clinical settings allow for a non-stigmatized

space to do various kinds of psychosocial and psycho-cultural work on oneself. This work on the self and its aims are at times conflicting and Chapter 3 will provide an analysis supported by preliminary data as to how self-actualization ideologies have been taken up historically and in the present study.

Cheer Up Marketing Examined

Notice the emphasis on a true self as a comedic self in this excerpt from an ad for Cheer Up, an improv venue where I conducted four months of fieldwork described in depth in Chapter 5**:**

> **You won't just find an endless list of comedy and writing programs for the aspiring performer, but a host of improv courses geared toward those looking to grow more comfortable with themselves by unlocking their inner comedian.**

Figure 2: Cheer Up Ad (2016)

Comedy is offered here as a kind of therapeutic lens onto the self. One must be funny, and find one's "inner comedian" and do so through these specialized improv courses "geared" towards personal growth. Here unlocking the true authentic self and successful self-actualization, also means unlocking the true authentic comedian.

The array of possibilities on offer at Cheer Up—from Improv for Veterans, to Social Anxiety Improv, to Improv for Middle Age—hearkens back to the discussion in Chapter 1 about a possible production of consumer anxiety as described by Schwartz (2004), as well as the inability to locate oneself among too many options. Note that the expressions "grow more comfortable with themselves" and "unlocking their inner" invoke therapeutic, self-actualization, and self-help genres while keeping the comedic genre intact. The improv class is marketed as a

kind of idealized eudaimonic search for the true, actualized self, an accepted self-care practice that fits into self-actualization as a laudable, institutionalized goal in the US. As in the previous ad, the ideology invoked here is that of getting to fulfill one's full and true potential as an entertainer with an emphasis on the importance of comedic skill.

Conflating therapy with theatre or improv practices effectively "embeds" the former within the latter. In this way, an alternative treatment of stigmatized concerns and objectives may be camouflaged within more socially-acceptable ones, revealing the complex dynamics of contemporary, late modern American mental health as a set of dialogic and interactive practices and processes. These embeddings may allow someone seeking clinical treatment for their distress to "pass" as an eager improv student looking to improve their comedic skill or to inject more fun-oriented activities into their lives, as the image of carefree enjoyment is a marker of successful American personhood. Classes like the one at Cheer Up (analyzed in depth in Chapter 5) are sold as a normalized way to cope with the interactional and expressive challenges of everyday life: they most often target one's self-expression, wellbeing, and interactive skills in fast-paced professional business settings or social and personal life.

Examining Identity Distress Through Theatre Pedagogies, Therapies, and Dramaturgy

This section combines insights from psychodrama and drama therapy, contemporary acting pedagogy, and a variety of theatre research theories and movements to explore identity distress as a performative and image-centric process.

Insights from Psychodrama and Drama Therapy

Psychodrama scholar and practitioner Doreen Elefthery wrote: "the role of the actor is symbolic of the human search for self and for freedom of expression" (Elefthery, 2014). Psychodrama, which is more protagonist and self-awareness focused, and drama therapy, which

is more metaphorical and improvisational, are two well-known modern clinical (and sometimes non-clinical) approaches stemming from the work of J.L. Moreno (1970), credited as the grandfather of group and action therapies[42], which use dramatic techniques for healing and expression of various vulnerable individuals and populations (Kedem-Tahar and Kellerman, 1996). Acting, improvisation, and other performance types are sometimes clinically, officially and in other instances unofficially (as will be demonstrated by this study) chosen by contemporary Americans as a psychosocial intervention in one's self-development. These self-selected interventions include taking a theatre or improvisation class to "get out of one's shell" – a saying (invoking a corresponding movement) often heard in the improv field sites described in detail in chapter 5. Improv exercises are increasingly used as a psychosocial intervention in a variety of settings and improv schools in urban centers (like the one examined in chapter 5) are offering classes geared towards a range of psychosocial needs to be exported to a range of settings.

Theatre and improvisation now exist in the purview of the many kinds of recreational self-help and identity development activities on offer. These activities and programs, some pioneered by clinicians, promise everything from improved communication in business and educational settings to mental health and developmental treatments for a range of conditions from autism to anxiety (Sheesley et al., 2016; Krueger et al., 2017). A recent evidence-based study exploring improvisational theatre as an intervention for social anxiety found improvisational theater exposure to be correlated with decreased social anxiety and improved uncertainty tolerance (Felsman, 2020).

[42] Moreno saw "psychodrama as the next logical step beyond psychoanalysis." It was "an opportunity to get into action instead of just talking, to take the role of the important people in our lives to understand them better, to confront them imaginatively in the safety of the therapeutic theater, and most of all to become more creative and spontaneous human beings." (Moreno, 2014, p. 65)

“Perezhivania”

The theory of “perezhivania,” key to understanding contemporary image management on and off stage, was developed by Konstantin Stanislavsky[43], a global leader in theatrical practice and scholarship who directed theatre and wrote theatrical theory in Russia in the early 1900’s (Hobgood, 1973). In his book *The Actor’s Work on Himself in the Creative Process of Experiencing,* Stanislavsky (1954) identified the ideal work of the actor as “iskusstvo perezhivania.” “Izkusstvo” means “the art of” or “mastery.” “Perezhivania” is a compound Russian noun-verb or gerund meaning “to experience,” “to undergo,” “to endure,” “to relive,” according to theatre scholar Burnett M. Hobgood (1973). As a Russian speaker, I suggest that “perezhivania” translates more precisely as “experiencing” or “experience with,” and depending on whether we are talking about it having directionality of the actor towards the character, then it has an embedded empathy. In everyday life, the modern Russian word “perezhivat” can also mean to worry for someone, to be in a continual state of empathetic experience and concern with what the other person is experiencing in the present moment (e.g., if they are sick or in pain), as well as an implied concern for their future state and the outcome of their condition as in “I’m worried about him” wherein “worried” has both present and future implications of empathy and feeling. The key in this theatre practice is to psycho-physiologically (in breath and in-the-moment reactions), create a sense of spontaneity and thereby authenticity in a scripted character allowing the audience to live in the time-space created by the actor.

We can understand the ultimate actor-character described by Stanislavsky to be in a relationship of “worrying along with” the character that they are presently portraying. What this

[43] Stanislavsky’s work underpins much of contemporary Western theatrical practice and theory, particularly as developed in the United States (whether explicitly or not).

signifies is that the psychological work of the actor is quite complex and as Stanislavsky's teachings are a large influence on the majority of contemporary American theatre and performance practices, this expectation around the complex psychological work of the actor is quite common. "Remember, this is an actor's fundamental work—to be able "to be" what he desires consciously and exactly," (Boleslavsky, 1933, p. 30) taught Richard Boleslavsky, a student of Stanislavsky's who started the American Laboratory Theatre where many prominent American acting teachers first trained, including Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg. The principle of the "psycho-technique" of the actor according to the Stanislavsky system, based on French psychologist's Ribot's theory of affective memory (1897), is to train to the point of being able to immediately retrieve emotional memories from their lives, i.e.,the lived experiences of those emotions, which match the experience of the character. Thereby the actor re-experiences a real emotion onstage, and acting in accordance with The System is taught as experiencing (Boleslavsky, 1933; Tcherkasski, 2013).

In terms of psychological impact on the actor, some scholars have argued that without proper training, acting in contemporary settings can be dangerous to one's sense of self while at other times with proper training and awareness, it can result in growth (Burgoyne et al., 1999). Areas of growth that have been reported by interviewees in previous studies include "enhanced sensitivity, empathy, and awareness; strengthened sense of identity and values; facilitated emotional growth; improved understanding of self and others; and cultivated skills in relating to others (Burgoyne et al., 1999; Tust-Gunn, 1995). The popular modern day permutation of this occurs when acting teachers or students talk about "finding truth" or "finding their truth" or "honest" or "truthful" acting whether the story or character is fictional, non-fictional, or something in-between. The goal is for the performer to find truth for themselves in the

performance; there is a kind of essential truth or authenticity sought in most contemporary acting pedagogy and practice. Either way, based on modern theories of actor training and my observations, when a performance is evaluated, it comes down on a fundamental level to the actor's attention (Donnellan, 2005) and engagement with time and space (Bogart, 2012): is the audience able to co-habit the chronotope (Bakhtin, 1937) or situation (Goffman, 1959) offered by the actor-character before them?

The work of the professional acting students I observed at State University was to maintain a balance between the self and the real and what was striking was the instructor's response to the relatability of their work. On a weekly basis, the students would perform realistic scenes that they would write. The instructor would assess the realness of their emotional responses and engagement, giving small suggestions for adjustment but ultimately working with the students to create believable and engaging interactions with their scene partners. Perhaps because this was a more advanced course, it was harder to "see" the internal work.

A couple years later, as a theatre MFA candidate at Columbia University School of the Arts, my observations of Anne Bogart's training of beginning MFA actors brought home the importance of the alignment of actor time with character time and audience time and recontextualized these earlier observations. Anne would carefully watch and give feedback based on her moment-to-moment experiencing of actor time so that acting students could learn to become attuned to what the audience needs to see. Anne's acting pedagogy emphasizes bodily and movement awareness and utilizes the Viewpoints Method, first developed by choreographer Mary Overlie. Viewpoints involves the careful training of actor attention on nuances of time and space elaborated by Anne in collaboration with Tina Landau[44] (Bogart and Landau, 2004).

[44] Tina and Anne first met in 1987 at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, MA and over the course of 10 years experimented theatrically and "…gradually expanded Overlie's Six Viewpoints to both nine Physical Viewpoints (Spatial

Anne's careful corrections of actor-character time and space configurations during class corresponds with notions of a Stanislavskian "worrying with" in its focus on alignment. It means the actor cannot be ahead of their lines or before them but in perfect sync with the occurrence and production of them as if somehow the utterance is happening now for the first time. During class, she would say to an actor after watching them rehearse: "I can see you thinking just ahead of the beat." The breath, heartbeat, and focus have to align with the reality the actor's character is living in; which aligns the breath, heartbeat, and experiential reality of the audience.

In terms of connecting this with everyday life interactions, the importance of the nuances of actor-audience shared experiencing has been picked up on by studies of the hospitality industry with concepts such as "deep" and "surface acting" referring to service worker's transactions (Lee and Madera, 2019). Hospitality researchers have concluded that understanding these distinctions is important for understanding success in service industry positions. The present study expands upon these understandings of everyday life acting in service industry contexts to identity distress processes in a broader range of everyday life contexts.

Significance of the Theatrical "Safe Space"

Foucault has declared that the "…anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space" (Foucault, 1984, p. 2). He points out that various spaces have not been desanctified in that spaces still hold certain oppositions which are imagined as inviolable, such as private and public, family space and social space, etc. Relevant for the pedagogical theatre spaces examined in the present project, Foucault described counter-sites to real-sites as heterotopias: "…a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, 1984, p.3). He further

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Relationship, Kinesthetic Response, Shape, Gesture, Repetition, Architecture, Tempo, Duration and Topography) and Vocal Viewpoints (Pitch, Dynamic, Acceleration/Deceleration, Silence and Timbre)" (Bogart and Landau, 2004, p. 6).

describes “crisis heterotopias” as “…privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live in a state of crisis…” Foucault goes on to explain that “…heterotopias of crisis are disappearing today and are being replaced, I believe, by what we might call heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed.” (Foucault, 1984, p. 4-5)

The various self-help retreats, classrooms, and other specialized self-transformation focused spaces are nestled in this history of societal heterotopias: the acceptance theme of the self-help movement pushes against the more critical and pathologizing tendencies while the actualization theme holds these underlying judgements, worries, and norms within it. The concept of safe space, and concepts akin to it, can be traced from corporate America as developed by psychologist Kurt Lewin in the 1940’s, to spaces where marginalized LGBTQ groups did not have to hide their identities in the 1960’s and continues to be used as a term for a space of anti-discriminatory spaces for marginalized groups on college campuses (Grimes, 2020.) In terms of conceptualizing an active space of change, similar notions are present in Winnicott’s 1971 “transitional space,” a safe place for play, and also in political theatrical movements such as the “transitive space” in Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1993). Both of these indicate an environment where an individual may disclose personally or politically sensitive information without fear of judgment or persecution and with the possibility of enacting personal and/or social change.

Theatre stages and classrooms are necessarily heterotopias in their work to represent, contest, and invert “real life.” The safe space exists within theatre and therapeutic theatre movements indicating heterotopias demarcated by alternative psychosocial boundaries and

interaction rules whether playful, clinical, or a hybrid. From American popular culture to early corporate discourse on safe spaces, the theatre classroom and club have come to be imagined as a kind of special developmental heterotopia called a safe space to mold one's sense of identity and reflect on everyday challenges. In contemporary applied theatre research, a "safe space" is "a processual act of ever-becoming: a space of messy negotiations" (Hunter, 2008, p. 5) and this messiness reflects broader modern debates and tensions around what constitute levels of risk, safety, and honest speech aimed at various groups in a myriad of regulated environments from college campuses to book stores with terms like "safe space," "safer space," and "brave space" reflecting these tensions (Grimes, 2020).

In youth theatre research, "safe space" can also be the environment for "liminal or liminoid activities" for teens and emerging adults: "…freedom of expression, a non-institutionalized space, an opportunity to explore and reinvent identity… this helps some young people feel more in control of how they project themselves in the social world" (Hughes and Wilson, 2007, pp. 69-70.) Thus in terms of colloquial American and still-popular Eriksonian notions of youth identity crisis and exploration, these theatrical safe spaces may function as heterotopias of crisis and/or deviance.

The theatrical safe or "anxiety-free"[45] spaces explored in this study are various kinds of counter-sites and heterotopias in their ideologies with one being explicitly a crisis-deviance heterotopia (the Anxiety Improv Bootcamp) and with the other pedagogical spaces of Clown Play and Neo-Futurism being taken up sometimes as crisis or deviance heterotopias facilitating liminal activities that participants may be lacking particularly in feeling more in control of their images in the social world and how they may not live up to certain standards of success (Hughes

[45] As taken up by the participant described in detail in the case study in Chapter 6.

and Wilson, 2007). All three can be understood as sites of transformation where identity distress (understood alternatively as a disorder, an idiom of stress, and a kind of quotidian struggle towards self-actualization) may be made visible and potentially be dealt with.

Safety for Identity Formation and Self Expression

A number of applied theatre researchers claim that theatre is a successful liminal activity that helps youth in their personal and social identity development processes. For example, Jenny Hughes and Karen Wilson, researchers of youth theatre in England where there is a long tradition of theatre as part of the national education system. Others, like Bernardo and Paula Weston Solano, California State University, researchers in the field of Theatre and Social Change, argue that while their rules do not work for everyone, they are generally successful for their purposes as a Safe Space:

> While our primary focus is on creating effective activist performances, we have taken care to develop a process and a working environment in which everyone feels included, respected, and clear about the 'rules of engagement.' (Solano & Solano, 2013, p. 154)

The Solanos work in a variety of California-based projects with companies such as Fringe Benefits which aim to create collaborative productions with the aim of social justice. The face-easing condition of clarity around "rules of engagement" and a sense of inclusion and respect is key: this is a group that is aware of the potential benefits of theatre for stigma-related identity distress and the culture of inclusion has to begin among the performers themselves. On the Fringe Benefits website they explain: "Since 1991, Fringe Benefits has collaborated with student and community groups to create tolerance-promoting plays and screenplays which we produce, tour and, in some instances, publish" (http://www.cootieshots.org/how.html. Accessed on September 16, 2019).

Boundary Blurring and Questions of Vulnerability in Actors

Relevant for the present investigation in terms of identity threats towards certain self and identity boundaries in everyday life performance, are studies of "boundary blurring," a blurring in the self/character boundary (Burgoyne et al. 1999), between acting and the personal life of the professional actor (Tust-Gunn 1995). These studies suggest that both detrimental and positive outcomes are possible and dependent on actor training and a variety of individual factors that may become evident through the study of performance pedagogies. An awareness of synthesizing one's discoveries has been identified as key:

> …the primary determinant of whether confronting themselves through their characters resulted in personal growth or distress for actors seemed to be whether or not they were able to understand and synthesize their discoveries… It was disturbing if difficult issues were evoked and the actor had no outlet for understanding them, working them out, or releasing them creatively. (Tust-Gunn, 1995, p. 161)

Further, an investigation of actor attachment histories and psychological vulnerability revealed that while professional actors tended to have higher levels of mental coherence and awareness than non-actors, they also (though this is inconclusive) may have higher levels of vulnerability to their past traumas (Thomson and Jaque, 2012).

It's important to note that in therapeutically-oriented non-fictional, playback, and testimonial theatre making (which is to some extent translatable to the more professionally-oriented practice of Neo-Futurism which we explain in chapter 4), the premise is to create new theatrical works that are collectively gathered and collaboratively honed into new theatrical productions (Malpede, 1999) through "a process of oscillating between empathy and distancing as the stories emerge …. Ultimately, the process helps heal the performers and their audiences" (Thomson & Jaque, 2012, p. 362, citing Kaplan, 2005). Actors are putting themselves in a place of vulnerability in order to create a truthful and believable role whether it is a fictional or non-

fictional one, based on their personal lives or a dramatist's imagination, and there are a number of complex issues to navigate which reveal some of the potential benefits as well as risks involved. In these explicitly therapeutically-oriented practices, the aim of "healing" is clear. In other more professionally-oriented practices, it may be a by-product, while in others still it may be hidden or intentionally unclear. Whether an explicit goal or a by-product of the pedagogical process, the negotiation of self-character boundaries is present in everyday life encounters and the pedagogies examined here provide insight into these processes.

Lessons in Intervention from the Applied Theatre Movement

The movement known as Applied Theatre has many activist as well as interventionist variants throughout the world. It is unique as a discipline in that it is both academic, interventionist, therapeutic, and artistic at the same time and it is possible to have various combinations and intensities of these directionalities. It means that it is incredibly versatile as a liminal activity in that it can both represent, be implemented for, and be interpreted for a variety of goals. It is a liminal activity and engagement in that it can inherently reveal much about the society and the participants among whom it is implemented. This is why it's also critical to pay attention to particular practices because the rules do reflect upon broader everyday realities. For example, one of the tenets in Theatre of the Oppressed was that the audience cannot just be passive spectators but they must become "spect-actors" – engaged and able to alter the play (Boal, 1993). For Boal this was a power metaphor for changing the dynamic between the oppressor and the oppressed. Theatre has a rich history as a liminal activity for altering and experimenting with the dynamics of everyday sociocultural reality, such as around questions of power and status, and we will study this in detail in the ethnographic analysis of three particular theatre pedagogies as practiced in an urban American environment.

Theatre in American Educational Institutions and Classrooms

Even when it's not intentionally set up explicitly as an intervention, theatre can provide a safe space and liminal activity in an environment of complicated identity development, such as the prototypical American public high school. The "drama kid" is an archetype of the American high school who is identified with and oftentimes identifies oneself with theatre. "They are some of the coolest kids you will ever know, no matter how nerdy they seem," reads an entry from *Urban Dictionary* (2019). Interestingly, it goes on to explain that this is because they don't care what you think which is the essence of keeping up American "cool" according to historian Peter Stearns:

> In the culture of the twentieth century, undue emotion, whether anger or grief or love, meant vulnerability as well as childishness. By the 1990s, several generations had been schooled in the desirability of keeping most emotions buttoned up and expecting other people to do the same. American cool still prevails." (Stearns, 1994, p. 310)

If the face-work of a drama kid succeeds in creating the "I don't care what anyone thinks" impression, then they have not only succeeded in establishing an ideal outward American "cool" emotional expression, which should never be too "hot" as explained by Peter Stearns (1994), but it also means they have fully achieved the ultimate in American individualistic expression and authenticity: living for an essential inner truth while simultaneously impressing and entertaining others with their performative skills—whether it's humor, original thought, non-mainstream behavior, intellectualism, artistic skills, etc. All of these live within a peer and educational culture of bullying and resentment as well as admiration within the American public school system. (Crosnoe, 2011)

"The creative individual is no longer viewed as an iconoclast. He-or she-is the new mainstream" (Richard Florida, 2012 [unpaginated]). The tension between the archetypal

American “theatre kid” and the cool, role model celebrity actor or reality star on screen is a fascinating one. It demonstrates that theatre classrooms can indeed be spaces of empowerment for marginalized students. In the view of a variety of researchers, such a space and practice of empowerment for society’s marginalized groups, whether it’s aimed at helping prisoners reintegrate into society or giving marginalized teenagers a voice and a supportive community, the beneficial possibilities of activist educational and community theatre appear broad-ranging and strong (Barak, 2013; Hughes and Wilson, 2007).

The Importance of Separation and Coherence in the Reimagining of Identity Distress

This section describes theoretical perspectives which lay the groundwork for exploring dramaturgical reimagining processes of identity distress. It argues that separation and coherence are key for these processes and it does so by building on emotional labor studies, dramaturgical theory, and bio-psycho-cultural research. First, emotional labor as analyzed by Arlie Hochschild in relation to Stanislavskian acting method in terms of deep and surface acting, is explored here and analyzed in greater depth in terms of other relevant aspects of Stanislavskian theory and technique. In particular, the work of the imagination, under-explored in current emotional labor theory, is emphasized here as an important area to integrate into the present theory because the imaginative process and labor of identification and emotional experience alignment with the role one is playing is worked out by Stanislavsky at a more nuanced level of analysis than the labels “deep” and “surface acting.” Second, I highlight the emergent effectiveness of what I term “dramaturgical distancing metaphors” as coping and reimagining strategies for a variety of mental health struggles. The work of Rebecca Seligman (2013) is examined as an example of how a practice akin to dramaturgical methods, that of orisha embodiment in candomblé

practitioners, in which the self and its roles, boundaries and characters is reimagined, can work to recast and even "treat" or perhaps more aptly, to reframe a mental illness condition.

An Enriched Perspective on Emotional Labor

The findings of this theatre-based study will offer a novel contribution to our understanding of what sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983/2012) calls "emotional labor," a theory relevant for understanding the reimagining of identity distress. Hochschild explains that "This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others…" and in addition to the emotional regulation of others "…it [emotional labor] sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality" (Hoshschild, 1983/2012, p. 7). Thus authenticity to the self of the emotional laborer is identified as important. Building on the literature-based work of Lionel Trilling (Trilling, 1972), Hochschild argued that authenticity has replaced sincerity in America as the dominant cultural value. Hochschild offered the concept of emotional labor as conscious effort to regulate emotional experience and narrative internally as well externally in terms of display and face-work in public service settings (Hochschild, 1983/2012). Though she focuses primarily on public settings in her study, Hochschild has a differentiation in her terminology between private versus public settings:

> I use the term emotional labor to mean the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value. I use the synonymous terms emotion work or emotion management to refer to these acts done in a private context where they have use value. (Hoshschild, 1983/2012, p.7)

In a later section she gives a sense of what this use value might entail when she describes the way in which girls are socialized to manage and display their emotions, e.g., "…'feminine' head-tilting, smiling, conversational cheerleading, and other deference displays" (Hoshschild,

1983/2012, p. 269), in order to subscribe to standards that will keep them subordinate to males and at a disadvantage in “male” arenas of competition (Hoshschild, 1983/2012). The implication here is that the American emotional system reproduces power inequalities in both public and private domains of exchange.

Private versus public divides are not assumed to be a clear-cut dichotomy in this study and the far more complex relationship of these two categories is eloquently described through Gal’s (2002) semiotic concept of embedding (discussed above) where, in this case, various public structures can be signaled within private ones, e.g., the way the domestic living room signifies a public space within a private one (Gal, 2002). Gal’s analysis of the complex nested and recursive relationship of private and public categories helps explain why emotional labor in its public and private iterations is relevant to most or all image management contexts. The present study finds the public-private distinction helpful when referring to the workplace versus other situations, as in work contexts which require “emotional labor” versus other, more casual social contexts which require “emotional work.” These distinctions proved relevant for the present study’s participants in that some level of emotional effort is necessary in all contexts while the rules of expression and necessary face-work efforts may differ depending on the space and its interlocuters.

Hochschild argued that emotional labor and work comes with psychological costs and that concept has since been found to be important in understanding depression and burnout among workers as well as customer satisfaction in the service and hospitality industry (Grandey, 2003; Lee & Madera, 2019; Lee et al., 2019). This research is also in conversation with the literature reviewed in Chapter 1 on emotional regulation, which finds that emotion suppression is generally more maladaptive, particularly for Americans with European values (Butler, 2007).

That said, the more nuanced understanding and the one most useful to the present argument is the finding that emotion suppression is healthiest when it is flexible and aptly controlled by the individual (Bonanno et al., 2012).

Hochschild utilized dramaturgical techniques and metaphors described in Stanisklavski's *An Actor Prepares* to analyze emotion management: "In everyday life, we are all to some degree students of Stanislavsky; we are only poorer or better at deep acting, closer or more remote from incentives to do it well" (Hochschild, 1983/2012, p. 194). At times, she claimed that what individuals (particularly those with public-oriented jobs like flight attendants), do in managing their emotions in work interactions was akin to acting. She theorized that these workers either lie to themselves or use emotion memory to alter their perception of disagreeable situations where various emotion management and face-work practices (e.g. smiling), have been commodified and expected by customers and enforced in company training.

One example which Hochschild described as a form of acting that was psychologically harmful, was a Delta Airlines training program she observed. There, workers, particularly female flight attendants who reported numerous cases of discrimination and discomfort on the job, were taught to suppress their feelings of anger and discomfort in the face of customers' expressions of anger however discriminatory those may be.[46] The situations Hochschild described typically involved female public service workers such as flight attendants or waitresses. These were situations in which individuals may be mistreated or discriminated against in the workplace because of unequal power relations, particularly for female employees who have to contend with double standards in terms of how male versus female attendants are treated (e.g., the female flight attendant who is imagined simultaneously as the nurturer, the attractive woman, and to a

[46] The concerns of the female flight attendants were also minimized when voiced during their training session, perpetuating the gendered emotion expression bias.

lesser degree than male flight attendants, the authority figure). It's very relevant to the present work that in her focus on the difficulties faced by women in public service industries, Hochschild was describing the challenges of emotional labor in light of fraught and discriminatory cultural stereotypes and stigmas for individuals in vulnerable identity categories, such as women. The present study brings these emotional effort challenges into fuller conversation with stigma management across a broader range of identity categories, and tracks not only the work of emotion but of imagination in character work wherein the individual is creating a new or alternative character (or in everyday life, a new or alternative identity) for themselves, a critical component of Stanislavsky's acting theory missing from Hoshchild's theorizing.

Hoshchild (1983/2012) describes various scenarios where she imagines how someone might apply the work of emotion memory to change their negative feelings and attitude towards someone in their everyday life by comparing these feelings to more positive past experiences they've had or by comparing them to more negative past experiences (e.g. Hochschild offers the example of convincing oneself to fall out of love with someone by focusing on negative characteristics or past experiences). While these hypothetical scenarios are not unrealistic, and the analogy is evident, they are not in fact a direct application of Stanislavskian acting strategy.

More recent emotion labor research investigates worker identification with the work role and in doing so gets closer to the character-actor imaginative component of the Stanislavskian method. Lindsey Lee's 2019 study on emotional labor in the hospitality industry found that identification with the role (or, perhaps more precisely, with the values and expectations of the role) is correlated with higher worker wellbeing. A closer application of the Stanislavskian emotion memory technique would mean an individual imagining a fantasy or fictional character version of themselves and then infusing this character version of themselves with the actor's

emotion memories in order to have a more authentic connection with the part one is playing but this has to do with relating to the character, "experiencing with" thus keeping a separation between actor-self and character-self. Ideally, this technique would help prevent detrimental boundary blurring in that the awareness of the self-character connection and distinction could allow for productive processing and growth.

In imagining how these positionalities may work in a psychosocial system, the present theory builds on psychologist Hubert Hermans' notion of "theatre as a powerful metaphor for the understanding of the spatial nature of the self and the quality of its internal and external relationships" (Hermans, 2006, p. 148), by exploring how individuals may take up theatrical metaphors as dialogic positions and counter-positions "in the wild," that is outside of a controlled therapeutic context where this is done as an intentional intervention. I will argue that imagined boundaries within oneself or lack thereof are key to understanding identity distress processes and this idea will be unpacked carefully in the case studies chapters that follow. The earlier discussion of boundary blurring is also relevant here. In the individuals Hochschild describes, particularly in their private lives and relationships, there is no psychological separation or imagined boundary between them and the difficult roles they have to play and I suggest that this lack of attention to the imagined boundaries and distances between oneself as an imagined manager of roles and the roles themselves is an oversight that the present work remedies.

Dramaturgical Distancing Metaphors Applied for Coping

This section describes distancing mechanisms as applied for cognitive and psychosocial coping in the United States and relevant research containing evidence of the application of dramaturgical distancing metaphors in various contexts which allow a separation that facilitates coherence and perezhivania during potentially distressing social encounters. "Dramaturgical

distancing metaphors" is a representative term for these mechanisms because they are dramaturgical in their use in both imaginative, perceptual, and performative-social functions. These mechanisms are metaphors in the sense that abstract spatial structures from a variety of practices and philosophies are imposed onto everyday interactions and understandings.

A Spatially-Organized Self and Society

Psychoanalytic theory provided one of the first proposals of an inner psychological separation with the imagining of oneself as negotiating between the super ego, ego, and id (Freud 1923). I propose that a key strategy towards improved mental and psychosocial coherence developed in the performance practices examined in this study is the creation of distancing mechanisms by envisioning at least two imagined points (whether within the self or with reference to some other construct of structure or frame) which one can then manipulate, negotiate, dialogue with, and establish a sense of agency over (often through a new metaphorical relationship to an imagined structure) both within one's imagined self-organization and which correspondingly provides perspective, organization, and coping tools in everyday life social encounters. On a broader theoretical level, these imaginative dramaturgical distancing mechanisms provide critical coping strategies for distress and tracking these mechanisms is key as they are fundamental to mental health, cognitive processing, and psychosocial coping.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) emphasize the importance of metaphor in our experience of the world:

> Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p.3)

Often the metaphors relative to the present work are “orientational” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) that is, they organize “a whole system of concepts with respect to another” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 14) by giving a concept a spatial orientation, such as the English expression “I’m feeling up today.” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 14) I will thus track imaginative dramaturgical distancing mechanisms through orientational metaphors as I argue that these metaphors are key to imaginings of how our psyches and especially our self-positions are organized. How these spatial imaginings are voiced and applied is relevant for processes of self-transformation. I mark these specific metaphorical imaginings with descriptors such as “dramaturgical distancing” as metaphorical actions like “distancing” and “boundary-making” dominate contemporary self-help and therapeutic discourse and many self-reorganizing practices.

Individuals seek better ways to cope by re-imagining parts of consciousness, the self, and one’s relationships to others. These self-world, backstage-frontstage, ego-id-super ego, medium-practitioner, body-mind, etc. imagined structures typically anchored in interactive social realities are what allow for a sense of agency, coherence, and what the psychological and medical institution understands as “wellbeing.” Or as Winnicott (1971) described, they can enable “a good enough attunement” within “a third realm”, a metaphorical space understood as a reconciling between fantasy and reality.

The public versus private divide is an intuitive self-organizing structure for individuals socialized in a society like the United States where the self is imagined as spatial. In the US, with its focus on Calvinistic and capitalistic values (Weber, 1905), the nuclear family and the imagined separation of the public and private (Berg, 2018), an understanding of interiority vs exteriority and inner versions of oneself are inherent to the structure. Thus Herman’s self-as-a-

theater metaphor is an apt one for understanding social organization and self-structure within such a spatially-organized society and self-understanding system.

Dramaturgical Distancing Metaphors in Psycho-Cultural Studies

The importance of an imagined separation for individual coping in a spatially-organized society is supported by the benefit to mental health for individuals who imagine their disorders as separate from them where they can develop a sense of agency albeit a fraught one (Weiner, 2011), or the way a separation between one's psychological pain and suffering is located and manipulated in the body by individuals in yoga classes who cultivate and control hope somatically (Goldwert, 2013)[47]. On the other end of this psychocultural research spectrum are various micro-cultural episodes of identity management through group practice (Seligman, 2013). Through ethnographic and physiological response data, Rebecca Seligman found that candomblé practitioners tend to be individuals who suffered from severe mental illness conditions prior to initiation, reporting a fragmented sense of self and identity akin to the DSM diagnosis of schizophrenia (Seligman, 2013).

Seligman's notable finding was that in becoming candomblé practitioners, their profound distress and mental illness disappeared on both a self-report and physiological level. Seligman's findings suggest that the successful "treatment" could be the highly organizing personality and importantly, relational template of the orisha god that the individual takes on. Further, not only do her findings emphasize the importance of de-pathologizing, sociocultural based understandings and treatments for suffering, but they provide evidence for how identity distress processes may operate dramaturgically. While the candomblé case offers a deeper case of

[47] Of note in this regard is a recent study which argues that Stanislavsky based around 40 percent of his basic acting exercises on yogic method (Tcherkasski, 2016) implying further possible parallels of spatial-bodily imaginings as important for sociocultural-specific coping.

identity fusion and boundary blurring with a character than perhaps roles that do not involve mediumship, I would add that the "actor" in this case nevertheless does have clear ritualistic practices that delineate when the orisha is embodied (during the candomblé ritual), versus not, (outside of ritualistic practice times).

Further, the "actor" in the candomblé case identifies with, believes in, experiences, "worries with," and feels a sense of authenticity and empowerment in the orisha role they are playing which is arguably persona-like so perhaps the boundary blurring in this role helps lead to positive transformation. In certian ways this outcome even fits the requirements of what appears to be successful perezhivania, as the delineation, high agency self-manager role, and self-organization is clear—this is perhaps why the schizophrenic and distress symptoms disappear entirely. Seligman's conclusion also comports with the arguments and findings that a sense of authenticity and identification is important for an emotional laborer's wellbeing (Hoshschild, 1983/2012; Lee, 2019).

Seligman's study does imply a level of fusion between the identity of the actor and the character that would likely not be recommended as healthy management of boundary blurring for theatrical actors learning a role for the stage; in the case of candomblé practitioners, being a medium for the orisha becomes a key, permanent aspect of their identity. Nevertheless, in terms of everyday life performances and interactions, the candomblé case study provides a model for how boundaries for the self around actor and character management may be helpful for managing identity distress and how boundary blurring in a lived practice could lead to positive transformation. The identity distress process for the individuals in the candomblé case comes to light here as an effort to find coherence, structure, and agency in social interactions and within oneself as a psychosocial entity.

Arguably becoming a successful theatrical performer and other sanctioned, high agency Western identity positions may offer a similar kind of empowering and self-organizing outcome for individuals in the US, with the transformation program being a theatre course rather than a candomblé initiation. In the present study, we will discover how acting and performance students of various traditions learn to reimagine and manipulate their sense of self and identity through dramaturgical tropes and practices. These tropes allow for a separation from a vulnerable sense of self and identities that are presented in various social and interactive contexts. The analysis considers individuals' roles and characters from childhood and adolescence, since both psychological and sociological research have demonstrated their importance in shaping identity and self-understanding in adulthood (Cohler, 1982).

Understanding Contemporary American Idioms of Identity Distress

This section describes two idioms or idioms-as-movements of identity distress invoked by contemporary self-help movements, revealing both how identity distress manifests and the various understandings of self that it signals. These contemporary American distress idioms are embedded in the self-help movements and effectively inseparable from them. To practice self-help is automatically to self-actualize, with the suffering is both implied and erased by the act of self-actualization. The imagined self here is one that has already taken stock of their inadequacies and problems and is pointedly working to fix them; this echoes the transformational force of naming as overcoming in the language of recovery i.e.,"admitting you have a problem" is an important first step in AA recovery discourse and practice.

These layered mental health phenomena embedded both the problem and the solution in one semiotic package. First, the "get out of your head" movement both indicates and seeks to

address an over-production of harmful thought patterns and thereby self-understandings. Next, the "be comfortable in your skin" movement provides practices to improve self-image and simultaneously implies that you are not sufficiently confident in your authentic self and therefore need these methods. Thus to participate in the practices offered by these movements is to both name a problem and begin to actively solve it.

The aim is to fit a standardized ideal of American personhood and both self-help movements provide various dramaturgical distancing metaphors for self-reimagining: providing new possibilities for consumers eager to reframe their experiences of themselves and their images in the world. The first metaphor pushes against a shy, overly introverted characterization of the self, while the second provides alternatives for a version of the self that is lacking in confidence, self-acceptance, or self-love. As self-actualizing adults adapt these practices to optimize themselves, the self-actualization market grows and adapts dramaturgical distancing metaphors and their associated movements and practices in turn to serve new opportunities for growth and image improvement. Thus the bidirectional relationship between the self-help consumer and the standardizing, market-driven, self-managing forces becomes evident.

The "Get Out of Your Head" Gurus

Media culture scholar Douglas Kellner describes the way media influences contemporary consumer society: "Not only do the media shape our vision of the contemporary world, determining what most people can or cannot see and hear (Kellner, 1982), but our very images of our own body, our own selves, our own personal self-worth (or lack of it) is mediated by the omnipresent images of mass culture (Featherstone, 1982)" (Kellner, 1983; see also Featherstone, 1982). Kellner's observations of image-oriented, media-driven society are relevant for what I'm referring to as the "get out of your head" emic iteration of identity distress. The need to get

distance on oneself is evident in this oft repeated contemporary idiom voiced by study participants and more broadly in the zeitgeist, particularly in its propagation through media and advertising.

If you google "get out of your head" you get a plethora of self-help gurus catering to every kind of consumer. From the self-help *Get Out of Your Head Study Guide: A Study in Phillipians* by bible study scholar, Jennie Allen (2020) who uses scripture supported by lessons from neuroscience to provide the latest recipe for dealing with "toxic thoughts" to *Unfu*k Yourself: Get Out of Your Head and into Your Life*, by Gary John Bishop (2016), a self-proclaimed "urban philosopher" who practices tough love and offers a formula for getting rid of "negative self-talk." "The mind is a pretty cool place – but when it gets to be too much, it's important to know how to take a break from it" declares Alice Walton (2014), a Forbes writer who offers "7 Science-Backed Methods To Get You Out of Your Head," wherein she compiles an assortment of escape plans from mindfulness to storytelling all legitimated by a study from Science titled "Wandering Minds: The Default Network and Stimulus-Independent Thoughts" (Mason et al., 2007). Walton morphs the language of this study just enough to compare the mind to a computer processor in a kind of idling, default mode.

Walton's combination of referencing peer-reviewed "science" to relatable vernacular registers is reflective of the discursive strategies of the gurus in this movement (including Allen who is appealing to a pious Christian audience and Bishop who appears to be targeting the independent pull-yourself-up by the bootstraps self-help reader looking for a tough life coach.) Walton extrapolates from Mason et al.'s (2007) study that the default system which Walton renames a "default mode network" as a "…means that the brain literally defaults to this kind of (worry-based) thinking much of the time." What's troubling is that Mason et al.'s (2007) study

never says anything about worry or negative thinking in relation to mind wandering. On the contrary, Mason et al. discuss daydreaming rather than worrying as the activity behind mind-wandering and postulates that it serves a number of beneficial purposes, such as maintaining an optimal level of arousal, or developing a sense of coherence with past, present, and future (Mason et al., 2007).

What is consistent about the specificity of the "get out of your head" self-help movement and the vernacular idiom it references, is the proliferation of dramaturgical distancing methods and metaphors offered. The movement offers these metaphors through "science backed" discourse often integrating, in varying degrees of accuracy, neuroscience, behavioralist thought particularly Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or CBT, psychology, and mindfulness. In "get out of your head" discourse there is the implication that there is something undesirable and even potentially harmful about ordinary, uncontrolled thought production. Thought production is imagined as nearly impossible to control particularly when one is "in one's head," i.e., in a state of uncontrollable and undesirable thoughts, where the production of such thoughts, particularly negative, thoughts is disproportionately high.

According to an interview with Allen on her new book *Get Out of Your Head: Stopping the Spiral of Toxic Thoughts* (2020), 85% of thoughts are negative for most humans (Huckabee, 2020). Thoughts, as preached by Allen and others, are imagined as primarily toxic entities to best distance oneself from, while the mind or "one's head" is imagined as an undesirable place to occupy, a location that it is best to escape from. "Get out of your head" gurus offer escape plans or distancing metaphors through whichever trope might best suit their target consumer whether it is God and truth versus evil and negative thoughts, a tough self-help coach, or imagining the mind as a faulty processer.

Additional contemporary distancing strategies to address the problem of being in one's faulty head and with one's toxic thoughts for too long are offered by the entertainment industry. Cultural consumer studies describe these strategies as escapism through hyperdiagetic bingeing, or "the self-selected separation of oneself from one's immediate reality—through the consumption of media resources, or *texts*, such as television, music, games and movies" (Jones et al., 2017) and which can include various consumer addictions including impulse buying (Li et al., 2011) and pathological gaming (Darrat et al., 2016). What's interesting in terms of hyperdiegesis as a storytelling strategy[48] is that it implies a rich, imagined world far beyond what the consumer is able to experience in each episode, and that the consumer is far more involved and receives more desirable experiences in contemplating the worlds of their favorite characters than their own lived experiences and the contemplation of them.

What hyperdiegetic strategies and consumer addictions have in common with the ones offered by the "get out your head" gurus is a deferral of agency and a creation of need and dependency. Whether the deferral is from the faulty mind to a higher force or a faulty life to a more exciting fantasy life, these various metaphors and strategies may create their own psychological complexes. I argue that presence, as taken up and imagined through these discourses, is oftentimes an orchestration of desirable absence. An interesting exception is science writer Walton's first recommendation where she actually advises readers "to go there" and deal with all those undesirable emotions and thoughts in your head, again as a way to "step out of them", but preferably with the support of a friend or better yet, a therapist. In the second recommendation, she is careful to warn the reader about the first as a "double-edged sword": she

[48] This storytelling strategy is often used in modern television as well as video games with the purpose of motivating binge-consumption in viewers.

encourages storytelling and offers narrative structure as a way to curb the dangers of "ruminating too much" (Walton, 2014).

Thus while tv addictions are a blatant form of escapism, the get-out-of-your-head self-help movement deems one's own thoughts as evil, false, negative, and toxic to the point perhaps of debilitation of the individual and a sense of agency. Instructions for not worrying too much and being the ultimate "present" person abound in many iterations. There is also a created need, dependency, and sense of insufficiency. The get-out-of-your-head consumer is thus urged to search for a truth and authenticity that may never quite be attainable. And just as what is deemed a truly successful tv show never ends: we often end up more hooked on the search for authenticity rather than authenticity itself and this cycle of striving for the unattainable (in oneself and others) is perhaps the most "American" phenomenon of them all in its ceaseless efforts to produce an optimal life. Or as Brockling puts it, "The entrepreneurial self is never finished with self-optimizing, while the indebted self can never retire from self-revelation" (Brockling, 2015 p. ix). Thus the self-improving, self-helping consumer comes to emulate what they consume. When it comes to the self-image actualization centric get-out-of-your head self-help movement the entire goal seems to be for the consumer to become the never-finished product.

All the performance-based trainings explored in this dissertation align with a sense of needing to get-out-of-your-head in so far as "being in your head" may impede successful performance on stage. These trainings are thus explored as alternative therapies for thoughts that may block audience engagement and successful interactions. One of the three performance practices studied here, Social Anxiety Improv, is explicitly constructed for battling "being in your head" as a colloquial idiom for a range of social anxiety symptoms and maladaptive thought

patterns, while the other pedagogies have histories in being constructed for alleviating performers' stage fright—evident in how these strategies are applied by teachers to help students cope with their distress as it emerges in the classroom.

The "Be Comfortable in Your Skin" Movement

Another self-help discourse, "be comfortable in your skin," focuses on self-acceptance and authenticity and is simultaneously concerned with self-management and self-improvement. The ideology of the "be comfortable in your skin" movement and idiom of distress is focused on self-acceptance and authenticity and yet it is simultaneously concerned with self-management and self-improvement. The acceptance aspect of the discourse concentrates on accepting and even celebrating the bodily as well as personal characteristics with which one is born, rather than hiding or changing them for the benefit of one's audience and interlocuters. Yet if self-acceptance and self-love are at a low, the onus is on the individual to develop an alternative to negative thinking patterns much like with the "get out of your head" movement.

One's "skin" stands for one's externally identifiable characteristics and the concern is how those characteristics might be judged by others. This idiom is visible particularly in various media and colloquial everyday discussions of women's self-confidence particularly as the idiom relates to their body images as well as to anyone who might carry another potentially stigmatized marker, from skin color to sexuality. In a how-to article on the issue titled 15 Ways to Feel Comfortable in Your Skin Everyday, online magazine Bustle paradoxically asks: "But why put yourself through that kind of stress when you're already perfect?" As is the typical format for the self-help genre, the article goes on to detail steps towards being comfortable in your skin. Each step includes a picture of a different young-looking female supermodel. Step 1 is "Stop Seeking

Validation from Other People" accompanied by a picture of two young women staring directly into the camera and clearly seeking validation from the camera-holder.

The intent to stop seeking validation and not worry about the audience is particularly complicated for anyone in a disenfranchised position. Writer Susan Griffin argues that for women to be comfortable in their own skin, they have to acknowledge oppressive beauty standards or what she calls "the pretty privilege:" "People who do reflect society's beauty standards will have an easier life" (Griffin, 2020 [unpaginated]). This example of privilege suggests that there is a pressure on those in disenfranchised identity positions to work harder on their image management because their success is determined by the gaze of the dominant identity.

The body positivity movement (known as #bopo on Instagram) and, more recently, the body neutrality movement are two of the latest responses to the struggle with the pretty privilege. A variety of blogs, sites, and social media accounts have been commodifying the body positivity movement since 2012 featuring self-help and lifestyle gurus and influencers in these movements (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). While the aim of the body positivity movement is to celebrate all shapes and sizes of the body as it changes, the pressure to be positive publicly and on social media in itself can become an exhausting identity and face-work objective and has been criticized by those who opt for body neutrality.

Body positivity represents distance from appearance-focused impression management, but it's not enough distance from self-image actualization pressures for some. The idea behind body neutrality, first noticed online in 2015 and popularized by fitness coach Anne Poirier the following year (Sharkey, 2019), is to appreciate what the body can accomplish such as digest food and allow the individual to get from point A to point B (Weingus, 2018). Thus, in body

neutrality, the individual does not have to worry about loving one's appearance, rather the movement asks them to appreciate functionality alone.

One recent article arguing for body neutrality as the right perspective for post-pandemic lockdown body image claims "Now, More Than Ever, We Need To Attempt Body Neutrality: You don't need to lose your lockdown belly – or embrace your curves. You can just… exist" (Evans, 2020 [unpaginated]). Pushing back against the commercialized pressure to believe in positive affirmations about one's body that the person may not actually believe, psychotherapist Allison Stone argues "Too often, we fall into the black-or-white trap of either loving or hating our bodies, and I think this movement provides an opportunity for a middle ground. It provides an opportunity for acceptance" (quoted in Weingus, 2018 [unpaginated]). The concern is that the popularized movement increases anxiety and self-loathing for individuals when they don't meet a certain standard.

Other terms that have been claimed by various outlets and advocates as offering a more accepting approach to body image than body positivity include "fat acceptance," "body acceptance," and "body diversity" e.g. this is also reflected in the efforts of art-based programs. [49] These alternative movements have in turn criticized body neutrality as well, e.g. the case of popular blogger, known anonymously as "Your Fat Friend," offers insight on the bidirectional relationship of body image actualization pressures which they argue, still exist in body neutrality:

> …rather than tackling the systems that *produce* inequality among our bodies, body neutrality suggests that the way to deal with the impacts of these complex, systemic forces is simple: just change your mindset. In that way, body neutrality perpetuates a problem that has long plagued body positivity: the conflation between *body image* and *body-based oppression.* Body image refers to how each of us individually feel about our

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[49] "Teens and adolescents suffering from body image issues are facing more challenges and triggers amid COVID-19. Additional time spent on social media can be a big contributor to this. With this in mind, Eating Recovery Center, the largest eating disorder treatment center in the U.S., has created the art-based program, "Love Your Tree," as a way for young people to celebrate body diversity and body acceptance" (Alzegeber).

> own bodies. Body-based oppression is about how the world around us *treats* our bodies. So, for example, a fat disabled person might not have issues with how they see their own body, but may struggle with a lack of acceptance from those around them and in the environments they're in. Conversely, a thin, white, able-bodied person may struggle mightily with an eating disorder, but not have to contend with the same kind of street harassment, discrimination, or access issues, as many of us whose bodies are marked by difference do." (Your Fat Friend, 2020, [unpaginated])

The ongoing discursive conflict in the media where each body image movement-name and ideology claims to be the more accepting and less psychologically harmful alternative is a vivid example of the tension between self-image actualization and acceptance of one's more authentic, unfiltered self in the US.

Individuals occupying stigmatized categories such as plus-size women, women in general, adolescents, or anyone who is self-conscious about their body image, are constantly being offered less distressing alternatives for imagining their image and yet Your Fat Friend argues, the pressure to reimagine is in itself problematic in not tackling the external sources of image-enhancement and actualization pressures. These movements echo Frederick Perls's desire that we just "be" rather than have such a pervasive focus on self-image. In addressing the desire to just "be," the self-help movement appears to be trying to erase its own pushiness, commercialization, privileging of certain kinds of ideal body types and people over others, and over-production of dictums on how to be an ideal person. Self-help gurus who advocate for the next best discourse are thereby explicitly criticizing self-help-movement-produced anxieties. This is of course in tension with the very mechanisms of self-help which pinpoint psychological and personal inadequacies and tell their readers how to fix themselves through an endless, readily available plethora of resources and gurus.

Importantly, the body neutrality movement argues for the (at least partial) silencing or intentional ignoring of a prevalent discourse on the part of the consumer. Critics of body positivity discourse are pointing towards a problematic self-help movement, namely body

positivity, as a culprit that generates exactly the kind of negative self-talk that get-out-of-your-head gurus tend to attribute to a flawed, negative-thought-producing human brain: “The constant conversation is also making people more anxious. Research shows that when you regularly repeat positive affirmations that you don’t actually believe — or at least don’t believe every single day — they can backfire. In other words, if someone says, “I love every inch of my body!” on a day when they don’t feel that way, the subconscious mind will reject this affirmation and make the person saying it feel more stressed out and resentful of their body as a result” (Weingus, 2018 [unpaginated] referencing Isais, 2015, and Wood et al., 2009).

These self-critical and competitive developments and fragmentations in the self-help movement, in their explicit attempts to reframe the thinking and imagined self and identity boundaries of self-help consumers, are suggestive of a shift in popular American culture towards understanding the individual and mental health experience as a bidirectional, dynamic experience and process rather than one of a flawed, solitary brain in a vacuum, e.g. accepting one’s internal and external conditions rather than attempting to force self-love and self-admiration. It’s also reflective of how individuals are seeking out counter-cultural and heterotopic alternatives to existing social spaces where impression management (including emotive practices such as exuding and feeling joy publicly to demonstrate body positivity[50]) is inherently distress-inducing because of built-in scrutiny and (often stigma-based) inequities.

A distancing metaphor which focuses on the functionality and health of the body rather than its beauty is one that is typically taken up by bodily-based therapies. These include practices like yoga (Goldwert, 2013) and clown play as explored in Chapter 6, which seek to foster a body-originated neutral state as an ideal baseline for its students. These bodily-based therapies

and pedagogies may be appealing to self-help consumers of the fraught, essentialist, "you're already perfect" sentiment proliferated by gurus within American self-help discourse. "Comfortable in your skin" discourse reflects the need for stigma management as a part of identity stress process where passing is a common strategy – stigma management and its specific strategies will also be more fully explored in Chapter 3. More broadly, an acceptance of the "unadorned" authentic self as good enough to be a worthwhile and engaging persona also aligns with the Neo-Futurist perspective explored in Chapter 4.

Levels of Awareness of Dramaturgical Distancing Metaphors

It's important to distinguish between levels of awareness in the application of dramaturgical distancing and coping metaphors such as in the two idioms above. The examples examined in this chapter all present different levels of awareness: with candomblé, initiates go through a long period of isolation in preparing to take on a new identity, while with the contemporary self-help movement, there is a conscious level of mental reframing. Perhaps a lack of control is particularly problematic when one does not believe in externally imposed metaphors and roles as in the case of female flight attendants taking up a policy that they find to be discriminatory or self-help seekers attempting to take up body positivity yet not quite believing in its mantras. Nevertheless, it's challenging to ascertain how self-aware individuals are when taking up dramaturgical distancing and coping metaphors.

In Hubert Hermans's dramaturgically-based therapy sessions, there is arguably a high level of awareness as roles, voices, and boundaries in the mind are first examined by the client and then consciously transformed during therapy sessions; new "characters" are even potentially created by the client in the "theatre" of their mind (Hermans, 2006). The self-help movement criticizes itself and yet does not have the same level of awareness of dramaturgical elements and

spatial relationships offered by dramaturgically-based practiced. The present study offers a semiotic and dramaturgical framework for analyzing these ready-made re-imagining structures in self-help and other self-enhancing spaces as they are taken up by participant-interviewees and the implications for future research and interventions in the everyday mental health and adaptation spheres.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter presented relevant background perspectives on theatre, therapy, and their complicated overlap. It made the case for how examining identity distress within the context of this overlap can make an important contribution to the fields of human development, mental health, psychological anthropology, contemplative science, applied theatre, and psychodramatic methods. It explained the place of "emerging adults" in the self-actualization complex. It presents some initial relevant psychologized concepts from theatrical pedagogy, and offers a semiotic frame of analysis as these methods and practices are inherently communicative and liminal.

Theatrical safe spaces were presented as interdiscursive, liminoid, hybrid, counter-sites or heterotopias where critical activities may take place for identity development as well as image management. These theatrical safe spaces and practices offer an opportunity to dramaturgically reimagine distressing realities and this aspect is not unlike the dramaturgical distancing metaphors used in other contexts. These various distancing metaphors allow individuals a therapeutic distance and hoped-for control over their distressing experiences.

This chapter has also established the recursive focus on personal presentation and performance pervasive in American institutions from education to the press, which contribute to identity distress as a culturally-proliferated phenomenon. This is intrinsically linked with

performance concerns in everyday life: being able to perform well in front of an audience means agency, power. This illuminates the market for cultivating the self as a performer, for tapping into one's inner comedian and so on. The ability to confidently stand in front of an audience, to be an extroverted, funny, charismatic performer may feel to many individuals like an apt metaphor for the ideal self. But what happens if one doesn't know oneself and has not reached or doesn't sufficiently perform the markers of the idealized Eriksonian Achievement stage? What if you somehow just barely survived high school? How do you survive in the so-called real world now? As will be analyzed in detail in the original data presented in the following chapters, there is a recursion in how moments are processed and reprocessed in everyday life, and how these come to form identity distress experiences, narratives, and overall trajectories.

CHAPTER 3

Research Methods, Preliminary Data, and Emergent Theory: Seeking Face-Ease

Introduction

This chapter describes the overall plan and methods of research, as well as the results of the preliminary phase of research and how these led to ethnographic fieldwork with performance pedagogies and case studies. As preparation for the detailed case studies to follow, this chapter presents background material on the populations studied, initial descriptions of the settings of the research, summaries of the findings of assessments and interviews, and information on the particular performance pedagogies involved. A few early interviews are analyzed here, focusing on the cases of Sandra and Martha, which illustrate the need for fieldwork in performance-focused group settings in the second phase of research. This chapter marks the transition point from describing and theorizing based on previous work to presenting and analyzing the original empirical data gathered by this project. The chapter concludes by describing the emergent theory, which will be further illustrated in the detailed ethnographies and case studies to follow.

Plan of Research

Qualitative, grounded[51], and phenomenological studies of performance-focused activities can be revealing in ways that standardized assessment measures cannot. This study evolved from a preliminary questionnaire and interview-based study into a site-based ethnographic study. As the assumption of this study was that American distress and identity concerns (and its potential correlates in anxiety, depression, and other distress-related mental health phenomena), are mostly

[51] Pidgeon (2003) "Grounded theory studies are often prompted by quite general research interests at the outset. These might include identifying actors' views or perspectives on a topic or investigating processes or phenomena of interest with their local contexts and settings, and from there arriving at insights and explanatory schemes that are relevant to ('grounded in') real-world problems, a previously unresearched topic area, or both" (p. 131). As Juliet Corbin further explains "grounded theory is a theory generating research methodology…the user of grounded theory method does not enter the field guided by a predefined theoretical formulation" (Corbin, 2005, p. 49).

a black box when it comes to understanding them in richly embedded sociocultural process, the research approach was necessarily exploratory and dynamic, letting the emergent findings and theoretical insights shape the study rather than pre-existing notions.

The interdisciplinary nature of the research question benefitted from a mix of qualitative methods. In its progression, the research has been shaped and informed by a process grounded in an iterative, qualitative psychological analysis of the narrative material collected (Josselson and Lieblich, 2003; Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003). The project evolved in several analytical and methodological phases, each influencing the next. The analysis and theory generation consisted of an ongoing synthesis of identity stress themes, ethnographic fieldwork observations, and narrative analysis of data. The following sections describe details of the procedures, the two phases of research, the populations studied in both phases, and the preliminary questionnaire and interview results.

Populations and Settings Studied

The first, preliminary portion of the study involved a formal survey of 37 participants and more detailed interviews with 10 of these participants. Students were drawn from four different college backgrounds. To protect anonymity the colleges will be referred to as Religious Private University, State University, Elite Private University, and Elite Quirky University. Participants were ages 18-23 and came from a diversity of self-identified ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Asian, Latin American, Mixed Race, African American, and Caucasian), a variety of socioeconomic statuses from low income to upper middle class, and a range of both high and low levels of identity distress as indicated by the IDS scale.

The second, primary portion of the study involved site-based, ethnographic participant observations of 49 participants in three different performance pedagogical classrooms and in-

depth interviews about their classroom experiences and identity stress processes with 16 of these. Participants in this portion were ages 19-52 and again were of a wide range of backgrounds (Asian, Latin American, Caucasian, Mixed Race, African American, and immigrant) and socioeconomic statuses from low income to upper middle class.

Phases of Research and Methods Used for Each

Sampling Methods

I used a combination of purposive sampling, which involves selecting information-rich cases for studying in-depth (Patton, 2007), and theoretical sampling, wherein "the researcher follows the trail of concepts looking for sites, persons or events that enable further comparisons of data, thereby extending knowledge about the properties, dimensions and relationships between concepts" (Corbin, 2005, p. 51), since theory-generation was a primary aim of the project in selecting participants to interview and analyze. Critical case sampling was used to focus on "…cases that can make a point quite dramatically or are, for some reason, particularly important in the scheme of things…" (Patton, 2007, p. 2). Patton explains that studying one or a few critical cases can often permit the researcher to make logical generalizations from the weight of evidence produced.

The first phase of purposive sampling for the preliminary interviews involved maximum variation sampling (hence a questionnaire and interviews with individuals from several different types of universities in Chicago), in order to sample variation across identity stress experiences, with an eye towards later theoretical and critical case sampling for preliminary interviews. The goal was to identify the more extreme instances of the phenomenon in order to understand it. Post-field work interviews and observations were increasingly focused on critical case sampling

and case studies were fully selected through critical case sampling in order to identify, locate, and develop theory for identity distress as a phenomenon.

Preliminary Semi-Structured Personal Interviews

The initial questionnaire and semi-structured interview protocol were based on my training with Martha Van Haitsma at the Chicago Survey Lab. To prepare my interview protocol**,** I first conducted "Cognitive Interviews" (Willis, 1999), a technique for identifying what particular terminology and questions mean to students in order to select the most relevant terminology and effective question phrasing and sequence for the semi-structured personal interviews. Online surveys were created to identify which participants to follow up for in-depth interviews. The surveys were created through Qualtrics software. The surveys (n=37) measured demographic variables, identity distress and eustress, and overall attitudes towards and comfort in the college environment. Recruitment was conducted through flyers in coffee shops near campuses as well as through internet sites and social media such as Facebook and email listservs.

Then using the terminology and questions developed in the preliminary surveys, in depth semi-structured in-person interviews were then conducted with ten individuals. Interviews took approximately 2-4 hours and followed an interview guide that was modified where necessary as the interviews progressed and new information emerged. The aim was to collect qualitative psychological data grounded in students' narratives and "creatively interactive" with students' experiences (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). Interviews were recorded on an mp3 audio device. Each respondent received $20 for participating in the study. Students were encouraged to describe their identity frameworks and identity stress experiences in relation to normative markers, as well as how the college culture plays into these frameworks and experiences. Previous research on various forms of stress in the coping literature has proven a narrative

approach to be effective in understanding stress as a process (Folkman et al., 1994; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Folkman and Lazarus, 1988). (See Appendix B for interview guides.) The in depth personal interviews revealed the focus of college students on public-oriented identities and self-presentations, and their need to be successful performers in their lives. Their ideal versions of themselves were successful in performative events such as speaking in front of a large audience as a student ambassador, being an effective tutor, being taken seriously as an aspiring pre-med student, gaining access to elite clubs, or organizing a successful LGBTQ fashion show. A few theatre majors were interviewed in the preliminary sample. Their insights onto performance of the self through dramaturgical perspective provided a fascinating comparison to the other interviewees who were also performance focused but less intentionally aware of it and its mechanisms. Those studying performance tended to use it as a self-help pedagogy for everyday identity stress coping. This discovery made clear the need to conduct ethnographic observations with individuals in explicit performance-oriented pedagogical contexts as a next step in my research.

Participant-Observation and Post-Fieldwork Interviews

I next undertook participant observation in three contexts where a performative practice was being taught, accompanied by informal conversations and interviews with some of the students and teachers in these contexts. In-depth interviews were conducted with students after the completion of each course. The three performative pedagogical contexts included (1) an Social Anxiety Improv course available as a clinical intervention, (2) a Neo-futurism course at an elite private university, termed Elite Quirky University, or EQU, in the ethnographic accounts, and (3) a Clown Play course at the same university. 16 students were also interviewed 1 or 2 times over the two years after these courses were completed. All 16 were interviewed from 2-4

hours once and then about half were re-interviewed a year later to gather follow-up longitudinal data. (See Appendix A for interview protocols.)

Overview of Research Strategy and Preliminary Research

From the onset of the study an effort was made to capture a range of identity stress experiences. Initial interviewees from the personal in-depth interviews were those who ranked themselves on either the high or low end of the Identity Distress Scale. Interviewees in the second participant-observation part of the study came either from the clinical Social Anxiety Improv group or from the non-clinical university classes of Clown Play and Neo-Futurism so as to sample for a range of identity stress experiences. Thus the study was able to examine a range of identity stress experiences, from more "clinical" ones typically associated with anxiety disorder diagnosis, to more specific and localized stress symptoms around identity issues, to milder identity stresses.

The idea behind the methodology was to develop a system of analysis for identity distress that is neither pathologizing nor normalizing but rather descriptive of a historical moment in which individuals are attempting to make sense of themselves within a particular cultural framework, in this case that of urban, college-educated, primarily middle class America (ranging mainly from lower to upper middle class with a few exceptions on both ends). The preliminary research phase consisted of in-depth online questionnaires designed on Qualtrics[52] and a series of follow-up interviews. Insights from key follow up interviews were later analyzed in conjunction with the ethnographic interviews to identify themes of identity distress, presented at the end of this chapter. The study was advertised through flyers and on social media; the majority of questionnaire participants were responsive to a Facebook ad. The study was intentionally

[52] See Appendix B for the full questionnaire.

advertised broadly as exploring the college experience so as to attract a broad range of participants.

Procedures for Questionnaires and Preliminary Interviews

The initial questionnaire and interview protocols were loosely based on Dan McAdams's Life Interviews as he has found this narrative-generating method helps reveal individuals' life values (McAdams, 2008), and that these values in turn, following Taylor (1989), reveal their identity. The interview protocol was semi-structured with entirely original questions developed for this study with the support[53] and qualitative methodologies of the University of Chicago Survey Lab. Questions were again first tested out on a few interviewees using the Cognitive Interview method (Willis, 1999) mentioned above, to ensure clarity of language and intent to the interviewees. In addition to the Identity Distress Scale (Berman et al., 2004) the interview items included the following: a demographics section; Likert scales measuring anxiety, depression, identity eustress and excitement; questions around the purpose of college for participants; and several open-ended questions asking participants to describe significant events in their lives as well as their dreams for the future and ideal visions of themselves. The idea of using several Likert scales as well as open-ended questions was to get an initial probe of what Berman's Identity Distress Scale was pointing towards and yet not quite capturing.

The preliminary in-depth interviews with ten college students from three major Chicago institutions were conducted in coffee shops near the various students' campuses, near Downtown, and on the North Side. I would spend at least the first 20 to 30 minutes getting to know the interviewee[54] before diving deeper into identity distress themes. The online questionnaire they filled out had given me an initial insight into potential identity distress themes

[53] Martha Van Haitsma was very helpful in helping to develop the initial protocol.
[54] See Appendix A for interview protocols. This was Interview Protocol 1.

to investigate. Any indicator of heightened distress on any of the scales was typically helpful as a starting point for discussion, particularly if they had elaborated on their experiences in the open-ended free-write section. I chose for these preliminary interviews those interviewees who were expressive in the open-ended sections, as this tended to be a good indicator that they were articulate and willing to elaborate on their experiences. I also chose interviewees who differed across a range of expressed identity issues and included a range of self-reported distress levels.

Results and Take-Aways from Preliminary Protocol

Demographic Results

Table 1
Self-Identified SES of Preliminary Respondents

#	Self-Identified SES	%	Count
1	Lower SES: My family's income is not sufficient for the basic needs of my family (i.e., rent, food, health services etc.). My family may frequently need assistance from government or non-profit programs. Needing more money is a big issue.	3.45%	1
2	Lower Middle SES: My family's income is barely sufficient for the basic needs of my family (i.e., rent, food, health services etc.). My family may at times need assistance from government or non-profit programs. Needing more money is an issue.	20.69%	6
3	Middle SES: My family's income is sufficient for the needs of my family. My family does not often need to seek assistance from government or non-profit programs. Needing more money is sometimes an issue. Sometimes my family can afford to buy some things that are extra and beyond our basic needs.	17.24%	5
4	Upper Middle SES: My family's income is sufficient for the needs of my family. My family can afford to purchase more than basic needs. Needing more money is not an issue. My family can afford to buy certain luxuries such as an annual vacation, etc.	41.38%	12
5	Upper SES: My family's income is more than sufficient for the needs of my family. My family can afford much more than basic needs. Needing more money is never an issue. My family can afford to buy many luxuries.	17.24%	5

Table 1 shows the categories used and the distribution of the respondents' self-ratings. The questionnaire respondents consisted of 37 participants, 29 males and 8 females with an average age of 21. Ethnic/racial backgrounds were as follows: White 24, Asian 6, Hispanic 4, Native American 1, Other 3. The self-identified economic backgrounds of the respondents who chose to answer the question "With which socioeconomic status do you identify?" using a five-point scale were distributed from Lower to Upper Socioeconomic Statuses with some skewing toward Upper SES (n= 29, mean=3.48, s.d.=1.10).

Identity Stress Scale Responses

The goal of the scale and questionnaire was not to produce a statistically significant comparison but to probe deeper with qualitative methods to understand the phenomena at play. Most of the quantitative responses to the identity distress scale didn't yield data that was particularly helpful for understanding identity distress in depth; it mainly indicated moderate levels of distress on average across the various identity distress categories, and individuals were reticent about writing anything in the open-ended section I added for identity distress. A modified identity "eustress" scale that I created for this study yielded more information in the open-ended section The question that was most helpful on the distress scale was the one indicating the duration of distress, which for this sample revealed that 41.18% of respondents had experienced distress related to the issues they had indicated as distressful (e.g., long term goals, career choice, friendships, sexual orientation and behavior, religion, values or beliefs, and group loyalties) had impacted them for the past 12 months or longer. This was an indicator that distress over identity issues tended to endure and was likely a significant aspect in how they made meaning around their identities and self-understandings.

Insights from the Personal-Enacted Identity Gap Scale

Previous studies based on the Identity Distress Scale have relied on comparing multiple scales with one another and analyzing results based on statistical correlations between operationalized constructs (Berman et al., 2004; Hernandez et al., 2006; Berman et al., 2009; Kamps & Berman, 2011; Gfellner et al., 2011; Wiley et al., 2011; Wiley & Berman, 2012; Berman & Montgomery, 2014; Berman & Weems, 2016) In the present study, several additional scales were used. The scale that yielded the most fruitful data in relation to stress around identity concerns was the Personal-Enacted Identity Gap scale adapted from communication scholars Eura Jung and Michael Hecht's 2004 study.[55] In the present study, 21 respondents chose to fill out the adjusted scale and then elaborated upon in it open-ended responses. These open-ended questions were also my original addition (as was the case with all of the Likert scales included in the questionnaire), as identity-gap research just like identity-distress research has also been entirely quantitative up until this point. The open-ended questions provided the richest insights as with the identity-distress scale.

The "personal-enacted identity gap" scale is intended to measure "the difference between an individual's self view and the self expressed or performed in communication" (Jung and Hecht, 2004). Jung's construct of identity gaps is predicated on the Communication Theory of Identity, or CTI, the core concept being that identity is co-constructed and occurs in communication with others and that even enacted identity, in its ideal form, feels fully genuine to the individual enacting it. CTI, as an overall theory of identity process, integrates a more

[55] I altered the wording in their scale to change "communication partners" to "peers" in order to more specifically explore students' experiences of identity in their college environments and with peer interlocuters where their identity aspirations were supposedly being put to the test.

dynamic and social component than identity-distress theory alone[56]. In the present case the focal gap was between personal (the self view) and enacted (the self expressed) identity frames. This is not a scale that had been previously implemented in conjunction with the IDS scale.

The personal enacted identity gap measure asked respondents to "Think about how you express and portray yourself when you interact with your peers (not including your closest friends), the ones you know and interact with in your college environment. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements." What was notable in the results was that a third of respondents strongly disagreed that they enacted their "real" selves with peers. This was one of the indicators that students were highly concerned with face-work in the college environment. This issue was then pursued in the in-depth interviews.

Overall Findings from Questionnaires and Preliminary Interviews

An optional open-ended question that asked students to elaborate on any of several scales they had just filled out elicited an interesting response. Notably, the majority who answered this question focused on elaborating about why they felt accepted and comfortable versus not in their college environment. The focus on fitting in socially and finding their social niche shows that these college respondents had similar concerns as those found among the American high school students studied by sociologist Robert Crosnoe (Crosnoe, 2011). One student wrote about a "fake sorority" that they created in their college environment to feel comfortable, while another wrote about how they "deliberately avoid conversations about family/high school life."

What was striking about these college students' responses was the focus on image management and, in particular, that they weren't always comfortable portraying their so-called

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[56] CTI operationalizes four different social frames of identity: personal, enacted, relational (which consists of four layers including ascribed relational identity), and communal identity, with 11 potential configurations of identity gaps which Jung and Hecht describe as dynamic in that the identity frames are inherently interpenetrating.

"real selves" in peer contexts as evidenced by the personal-enacted identity gap scale. During interview follow ups to these questionnaires, it emerged that "erasure" (Gal, 2005) was a common image management strategy for many, and it typically meant hiding an aspect of themselves, usually an ascribed or acquired identity characteristic or part of their personal history, by which they could be negatively judged or stigmatized in their particular context of college peers. This was the first glimpse I had into a complicated self-management and face-work terrain where students reported not feeling comfortable portraying their "real" selves in certain contexts. This preliminary qualitative investigation thus helped lay the groundwork for a fuller examination of authenticity in American identity processes. It revealed the importance of successfully managed performances of themselves and of hiding potentially stigmatized identities in order to fit into one's respective college environment.

The theatrical nature of these students' approach to identity management was evident in the self-reports such that even non-theatre majors described the roles that they played in different contexts in a manner that echoed Goffmanian face-work analyses. Theatre and performance majors went further and talked about the performance classroom as spaces in which everyday life identity stresses could be examined and potentially treated. It was also telling that the interview contexts themselves were treated by interviewees as uncertain spaces in terms of safety: interviewees would try performing different roles with me as researcher in attempts to figure out how to please me as their audience. I would encourage them to get more comfortable by explaining that I was not seeking a correct answer.

The performativity and stress around face-work appeared to be a shifting process as they questioned me and re-positioned themselves in our interviewer-interviewee relationship. As an

example of one recurring theme, one interviewee, Adam[57] emphasized his identity narrative of upward mobility: it was important for him in the interview to figure out how to position himself in relation to me in terms of power and class. Adam's family had lost their socioeconomic position during his childhood and he was determined to help them regain their status. For him this meant at various times comparing my achievements with the achievements of his girlfriend and with his own. He spent a substantial portion of the beginning of the interview discussing his membership in a genius society, Prometheus, before explaining his family's financial losses.

Another interviewee, Robert, (described briefly in Chapter 1,) a first generation college student and high-achieving scholarship recipient, rarely felt like he could share information about the reality of his family's poor immigrant background with his privileged white peers. He pre-emptively saved face and managed stigma by avoiding mention of his background and upbringing to them and the interview eventually provided an opportunity to disclose his identity adaptation story at Elite Urban University. Typically this narrative was reserved for members of the Latino club he had founded on campus because he felt more comfortable being himself there without erasing his background. This trajectory of students of slowly getting to the point of admitting their identity discomfort in a way they normally only would in a space where they were more accepted was striking in terms of demonstrating how important it was for interviewees to hide their potentially stigmatized traits in potentially threatening interactions which they described as encountering frequently in their everyday lives.

The importance of audience-pleasing was emphasized interactionally during interviews: it became clear that figuring out the correct line to maintain, in case there was something they weren't reading "between the lines," was imperative to them in case I might be high enough in

[57] All participant and interviewee names in the text are pseudonyms.

their imagined hierarchy to influence their reputation and status in an imagined post-interview future. They would, perhaps in accordance with this, initially give responses that sounded "scripted" for social approval; less scripted or safe narratives would typically emerge only in the second half of the interviews. This clarifies one way in which the use of quick quantitative diagnostic scales alone might not be as accurate or revealing as more in depth qualitative assessments. Such tools would neither pick up the shared focus on image management among these students nor would it reveal the sources of individual anxiety motivating each individual's efforts.

This maneuvering of identity display during interviews indicated the challenging nature of identity management for emerging adults in interactive contexts and the importance of examining it further in contexts where the distress itself (and potential mitigation for it) could be examined communally. They were a kind of telling control group: focused on image-management even in a college context of approved identity experimentation, but not reflexive about it in a way that would yield insight onto their transformation and transformative practices. In this way, their responses were "generic:" e.g., going on a self-expanding study abroad trip wherein the trip itself marked the self-expansion.

The more stigma vulnerabilities and challenges the interviewees had however, (whether in terms of race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender, childhood trauma, etc.,) the less they tended to fall into generic narrative patterns. These challenges tended to construct a more complex identity development landscape that appeared to necessitate more self-reflection and innovation. It was evident from initial interviewees that in order to manage identity distress, individuals needed contexts where they felt secure displaying themselves fully and not erasing any vulnerable characteristics.

Three Performance Pedagogies: Three Perspectives onto American Identity Distress

Aims of the Ethnographic Study of Performance Pedagogies

The focus here on pedagogies of theatre and performance is in direct dialogue with the modern American focus on a public-oriented sense of self and an image-oriented identity: "the image-oriented identity is based on a projection of images that meet the approval of a community, gaining one access so long as the images remain acceptable" (1996, p. 421). The ethnographic component of the present study examines the experiences and interactions of students in three different performance pedagogies aimed at individuals from two different standardized American life stages. These individuals are drawn to these pedagogies to work on performative skills and oftentimes on themselves as incomplete or inadequate projects in their everyday life performances. The practices and field sites are thus examined here as functioning as alternative therapies for identity distress.

Descriptions and Criteria for Choosing the Three Pedagogies

All three pedagogical practices were located in classrooms and sites around Chicago. As one of America's most prominent and arguably most innovative performance and theatre cities, Chicago provided a fertile environment for investigating a range of theatre pedagogies.[58] The focal pedagogies[59] include Neo-Futurism, Improvisation for Social Anxiety, and Clown Play. Neo-Futurism and Improvisation were both first developed in Chicago and the particular version of Clown Play that we examine here was a hybrid developed by a Chicago-based teacher who led

[58] There is debate about this, but many credit Chicago as the birthplace of improv. The first improv show is claimed to have been the performance by the Compass Players at the University of Chicago on July 5, 1955.

[59] I also conducted an observational study in a Stanislavsky-focused classroom at a state theatre program in Chicago which ended up as supplemental and background rather than focal data and my later MFA work at Columbia University in New York studying and observing theatre pedagogy is referenced where helpful.

the class. These three pedagogies were chosen to provide a range of participants, performance intervention types, and sets of issues and values that they focused on.

Two American Life Stages and Self-Development Contexts

The three performance pedagogies operated in two distinct settings which served different groups. Clown Play and Neo-Futurism were both offered as university classes (at Elite Quirky University) and served college students. Social Anxiety Improv, or SAI, occurred as part of the wellness program at Cheer Up, a commercial performance venue and training center that served both working professionals and ambitious improv hopefuls. Both contexts explicitly focused on performance of self or character(s), emotions, and various psychosocial skills that are key to successful performance on stage and purportedly in other life contexts. SAI was a quasi-clinical setup that was predicated on either an official diagnosis (insurance could cover part of the costs) or a self-categorization of having anxiety or social anxiety. The college context consisted of college theatre classrooms where students were expected to utilize "real" or authentic aspects of themselves to create engaging performances in Clown Play and Neo-Futurism. Self-exploration, meaning-making, and on stage presence were emphasized in these courses, as were social interaction skills. Clown Play offers a deconstruction of social expectations through exaggeration of emotion expression, an invitation into a pre-socialized innocence, and an absurdist perspective onto norms and cultural expectations, while Neo-Futurism does so through a lifting of the fourth wall[60] and inviting the audience into the typically interior, private experiences of the performers.

In college more generally, these students are presented with the challenge of creating a new social environment or niche for themselves in the absence of their parental support system.

[60] The "fourth wall" is an imaginary wall between the actors and the audience. It is a shared, imagined boundary. "Breaking the fourth wall" means breaking this imagined boundary when for example a character acknowledges that they are fictional.

College has been viewed by psychologists as a critical psychosocial moratorium where individuals should be learning to establish identity, manage emotions, develop mature interpersonal relationships, and other key psychosocial developments and achievements (Chickering, 1969). Of relevance is the fact that historically American liberal arts institutions were established for the perfection and actualization of the elite:

> Liberal arts colleges—like many other colleges and universities—have their philosophical roots in a tradition that began in New England over three hundred years ago with the establishment of the first enclaves for educating privileged white males. Their select young students were groomed in a tightly disciplined Anglo-Saxon educational tradition that was presumed to instill qualifications for leaderships of a theocratic community. While imparting knowledge, their academic regimen was also intended to develop personal character and intellect… (Lang, 1999, p. 134)

Students at EQU are socialized to prove themselves among their high-performing peers through an engagement in an array of impressive and unique activities. Notably, interviews with EQU students revealed a prevalence of "impostor syndrome" and overall fear of not being good enough or not achieving enough in comparison with their peers. In both Neo-Futurism and Clown Play, the instructors worked with students who expressed feeling burdened with heightened performance anxieties around their skills, development, and worth in a hyper competitive and selective environment.

The second learning context, SAI, consisted of working, post-college adult improvisation students engaged in an Improvisation for Social Anxiety "bootcamp" located in a high rise building several miles from the central location of Cheer Up, a "wellness"-oriented offshoot of the primary improv training program. These students were variously seeking a new skill, a support group, a friendship group, and/or alleviation of their self-identified social anxiety within a hybrid, fun-promising alternative to a traditional clinical setting. Unlike the college students, Social Anxiety Improv, or SAI, students, as middle-class professionals in modern American society, are presented with the challenge of being "successful" at the workplace and in their

social life without an institutional or parental support system. SAI offered a practice that teaches a comedic vocabulary of emotion display, Cognitive Behavioral Strategies, and quick communication response ostensibly importable into real-world, anxiety-provoking scenarios. The ethnographic research itself consisted primarily of site-based, participant observation in classrooms and separate in-depth interviews with individual students and teachers.

These alternative practice/therapy classrooms are particularly salient sites for the understanding of identity distress in process because learner identity implies an incompleteness in some aspect of one's knowledge, development, and/or skills. Classrooms have been productively studied by others as sites of various kinds of identity-construction, production, socialization, and experience for a variety of racial, gender, academic, cultural, etc. identity categories (Leander, 2002; Wortham, 2004; Sánchez-Casal & Macdonald, 2009). Observing individuals who seek alternative practices for self-actualization is ideal for understanding self-enhancement-related distress and its related goals in process. In this study, the exploration of the classroom as a locus of identity stress, whether distress, negative stress, or eustress, positive stress, was twofold: first as a space that facilitates and constructs socio-emotional group learning processes, and secondly as a space that impacts individual students in their identity experiences and socio-emotional learning processes.

Fictional vs. Non-Fictional Imaginaries

Another key dimension along which these practices varied was in their range of relationalities towards identity and the self. Each pedagogy offered perspectives and metaphors located at different proximities to everyday life, that is, closer to or farther away from everyday life experiences, memories, feelings, etc. This proximity was a function of whether they were grounded in a fictional or non-fictional imaginary that learners could then take up.

Neo-Futurism is a non-fictional form of theatre. It’s very strict in utilizing the individuals’ and collective’s real, in-life identities and experiences on stage. Performances range from memoir-like vignettes to real-time interactive games exploring issues of importance to the performer. Neo-Futurism breaks the fourth wall between performers and audience as a rule in order to enhance the sense of realness, immediacy, and connection.

Improvisation (with certain exceptions) is entirely fictional, with absurd gimmicky characters invented on the spot and no necessary relationship to the identity or feelings of the improviser. Identity of your character, or where your character will be, what they’ll be doing, etc., is not something you plan for, it’s a detail to add in as you work out the plot with your scene partners on stage. Student improvisers are taught to throw in character names so that the audience can follow but the primary focus is time: being in sync with your scene partners is the paramount focus in playing off of their ideas in real time.

Clown Play lives somewhere between these two practices: it is expected that your clown persona’s proclivities, reactions, tendencies, and emotions originate from within the performer but are then exaggerated for the audience to the point of absurdity. The focus is constant, real-time engagement with the audience, and responding to the audience’ responses to your clown persona. You’re responding to the audience’s real time reactions with an exaggerated version of your own and this determines the length and development of “clown beats,” which are a rough sketch outline for your clowns’ actions the length of which are entirely determined by how engaging the audience finds them to be since audience enthusiasm and oftentimes, participation, are everything for the clown. Examining these three practices with differing perspectives and processes in terms of one’s real identity and that of one’s character allowed for a complex,

dynamic examination of individuals' relationships to reality, fantasy, imagination, and meaning-making in their identity stress processes.

Entry into Field Sites

For Social Anxiety Improv, I was invited to sit in on the weekly support group for both classes that were running at the time. Everyone knew that I was a researcher and the primary therapist and teacher, Dan, integrated me into the group with a kind of social anxiety "hazing" where he would occasionally ask me to share things in the circle. This was his way of making sure that I was also a "person of anxiety," as he termed it; I also participated in all of the improv games that the SAI students played during every session. With the other two pedagogies, Neo-Futurism and Clown Play, the teachers of those classes simply let me enroll as a student, and so there was not any distinction between me and the other students, except during one of the last classes when the teacher made sure that everyone in the class was fine with me using my observations in my dissertation. In both Neo-Futurism and Clown Play, I participated in the student performances and contributed with original performance pieces of my own. I put up my Clown Play performance at an ICQI conference session as well as an additional assessment of the performance and the developing analysis.

Strategy in Selection of the Focal Post-Fieldwork Case Studies

Focal case studies of individuals, one from each pedagogy, were chosen based on critical case sampling of two primary criteria: a narrative of engagement with the performance pedagogy for the individual's everyday coping,[61] and an expressed need to cope with ascribed or acquired stigma categories in their everyday interactions. Among the three focal case studies, there is a

[61] Not all participants were equally engaged with the practices. This study was more interested in those who demonstrated a certain level of effort and interest in the practices, in order to examine the way a practice aimed at the deconstruction of self and performance is taken up.

range of contemporary stigma and identity distress experiences along the lines of gender, culture, religion, disability, sexuality, and race or ethnicity. This range allows for the study of identity distress in relation to a variety of both visible and invisible stigmas with which individuals may to have to contend in everyday interaction.

Emergent Overall Theory and Themes from the Data

Introduction

In this section I will describe the theoretical ideas emerging in this study. I first describe the central process of dramaturgical metaphors in managing identity distress, along with key supporting concepts of face-work, stigma, and lines. I then explore the place of performance pedagogies and classrooms as opportunities and spaces for improving one's interactive skills, altering one's perspective and experience of identity distress, and potentially one's sense and presentation of authenticity. These pedagogies offer insight into an ongoing contemporary tension between actualization of how one is perceived and acceptance of who one is in present reality without special image-augmentation efforts. This is followed by a preliminary case illustrating how these ideas emerge in the interviews. I then bring together an emergent theory on how the trope of work on the self dominates popular and academic discourses and complicates the study of identity distress. I introduce the concept of face-easing practices as mitigation strategies for the tensions and psychosocial load of everyday identity-threatening encounters and illustrate the emergent theory further in a second preliminary case.

Use of Dramaturgical Metaphors in Managing Identity Distress

Metaphorical Reframing

Metaphorical reframing is how I'm describing participants' application of dramaturgical metaphors to manage and reimagine identity distress. These dramaturgical metaphors, drawn

from participant-observation of performance pedagogies and in-depth interviews, will be detailed in the case studies and ethnographic descriptions that follow. Some individuals apply these dramaturgical practices intentionally while others appear to integrate them into their cultural meaning-making (Bruner, 1990) without much reflection. The processing of time, death, and living a meaningful life is a core underlying element of anxiety and distress. As will be made evident, reframing one's experience of time is one of the primary forms of metaphorical reframing I observed.

Metaphorical reframing is taken up as a means for coping with identity distress because it helps to create a greater sense of agency, specifically when individuals are overwhelmed by inconsistencies and contradictions within their everyday identity experience. These inconsistencies create an incoherence or dysphoria which they experience as intolerable. Dramaturgical metaphors and practices were both interpreted and at times explicitly offered as opportunities for imaginatively reframing, repositioning, and enacting more tolerable modes of presence; if not in everyday life then on the stage where one is confronted with a myriad contradictions from fantasy versus reality such as the "fourth wall" and "suspension of disbelief," to the contradictions inherent in displaying what are imagined as interior life and motivations outwardly for others. In other words, theatre facilitates a capacious expansiveness of imagination and imaginative existential modes for its practitioners and thereby perhaps an enhanced possibility for the tolerance of contradictions.

Face-work in Context

Goffman pinpointed the bidirectional complexity of how image-oriented identities could be experienced in his description of "face." His definition states that face is "...an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an image that others may share," a

couple of examples of this bidirectional complexity are “when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself” (Goffman, 1967). Studying contexts of performance thus literalizes the Goffmanian metaphor of being on-stage in “face-work” insofar as individuals are intending to – and instructed to – play a role. Whether it’s to metaphorically reframe your real self on stage (and potentially in life) as a Neo-Futurist, or to play a clown character version of yourself, or to improvise an archetype that others find hilarious.

Stigma Concerns and Management

Stigma is oftentimes an intolerable and contradictory experience for study participants. Participants in the study tended to have a *stigma concern*, a vulnerability to be negatively judged for a particular trait during interaction whether the potential stigma was visible or invisible to their interlocuter wherein the interaction could lead to social defeat. The stigma concern could also be manifest in a fear of failing to maintain the line and to therefore be negatively judged in some way—not necessarily fitting a stereotype in this case as in stereotype threat (Aronson and Steele, 1995)—but judged negatively nonetheless, as a result.

Participants sometimes went to great lengths to avoid revealing aspects of themselves that could be perceived as spoiled or stigmatized identity characteristics, oftentimes using erasure as a self-presentation strategy. Semiotician Susan Gal defines erasures as: “forms of forgetting, denying, ignoring, or forcibly eliminating those distinctions or social facts that fail to fit the picture of the world presented by an ideology” (Gal, 2005). In my interviews and observations, individuals who reported any kind of heightened distress around identity concerns commonly implemented erasure practices in social interaction so as to fit the ideology most pleasing to their interlocutors.

For participants engaging in theatrical training, dramaturgical reframing was a cognitive resource for coping with stigma during the encounters themselves as well as in the cultural meaning-making around the stigma management. Stigma management is defined as "…the attempt by persons with stigmatized social identities to approach interpersonal interactions in ways aimed at minimizing the social costs of carrying these identities" (O'Brien, 2011, p. 292). The costs of unmanaged stigma are in fact both social and psychological. They may include "feelings of embarrassment or shame, loss of self-esteem, and a sense of responsibility for perpetuating the negative stereotype" (O'Brien, 2011, p. 292).[62] Unmanaged stigma may also lead to severe social sanctions including "verbal or physical harassment, loss of employment, or imprisonment or institutionalization" (O'Brien, 2011). [63]

Sociologist John O'Brien describes four commonly employed stigma management strategies: "passing (the attempt to hide the stigmatized attribute completely), disclosure (the open admission of stigma in hopes of acceptance), and disavowal (in which both the stigmatized and non-stigmatized parties ignore the visible stigma)" (O'Brien, 2011). All three strategies were evident in participants' narratives. Stigma experience and stigma management could be intolerable because of all the above-listed possible social and psychological threats to identity objectives (explained in the following section) thereby causing identity distress, and it was potentially contradictory because of the inauthenticity inherent to the erasure practices of passing and disavowal.

Lines and Identity Objectives

In exploring contexts, practices, and the interactive uptake of dramaturgical metaphors, face-work will be analyzed through what Goffman's terms a "line":

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[62] See also Miall (1986), Snow and Anderson (1987), Steele and Aronson (1995).
[63] See also Edgerton (1967), Spradley (1970), Shneider and Conrad (1980).

> …a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself. Regardless of whether a person intends to take a line, he will find that he has done so in effect. The other participants will assume that he has more or less willfully taken a stand, so that if he is to deal with their response to him he must take into consideration the impression they have possibly formed of him. The term face may be defined as the positive social value he effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. (Goffman, 1967)

As such, Goffmanian principles of face and line maintenance become part of the process of face-work analysis in contexts that are explicitly performative and will be applied as such:

> A person may be said to have, or be in, or maintain face when the line he effectively presents an image of him that is internally consistent, that is supported by judgments and evidence conveyed by other participants, and that is confirmed by evidence through impersonal agencies in the situation. (Goffman, 1967)

Goffman further explains that whatever one's objectives, they are usually conducted in such a way as to be "constituent with the maintenance of face" (Goffman, 1967). In combining Goffmanian analysis with my exploration of identity distress as a process, I will use the term *identity objectives* to refer to the overall objectives of individuals in their identity processes, which include emotional work, stigma management, and face-work. In terms of erasure practices observed in this study, the primary utilization was to hide stigma characteristics that might interfere with the line and positive face value and overall identity objectives individuals were trying to maintain with their interlocuters, whether on an individual, group, or community level. Note that the following section presents some of the primary identity objective themes in terms of how they occurred in this study as a part of an image management and identity distress mitigation process. See Appendix A for further descriptions of the individual, group, and societal levels of the identity objective themes listed in Table 2A and referred to throughout.

What's the Point of Being Interesting (in America)?

As was evident from both preliminary and post-fieldwork interviews, in both the college and post-college groups, interviewees expressed concern about being interesting, engaging, and entertaining enough; whether in comparison to their peers in their hyper-competitive college environments or in post-college work and social interactions.

Performance Classrooms as an Opportunity to Augment "Interesting" Value

The dramaturgical metaphor is literalized in performance pedagogies but they are also spaces where personal expressiveness, creativity, and audience engagement are at their height. As liminal self-development activities, the three alternative performance practices presented participants with new frameworks and exportable metaphors for various kinds of personal growth, achievement, reimagining of themselves, as well as an entryway into new social networks or opportunities for social support.

Overall Importance of Authenticity or Realness

Various iterations and notions of the terms "authenticity," or "realness,"[64] emerged in a variety of performative and identity-relevant contexts, with a variety of historical, academic and colloquial uses, making the concept harder to pinpoint. According to anthropologist Ilana Gershon (2014), authenticity in self-branding means portraying a consistent character across multiple social media platforms. But beyond the front stage display, what is authenticity? "Authenticity is about itself, not about others," writes historian Charles Lindholm (2013, p. 364) in his description of the emergence of a self-focused expressive authenticity that took shape in the chaotic mess of modernity. With no clear hierarchy or social order to organize the lives of

[64] Authenticity and realness are used interchangeably in this dissertation to refer to "authenticity" with the understanding that "realness" is the term used in Neo-Futurism, and has other, more recent colloquial uses outside of Neo-Futurism.

individuals, an essential, expressive truth was sought from within. Authenticity materialized as an ideal of orientation of being true to one's inner essence, the notion being that one has an inner essence to be true to.

"Authenticity" is an overriding theme for the ideal, self-actualizing American. The other identity distress themes that emerged all fall within it in various ways: thus an authentic or real American belongs, is a (self-made) success, contends with precarity and uncertainty with great improvisational verve, self-manages their wellbeing, is likeable and engaging, is present, positive, well, and is excellent at impression management overall while making their speech, emotive, and facial expressions appear unrestrained and charmingly flawed. Further, and perhaps most importantly of all, the ideally-adaptive, fluid American learns how to either hide their stigma or how to reconfigure it. This means reframing it for themselves psychologically so that they can cope as well as rebranding it socially so that they can impression-manage. So how do you reframe and rebrand stigma? You both imagine and broadcast it (i.e., engage in *disclosure*) as the hallmark of your authenticity. A dramaturgical reimagining of stigma through authenticity as an identity distress coping strategy is investigated in the following chapter.

Actualization versus Acceptance

Actualization ideologies and their corresponding discursive practices emerged as a dominant theme in the identity distress process. "Self-actualization" was first coined by Kurt Goldstein and understood as the ultimate goal of all organisms, and then developed in various iterations by other humanist psychologists with a consistent focus on human potential (Goldstein, 1939; Maslow, 1943; Rogers, 1963). Abraham Maslow wrote of self-actualization as the highest in a hierarchy of needs, and one that presupposed a kind of authentic, essentialist potential:

> A musician must make music, a poet must write, an artist must paint, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man *can* be, he *must* be. This need we may call self-

> actualization…It refers to the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming. (Maslow, 1943)

Humanist psychiatrist Frederick Perls identified a contradiction in actualization ideology (both in the theory and its everyday uptake) twenty-six years after Maslow's first paper. He pointed out that actualization theory was being taken up as "self-image actualization" rather than "self-actualization:"

> Shall I now draw the conclusion that self-glorification is the genuine interest for which I live, that I slave and labor in the service of the image of the Great Fritz Perls? That I do not actualize my *self*, but a self-*concept*? (Perls, 1969, p. 20)

I am in agreement with Perls' critique regarding self-glorification as a destructive interpretation of actualization. Maslow himself eventually made this assessment: his initial 1943 paper placed the esteem needs as a prerequisite to the actualization needs but then in a 1971 paper argued that the most actualized people were in fact beyond many of these needs: "they do not need or seek for or even enjoy very much flattery, applause, popularity, status, prestige, money, honors, etc." (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1971). In tension with placing the most actualized people beyond the esteem needs, Maslow presented an explicit hierarchy of whom he claimed to be the greatest and most accomplished self-actualizers in his 1971 paper. Maslow includes in this list of "great men" Albert Einstein and Aldous Huxley and calls them "the transcenders:"

> Not only are such people lovable as are all of the most self-actualizing people, but they are also more awe-inspiring, more 'unearthly,' more godlike, more 'saintly' in the medieval sense, more easily revered, more 'terrible' in the older sense. They have more often produced in me the thought, 'This is a great man.' (Maslow, 1971)

Maslow himself admits in the same book to the "…deep conflicts of elitism inherent to any doctrine of self-actualization" (Maslow, 1971), which identifies superior and inferior self-actualizers. Maslow's description also includes the superior actualizers' sensibilities towards

music and art, so that there is echo here of Bourdieu's (1979) typology of taste in that it regiments a hierarchy of actualizers. This actualization paradox was a consistent theme for the participants of the present study.

Frederick Perls' critique of an image-oriented uptake of actualization by individuals in their everyday lives[65] could be applied to possible selves theory, developed almost 20 years later. Possible selves theory appears to be primarily self-image oriented and hinges upon the success or failure of that self-image without any noticeable reflexivity on the embedded moral judgments:

> Possible selves are the ideal selves we would very much like to become. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming. The possible selves that are hoped for might include the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thin self, or the loved and admired self, whereas the dreaded possible selves could be the alone self, the depressed self, the incompetent self, the alcoholic self, the unemployed self, or the bag lady self. (Markus and Nurius, 1986)

Unsurprisingly, numerous studies exploring possible selves theory have examined elite, career-oriented individuals such as medical students (Burack et al., 1997), professional athletes (Hickey and Roderick, 2017), adults who are dissatisfied with who they are (Plimmer and Schmidt, 2007), students striving for potentially impossible career goals (Pizzolato, 2007), and others who are driven to actualize both their potential and/or their image. Notice the focus on work identities as standing in for the self, indicating a kind of metonymic relationship wherein individuals project their hopes and dreams at large onto career-related identities exemplified by such notions as "career-possible self" (Pizzolato, 2007).

The individuals in this study did express deep care and worry about their career and academic identities in terms of both external and their own personal standards of success and achievement. "Beneath the carefully written resume, the reasons for seeking career change may

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[65] Perls studied himself and his own self-contradictory strivings as well as that of his psychotherapy patients. His book, written in a stream-of-consciousness style, reads as a critique of the contradictions embedded in his own thinking processes.

be fraught with emotion, uncertainty, and the desire to be someone different" (Plimmer and Schmidt, 2007, p. 61). According to Burton Bledstein the culture of professionalism has been dominant in America since the mid-19th century (Bledstein, 1976). Further, the focus on *work* in American self ideology is pervasive and the significance of this emphasis and metaphor will be unpacked further later in this chapter. Also of relevance are the possibilities afforded by professional identities to rewrite stigmatized cultural identities in America, such as for African Americans in the journalistic profession (Slay and Smith, 2011). No wonder, then, that oftentimes fraught identity struggles often take place in the professional identity contexts. Numerous examples of these struggles will appear in the ethnographic chapters that follow. It seems that possible selves theory takes a popularized self-actualization ideology for granted as the primary self and identity objectives that define psychosocial development.

Actualization ideology, while very prominent, did not fully account for the identity distress process and experience of study participants. In my interviews, I noticed an important undercurrent in participants' narratives. Oftentimes, in tension with possible selves or self-image actualization objectives, individuals had concerns with presence, connection, ease, acceptance, trust, authenticity, confidence in being enough, as well as spaces and people who understood and co-existed with them as they are without alteration or enhancement and a nowness orientation over a future orientation. More broadly, these needs and desires may be categorized under self-fulfillment and communion. Individuals strove to worry less about being judged for their achievements, external identity markers, or other characteristics that might influence the perception of one's status and success in a broader social hierarchy. These concerns should sound familiar to anyone aware of the popular self-help and mindfulness movement in the United

States,[66] which centers around values like self-compassion, non-judgment, acceptance, connection, and presence, and these themes are available within theatre training[67] as well. The "Comfortable in Your Skin" Movement described in Chapter 2 is an example of some popular acceptance-oriented and image-of-acceptance-oriented self-help discourses. The polarities and tensions in dominant American identity discourses between actualization of an idealized self-image and acceptance of authentic identity objectives have led individuals to pursue alternative therapies as counterpoints.

It's thus important to keep in mind that in noting these two identity objective orientations of image-oriented and acceptance-oriented objectives, all identity objectives in Table 2A below are inherently to some extent complex and fraught, e.g. one may strive to be present but also to be perceived as present, etc. Table 2A presents a non-exhaustive inventory of these fraught identity actualization and acceptance objectives that emerged in the preliminary phase of this research, with each actualization objective displayed alongside a corresponding acceptance objective counterpart. The first column lists each identity objective along with the associated risks from failing to achieve it. The second column presents, for each identity objective, one or more *actualization objectives*, that is, the specific external audience and image goals associated with achieving the identity objective. The third column presents, for each identity objective, one or more *acceptance objectives*, that is, the specific internal or personal authenticity and self-fulfillment goals associated with achieving the identity objective. The fourth column is left blank here but will be filled out in the concluding chapter based on the material emerging from the ethnographic work and case studies presented in the next three chapters. It will list specific

[66] Borrowing from the East is a popular trope in the US in seeking a counterpoint to dominant ideologies and practices. Funnily, mindfulness has now been re-exported back to the East in its Americanized, scientifically-supported, much watered-down and standardized form (Cassaniti, 2018).
[67] According to the historical research of Sergei Tcherkasski, about 40% of Stanislavsky's actor training regime was founded in yogic practice. (Tcherkasski, 2016)

metaphorical reframings and face-easing practices provided by the various performance pedagogies that help individuals achieve their actualization and acceptance objectives, and hence their identity objectives.

This means that identity objectives can be about proving oneself and the need to save face in face-threatening situations when it comes to actualization, or they can be about establishing conditions where there is no need to save face and to prove one's worth through a variety of one-upmanship – this requires an equal power relationship, trust, and shared rules of engagement. These kinds of conditions are often constructed through theatre practices, particularly with scene partners. The fourth column, left blank in Table 2A, will be filled in with a non-exhaustive list in Table 2B of the various kinds of metaphorical reframing as it emerges in the case studies and ethnographic observations. Table 2B will be presented in the final

Table 2A. Identity Objectives

Identity Objective Orientations

Identity Objectives vs. "Worst-Case" Fears	**Image Actualization Oriented Objectives (social or audience-perception and self-image-oriented)**	**Acceptance and Self-Oriented Actualization Objectives (communion, self-authenticity-oriented)**	***Face-Easing Practices*** **(to be added in Table 2B in Chapter 7)**
Status & Success vs. Failure	Status, hierarchy – being perceived as high status	Not worrying about power differences, equality, non-judgement	
	Being perceived as a success	Self-Esteem	
	Competence	Cognitive authority or a sense of agency in learning	
Likeability & Engagement vs. Being Shunned, Ignored, Disliked	Being considered authentic	Sense of Authenticity, being "full self"	
	Being considered present	Presence: "I want to get out of my head" – being able to experience/share time-space reality in a non-anxious way	
	Being considered interesting	Communing over shared interests or experiences	
	Being considered funny, engaging	Communing over shared humor	
Social Belonging vs Rejection	Group membership	Comfort, anxiety-free connection	
		Being accepted in group or category that is authentic to you	
	Doing what is dictated by society, your cultural group, etc.	Valuable friendships, relationships	
Being in control vs. Being out of control	Wellness – appearance/ Being taken up as put-together person	Wellbeing - feeling	
		Sense of Coherence, Self-Understanding	
		Sense of agency	
		Self-Trust	
	Being perceived as adaptable	Wanting to embrace precarity, to understand death, ontology, lack of control	

Perceived power inequalities and the need to prove worthy status and self-image were evident early on in the study. Notably, themes of self-image actualization (such as along lines of socioeconomic class in the cases of Adam and Robert) often dominated the first hour of preliminary interviewing. Interviewees tended to initially focus on impressing me on along lines of status and implemented various face-saving moves to support this goal. By the second hour of preliminary interviewing, interviewees typically admitted or demonstrated in some way how exhausting that first hour was for them and they would get into discussing the aspects of themselves that might be perceived as less attractive, less coherent, less confident and put-together, more messy, more vulnerable to stigma, discrimination and negative judgment. From a methodological point of view, this is the advantage of long-form in-depth interviewing, but it also demonstrates approximately how long it might take to stop "pretending" and start sharing what are more authentically-felt experiences with one's interlocuters for an average American adult in everyday life, assuming the interlocuter(s) prove themselves as trustworthy and "non-judgmental."

Face-work oriented around self-image actualization can prove to be incredibly exhausting. An idealized self-image is something that individuals often feel they have to "prove" during interaction, as if interaction is itself an attempt at actualization (in this case certainly self-image actualization of one towards greatness) through discourse, or a perlocutionary speech act[68] (Austin, 1955). An example of this occurred with Adam in his positioning of himself as equal to my academic status and the status of his girlfriend in the sharing about the genius society of which he was a member. Adam's attempt at greatness assertion and self-glorification as a member of a greatness-oriented group was made whether it was successful or not. As evidenced

[68] A speech act wherein the words themselves constitute a speech act of approving and achieving something.

from my observations and interviewees' narratives of certain identity distress experiences, self-image actualization objectives and desires are hierarchically oriented and involve catering to please an individual in a higher power position with social ascension as a motivating factor (i.e., seeing me as a potential employer, more advanced academic, or date to impress, etc.)[69] while acceptance objectives and desires involve connecting and commiserating with one's interlocuter on an equal plane that focuses on the status quo rather than the future (i.e., as a peer, friend, fellow student, fellow sufferer, etc.). This suggests that self-image actualization objectives are more likely to lead to identity distress, as working towards them presents a heavier emotional and cognitive load, particularly if they mean practicing face-work and emotional work that feels inauthentic as argued by Hoshchild (1983/2012) and supported by emotional labor studies since (Lee et al., 2018, Lee and Madera, 2019).

In reality, self-image actualization and self-fulfillment as well as communion-oriented objectives and desires often coexist in a complex relationship. This is evident in both institutionalized and colloquial practices. It is evident in Roger's (1951) therapeutic approach where "unconditional positive regard" of the patient is necessary for their future actualization. It is also evident in this excerpt from Perls:

> It is obvious that an eagle's potential will be actualized in roaming the sky, diving down on smaller animals for food, and in building nests. It is obvious that an elephant's potential will be actualized in size, power and clumsiness. No eagle will want to be an elephant, no elephant to be an eagle. They 'accept' themselves; they accept them-'selves.' No, they don't even accept themselves, for this would mean possible rejection. They take themselves for granted. No, they don't even take themselves for granted, for this would imply a possibility of otherness. They just are. They are what they are what they are. (Perls, 1969)

[69] This is also in alignment with Hoshchild's findings about the emotional labor of flight attendants who have to take in the discriminatory and inappropriate behavior of male passengers because of their higher interactional status as customers.

Perls expresses an individual's desire to just "be." While it appears embedded with an essentialist assumption that we all have a natural "purpose" to discover, there is also the impression of a longing to cast off the possibility of failure and to simply exist as one is without concern for how others are actualizing their potential. It attempts to move beyond acceptance, beyond concern for the regard of others.

The preliminary case of Sandra presented next is a telling illustration of the pattern of backstage-frontstage sharing and the complexity of actualization tensions specifically around authenticity of emotion. Her case not only reflected the face-saving erasure practiced by many of the interviewees, but her interview also provided insight on how identity management can be informed by theatrical training. This interview was critical in laying the groundwork for my exploration of theatre as a liminal activity and space that could yield further insight into contemporary American identity distress processes. As was evident throughout, Sandra's training in theatre gave her access to a deconstructive language and set of meaning-making strategies for unpacking her identity distress.

Sandra: An Exemplary Preliminary Case

I will illustrate the broad generalizations presented in the previous section by describing in detail a case that exemplifies the themes and general pattern of responses I observed. This case also played a crucial role in my recognition of the importance of performance pedagogies as a space that could yield insight into contemporary American efforts to manage identity distress.

"I'm an actor, I'm used to this" – Front Stage Actualization Discourse

The exemplary case was that of Sandra, an acting student at State University. Her case not only reflected the erasure practiced by many of the interviewees, but her interview also provided additional insight on how she managed her identities. It was evident throughout her

interview that her training in theatre gave her access to a deconstructive language and set of meaning-making strategies for unpacking her identity distress. As she put it: “I’m an actor, I’m used to this.”

Sandra comes from a Caucasian middle class family and a suburb where she states her family was the only one without a three-car garage. In her interview, she uses all kinds of medicalized and psychologized terms to describe herself: "Type A," "ambitious," "anorexic," "the old soul," "the ugly friend." Like so many others of her sociocultural and generational group, she fits what James E. Côté describes as an "other-directed character type" that tends to develop in a society characterized by mass consumption (Côté, 1996; see also Riesman, 1950) and in which children don’t only learn from parents as authority figures (Côté, 1996; see also Mead, 1960). This is a character type that is "sensitive to others-to their opinions and approval." The list of standardized terms and archetypes displays a kind of front stage awareness: Sandra demonstrates an awareness of the labels that others may place or have placed on her, and the significant ways in which she could be marked. This tracking of potential markers in itself appears to be a kind of agency-enabling, cultural meaning making process, an attempt to organize and synthesize in her own way all of these potential labels and possible selves as perceived by others.

Back Stage Authenticity: From Theatre Classroom Discourse to Life Narrative

For Sandra, narrating her life and various experiences feeds into a deconstructive psychological language developed in the theatre classroom. This includes the popularized language of trauma (e.g., Giacomucci and Marquit, 2020) which has a particular place in psychodrama as well as in actor-character “experiencing” processes. As is evident in the following interview excerpt, Sandra is well aware of American standards and stereotypes of

childhood and both the American as well as Western dramatic and popularized psychoanalytic focus on one's early development. When she began speaking during our interview there were very few pauses or hesitations, as if this particular version of herself was one she was used to playing, not unlike a well-rehearsed script where she described her ideal childhood in a middle class suburb. However, towards the second hour of the interview she brings this "ideal childhood" up again and then reveals what seems to be the more exclusive, backstage version of her narrative:

> I'm really lucky. I'm one of the few people that you'll probably meet that (laughs) have (laughs) like this ideal childhood. I mean, like. Stuff was messy, I think the biggest, what my like, I'm in therapy, I go to therapy once a week because I'm an actor, so you gotta go to therapy, right? ... And, uh, the big thing that, like everyone has that one traumatic event, or like a couple traumatic events in their childhood. I was nine and my dad was in a very serious car accident and, um, hit at 75 miles per hour on the driver's side. They said he wouldn't walk again.

In the above interview excerpt, there are phrases that sound like they've been used before as a face-saving move like "so you gotta go to therapy, right?" It appears to be a kind of preventative face-saving: the act of going to therapy may be pathologized, but as acting training has professional motives for mining the actor's psychological "depths" or "mess" as Sandra offers, therapy here is dropped in as a normalized component of her actor identity.

Yet as will be evident, for Sandra sharing the more "messy" stuff is meaningful. Her own psychotherapy in conjunction with the theatrical training has ostensibly offered her a means for developing a discursive way to organize the "mess" into a coherent narrative about herself. Messiness is therefore a sign of less strenuous face-work and greater face-ease, of trust even if as an actor she is always particularly aware of the performative nature of every interaction. Later in the interview still, Sandra recounts more private, potentially stigmatized and socially

unappealing or “messy” information, such as the beginning of her eating disorder, which can be traced back to age 10, not too long after her father’s car accident.

This sets an important precedent for the present study: as individuals are seeking alternative and at times hybrid therapeutic forms, this study is in conversation with various discourses of meaning-making around one’s identity including psychotherapeutic, medical, academic, dramaturgical, and developmental, as they come into play. “The failure to maintain a coherent personal narrative leads to feelings of fragmentation and disintegration” (Cohler, 1982, p. 1). Maintaining a coherent life course narrative that integrates early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence is dominant as a self-understanding strategy in multiple facets of American life (Cohler, 1982), while distress and anxiety tends to originate in childhood (Compton et al., 2010) as they did in Sandra’s narrative. Thus it was helpful in the present study’s interviews to gain a sense of how individuals were organizing their understandings of their identity distress from childhood and on.

Identity Conflict: The Good Christian Daughter, The Actress, The Rape Victim

More recent events that Sandra reported as stressful in her college life at the time of the interview involved two incidents of sexual assault, one of which she calls a "date rape." She explains that she didn’t realize until much later that she shouldn’t have been mixing her anti-depressants with alcohol and that that was causing her to black out at college parties. She explains that she had been trying to fit in with her "crazy roommates" but once the sexual assaults happened she stopped going to parties and turned more strongly towards church, which had always been a part of her life in the past. This type of fundamentalist turning away from the evils and dangers of drinking and partying was a common theme among my preliminary student interviewees, particularly those who identified as serious about their Christian faith.

As for portraying herself to others, Sandra's relationship towards the very labels she's been using breaks down when I ask her why she didn't tell anyone about her sexual assaults. It took her a month to tell her therapist. Her rapport with me developed nicely over the course of the interview and towards the latter half of it, she ended up sharing some of the self-admittedly "messy" things about herself she does not share with most people right away, the things that she erases from her narrative of an idyllic childhood and life; yet hers is a life that was rocked by trauma early on. Perhaps the telling of the story about her father early on was a safe way to test me as an interlocuter: Will I be judgmental? Will I empathize? Will I jump to a conclusion about the kind of stock character Sandra is, or typecast her? Being typecast or constantly cast in the same generic role repeatedly, is a big fear for fledgling American actors and her narrative suggests that she is afraid of being typecast in a negative way in everyday life. I suspect it helps that Sandra was being interviewed by a young female who actively listened and consistently showed understanding or recognition throughout her narration. I seemed to pass the test. When I express empathy in response to her sexual assaults and a concern about her lack of action she explains:

> SANDRA I didn't want to be a rape victim.
>
> MARIANNA That label?
>
> SANDRA Oh, I was not about it. That's why I didn't tell anyone about the eating disorder. I didn't want to be that girl with anorexia. Labels, I'm terrified about them.
>
> MARIANNA What's so scary about labels?
>
> SANDRA Cause then people only see you through that. Then they put that, you know the optometrist, they put that little thing that slides, they can only see through that. I'm not going to sit here and be a victim.
>
> MARIANNA Have you felt like in your life that you've been seen through those little pinholes before? Where is that coming from?

> SANDRA Oh yeah. Yeah. Um. (laughs) Shows that I'm very ambitious. In a male, if I were a boy, I would be applauded for that [ambition]. I would be such a good leader. As a girl, I'm a bitch. Let's be totally honest.
>
> MARIANNA Who thinks that?
>
> SANDRA My peers, and sometimes my professors or whatever, like coaches. But definitely my peers though. You know, that's why I've definitely been ostracized, I have a very masculine, I'm very competitive, I'm a leader. But as a woman, that doesn't fly. It doesn't. And that sounds so 1950s, but like boys are scared of me. I've always been the tomboy, you know that kind of idea. So I'm only seen through that lens as somebody who's super tough and super strong when in all actuality I'm very fragile. Very sensitive. But I can be both. You can be strong and sensitive. Like I'm just learning that now. So that's the other thing I feel like. People like to put other people in boxes cause it makes them less scary and less complicated, but in all actuality nobody can be placed in those boxes. Like no one can. That's just as we as humans do, because we like to organize things, make it easier. Life's already hard enough. (laughs) And I don't blame people for wanting to see me through those lenses but I'd rather be in a different lens- like if I had to choose, I'd rather you see me as like a super ambitious actor than as a rape victim. You know.
>
> MARIANNA So you feel like people can only handle one lens at a time?
>
> SANDRA Usually. It takes special people to be able to handle more than one. And they're usually artists.

Sandra shows a kind of practiced awareness of being able to modulate the way others see her, reified as lenses or boxes that she may or may not make available to them. For Sandra, a personal-enacted identity gap could mean the difference between being taken as a serious actress versus a rape victim. This demonstrates a heightened attention to the other and to one's audience. A key component of actor training is being able to convey a performed character in a particular way to the audience, so why not one's own character? This sense of control over her image has been so important to Sandra that she chose it over prosecuting the men who assaulted her and even seeking help on the matter right away from her therapist.

Safe People, Walking Messes, and Zipping Up

Her most sincere performance and sense of who she is comes across when Sandra talks about acting. By "sincere" I mean in the Goffmanian sense that she herself believes "in the

impression fostered by [her] own performance" (Goffman, 1956, p. 18), In more contemporary American terminology this is more often understood as "authenticity" or "realness." Lionel Trilling declared in 1972 that "sincerity is dead" in America (Trilling, 1972) and that authenticity was dominant as the moral standard or "staying true to oneself." This American moral standard works well with the truth-seeking of acting practice and for Sandra, this means that there is an authenticity of self that she is discovering through acting. She describes a self-discovery process wherein her acting training plays a formative role in facilitating her awareness of her emotions, face-work, and her overall of sense of self and identity, metaphorized as actor and character:

> The more you know about yourself, the more you're able to apply yourself in your art. And really as an actor, everything comes from you. Everything starts with you, you know. What's most important to us. We would like to say our family or religion or whatever, no. Finally it is to take care of yourself. To make sure you're eating, sleeping, breathing, you know that kind of stuff. So, when you've figured out those little things, like for me, I'm afraid of my own anger. I'm a very angry person. And I've learned to shut that out, and recently I've found that by learning that my anger's ok and that some people aren't going to like it, but that I'm ok with it, I'm able to tap into something way more real and visceral as an artist too, because you know I'm going to have to play an angry character at some point. But it's like, sometimes you do character analysis and you're like, I don't even know this person. Like I can tell you their favorite color and their background story, but I don't know how to play this person. And sometimes you can start from something very little in yourself and grow that into whatever it means to be, it's really a totally different ball game than what people think acting is.

Sandra's dramaturgical reframing of her own psychological processes appears to allow for a less pathologized counter-position (Hermans, 2006) to the negative societal judgments around things like "hot emotion" expression which are traditionally disapproved of in American society (Stearns, 1994). In fact anger, in particular, is an emotion that Americans have "waged a war" against for the last two hundred years (Stearns and Stearns, 1986). Further, as Hoshchild found, anger is imagined as within the domain of male emotions, for women it is typically taken up as irrational:

> When a man expresses anger, it is deemed ‘rational’ or understandable anger, anger that indicates not weakness of character but deeply held conviction. When women express an equivalent degree of anger, it is more likely to be interpreted as a sign of personal instability. It is believed that women are more emotional, and this very belief is used to invalidate their feelings. That is, the women’s feelings are seen not as a response to real events but as reflections of themselves as ‘emotional’ women.” Here we discover a corollary of the ‘doctrine of feelings’: the lower our status, the more our manner of seeing and feeling is subject to being discredited, and the less believable it becomes. (Hoshchild, 1983/2012)

It’s significant that Sandra has recognized that she has learned to “shut that out” when it comes to her anger and through acting she is engaged in re-socializing herself in relation to what is acceptable in terms of her own emotions. She is redefining her right to agency, and her identity as a woman, in spite of her concerns of being known as “that girl who got date raped” and her awareness that as a woman she is more vulnerable to stigma. All this indicates that she is normally likely doing quite a bit of emotion suppression. Prioritizing her actor identity and the importance of full self and psychological care expressed as part of actor training ideology, allows her to suppress less. As she reasons, she’ll have to play an angry character at some point and that requires anger expression and an understanding of anger.

For Sandra, being an actor has allowed her to alter her value system and reimagine her relationship to her own psychology: the most important thing is “not family or religion or whatever, finally it is to take care of yourself.” It also means an alternative from the self-image concerns that seem to dominate much of her everyday life outside of the theatre. In the following excerpt, Sandra uses and literalizes the acting metaphor of “walking mess” to imagine a boundary for containing her socially undesirable and potentially stigmatized characteristics in spaces where she can’t “show” all the varying aspects of herself at once as she finds she is able to with certain people and in her certain spaces such as in her acting program outside of which the “world is harsh and cruel”:

> SANDRA Finding those safe people, those safe places to delve in, then coming back and we call it zipping it up. Zipping yourself back up for the world. (laughs) Because you can't take that person that's [just like]a big walking mess. (laughs) Through the world, you can't. And like. Wouldn't it be amazing if we all could?
>
> MARIANNA Could just be a big walking mess?
>
> SANDRA Right, cause to be totally honest everybody is. But we have to zip up, because this world is cruel and harsh and I hate that that's the way it is, but that's what it is. You know, so I put that-, so really really diligent about figuring that out too like. How you learn to fall apart and then put yourself back together, which is in a sense what your sanity is in a lot of ways too. A lot of people think you can't be a Christian and be an artist, but I have like quite the opposite. You don't have to be in therapy, but you can do it.

"Zipping up," is taken up as a notably agentive metaphor by Sandra. It offers not only a metaphorical boundary for compartmentalizing what she does not want to show in certain contexts and with certain people (whomever she deems "safe"), but a literalized action metaphor for consciously controlling that boundary and allowing herself to be a more effective manager of face-work. She demonstrates what Goffman termed the cynical performer "When the individual has no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his own audience…he can toy at will with something his audience must take seriously" (Goffman, 1956, p. 18). But in the case of Sandra, as stated above, at other times she comes across as completely sincere, particularly when talking about acting, and she never comes across as fully cynical because although she is able to manipulate her audience, her expressed concern with their beliefs is unwavering. She utilizes a combination of the stigma management strategies of passing and disclosure; disclosure being reserved for audiences who accept the mess (O'Brien, 2011).

In addition to giving herself perspective on face-work and stigma management, her use of dramaturgical metaphor and process is closer to Stanislavskian "perezhivania," in her emotional labor and work. She draws on what she identifies as authentic identity aspects of herself such as "Christian" to present a version of self that is still authentic and yet will be taken up most

favorably in a particular context. Sandra is more closely like what James E. Côté calls the "intelligent strategist," holding

> …a more 'diversified portfolio' that includes psychosocial skill may be necessary if an 'intelligent strategist' is to be at the helm of behaviour. The key is for the individual to form and sustain an identity with other actors. To do this in a complex, shifting social milieu requires certain cognitive skills and personality attributes that are not imparted by human or cultural capital, and are certainly not imparted by mass/public educational systems. With this portfolio, an individual should be in a much better position to move at will through the dimensions of place and space in the late-modern world, and may do so by engaging in tactics like self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974) and using situated identities (i.e.,adjusting one's behaviors to suit those of others in particular situations, Gecas & Burke, 1995). (Côté, 1996, p. 425)[70]

In addition to the psychosocial skills listed by Côté, Sandra has particular dramaturgical skills and methods from her theatre training which can enhance and contribute to her more "diversified portfolio" or as we describe it here, her "dramaturgical toolkit" and facilitate her interactions and movements through contemporary everyday life.

Overall Emergent Theory

Work on the Self: A Dominant American Theme

Notice Sandra's enthusiasm to engage in work on herself as both a normalized activity and one that may appropriately include therapy. In this way, notions of "work" and "labor," particularly controlled strivings towards work on the self, are pervasive on both an institutional and academic level in the US (and perhaps to a similar extent in "other-oriented" societies as described by Côté). These include some of the concepts engaged with in the present study such as emotional *labor*, face-*work*, stigma *management*, identity *capital*, etc. These notions saturate American psychology and sociology as well as popular discourse. They complicate the study of

[70] Notice that this theory is located within the labor discourse and paradigm.

identity distress: it is necessary to engage with these hyper-dominant discourses while being reflexive about them.

Importantly for the present study, "work on herself" allows someone like Sandra a pervasive, vague, and malleable metaphor of self-actualizing labor to engage in whatever kinds of activities may be necessary to make herself "function." She thus fits the capitalistic, post-Calvinistic,[71] self-actualizing American dream while engaging in whatever activity suits her in her in her work on herself. Thus, alternative and contrasting practices, metaphors, and counterpoints emerge in relation to and in dialogue with work and organizational metaphors, while being subsumed by them, resulting in complex, often contradictory practices: popular examples of this include meditation teachers and self-help books who tell students to "let go" and "love themselves" so that they can manifest their dreams, e.g., as in *The Secret*, or any of the other popular teachings of Deepak Choprah. This theme will be evident throughout, from the attempts to be "interesting enough" without artifice through the practice of Neo-Futurism in Chapter 4, to the "it's not that serious" desire to distance from social pressures expressed by anxious improvisers in Chapter 5, to the childhood-nostalgic practices of Clown Play in Chapter 6.

A New Understanding of Identity Distress as a Process

Identity distress, previously understood as a more static and elusive construct, with minimal understanding of its mechanisms in sociocultural context and process, is here explored and understood as a process. First, identity distress is redefined as a process initiated by a threat

[71] Ideologies of self-improvement and striving have arguably dominated American thought for centuries. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 1905) illustrates how Calvinists and their focus on endless work, striving, and self-improvement to show that one was chosen and worthy of God and heaven. Their doctrine imagined a self that was always in need of further signs being among the elect and that during one's life, the pursuit of these signs was never done.

signal to the identity objectives individuals are working towards in the face of social performance pressures and stigmas. Then it is reimagined as a process:

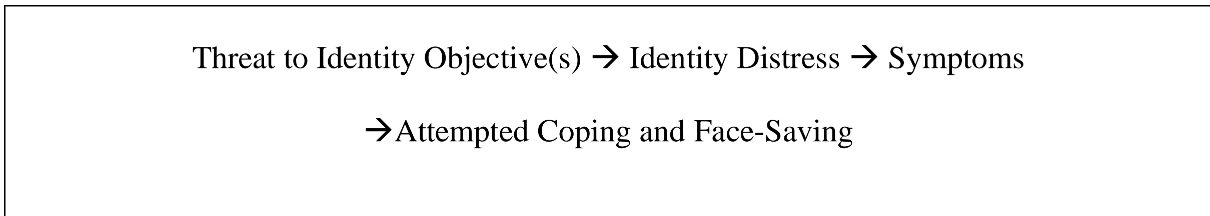

Figure 3: The Identity Distress Process

As this study focused on those who seek (and claim to find benefit from) alternative group therapies, the following figure demonstrates their trajectory in the process.

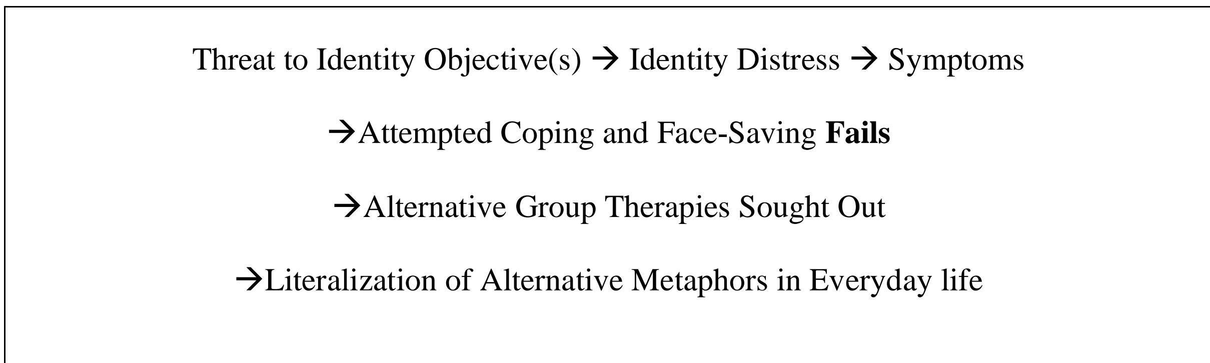

Figure 4: The Identity Distress Process with Alternative Performance Intervention

Sandra is the preliminary case study of the process delineated by Figure 4. Further examples will be provided in chapters 4-6. In Sandra's case, she deals with threats to her identity objective of being perceived as a serious actress, i.e., actualization maintained through face-work, yet wishing for "safe places and people" where she can display her full "walking mess," i.e., acceptance – face-ease for Sandra means getting to display and explore emotions like anger and potentially stigmatized sides of her identity such as her date rape history. Taking up acting metaphors and perspectives in this way allows for Sandra to engage with acting training as a kind of alternative therapy in addition to her psychotherapy sessions. She is aware that threats to her sense of control can cause her to have severe distress symptoms, as evidenced by the eating disorder she had in the past, and, for her, seeking acceptance means communing with people

whom she can trust as well as have a shared understanding, such as with other artists. I suggest these are the key conditions for what I will elaborate in the next section as *face-ease*, that is, practices that lighten the psychosocial load and consequential distress that can be caused by face-work.

Face-work versus Face-ease

This section will outline the concept of *face-easing practices* as a complement to Goffman's "face-work." The idea is not to claim a perfect dichotomy between these two wherein certain contexts are completely devoid of "face-work." By face-easing practices I mean that a person can put themselves in a situation requiring less strenuous face-work, particularly face-work that is compounded by emotional work and stigma management in the face of threats to one's identity objective(s), and where therefore they are less prone to face and identity threats. Further, the American adults I interviewed and observed spontaneously sought out such conditions and described them in their own terms as "getting out of my head," "being my full self," "being real," in relation to how they felt in such conditions and "anxiety-free spaces,[72]" in describing the psychosocial dynamics of such sought-out conditions of a sense of acceptance. I will point out face-easing practices and conditions in the subsequent ethnographic chapters. I will establish the foundation in this chapter with a brief analysis of a couple preliminary interviews: Sandra, already described, and Martha, analyzed in the following section as a second preliminary case.

Face-easing conditions notably facilitate a focus on the "now" rather than worry about the future which corresponds to the common identity objective of "getting out of my head," and on interactions that are experienced by individuals as more genuine, authentic, and ones where

[72] This fitting term comes from Alex in Chapter 6.

they feel more “comfortable in my skin.” Seeking out such conditions of acceptance and less strenuous face-work or greater face-ease is a state somewhat akin to “perezhivania.” This state is closer to the distinction Hoshchild (1983) makes between surface acting and deep acting, where deep acting comes from a more authentic place for the actor: they identify with the role they are playing, while surface acting may feel forced to them.

Face-easing practices are not simply one-sided and self-serving. Acceptance is sought and desired as a result of concerns with both audience evaluation and the quality of one’s own subjective self-experience, with the balance generally being more tipped towards one’s own interests (e.g., wellbeing) but not to the point of total disregard for one’s interlocuters. Acceptance also means self-acceptance.

The practice and objective of acceptance and a decreased need for face-work is a condition and objective that is worked towards through face-easing practices as illustrated by how Sandra worked towards this in her theatre classrooms and in turn with me during the interview by testing me and to some extent “unzipping the walking mess” towards the end. Contexts where acceptance and greater face-ease might be established could include contexts in one’s private domain if it’s possible for one to be less effortful there (this is of course not universal but tends to be an idealized reality when individuals speak of my “refuge” or my “person”). Or it can include contexts where one is of equal or possibly superior status: notice that individuals whose behavior is deemed socially despicable often take advantage of the opportunity to not have to maintain positive face to maintain their status position such as the discriminatory male passengers’ behavior toward female flight attendants described in Hoschchild’s (1983) research.

Martha: A Search for Nowness and Identity

This section will present a second critical case drawn from the preliminary interview sample, that of Martha, which revealed additional key aspects of identity distress process the seeking of nowness and presence for identity distress, often described colloquially by participants as a desire to "get out of my head". Further, her coping efforts demonstrate an alternative performative training context taken up as a kind of therapy. A theatre major at Private Elite University, Martha describes herself as "half black, half white," and "queer" – and as having been raised by a politically-minded mother to be very aware of social and political issues pertaining to her racial identity:

> … I have these ideas from my mom who's fully black. Like if you look at her. And so I've got these things like in my mind like "oh like you know, be aware that you might be profiled." But like being biracial you're often not profiled and you're often questioned. So it's very strange to, the way it's manifested now at this point in my life is like realizing you've got this whole community you belong to as part of your identity that you're like actually super out of touch with…especially as a performer who is like interested in new work and like work that creates like dialogue. And stuff that like fosters new dialogue. How do I-keeping an awareness I suppose of what do I represent in my identity in the context of all that. I think it's important.

Martha is on a deliberate search for self-understanding and identity through theatre. Her self-actualization and self-image actualization efforts are very deliberate and as she mentions in the above excerpt, performance and theatre are part of the dialogue she is seeking to create. The contradictions she has grown up with are evident in her narrative as a mixed race woman who was raised intentionally with African American barbie dolls and politically-conscious books for mixed race children which as she pointed out "raise a duality."

Her intentional desire to create dialogue while being positioned at a discursive meeting place in terms of her identity is one that Martha pursues through her current theatrical practice where she finds herself as theatre director as well as in observing the dichotomies in her life. One of these dichotomies became evident in her choice of university. She dealt with the identity

distress she felt at the prospect of attending Private Elite University by literalizing the duality she felt and transferring away for a year before returning:

> [Private Elite University] is built on many ideas such as prestige, success, and inevitably a large income because of where your degree is from. I don't identify with that at all. Also I'm just very atypical in my habits, norms and activities in comparison to my peers in my program at [Private Elite University]. It's just a fact, at this point I am comfortable with it, but when I first started here I got really depressed about it and transferred away until I felt comfortable enough to return and get my degree from the university I worked my ass off to get into in the first place.

For Martha, the prestige of Private Elite University was why she applied there and yet once she got in it felt antithetical to her values or perhaps more accurately it was antithetical to her self-image as someone who does not care about things like prestige. While away, she attended a state school in her hometown that was less centered on self-image actualization pressures for ambitious actors. She used her time at the state school to explore a life within a community of artists that had a "neo-hippy way of living" she admired and wanted to identify with. She pursued a relationship with a woman who "took a toll on her psyche" by constantly putting her down. She described her as toxic and a relationship that it took her a while to "rebuild" from:

> You know, you're with someone who like literally tells you and also makes you feel that you are stupid. That you'll never be successful or self-actualize or anything like that. Um like that basically your existence is a joke.

Disillusioned with the inconsistencies of the supposedly all-loving and accepting neo hippies who did not in fact reality offer a context of less strenuous face-work and greater face-ease, Martha came back to Prestigious Elite University the following year. As evident from the excerpt, Martha's tracing of self-actualization and self-development was quite explicit and is reflective of how these academic and self-help discourses have permeated colloquial self-understandings in America. She was now ready to pursue her prestigious degree in a way that was more in dialogue with how she imagined herself and no longer a threat to her identity that

she couldn't overcome. She made a point of not living on campus in order to avoid too closely supporting the dominant campus culture, while at the same time she made art on campus that was necessarily challenging of dominant and marginalizing ideologies:

> I've easily let parts of myself become not present and become not important. Like I'm always very quick to like play myself down. Yeah, which I think relates to the show that I'm working on and the importance of marginalized groups and the importance of noticing how sometimes you marginalize yourself and the importance of not doing that. Like really taking up the space that you're not allowed to take up.

In the above excerpt, Martha first reflects on how she "let parts" of herself "become not present" referring to the toxic relationship she was in and other circumstance in which she practices a kind of suppression. Evidently, taking up the position of theatre director gives her a sense of agency and opportunity to express herself more authentically, though as she points out, "I'm good at stepping back and being invisible and like guiding things. But like you shouldn't be doing that in your day-to-day life."

This need to be present and to not hide herself comes full circle when Martha describes circus acrobatic training as the experience she would write about on the back of her memoir: circus was the most remarkable growth experience for Martha. She joined a class of 9 year-olds when she was herself aged 17. It's reflective of how gaining brand new creative, performative, and other kinds of skills through organized activities has increasingly become a normalized practice for adults of all ages in the US (Mahoney et al., 2005; Goldwert, 2013) and notably as expressed by Martha, these activities are viewed as an alternative perspective onto herself:

> …I feel like since it requires you to be so self-aware and to like be aware of where your hands are and like you know your strength and you know your limits because otherwise you can't push yourself too far. Because you will like fall. But you never will get to that point because your brain is awesome like that and knows when to tell you to stop.

In her appreciation of her physical strength and abilities, her appreciation of her brain as "awesome" resemble tenets of the body neutrality (and to a lesser extent, body positivity)

movements described in Chapter 2, both offshoots of the "comfortable in your skin movement:" the appreciation of what the body can accomplish rather than a concern for social judgment or appearances. This new perspective was a pivotal development for Martha:

> I always felt very fat and self-conscious about my body. And it would dictate my eating habits. When you engage in something like that [circus], you have to eat. You can't not- you have to build muscle. (laughs) So it forced me to look at my body in a different way, it was like 'oh my body isn't just something, it's me...It made me really after I did my first show, very proud of my body in a self-love type of way. Because it's not 'look at how great I look up here' it's like 'wow look at what my body can do.'

In this case, the recognition of her body and brain's ability to do trapeze allows her to reimagine herself as an incredibly capable in-the-moment performer rather than the distressing, image-focused identity experiences she has in other contexts. This new identity position is a face-easing, distancing metaphor that offers a reprieve for Martha from her fraught position as a queer mixed race female artist with body image-related distress. However, that doesn't mean those other contexts don't permeate the experience of training in trapeze:

> You also can't lie to yourself. So if you're having like a bad day and you're doing trapeze, you have to acknowledge that you're having a bad day. You have to be able to focus to do what you have to do, you have to push it out of your mind. Because you can't be distracted and be hanging from the air. So it just forces you to be in touch with where you're at. It's like, it doesn't necessarily solve those things, but it's like a different kind of therapy. And it's really awesome.

The time-space focus on the now (as forced by physical danger in this case) emerges as important here and recontextualizes the importance of being present as taught in a performative training context: "…if you're having like a bad day and you're doing trapeze, you have to acknowledge that you're having a bad day." An urgency to focus on the present through the immediacy of physical danger offers an alternative to worry about the future or the past or the need to suppress emotion, save face, pass, etc. This practice is not devoid of future worry or self-actualization concerns: Martha's hope is that her ability to stay focused on the present during

circus, and the self-trust that goes with it is something that she can export outside of circus in the future. As light-hearted as the activity may seem, it is an attempt at treatment and at self-transformation and thus she no matter how fast she is flying through the air, in a sense she is always working.

Concluding Thoughts

The initial cases of Sandra and Martha demonstrate that what mattered for individuals in this study was being with others where one felt understood, where there was a shared vocabulary and trust. Trust here is an intuitive notion implying that the "rules of engagement" in one's cultural group, family, friend circle, tend to be known and shared. And if one is lucky and trust is established, then there is less of a likelihood that one's identity objectives will be threatened and therefore less "work" is required, particularly in relation to characteristics that may be taken up negatively in other social spheres. As a corollary of "perezhivania," being able to occupy the same time-space reality as one's interlocuter(s) without worrying about past or future failures is also a helpful precursor of greater face-ease. Lastly, a sense of social equality with one's interlocuters tends to be important in order to experience greater face-ease and acceptance. In such conditions, decreased face-work and overall image management efforts are necessary. These may include any emotional work, stigma management, or cognitive and emotional load mitigation and face-easing strategies aimed at addressing these challenges will be explored in depth in the ethnographic chapters that follow.

While all the preliminary interviewees expressed concerns with performance of the self in everyday life, Martha and Sandra were two who explicitly engaged in performance-oriented activities as alternative therapies or self-help practices from which they derived dramaturgical metaphors for everyday life coping. The other preliminary college interviewees were also

constantly engaged in stigma management and face-work to prove themselves as successful self-actualizers, yet most did not have an established self-reflective environment or community where they could mitigate their identity distress through face-easing practices. Robert was a notable exception: his Latino club was a space in which he felt like he could more fully and easily be himself and be accepted. Based on these performance-focused preliminary interviews, with Sandra presenting a striking case of dramaturgical metaphor literalized for self-understanding in everyday life and Martha presenting an attempt to self-actualize while attempting to let go of self-actualizing worries, I decided to explore in several group-practice-centered contexts the way in which performative pedagogies could be taken up by students as a coping strategy in the individual's attempt to address everyday life identity distress. I was also interested in exploring the cultural insights that particular pedagogies could provide on performance of the self in everyday American life and its relationship with identity distress.

The preliminary interviews discussed in this chapter told a story of stress around erasure of stigma and accentuation of "fit," for the sake of social and/or economic upward mobility and successful performance in micro-interactions. College students expressed uncertainty about achieving their more distant dreams as well as the management of their ideal selves in the everyday. The performative practices described in interviews revealed the existence of intentional spaces of identity examination and safety that I decided to explore ethnographically as elaborated in the following chapters, so as to further deepen the emergent qualitative knowledge that was previously inaccessible through the use of the Berman IDS scale alone. A novel perspective and theory emerged as a result of this ethnographic work around identity objectives, with acceptance as a counterpoint to actualization in America, and face-ease as a sought-after lightening of the oftentimes distressing nature of American face-work. As will

become evident, post-fieldwork interviews with participants allowed for an enriched understanding of identity distress experience and coping for emerging adults in the observed contexts of performance classrooms and in the described contexts of participants' everyday lives.

CHAPTER 4
Neo-Futurism at Elite Quirky University

Introduction

This chapter provides an ethnographic examination of the practice of Neo-Futurism, a nonfictional form of theatre, and its participants ethnographically. This practice originated in Chicago and has achieved some success in offshoot Neo-Futurist theatres in several major cities, mainly in North America. The central premise is that the performers are always themselves on stage rather than fictional characters, and by using their lives as content, they achieve a more authentic, equal, and real relationship with themselves as well as the audience.

As this practice is non-fiction-based, it presents a perfect opportunity for examining tensions in face-work centering around the aim of "real" or "genuine" in America[73] and the need to be a captivating performer. From an analytical standpoint, Neo-Futurism could be understood as interrogating modern authenticity—it is an anti-performative performative practice. While Neo-Futurism professes that you are enough as you are, it is simultaneously highly evaluative of your realness[74], and in that way presents a salient group-level study in the tension between actualization and acceptance, face-work and face-ease. In the first substantive sections of this chapter, the fieldwork and overall cultural insights it produced on identity distress and performance will be examined along with episodes of student work in the course.

The second substantive section will present an exemplary case study of Kay, a Neo-Futurist student. Kay identifies as transgender and non-binary. As Judith Butler (1990/2015)

[73] Note the use of "sincerity" in the excerpt below. The teacher, Greg Allen, doesn't use the term "authentic." He would more often use the term "real," as in "be your real self on stage."

[74] "Realness" has a complex history in how it has been applied in different identity and performance-related contexts in America. One notable use of realness is from drag ballroom subculture wherein "The participants are judged on their 'realness' or their ability to convince the judges that they look and act the part of a typical woman (or man) who would inhabit said category" (Strings and Bui, 2014, p. 2). Thus "realness" is also a complex construct in the perception, construction, and performance of authentic identity (particularly in relation to gender, a focus of this chapter) and realness has been used in other contexts to enact true identity through performance.

suggests, not only is gender identity prior to any other identity, but it also necessarily occurs through performativity in which gender identity is constituted by its expression. To analyze gender identity which is already understood as a constructed, performative category that is simultaneously deeply important for personal identity through the lens of performance pedagogy is a fruitful nexus for understanding identity distress as a process.

The case study of Kay is foundational to analyzing the subsequent case studies in Chapters 5 and 6, which occupy increasingly more difficult-to-pinpoint identity positions and struggle increasingly with a sense of coherence and agency, and yet ones that are no less meaningful to the individuals in question and their interlocuters. Coping with being misgendered is Kay's most typical identity distress experience. Kay's participation in Neo-Futurism presents a rich case to unpack for notions of authentic identity experience and performativity in the United States and the use of a non-fictional theatrical pedagogy and notions of "truth" in theatre to cope with the at-times painful contradictions and incoherencies.

The Ethnographic Landscape

Mission of Neo-Futurism

Neo-Futurism was founded in Chicago by Greg Allen in 1988. "Much of Allen's persona as an artist or leader seems to stretch back to his experiences of childhood, and Allen is the first to mention it. Growing up on The North Shore during the shadow of the Vietnam conflict, Allen describes his childhood as: '...isolated, bereft of friends, filled with public humiliation, and completely repressed'" (Glenn, 2014, p. 14). It's not surprising, then, that his artistic practice is focused on self-expression and what appears to be a striving towards authentic human connection. In creating Neo-Futurism, he "borrowed the speed, brevity, and compression of the [Italian] Futurists, a joy of the chaotic and unpredictable from Dada and Surrealism, audience

participation and happenings from Fluxus, and games from the theatrical experiments of the 1960s" (Glenn, 2014, p. 15). He combined these revolutionary, avante-garde influences to develop a form of theatre that he believed would be experienced as more vital and relevant than the theatre that was being created in the US at the time.

The following is the statement of purpose that Greg Allen presents on his website:

Neo-Futurist Statement of Purpose

The Neo-Futurists are an ensemble of artists who write, direct, and perform their own work dedicated to social, political, and personal enlightenment in the form of audience-interactive, conceptual theater.

The Neo-Futurists are dedicated to:

1) Strengthening the human bond between performer and audience. We feel that the more sincere and genuine we can be on stage, the greater will be the audience's identification with the unadorned people and issues before them.

2) Embracing a form of non-illusory theater in order to present our lives and our ideas as directly as possible. All of our plays are set on the stage in front of the audience. All of our "characters" are ourselves. All of our stories really happened. All of our tasks are actual challenges. We do not aim to "suspend the audience's disbelief" but to create a world where the stage is a continuation of daily life.

3) Embracing the moment through audience interaction and planned obsolescence. In order to keep ourselves as alive on stage as possible, we interweave elements of chance and change – contradicting the expected and eliminating the permanent.

4) Presenting inexpensive art for the general public. We aim to influence the widest audience possible by keeping our ticket prices affordable and our productions intellectually and emotionally challenging yet accessible.

Greg Allen
1992

Figure 5: Neo-Futurist Statement of Purpose (Allen, 2012)

The Neo-Futurist theatres that Greg Allen founded in several different cities (including San Francisco, New York, Montreal and many others), all follow this mission statement. The political aspect is one that continues to be of importance long after my data collection ended. In new iterations of Neo-Futurist theatre companies that Greg has founded since the election of Donald Trump, he has publicly proclaimed that his new theatres would be rebooted with a more

diverse ensemble as a resistance effort "comprised entirely of people of color, LBTQ+, artist/activist women, and other disenfranchised voices in order to combat the tyranny of censorship and oppression" (Gossett, 2016; Hayford, 2018).[75] ostensibly against the current administration, and as "…a machine to fight fascism" (Hayford, Chicago Reader, 2018).

Greg has become a contentious figure in the shadow of his own legacy, promising a democratic form of theatre yet going so far as to revoke the rights for his original Chicago-based company to perform "Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind," alternatively known as "Too Much Light", "TMLMTBGB" or "TML," his trademark show. In a qualitative study on the historical rise and long-time success of the Neo-Futurists, Greg admitted to his "control issues" (Glenn, 2014). The contradictions in Greg's intentions were evident since early on. He expressed the wish to create a democratic, cooperative ensemble yet needed to control every aspect of it in the manner of a more traditional artistic director. This included his calling his 1988 collaborators' roles "parts" (as in parts in a script that he had written) whereas contemporary TML performers would only call themselves ensemble members (Glenn, 2014). In the present study, these issues would arise sometimes in tensions around Greg's power role and demeanor in the classes I observed and in students' expressed frustrations with him as will be evident in the next section. As Max Glenn notes:

> Yet so much of this genesis work, while providing room for his ensemble to find their own individual contributions to the work, seems far more guided and controlled by Allen than his intentions let on. Considering that two thirds of the work premiered on the opening weekend of TML was written by Allen himself, it is evident Allen was far more in charge than he lets on in interviews. A large portion of Allen's desire to be in control stems from his strong artistic vision and his own neurosis, as he has explained himself as

[75] According to journalistic sources, Greg had a falling out with the Chicago-based company in 2012 where they temporarily removed him as a member, accusing him of abuse of power. A year later he did carry on with teaching engagements at the company but he never became as active with the Chicago Neo-Futurists again. In 2016 when he fully closed down the rights of the Chicago company to *TML,* his claims about creating a new, more powerful political machine implying that the current one was insufficient were not well taken by the ensemble members and artistic directors of the Chicago company (Gossett, 2016; Hayford, 2018).

> someone who struggles with a deep desire to control things (Allen Interview). (Glenn, 2014, p. 19)

Since his recent schism with the original Chicago company, Allen's original companies continue to produce Neo-Futurist work. He has since created new Neo-Futurist companies with new names in numerous cities. He posts on social media about his new companies in cities like Detroit, Houston, and the over 100 Neo-Futurist shows that were produced from London to Shanghai in 2019. At the time of my fieldwork, described in the next section, Greg Allen was already a figure with a somewhat notorious reputation in the Chicago theatre scene. At one point his reputation for being possessive around his methods even came up in an interview with a student interested but a bit concerned about trying out Neo-Futurism in other contexts. The dilemma that has arisen repeatedly is that Neo-Futurism is an intuitively exportable form, which means Greg struggles to control the situation every time someone he hasn't authorized to do so replicates it. In spite of the notoriety, the acclaim of his work had earned him a consistent post teaching Neo-Futurism at EQU, and I was fortunate to get a spot in class as it was quite popular within their theatre curriculum offerings.

The Pedagogy of Neo-Futurism

The structure of Neo-Futurism classes proceeded in the following manner, building on accumulating and celebrating the originalities and differences of the students: We would start with the ritual of an ever-evolving name game, with everyone standing in a circle facing each other, in which each student would come up with a unique physical motion plus oftentimes some kind of imaginative story. Someone's name in the Neo version of the name game was the least important element – what was most important was remembering the physical action and text that each student produced and passing that back in a conversation that moved around the circle. It was fluid and spontaneous just like in an improv class (see chapter 5), but what was different was

the collective memory around each person's continuing contribution to a shared physical and textual vocabulary, which centered on collecting individual's unique narratives and quirks. Quirkiness was celebrated as realness; for example, one woman's motto was "Get the horse off my face," and this became a beloved callback in the shared memory and expressions of the class as in turn we "passed" this expression around. A sense of trust in the sharing of the unexpected with one another began to be cultivated and rewarded. This is the key to Neo-Futurism: fitting in meant standing out within the frameworks of the rituals, exercises, and performances.

Standing out was judged by Greg in terms of whether he perceived it as creating a sincere collective aesthetic experience and impact on the audience. This evaluative role presents a nearly-universal challenge with theatre wherein one person, typically the "director" or sometimes the producer, in the room assumes their experience to be the most important and telling one. There were weekly assignments to create performance pieces which we were to present in front of the class for evaluation and these were selected collectively. The most successful student pieces were chosen by Greg and the students for the final performance, which would be a compilation, or Neo-Futurist "menu" of student works.

As there was oftentimes audience participation, this provided additional evidence of how engaged students were at the time. Feedback sessions (and there was a feedback session after every student piece that was workshopped during class) weren't necessarily a time that was a perfect source of uncensored student response as there was the pressure to succeed for a grade. I interviewed a little under half of the students in-depth. With a couple notable exceptions, the majority had positive responses. But I know from these interviews that there were students that did hold back on certain responses.

Excerpt from a Day in Neo-Futurism Class

We sit cross-legged on a black dance floor in a large university classroom flooded with natural light from floor-to-ceiling windows that face the northern expanse of campus. The 12 of us are only three classes in when Greg introduces the "chair test." We soon discover that the chair test involves, yes, a chair and your "real self." The chair is placed in the middle of the room and faces the audience. The placement of the chair is approximated in the following diagram.

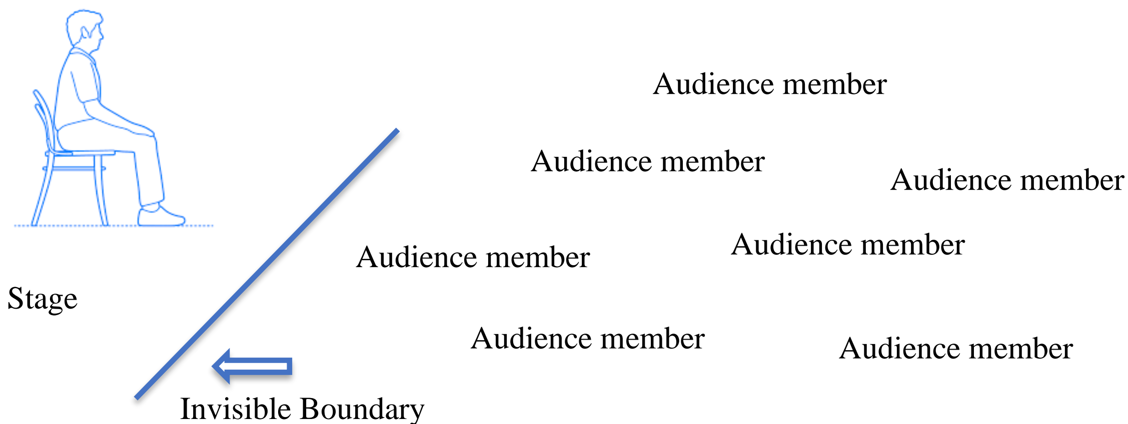

Figure 6: The Chair Test[76]

Greg indicates an invisible boundary on the floor that separates the stage from everything else, delineated by a piece of paper, which he places on the floor. This creates a setup that subverts what Goffman (1959) described as front and back stage: the stage is a place where the fourth wall exists as an imagined boundary and yet is more permeable than if this were a naturalistic and fiction-based performance where the performer becomes a fictional character.[77]

[76] (Included image of chair - *Era Chair Dimensions & Drawings | Dimensions.com*, 2021)
[77] Dramatist Bertolt Brecht utilized the "breaking the fourth wall" as a strategy of theatre-driven social change. Many politically-motivated contemporary theatre-makers like Greg build on Brecht's strategies. To "break the fourth wall" is to impact the audience's perception of reality: "In naturalism, the audience is expected to empathize with the characters on stage but is not

When they are on "stage" they are still the same person who they were before they stepped on stage. When you get up from the audience onto the stage and occupy the position of "performer," you do not transform into someone else. The performer sits down on the chair with the meta, real-time, non-fictional awareness that they are still in the same chronotope as the audience (and they may acknowledge or speak with the audience at any time), with the aim of inviting the audience into a performer's, that is a person's, more typical everyday life "backstage" experiences. Interior, private, and autobiographical experience is externalized and shared on the Neo-Futurist stage with the aim of not appearing and therefore not being artificial, staged, or fake yet the delineation between stage and audience persists and that is the paradox of this "real" performance practice.

The instructions sound simple to me as a student and participant-observer in the space: walk to the chair normally and as yourself, sit in the chair and then get up and get off the stage. "Do it without artifice," Greg Allen adds. One student after another (myself included) attempts to do this quotidian activity in front of an audience that is judging you for the "realness" factor, whatever that is. It's an exercise that as a student I discovered to be easily confusing and anxiety-provoking: What does the teacher want? Is my sitting in this chair "real" enough for him? One student giggles, another blushes, another takes a long while to look at us, lingering behind the chair, while others look away. One student wipes away tears afterwards. No attempt is the same and this goes on for some time; for example, in order of occurrence here were the responses of the first five students:

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necessarily expected to think how their situation might be altered. The process therefore ends as the play closes. Brecht wanted to break down the 'fourth wall' through various devices: revealing decisions his characters made and the context in which they did so; making narrative techniques overt; and exposing the processes by which performances are constructed, even showing the actor to be aware on stage of the artifice of his or her role…Brecht wanted the spectators to rationalize their emotional responses and to evaluate the stage action objectively in order to ascertain the social foundation of the characters' motivation and their own reactions to these" (Allain and Harvie, 2006, p. 29-30).

1st Looks reluctant.

2nd Looks pondering.

3rd Takes off boots, stretches.

4th Stretches legs, takes time.

5th Walks up to the chair very quickly, poised

Meanwhile, during and between these attempts, Greg critiques the way we are sitting and says things like: "One way or another, show your vulnerability. The aim of Neo-Futurism is to treat the stage equally in our lives, as yourself, where you are, raising your self-awareness." This treating of the stage "equally" implies a possible move towards acceptance and a face-easing practice and yet you have to "show your vulnerability" and in the showing is kind of self-image actualization: a performative achievement measurable and judged by others. Steve, a Chinese American student, of wiry, muscular build, is criticized that his sitting appears to be too much of a performance. Steve says that he has always been accused of performing. He keeps a neutral facial expression as he speaks, even during feedback, and according to Greg's feedback his lack of outward emoting is problematic for Neo-Futurist practice, an insufficiency of showing. Paul on the other hand, revealed his self-consciousness by chattering incessantly all the way through the chair test. In the feedback time he admits to the class that he is "preparing what I'm going to say, constantly." Interestingly, in this way Paul demonstrates what is considered a textbook symptom of social anxiety in compulsively editing his own speech.[78] Greg instructs him to repeat the exercise without talking and warns Paul that he will throw something at him. When Paul repeats the exercise, he does come across[79] as more relaxed without the constant chatter that

[78] See Chapter 6 for more on symptoms of social anxiety as characterized by CBT self-help workbooks.
[79] As his "audience" along with the other students, this is what I interpreted as we are all attempting to read for the "realness" Greg Allen is striving for as he is deconstructing each student's "realness".

accompanied his first attempt. Greg remarks that Paul seemed grounded in the exercise: "There's probably a level of self-monitoring, self-conscious voice you could let go of and you'd be happier." For Greg, he explains that "realness" in Neo-Futurism practice comes from a personal place: it's Greg's own voice that was always too self-monitoring, and he designed Neo-Futurism as a way to "let go" through speed, through distraction of immediacy and urgency, which demands that one has to be in the moment—as when you are about to have an object thrown at you[80] (Greg Allen Interview [hereafter GA], 2015).

As I sit in the chair and look out at everyone, the concept of vulnerability has never felt more palpable. Can they "see" me, I wonder? Can they see me more than people can normally see me, somehow? The exercise is to be real in front of an audience and here vulnerability, sincerity, and authenticity or realness are laminated onto one another: as I and my interviewees discovered, if as a student of Neo-Futurism you can show the struggle of performance in front of others as you sit in the chair, you're "real." If you can then stop struggling and just live in the discomfort of the social pretenses that you typically present in your face and body, the ones that signify that everything is fine, perhaps a kind of American cool and poise, and instead emote whatever you're experiencing more expressively and with less restraint, you're becoming a Neo-Futurist. "If you have a performer, it's wherever they are," (GA, October 2014).

For Goffman front stage is "that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion we define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (1959, p. 486) and backstage is

[80] As with the concept of perezhivania, much directing and acting is focused on the management of the perception and expression of time. Directors oftentimes come up with little shortcuts, such as getting them to speed up or to focus on an immediate task, to get actors to stop "acting" (which means to stop thinking about acting). In this way, what Greg Allen is teaching with the chair test is actually little different from what is done in fiction-based acting training and directing.

the place where "the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking in his lines, and step out of character" (1959, p. 488). In Neo-Futurism, there is the goal of subverting this impression management divide.

The chair test, originally developed by Stanislavsky and Maria Knebel[81] (Carnicke, 2019), as taught by Greg Allen, is a measure of one's "front stage" behavior in a back stage—front stage zone where the paradoxical aim of existing as you are back stage while you are in fact ostensibly, and as delineated by a simple set of markers "on stage" or front stage. This paradox means accepting yourself in an open way that can be evaluated by others for its performance quality, which is theoretically improved by your authenticity. You are thus engaging in a face-easing practice in your reimagining of your relationship with the audience. It is no wonder that a a plethora of confused and conflicting emotional responses can result. This is what happened for me and other participants who visibly struggled and were criticized by the teacher, for not perfectly being "non-performative" or "real" in the Neo-Futurist sense. The very exercise of the chair test is asking the student to observe and blur their own front stage/back stage behavior into a new mode of presence.

Greg then gives us a chance to try it a second time around. He first explains "this exercise taps into how we protect ourselves. Through it, we often learn about people's defaults, whether that's to be super friendly, nice, or to tell the world to fuck off." He indicates that certain behaviors, like less eye contact showed less confidence. He states that there is a difference between the "performance of casualness vs. being casual." One student says "I was like should I itch my face? And I itched my face." Greg challenged the student further in their self-reflection saying:

[81] Stanislavsky's original version of the "chair exercise" was a relaxation technique and involved individuals training to focus on and eliminate tensions in their bodies.

> …by focusing on just your face, you made it simpler for you. Instead of 'I'm sitting for you, I'm standing for you'...No 'I'm just sitting, standing'. How can you be yourself when someone is watching? (Fieldnotes 2015)

This method of focusing oneself with a mundane task comes up again in a later class when Lindsey, a 20-year-old junior, does a performance replete with objects and text: Wearing a nightgown, she stands in front of the class as if at a bus stop. She says that she doesn't even wear a nightgown most of the time. She asks the room: "Mom are you proud of me?" She takes out a colorful vibrator, turns it on, places it on the floor in front of us. "This is the most real that I can be," she says. It buzzes in the middle of the classroom as the other students look on. She takes out a stick of gum and chews it for a few minutes at the end, the distant look on her face indicating that she's likely thinking about something else, experiencing something outside of the classroom and the present, shared reality. She eventually stops chewing the gum and puts it away. In his critique Greg remarks, "The best moment was when you just chewed the fucking gum. Sometimes what's most amazing is watching someone experience genuine emotion onstage." This echoes Lionel Trilling's (1972) description of authenticity:

> …its provenance is the museum, where persons expert in such matters test whether objects of art are what they appear to be or are claimed to be, and therefore worth the price that is asked for them—or, if this has already been paid, worth the admiration they are being given. That the word has become part of the moral slang of our day points to the peculiar nature of our fallen condition, our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existences. (Trilling, 1972, p. 93)

Trilling pinpoints authenticity as a dominant moral lens through which art is evaluated in modern times, as in a museum, another kind of stage.

Greg's particular uptake of the drive towards authenticity is through an evaluation of "realness." In terms of Greg's judgment of Lindsey's "realness," and the implied evaluation of the credibility of her condition, it's helpful to consider the paradox in terms of time-space reality: Lindsey demonstratively occupies some other reality where she is not concerned with an

audience and yet is simultaneously "present" enough to include the audience. She holds our attention by chewing the gum while facing us on a designated stage yet not looking directly at us. This seems to qualify as "genuine emotion onstage."

It's a deictically complex maneuver: she is demonstratively both in her own imagined time-space reality and the present time-space reality of the audience at the same time. Thus realness (arguably the Neo-Futurist version of perezhivania) comes down to being able to stay focused on your own time-space reality so that emotion expression can occur free of face-work (and face threat) concerns through a simple activity or thought process in front of the audience. Lindsey maintains the line of good Neo-Futurist performer by not visibly worrying about this objective.

Greg's lack of positive commentary or response of any kind to the vibrator effectively rejected that other mode of "authenticity" that Lindsey seemed to be presenting in sharing this object with us. Allen's implied philosophy of authenticity, as being in opposition to the meaningless and superficial, lines up with Rose & Wood's explanation of the modern drive for personal authenticity:

> Philosophically, the drive for authenticity may be conceived as a reaction to threats of inauthenticity (e.g., the sense of a meaningless, superficial, or performative existence) has been a common theme in literary and philosophical works since the late nineteenth century (e.g., Flaubert, Sartre, Nietzsche). (Rose & Wood, 2005, p. 286)

Was the vibrator evidence of Lindsey trying a little too hard for the audience? After all, it's particularly unusual to turn a vibrator on in a classroom or stage setting in front of a group of peers and one's professor; it's a strikingly unusual act in that presumably that is not how one would use this product in private so its unusual use did come across as more of a spectacle (to me and other audience members who got more quiet during this portion of the piece). For Greg, it seemed to dip too deep into a performance of casualness rather than being casual. It also

perhaps distracted from our focus on the performer herself. In contrast, the blurring of performance and everyday life in Lindsey's more "genuinely casual" and expressive gum chewing allowed for a nonfictional form of theatre that was closer perhaps to the voyeuristic invitation of reality television and Instagram videos by sharing one's so-called private experiences in a mundane activity as if by accident.

Type-Sourced Interdiscursivity as the Route to Successful Neo-Futurism:

Dissecting the American and Neo-Futurist "Genuine" and "Real"

An informative lens through which to examine the construction of a successful Neo-Futurist event is what Michael Silverstein describes as a type-sourced interdiscursivity (Silverstein 2005). Silverstein defines interdiscursivity as:

> …a structural relationship of two or more situations, and an indexical one at that. Within any situation in which we participate, we can experience the relationship by a semiotic act of "pointing-to," which of course implies pointing-to from someplace (the arrow or pointing finger starts somewhere and ends somewhere else). In its situational locatability, interdiscursivity can be seen to be a strategic positioning of the participants in a semiotic event such that an inter(co(n))textual structure emerges. It is the intersubjective cover under which participants give interpretability, significance, and causal consequentiality to any social action by stipulating its non-isolation in the domain of interaction. (Silverstein, 2005, p. 9)

Interdiscursivity thus describes how individuals in interaction position themselves in a way that signals or mirrors their relationship to familiar sociocultural events and structures and thus conjures meaning relevant to those events and structures. Silverstein also explains that "Type-sourced interdiscursivity implies normativities of form and function, such as rhetorical norms, genres, et cetera (2015, p. 1)." I suggest that in the case of Lindsey's "non self-conscious" gum-chewing or the student's nose scratching, the genre invoked appears to be one of behavior that is saved for private or for non-self-conscious moments with only oneself. This behavior is a reflection of the mainstream song phrase "things we do when we think no one is watching,"

which indexes an American genre of behaviors and expressions imagined as authentic and genuine simply because they are conducted privately or not intended for an audience.
These are mostly relaxing or non-self conscious solo activities that are not concerned with external evaluation. On the contrary, the vibrator was switched on and placed on the floor in front of the audience which is clearly not the typical use of a vibrator. It was turned into a performance for a watching audience rather than used in the way it would be in private.

If we are to understand the real and the genuine as one's personal and private chronotopic realm or mindscape, indexed by representative tokens of one's subjectivity, then successful intersubjectivity, i.e., successful Neo-Futurism, is the interdiscursive sharing of this chronotopic realm or mindscape. In conversation with the notion that the real and genuine self is the one displayed in personal and private settings, Neo-Futurism seeks to achieve authenticity in public social encounters by publicly sharing the personal, private, and non-audience oriented activities and modes of being.

This notion of private behavior done in public as evidence of one's authenticity is pervasive in American pop and expressive culture and is a dominant theme in social media, reality television, and all the of the current technologies that support the possibility of micro-celebrity (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). The new reality is that technically anyone with a smart phone can become rich and famous and this means that pressure to capitalize on the self as commodity might be felt by anyone with such aspirations. One example of the private-genuine link is the 1987 song "Come from the Heart" by Susanna Clark and Richard Leigh. The lyrics of this song, often misattributed to Mark Twain and others, demonstrate the American cultural paradox of genuineness, in that heartfelt seems to mean that an audience should experience your private experiences as if you are not aware that the audience is there:

> You got to dance like nobody's watchin'
> It's gotta come from the heart
> If you want it to work
> Now here is the one thing I keep forgettin'
> When everything is falling apart
> In life as in love, you know I need to remember
> There's such a thing as trying too hard

The genre of genuine authenticity or plandid (i.e., a planned candid photo)[82] as sharing the private truth in public seems to have only increased in its complexity and contradictions. From the 1987 lyric that points out that "there's such a thing as trying too hard," to the current fixation on the "plandid," to the popular success of a YouTuber Emma Chamberlain who is lauded and emulated for going makeup-less, not always showering, and not touching up her photos. The following excerpt from *The Atlantic* describes the appeal of Chamberlain and the movement she leads:

> Chamberlain is relatable, her fans say: Unlike those *other* YouTubers living in mansions with perfect hair and expensive clothes, she's just an average teen. Sure, she lives in L.A. herself now and is undoubtedly a multimillionaire, but the point is, she doesn't *care*. She doesn't take herself so seriously. (Lorenz, 2019)

This trending attitude towards social media to show that you do not care too much about audience approval supports what I found in terms of attitudes towards Facebook and other social media among many of my college-age interviewees (see discussion of interviewees in Chapter 3), which was an overall distancing from social media and the attention-seeking practices associated with it. One 21-year-old Asian-American student named Samantha expressed a message of actually stepping away from focus on the self as performer in one of her Neo-Futurist workshop pieces by using an obstacle course of sticky notes to tell a personal story about herself

[82]A photo that is carefully engineered to look like it was taken spontaneously, unbeknownst to the subject. As an Instagram design study describes: "…a portmanteau for "planned" and "candid," has recently been coined to describe Instagram users' long and careful planning of their photos to fake an effortless look in their picture-perfect posts" (Xie, 2018.)

instead of speaking or acting, fully taking herself out of the performance itself, opting as she expressed it to not "show off too much." In an in-depth interview afterwards, she explained that she was intentionally not on Facebook and tired of the "showing off" people were doing on it suggesting that she was seeking to lighten the self-image focused face-work involved in "showing off."

The sticky note performance is arguably a face-easing practice because it was a movement away from what she experienced as the uncomfortable "showing off" aspects of making herself the center of attention, which she associates with the passé over-showiness of Facebook and social media in general. On a broader identity objective level, Samantha's performance suggests an intentional movement away from the self-image actualization ideology implied and in this case towards a kind of authenticity and communion over the sticky note performance. Samantha's face was literally removed from the storytelling as was her presence in the piece as a character or protagonist; she was closer to a silent narrator and curator of the audience member's experience, wherein the audience member is invited to be the protagonist. Samantha's face-easing practices interestingly echo Greg Allen's valuing of the "unadorned," which in relation to Neo-Futurism's origins in Happenings and Fluxus[83] aims to carry an anti-wealth-establishment message of low cost, economic simplicity, and availability.

The emphasis on not caring and not taking oneself too seriously, or on not trying too hard as in the Clark and Leigh song, all point towards an evolution in the expression of "American cool" (Stearns, 1994) or the cool pose. Just as "hot emotions" should not be expressed, the sense that revealing that quite a bit of effort has been made is also not desirable. Notions of cool imply

[83] Fluxus and Happenings was an avant-garde international artistic movement that developed in several European countries as well as the US in bursts of activity credited to a variety of artists from the 1930's to the 70's. It was one of Greg Allen's primary influences in the creation of Neo-Futurism.

an essentialist notion of authenticity: perhaps if we see the work that went into the construction of an image, we no longer believe the image as honest or true. Truth and honesty should just emerge effortlessly, naturally, at least this seems to be at the heart of this imagined American ideal. The contradictory notion of "effortless cool" as examined by philosophy scholar Luke Russell, only works, he suggests, with "self-effacing goals:" "A goal is self-effacing if our achievement of that goal requires that we look away from the goal rather than pursue it directly" (Russell, 2011, p. 47). Russell goes on to give an example from those who are considered cool in terms of their fashion choices: "The cool person is the person who self-consciously achieves some kind of aesthetic excellence while not caring about the social approval or disapproval that she might attract in virtue of her aesthetic choices" (Russell, 2011, p. 48).

This notion of the self-effacing goal is also helpful for understanding Greg Allen's evaluation of "genuine emotion onstage" or what he distinguishes as a "performance of casualness" versus "being casual." Lindsey's focus on her own thoughts and/or her enjoyment of the chewing gum allowed her finally to look effortless and therefore authentic, real, genuine, all the most approving qualities that an American audience can bestow on a performer who apparently is not there for their approval. These tensions in authenticity evaluation emergent in Neo-Futurist pedagogy demonstrate that the folk concept of the genuine, authentic self in modern America is embedded in private habits and ways of being when one is less self-conscious and concerned by what a potentially judgmental public might think. It also interestingly demonstrates that the acting technique of focusing one's attention on a concrete goal or activity in a scene, e.g., chewing your gum, will allow you to achieve your underlying goal: appearing authentic which ostensibly, and as argued by Russell, translates to being evaluated as cool in everyday life. Neo-Futurism practices, particularly as they are focused on one's real-life identity rather than

that of a fictionalized character, provide insight into identity distress concerns about authenticity, self-image actualization, and acceptance.

A student-produced piece illustrates how Neo-Futurism's private-in-public standards can be built on the foundational lesson of the chair test. A South Asian Economics major in the class, Viraj, arrived dressed to class in a formal suit. He began the piece by informing us that he was going to a business-themed career fair immediately after the class and invited us into the kind of "safe space" he would have created, he explained, had he been in the privacy of his home. This meant putting on a favorite song by Norah Jones to create a calm atmosphere and his sense of a safe space. It meant a reprieve from the job interviews he had scheduled right after class.

The type-sourced interdiscursivity was clear in that he signaled a different event type within the present one of class. He did this by replicating the structure and practices of his typical at-home calming ritual: He turned on the song as he lay down on the floor and visibly "relaxed" to the music. He removed his shoes and reclined his head on his hands as he lay on his back in a casual posture as one might lay on a bed or a couch at home. The difference was that he invited a classful of people to stand in a close circle around him and watch. Viraj invited us into the observation of his vulnerable experience, space and practices, while ostensibly and with the aid of Norah Jones, forgetting about us and achieving the self-effacing goal of privacy-on-display.

In this way, we as audience were invited into his private physical space in which he creates a calm psychological space for himself. We were invited to voyeuristically experience it with him in the classroom. Doing this in class did feel "real" to him he informed me in an interview later. He created in class the safe space and intimacy that he creates at home. It felt to him and to me and others as audience members (who expressed their responses in a feedback session afterwards) like he was "being himself" bringing a piece of his private self into a more

public space by reframing that public space with the rules of the private. In this way, Neo-Futurist pedagogy cultivates a kind of fused public-private presentation of self, blurring boundaries of where it's appropriate to cry and emote sincerely and without restraint (e.g., in every class, without fail, a different student cried) and to express very personal stories in a pedagogical and theatrical safe space[84] which functions as a kind of autobiographical and identity experimentation-oriented heterotopia and face-easing space.

Self-focused activities, appear to allow for increased face-ease and less strenuous face-work in public for individuals like Viraj who are able to experience them as "real." This experience of realness is facilitated by the blurred private-public divide of Neo-Futurist pedagogy and practice. In Viraj's workshop piece, the establishment of a specific chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981/84; Silverstein, 2005), or time-space frame of the public theatrical present with an audience as intimate interlocuter, invokes communion and acceptance in inviting the audience to all but participate in Viraj's psychological experience.

This communion is facilitated by the prerogative of the performer-director to control the interaction rules: he can tell us to be invited visitors and observers as in Viraj's case or followers of an obstacle course as in Samantha's case. In enabling the performer-director to set up the space and engagement rules, the "safe space" is whatever they would like it to be. In this way there is a great amount of agency possible through the Neo-Futurist framework and the potential to setup a situation for the performer of greater face-ease.

The theatre audience can be the ultimate reflection of one's evaluating interlocuter in everyday life interactions. The element in many student presentations of private-public boundary blurring is in line with the ethos of Neo-Futurism and is well known by anyone who has been to

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[84] From Solano and Solano's (2013) definition elaborated in Chapter 2.

a Neo-Futurist show. The immediate boundary dissolution—wherein the public self-position draws on the freedom and agency of the private self-position, creating a more empowered Neo-Futurist performer position— and restructuring of the rules of engagement is very intentional. I was surprised to discover that after decades of weekly audience exposure, Greg exhibited signs of nervousness before our final show.

Greg explains that he designed Neo-Futurism to help cope with his own anxiety about his sense of the audience's power over him. He created Neo-Futurism as an agency-enabling, equalizing, trust-building, and ultimately, face-easing practice:

> … I go out and I take away the audience's power by going out and talking to the audience and realizing they're just people like I am. And so often I target the person that's most intimidating [to me] in the audience to talk to and realize oh they're just a person.

Greg goes on to explain that to him the relationship to the audience feels like oppressor and oppressed. Greg has developed a strategy for subverting his sense of being in a disempowered or oppressed position by creating a closer, more intimate and therefore more equal relationship:

> …I go up to them and kind of try to humanize them. Pantsing them. I call it 'pantsing the audience.' No I just, strike up a conversation. I've also gotten good at that. (laughs) I mean I can strike up a conversation with anybody. Having done it for 150 shows a year, yeah.

Pantsing begins during the pre-show (i.e., the time when an audience arrives at the theatre and before the show officially begins), so that from the get-go we are entering Greg Allen's version of private-public safe space. "Pantsing or disempowering the audience," is Greg's personal power-leveling metaphor, which entails interacting with audience members and breaking the fourth wall during the pre-show. It's reminiscent of the adage "imagine the audience naked," popularly attributed to Winston Churchill in calming his performance anxiety, as a technique to calm yourself by bringing the power of an evaluating audience down to your level. Allen's intent as he explained it during our interview, was supposed to be both egalitarian

and anxiety-soothing and appears to be an identity objective of acceptance by the self and others and of heightening self-esteem. Other intentional, face-easing practices Greg has embedded in Neo-Futurism include planned spontaneity and a race against the clock: from the performers who greet audience members by inviting them to play a lottery game[85] to determine their ticket price in the entrance way, to the fast paced race to complete the show on time which serves as an effective self-effacing goal:

> Just do it, don't think about [it.] Which is also one of the reasons why I use so much time pressure in the class. It's like you only have so much time, make a decision and do it. Um, cuz if we sit around and think about it often nothing gets done. Work becomes stifling.

This statement is reflective of the structure of Neo-Futurism and Greg's longest running, most successful theatrical show, "Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind". It consists of 30 micro-short plays, produced in 60 minutes in an intentional race against the clock. The plays are randomly sequenced, selected by the audience throughout the night, and new plays get written every several weeks to keep the material current and relevant to the performers' lives. The performers don't always succeed in doing all 30 pieces but when they do, they have a final reward for themselves as well as for the audience (part of the ideologies of equal footing, goals, and shared rewards) of ordering a large pizza, an event that happens in "real time" and literally gets shared with the audience as the pizza is cut into tiny half-inch squares and distributed.

> I mean I created Neo-Futurism very specifically for me. I created it to train myself to deal with whatever happened in the moment, basically. It's that I had been destroyed by preconceived notions of myself, was my self-perception at the time and so I wanted to deal with whatever came at me in the moment. And so yeah improv is all comedy, whatever, it's fakey, but if you're actually thrust into one of 30 plays in the moment, you don't have time to get all anxious about it. You just have to do, you just have to get out there and do it. And so I very much created the format of Too Much Light anyway, to train myself to deal with whatever comes up in the moment. I was also a shitty actor, I'd

[85] The final cost of one's ticket is determined by chance. An example of the latest rules at a Neo-Futurist venue for this pre-show ritual: "Tickets sold at the door cost $9 plus the roll of a single six-sided die; depending on your luck you will be paying $9-15. Presale tickets cost $20 minus the roll of a six-sided die ($14-19)!"

> always been one of those people that if I dropped something on stage I'd be like 'do I pick that up?' I mean I was just always in my head. And so by trying this form of theatre, I knocked myself out of my mind. Which was the whole aim really.

In this passage Greg presents his anxiety as being stuck in overthinking one's actions and the speedy, unpredictable conditions of Neo-Futurism as a kind of treatment. By creating additional challenges to focus on like racing against the clock, he has built in self-effacing goals that mean he is not focused on audience approval as his primary goal. The forced focus on the race against the clock facilitates the acceptance objective of presence: in taking away time to worry, Greg only leaves time to act.

Threatened status was a common theme and contributing factor to identity distress among participants. By status I mean a lauded or esteemed social position or level of achievement that an individual may strive for. In addition to his desire for ease and presence, Greg's own identity anxiety reveals a self-image actualization concern around status.[86] After all, he had given himself the power of "depantsing the audience" which reads as a one-upmanship move. It also demonstrates the greater face-work and emotional work stresses associated with interacting with someone of higher social power,[87] or the prospect of such an interaction, which was true in the case of Viraj as well. Viraj's identity distress was caused by the onus of proving his competence and worth to potential employers immediately following class, so he engaged in practices that would normally create conditions of less strenuous face-work for him before a potentially face-threatening experience.

[86] The perception of Greg's identity and his struggles illustrate the tensions defined in this study. Greg attempts to prove status through one-upmanship metaphors, but still works towards objectives of acceptance and communion; this is a likely explanation for the conflicts in Greg's history and reputation as a proclaimed egalitarian collaborator who appears to need to control every detail of production.

[87] This also connects to the discussion in Chapters 2 and 3 of Hoshchild's theories about emotional labor and social status, such as the compromised position of female public service employees.

One of the most lauded workshop pieces of the semester was done by Paul, who in interviews expressed his skepticism of Neo-Futurism. Greg cried at the end of Paul's piece, which in Neo-Futurism is likely the highest praise you can get. At the top of the piece, Paul asked us all to lie down on the ground, facing the ceiling. He then played a YouTube clip of whimsical background music on his laptop, from "Man on Wire," the documentary about Philip Petit by James Marsh as he told us a 5-minute version of the story of how Phillip Petit managed to tightrope walk between the Twin Towers in 1974. His telling of the narrative was full of musings about Petit's daring walk, his preparation for the feat, and the technical elements involved in Petit being able to pull it off. At one point he asked "what do you think is beautiful?"

For myself as audience participant, looking upwards and imagining the two juxtaposed stories of the Twin Towers was moving, particularly in the way it made me think about their place in the national narrative. One event highlighted them in an act of celebration of human achievement and wonder, while the other underlined them as symbols of national trauma and desolation. At the very end of the piece, Paul allowed for some silence while several people cried. A few people held each other. He asked those who knew someone who died during 9/11 to stand up and a few people did. Greg said the piece was successful because it "...let us do the emotional work, and just conveyed the information for us." As Neo-Futurism is partly influenced by the international movement Fluxus and Happenings, whose aim is at times "historiographical," Paul's piece arguably achieved this aim.

In terms of the chronotopic and interdiscursive success of Paul's piece, the fact that he had us lie down and face the ceiling allowed each individual to have their own personal experience that was not entirely observed by others. There was the privacy of looking up at the blank canvas of the ceiling, but there was also an embedded interdiscursivity in the piece

between two emotionally-laden historic events. One of these events was so poignant and clear to the audience from the narrative (as it was a relatively recent shared national trauma) that Paul not naming 9/11 until the very end only made it more obvious to me, the teacher, and the other students, that the national narrative was shared and this became completely explicit during the feedback discussion afterwards. The shared "looking up" from the ground created a sense of shared helplessness of the onlooker, and helped listeners experience the verticality as both metaphor and physicality.

Paul's piece is also an example of why Greg imagines that Neo-Futurism is a welcome treatment for students at this particular university, who he describes as too disconnected from their bodies and emotions normally:

> These students tend to be more intellectual and academically inclined, and tend to be more in the world of the mind rather than the body and their emotions. I do think that Neo-Futurism does a great job of intertwining all three of those worlds. And getting people to realize how they're feeling and what they're doing besides just thinking about it. That's another reason I don't go too far into defining what truth is. To allow them to just do.

Yet while Paul was able to foster a physicalized, shared experience for others while expressing his skepticism of Neo-Futurism in interviews. He didn't seem to be sold on its authenticity himself. This highlights that while Neo-Futurism may be experienced as authentically helpful and face-easing for some like Greg and Viraj, for others it may simply be experienced as a performative practice and pedagogy that does not have any therapeutic or life-improving effect. For a dramaturgical practice like Neo-Futurism to have therapeutic effects, the individual would have to employ dramaturgical reimagining of their everyday identity distress with Neo-Futurist metaphors and practice in mind.

Personal Life on Center Stage or What's the Point of Being Interesting?

In this section, I will unpack how notions of "being interesting" were understood and emerged in the Neo-Futurist classroom and in the observed behaviors and self-reported experiences of EQU Neo-Futurist students. I will examine how these notions reveal insights onto American cultural values relevant to identity stress processes.

A strong theme about the pressures of everyday American life performance that comes out in participants' comments during the practice of Neo-Futurism is being an interesting enough subject for your audience. When the personal is at the heart of the performance, suddenly the spotlight is on the individual and participants feel the pressure to be unique, entertaining, and interesting enough. "I'm afraid of not being interesting enough," explains Emily, a student who cries afterwards during the feedback session after the chair test exercise.

Emily's response represented a norm in the Neo-Futurist classroom: at least one student cried in every class. I found myself tracking this phenomenon. In part, it was startling to see someone burst into tears in the American higher education classroom and the crying was in stark contrast with the typical cool and collected emotion display typical of both graduate and undergraduate students at this university. But further, after attending several Neo-Futurist classes and noticing that a different student cried every time, I began to understand it as an expression of not only individual but also a collective anxiety felt by this group of students. What emerged, based on student accounts in the feedback discussions afterward, was that the pedagogy was hitting on certain anxieties around identity performance at the university. The most prominent themes of distress were around demonstrating achievement and being good enough. It included identity concerns around status, likeability, belonging, and coping with the moments of exposure

in class of potential stigmas that could threaten these objectives, such as Emily's expressed discomfort after the chair test.

During the post chair test discussion we collectively analyze what we've just experienced. Greg listens and probes at each student's attempt, apparently looking for whatever it is that was keeping someone from being "real": he asked things like (paraphrasings mine), "so you, Sarah, have a laughing, smiley defense," while "you, Michael, have a cynical, hard shell." Greg uses his personal understanding of his own identity anxieties in his assessments. This includes assessing students' embodied emotional responses, facial expressions, gestures, and movements on stage.

This examination can itself feel unsettling and yet revealing not only to the individual on stage as it did for Emily but also to the audience participants. Some students found the critiques difficult to bear and would cry and mutter complaints to each other during class. In this way it appears that there's a "depantsing" of both the student on stage and the students off stage in the discomfort of having one's so-called defenses called out by a theatre teacher. A few students expressed not liking or relating to Greg and his approach, or finding him too harsh. Students' responses to the method and to Greg overall appeared to be mixed. Yet, the final work produced by these students demonstrated an aesthetic rigor in terms of effort and product. Even skeptical students like Paul clearly put thought into their pieces, which were quite complex in terms of structure and content. Greg's "harsh" yet realness-centered approach appeared to at times hit a nerve while simultaneously getting students to discuss openly and with freer emotional expression about uncomfortable subjects.

The imposed challenge and invitation of on-stage realness and the encouraged openness of feedback sessions appeared to facilitate greater face-ease in that students did share out their

pain in a much more expressive way than in other public social contexts, even if this also meant expressing their frustration with the class or the teacher. Another crying episode occurred when Greg voiced his observation of the fixed facial expression of Lindsey during another exercise. During the feedback session, Lindsey cried angrily in front of the class and openly expressed the frustration and painful memories triggered by his comment. She shared with us the narrative about how she had suffered facial paralysis years ago and that it had been a long and arduous process rehabilitating her facial muscles. Everyone including the teacher listened quietly and sympathetically. A few students expressed their support aloud. This support of each other was common, many of the students were friends and this facilitated students' sense of being able to share openly and the shared acceptance objectives such as authenticity, non-judgment, and communion.

The rules of engagement encouraged students to share their personal histories as well as their so-called real emotions with the class which often meant "hot emotions" (Stearns, 1994), the ones that are typically expected to be restrained in public spaces in America. Thus even though Lindsey appeared quite hurt, the chance to voice her feelings seemed important—it meant that Greg had to listen and had depantsed himself as well in that her experience was what mattered at least as much as his. It's understandable why a student like Paul would be a skeptic of this approach of openly crying and describing your life history—is that behavior real or made to please your teacher? The potential of this practice (and all the practices I observed) to be a helpful one is in part contingent upon having a sense of comfort with and trust in the teacher.

I suggest that the tears and discomfort reveal not only students' fixations with audience approval, and a welcome relief from emotional work and face-work, but also their anxieties about audience approval particularly in a practice that declares that they are already interesting

enough to be the main event. They simply have to reveal their "real" selves to the audience. It turns out that the environment of this particular university, which boasts a highly selective acceptance rate and presents itself as a place for exceptional and idiosyncratic individuals, being interesting is not experienced as simply being yourself but as self-image actualization pressure. As Lindsey, explains:

> I find it important to be interesting because everyone is interesting … fascinating, even, and everyone is fascinated, so if people are both fascinating and fascinated, then I feel the pressure to be worthy of someone's company, attention, and fascination. It's an exhausting pressure. It's hard to keep up, so, unconsciously, I have been trying to be interesting since I got [to EQU]. It is important to me to be impressive as well. It's important to all of us to stand out in some way, and for me, being impressive means being special, having something to offer that your average person does not -- which is why we are impressed. (Lindsey Interview 2015)

Neo-Futurism thus presents an uncomfortable paradox for students: they are to be interesting, but without augmenting who they are. In one performance, Emily, the student who cried as a result of the chair test, sits on the floor before us in a ballet split with a plastic bag of mini carrots in front of her. At another point, Emily shared about the pressure of her early ballet training, her perfectionism, and her ambitious academic strivings with the class. She was very precise with both her ballet split and the placing of the carrot tops, as if it was part of a formal, deliberate movement perhaps intended to signal a notion of perfectionism. She announces the title of the piece: "Sometimes I give fucks and sometimes I don't," perhaps signifying her coolness or an attempt at it in this announced ambivalence of care; maybe the approval of the audience isn't everything? She takes out the carrots and bites off the ends one-by-one. As she audibly chews each carrot end, she arranges the decapitated carrots in a formation on the floor. At one point, when the carrots start to form a shape she announces, "I'm making the Fibonacci triangle for you guys." This elicits laughter in an otherwise quietly watching audience of students.

In the last portion of her piece, Emily admits that she only eats the ends of carrots and that she mentioned the Fibonacci triangle to hide that she never eats the tops. “And I always hide the evidence,” she announces, and takes the bitten off tops and demonstratively throws them out the open window. Here Emily stages an attention-grabbing, quirky, and unexpected personal characteristic presented as theatre, but beyond this an unveiling of a personal secret in her impression management, in which the audience members are brought in as silent accomplices: “I always hide the evidence.” The teacher gives what seems to be a positive critique in that since it’s about Emily and her everyday life presented to us, it seems to pass the realness test and simultaneously the performance is interesting.

The above evaluation of Emily’s piece as “interesting” by Neo-Futurist standards seems to make sense. It fits all the criteria: Emily is able to keep our attention by staying present and arguably the real-time engagement of perezhivania should be easier to achieve in Neo-Futurism because the character you are performing is yourself. She also succeeds in effacing her goal of audience approval by being interested in eating carrots. There is even a fascinating exposure of her audience approval desire (and she demonstrates her process of taking up the pedagogy by talking about her practices of hiding something about herself openly) with the spectacle and joke around the “Fibonacci” triangle with the carrot ends and then their dramatic defenestration. In terms of the sociolinguistics of identity performance, Emily’s piece can be interpreted as a kind of exposure of American identity erasure (Gal, 2005) or passing (O’Brien, 2011) practices as they relate to identity distress: By commenting on hiding “the evidence” Emily is commenting on the evidence of her practices of hiding aspects of herself that may result in negative social judgment and possibly failure and thereby on her lack of self-confidence and openness in everyday life as well which could be negatively judged.

Yet the carrot performance seems a little safe, an admitted exercise in audience distraction. When Emily did her second attempt at the chair test earlier on, Greg had responded with: "You looked like we were gonna attack you." Tears began to stream down her face and she lamented, "I was trying to check in more with myself...I don't know how to be me on stage without projecting things that I do ... I'm trying not to pursue being interesting." Greg responded, "Have faith that you are [interesting]. Unadorned people are more interesting than any performer ... For a lot of people being yourself on stage is the hardest thing to do."

There's a tension in Emily's carrot performance, she attempts to be her real self on stage by revealing what she is hiding or that she is hiding. The reveal of the point of the Fibonacci Triangle statement shows her pursuit of being interesting in answer to her ambivalent title that apparently hopes for the "not giving of any fucks." Indeed, it's a confusing challenge that she is presented with. Greg seems to believe that all students are interesting enough, and he chooses to teach in an extremely elite individuality-rewarding environment where students have already been pre-selected for their originality, for their extraordinariness, and yet he puts them under pressure to one-up each other in this domain.

In my own preparation for these performances, while being myself was not necessarily effortful in front of an audience, this was only because of careful planning: I wrote a script, included props, scenic elements, and had carefully blocked my movements. My emotional display on stage was indeed "real" and "genuine." I had written a poem that referred to the passing of my grandmother, and reading it aloud moved me to tears not because I wanted to impress the audience, but because of the real-time emergence of my own feelings and memories in relation to my grandmother. I experienced the audience grieving with me; the collective effervescence was quite powerful and even cathartic, as ideal instances of playback theatre

(Barak, 2013) are intended to be. In this instance Neo-Futurism shared these qualities.[88] Greg deemed this piece a success and it was included in the final performance.

A successful Neo-Futurist performance, at least one based in autobiography, requires a rigorous amount of effort, planning, and a willingness to self-examine. From this self-examination one then cultivates a theatrical performance. Once all these elements are sufficiently rehearsed and in place, then one can drop social face and fully, effortlessly engage as oneself on stage with an openness to surprise and serendipity. I discovered that my emotion (both as a felt experience and in terms of crying) was less strong with each performance and this clarified why Neo-Futurist pieces are only performed a few times: their emotional resonance is only impactful for the audience as long as they are personally impactful and emotionally resonant in real time, rather than imagined time, for the performers.

Conclusion

In the Neo-Futurist context, the face-work towards being interesting in the competitive university environment is in tension with the face-work towards being interesting on the Neo-Futurist stage. This tension is evident in the students' severe emotional reactions to receiving critique for performances that hinge on their identity survival in everyday life. They are instructed by the teacher that it should be as simple as being themselves when their everyday reality is a constant, endless project of augmenting their "interesting" value. The Neo-Futurists present an iteration of the American anxiety to keep others engaged and to be perceived as

[88] Though Greg Allen created it to cope with his own stage fright, Neo-Futurism is not an officially therapeutic practice as playback theatre is. I took a course in playback theatre and narrative therapy with Adi Barak aimed at social work students in order to understand how explicitly therapy-oriented theatre pedagogy might differ from performance-oriented pedagogy. Neo-Futurism is primarily an artistic practice aimed at engaging a live audience. In this instance, the opportunity to revise or reclaim a painful narrative in front of a supportive audience (the aim of playback theatre) aligned with what ended up being a good performance piece by Neo-Futurist standards. This issue is complex in practice and rarely a perfect dichotomy, however, in that playback theatre can be used to create artistic performances that have social work components, such as the live performances Adi created in 2014 with prison in-mates re-entering society which I got to witness as an audience member. Cf. Barak and Stebbins (2017).

worthwhile human beings who are succeeding. There are contradictory social pressures at play: to be extraordinary and captivating while appearing effortless. It's clearly both incredibly challenging as a practice and yet far less complicated to deconstruct analytically than one might suspect. Which raises the question: who might this performance practice aid in a therapeutically transformative way? In the following section, I examine a case study of exactly the kind of individual for whom this kind of pedagogy and practice can work therapeutically: one who is already constantly negotiating the legitimacy of their identity experiences and expressions in everyday life.

The Case of Kay: Everyday Trans Identity Strategist

Introduction

Kay is a white, transgender college student at Elite Quirky University (aged 20 and 21 years old during our succession of interviews) who presents an exemplary case for the study of Neo-Futurism and everyday life interactions and the management of authenticity and identity distress. Kay expands the Neo-Futurist practice and honesty-oriented techniques from other acting classes into a more capacious version of what their[89] identity can be. I witnessed that it was typical in professional Chicago and New York Neo-Futurist performances to feature performers who used the practice and theatre community as a platform to be open with audiences about their identity experiences. These were often the identity experiences of women, LGBTQ+, minorities, and anyone who had lived a marginalized and/or stigmatized experience. Historically, this LGBTQ+ focus links back to two of the founders of Neo-Futurism, Dave Awl and Ted Bales, the two first homosexual members of the ensemble in 1989. They had a big impact on the

[89] Throughout this chapter I am using Kay's preferred singular third-person pronoun set: *they*, *them*, *their*. By current convention, the associated verb is in the plural: *they are* (compare with singular *you* with plural verb: *you are*). See *Chicago Manual of Style*, 2017, Sections 5.48, 5.256.

company during a time when Greg Allen was away. “Their impact helped organize the Neo-Futurists into marching in Chicago’s Gay Pride Parade and more importantly, beginning their annual LGBTQ show in June, TML Pride: ‘Thirty Queer Plays in Sixty Straight Minutes’ (Glenn, 2014, p. 35).

Kay is an ideal case to focus on because they are articulate regarding their dramaturgical reimaginings and representative of the type of performers who seem to gain the most from Neo-Futurism-like practices in terms of their own identities. Susan Stryker states about performativity, “A woman, performatively speaking, is one who says she is—and who then does what woman means” (Stryker, 2006, p. 10). Performativity around identity is therefore necessarily problematized through gender as gender in modern American society (and traditionally in Western societies) is interpreted through a binary. Thus, these issues can become even more complicated to convey when one’s identity, like Kay’s, doesn’t fit neatly into the man vs woman, he vs. she categories:

> ...much of the gender discourse within Western society seems to be centred on the experiences of men, women, *trans-men* and *trans-women*. There appears to be less attention given to the non-binary experience...the non-binary gender community within the Western world are believed to be at a greater risk of poor mental health outcomes in comparison to the binary transgender community as a result of the higher levels of discrimination they can experience. (Losty and O’Connor, 2017 p. 41-2 citing James et al., 2016; Budge et al., 2014)

The problematic gender binary is one that Kay constantly has to contend with. They disidentify with being confined to a binary, as Queer Studies Scholar, Jose Muñoz explains:

> Disidentification is a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology…It is a reformatting of self within the social, a third term that resists the binary of identification and counter-identification” (Muñoz, 1997, p.83).

Instead of counter-identifying as the opposite sex, there are many transgender individuals who fall within other categories such as gender fluid, genderqueer, or non-binary and this can be

even more risky, distressing, and complicated to explain and have recognized than a binary transgender identity (Losty and O'Conner, 2017). Kay is often in exhausting and at times distressing situations of having to explain their fluidity. In the following excerpt, they attempt to answer the questions of a French friend in Berlin during their study abroad program. They answer in English with an awareness of the more rigid set of linguistic, gendered categories in languages like German and French:

> She was like 'Can I ask you something?...Do you feel more like a boy or like a girl?' And I was like 'oh god, this is such a complicated issue.' And it was like 'how can I explain this to you in a really compact way in five minutes…I was like 'you know, gender is more than just men or women and it's like really complicated. For me it's like a mix of like a lot of different things...And I think she was kinda getting it but also kinda not getting it. And she was like, so like '*he* or like *she* which is the better one?' And I tried to like I had to like explain like singular 'they.'

Singular "they, them, their" are Kay's pronouns of choice and luckily for them, these pronouns are recognized in what they now realize is the comfortable "bubble" as they describe it of their specific university environment. Kay mostly fits into what Losty and Connor discovered about their non-binary transgender interviewees regarding misgendering which they describe as "…any incident in which the participants were perceived as a gender other than a non-binary gender" (Losty and O'Connor, 2017, p. 50). Thus being in more rigidly gendered contexts is inherently difficult for them.

As far as Kay's identity distress process, the threatened identity objective in this case is to be accepted and recognized as gender fluid, which is integral to Kay's sense of authenticity. Kay's continued exploration of theatrical experiences and trainings since Neo-Futurism which Kay identifies as an important pivot point in their understanding in that they were encouraged to be their real self rather than fitting into a performative

construct or a ready-made character[90]. Neo-Futurism was arguably a kind of alternative therapy for Kay and is part of their process of identity exploration and of acquiring new coping and face-easing strategies. These new coping strategies for misgendering distress include dramaturgical reimagining around how to respond to being misgendered. While Kay is more feminine than masculine-identifying when it comes to contending with the binary, they express being most comfortable not having to choose between the two and being able to fluidly inhabit aspects of multiple categories at will.

Beyond Berman:
Contemporary Identity-Related Distress Explored Qualitatively

As with all my case study participants, the methods used with Kay involved a combination of participant observation during the class and in-depth interviews upon its completion. Two interviews were recorded, spaced one year apart: one right after the completion of the course and the other a year later. During one of our interviews, Kay filled out a modified version of Berman's survey. They also responded to a set of an open-ended set of questions of my design. The content of their distress only became clear in the open-ended questions as was the case with all my interviews.

I include the open-ended question as filled out by Kay here as an example. The open-ended question asked the participant to "describe, in a few sentences or more, the issues, events, concerns, etc. that you have been distressed or worried about during the past 6-12 months." Without this additional descriptive material, the Likert scale was inscrutable for understanding the content of an individual's identity distress.

In response to the above question, Kay wrote:

[90] This exploration includes Neo-Futurism, the "black box" acting class they took after it, and the experiences they continue to gain where they get to try out performing different identities in theatre and film.

> In the past 6-12 months I have been mostly worried about how I fit into society and my culture's given gender. I'm never 100% sure 1. How I identify in terms of gender, and 2. How that affects my place in groups. I have worried a lot about people respecting my gender identity. Additionally, I have been worried about my career and finding jobs.

The last sentence of Kay's response alludes to the typically expected "career" anxiety, which Berman anticipates in his scale, but the full complexity of Kay's identity anxieties are not captured by the measure. A few significant dimensions and sub-themes that are not captured include Kay's anxieties about authenticity, social belonging, and a potentially stigmatized gender category as it pertains to these – "mis-gendering anxiety" is another way to characterize this.

Berman's scale is lacking in several ways. In part, the scale is simply outdated. For example, the sub-scale about sexuality does not capture the range of contemporary gender identity concerns. More crucially, it is simply not multidimensional enough to capture the dynamic interplay of various ongoing anxieties – here gender and career. And finally, it does not encompass anxiety about everyday interactions themselves and the face-work they involve. Berman's constructs imply, as previously described in Chapter 3, a simple cumulative identity model (Thoits, 1983) without internal complexity or attention to interactional activities. With the aim of capturing some of the complex dynamics of identity as an interactive process, the following sections unpack Kay's identity distress themes, events, and experiences ethnographically.

An Ideal Neo-Futurist?

Kay, a self-identified trans individual open about their experiences and alternative identity development process, stood out as an exemplary Neo-Futurist. The impact of their autobiographical as well as sociocultural and political subject matter and performance pieces was resonant and immediate as was the importance of the practice and pedagogy for Kay's identity distress. As an example, one of Kay's workshop pieces drew on another popular American

genre: that of the American high school dance. They did this primarily by using the classroom to create the ambience: they turned off the lights, lit a candle, and put on the kind of upbeat yet romantic dance music of the type that gets played at American high school homecoming dances and proms.

As an audience-participant in this piece and as someone who attended an American public high school, I was immediately transported back into the awkwardness of high school dances as were the others[91] who demonstrated many of the relevant behaviors from dancing to being a wallflower that one might expect at a formal high school dance. The dim lighting, music, and huddled group of uncertain young people turned out to be the key ingredients to conjure memories, past behaviors, and old feelings towards this event type. The pressure to find a date or dance partner, or to be picked, was palpable as we inched towards each other, encouraged by the ambience, the music, Kay who was already dancing, and those who dared to get closer and to start dancing themselves. Within a few minutes, lots of people started dancing together enthusiastically. Those who were already friends with each other outside of class were at an advantage in that their pre-established relationships created an easy foundation for this kind of socializing exercise and thus several smaller groups or high school-like cliques as well as duos began to form. Kay swayed to the music and watched everyone until Paul approached Kay and danced with them. This marked the end of the piece and afterwards Kay explained that this was the ending they were waiting for.

According to Greg the piece was "selfish", and so Greg criticized Kay for this. This is the tension in a potentially therapeutic yet performance-oriented practice like Neo-Futurism: it can offer a therapeutic component that the teacher may interpret as selfish rather than audience-

[91] As with all the student pieces, there was a group feedback session after and students did report connecting personally with the recognizable setup and genre of the piece.

oriented, and yet the way in which Kay took up the practice was helpful in their identity development; though perhaps Greg wished for the healing to be more shared, creating a group-oriented objective or less rigid in what the outcome needed to be, allowing for more audience-participation. It's possible that the piece could be expanded in some way for greater audience impact but nevertheless for the student audience members including myself, the familiar high school dance genre and the affect and memory associated with it were palpable to all those who had shared in this kind of coming-of-age social event; thus, based on my own experience and the enthusiasm of engagement, and the feedback session, the students were not necessarily in agreement with Greg's criticism. It was also culturally significant that Paul chose Kay, as this disrupted the traditional, heteronormative narrative of the American prom. In its invocation of a familiar genre that immediately blurred the theatre vs. reality line, along with its unpredictability, interactivity, as well its sociopolitical import, the piece was very effective by Neo-Futurist standards.

"Every day I have to make a choice between authenticity and safety…" declares transgender performer, activist, and author ALOK on the podcast of transgender celebrity Laverne Cox wherein activism is understood as speaking and acting in accordance with one's non-conformist, radical truth in front of a public. "We fear that if we don't conform then we'll be abandoned but there is no loneliness like having people see you after you've erased yourself," (Cox, 2021, un-paginated) ALOK concludes. Like for other non-binary and transgender individuals who turn to the performing arts for healing through authentic self-expression, (several of whom I've seen in Neo-Futurist shows) Kay's healing and version of therapeutic personhood is public and the witnesses to their honest self-expression are a large audience. Being able to express unique and non-standard identities within the traditional hetero and cis-normative

framework of prom is a kind of fraught, culturally revolutionary act, and is representative of what Kay strives for in their life. In order to push past the mis-gendering that they experience on a regular basis, they often have to instigate changes in others' behaviors. In the case of their prom piece, there was no need to worry about erasing themselves by "fitting in" as they would have to in high school (Crosnoe, 2011), rather the social milieu signified by the transformed classroom space at that moment created a society where Kay already was normal. There was no need to seek belonging within a smaller niche[92]. We all found ourselves inside a new world, orchestrated by Kay. It was not only on display for us, but we were willing, validating participants and witnesses.

This example demonstrates another instance in which the Neo-Futurist framework was taken up in a manner similar to narrative therapy and playback theatre (Barak, 2013): a therapeutic re-experiencing of past events and emotions that allows an individual to rewrite their own narrative, albeit in this instance with a more political purpose as well. Kay had never had a prom experience and one that was on their own terms. The effect was potentially not only therapeutic but also politically impactful, simultaneously invoking the genre of Fluxus and Happenings, as the event was "happening" in real time. Kay got to occupy the fluid gender identity they feel comfortable with without being questioned or misgendered by a group at a Prom-like gathering and finally in being asked to dance by a cisgender man. I imagine that the piece would have still had a powerful impact if Kay had been asked to dance by a cis-woman as well, but as white heterosexual cis-men often occupy the category of oppressor (e.g., the #metoo movement), to be asked by Paul was powerful as a revisioning of stigmatized identities and behavioral norms.

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[92] Though technically this Neo-Futurist class and its many performance studies majors shared characteristics with "the drama kids" clique one often finds in American high schools. (Crosnoe, 2011).

Why Wouldn't I Want to Go by Kevin?

In my one-on-one interviews with Kay, we were able to examine these themes of identity narrative revision (through theatre as therapy or otherwise) on a deeper level. "Have you ever seen a therapist? We haven't talked about this before..." I ask Kay, and there isn't much hesitation on their part. "Yes. On and off for the past few years. And at one point when I was a kid." So we delve into it, why therapy at those times, and did it help? Kay's declared identity hinges on the singular pronoun "they" and a sense of comfort in not having to choose between genders, at least in "the bubble" of their university environment where liminal categories for gender can readily exist. To Kay, occupying this identity is their sincerest performance in Goffmanian terms (Goffman, 1959). This position of not wishing to identify or be identified with a gender binary is typical of the identity development processes of many self-identified genderqueer, non-binary, and transgender youth and adapting to this issue is at the forefront of much contemporary American campus, workplace, as well as health reform research and activism (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012; Dietert & Dentice, 2009; Seelman, 2014; Winter et al., 2016).

Kay explains that in many of their identity experiences in everyday contexts outside the Neo-Futurist classroom, they do not get to feel this sense of sincerity. For instance, when Kay left their comfortable university community and went to Germany for study abroad their senior year, they had to settle temporarily for being understood as a gay "he." Kay didn't feel that there was a suitable German pronoun equivalent to the gender pronoun "they"[93] which Kay prefers in

[93] The options in German being "er," "sie," and "es," or he, she, and it – none of these gender identities aligned closely enough for Kay with the gender fluid "they" and thus they settled for a homosexual, "er." German is a more highly binary and gendered language than English and therefore gender fluid individuals in Germany have struggled to have their identity reflected in the language in a way that feels authentic. Although it's easy to think that pronouns like "sie" could be used because it means "they," it means "they" in third person plural rather than singular, and is considered unusable by members of the LGBTQ who identify as gender non-binary. "'It is very difficult to find a gender-neutral way of saying anything in German, and that means I don't fit in anywhere, because I don't fit in with the male version, and I don't fit in with the female version,' says Jamie Pax Abad, a Berlin-

English. Further, “trans” is not an identity category that gets regularly recognized or understood in public spaces in Germany.

> My teacher took me aside when we were at a museum for a field trip to ask why wasn’t I using my government name, when it was such a nice name. They just couldn’t get it. Why wouldn’t I want to go by Kevin?

Kay’s external display of identity in markers like first name, pronouns, clothing choice, hair style, etc. is a carefully considered signaling of liminality and ambiguity. For Kay this typically means long hair partially pulled back, clean shaven, gender neutral pants and shirt which signal androgyny. They describe themselves aesthetically as “butch femme”[94] a non-binary, balanced mix of masculine-feminine fluidity:

> I was thinking that the way my presentation works, um, the way I worded it to a friend was “butch femme” where butch is the adjective and femme is the gender. So I feel like my presentation is pretty, butch but like my personality but like you know my identity is more on the femme side of things. I don’t know. I watched this Danish tv show while I was abroad called “Rita” it’s about this school teacher, she’s like this rebel school teacher. She’s like the bad kid at school who then goes on to be the teacher that like some kids hate. But there’s like three kids that are like really about her. And she just…Every episode it was..She wore like skinny jeans and like long-sleeved t-shirt and like a flannel shirt over it, her hair just like down. She just like smokes her cigarettes at the school door. You know she just like doesn’t give a shit, you know. It was like this nice balance. It seemed like really ideal.

Kay identifies most with their grandmother, whose elegance they emulate. They have a strong bond with their mother who divorced their father when Kay was 7 years old. Kay and their mother moved around quite a bit after the divorce. They tell me that there was a lack of stability (both financial and geographic) and sense of a home of one’s own for a long time; and from this I began to get the impression that Kay has learned to cope and adapt to uncertain and

based philosopher and non-binary trans-person” (Ramani, 2018). Attempts by the government to remedy this include a new law passed in 2018 that allows for a third, “intersex” or “diverse” gender category and debates and reform in relation to the reflection of transsexual identity in official documentation and language continue.

[94] A term initially used for the lesbian identity continuum that is now part of the transgender identification spectrum as well (Stryker, 2017).

not entirely welcoming circumstances from early on. The gender fluid and at times the gender feminine is Kay's self-described place of comfort and identification, the key though, is not having to settle for a binary. Based on their narrative of distressing events, when their self-described identity category is denied by interlocuters and mis-gendering occurs is when their identity distress is at its peak.

From Kevin to Kay

Beyond the constantly changing external environment of their childhood, Kay explains that they did feel different internally since childhood and that something about the way they were expected to exist in society was not quite right. Kay was always more comfortable and identified more with girls than boys, and early on felt what they describe as an obsession with their name (suggesting an early drive towards authenticity) and how they might change it:

> I remember as a kid always being like, oh like "a different name would be cool." And I was like always like obsessed with…I would like sign my name on a piece of paper, and keep doing it and keep doing it and keep doing it and doing it and doing and doing it and changing it and like putting like different options and like switching out different names, like to see. And I was like really obsessed with like signatures, and like handwriting, and names. For a long time. I'd spend like an hour signing my name like over and over again. Just like to see what to see what it looked like, you know?

As evident from their narrative, the journey towards finding an identity and a name that they were comfortable with hasn't been easy and it is ongoing; notably as in their experimentation with signatures, it involved a constant "obsessive" focus and devotion to experimentation and transformation. Kay reports that the last time they remember doing it was when they were studying abroad, which is understandable, given that not everyone was understanding about their new name there. Notably, the obsessive return to the signature, and the repetition of it signifies an anxious focus, as if the act of return – though playful and imaginative, will somehow make it so.

Kay's desire to change their name to something that felt more authentic to them became conscious in their ability to discuss it in college as something that they could have agency over (Giddens, 1994). This was due to a LGBTQ+ positive community and most importantly, a role model who led the way. Kay's Resident Assistant (RA) in the university's housing system also identified as gender fluid, had changed their name a year ago, and was someone that Kay described feeling like they could always go to for advice and support. Their RA presented Kay with a path towards doing what they had always desired and encouraged them to "try out" a new name. For now, the gender neutral name of "Kay" felt a little like a placeholder to them but one that was far more comfortable and authentic than their birth name of "Kevin" could ever be. While they've made progress with their identity challenges, it is an ongoing battle because the external world is not always supportive of their overall gender, pronoun, and name presentations. The following section will unpack the themes of Kay's identity distress and coming of age narrative, which is dominated by overcoming distress around mis-gendering overall—with name presentations recurring as an important sub-theme.

Trans Identity: A Relevant Site of Authenticity Distress

Introduction: Adornment and Inauthenticity

One of Neo-Futurism's primary principles is the elimination of "adornment", which I will gloss here as pretense. Striving towards "realness" or authenticity on stage in order to eliminate adornment offers a potentially fruitful context and platform for someone who struggles with getting to feel and be authentically themselves in their typical everyday life contexts and for whom these contexts demand and are experienced as continual pretense and false adornment. As philosopher Lauren Bialystok explains in her 2013 article "Inauthenticity and Trans Identity," "Inauthenticity is a disregard for, or violation of, some inner truth, which does not necessarily

manifest itself as inconsistency to others" (Bialystok, 2013, p. 125). The following section unpacks this authenticity theme as it is relevant for Kay's identity distress as a trans-identifying individual.

The criteria for authenticity pinpointed by Bialystok include an essentialist structure and set of properties that instantiate a "true self," the identity revealed should identify the individual over a protracted period of time, there should be some different content that we understand as "inauthenticity," and finally, authenticity should be juxtaposed with conformity, by understanding how authenticity applies to a particular person we should understand the value for this person, of inhabiting this condition (Bialystok, 2013). Based on Kay's narrative, they indeed appear to fit all of these criteria.

Being Misgendered: The Pain of Inauthenticity in Contemporary America

In contextualizing philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's famous maxim, "Hell is other people," Trilling (1944) argues it to be the infernal experience of inauthenticity:

> …the infernal outcome of the modern social existence as Rousseau described and deplored it, in which the sentiment of individual being depends upon other people. All other people, the whole community up and down the scale of sentience and of cultural development, make the Hell of recognized and experienced inauthenticity. (Trilling, 1972, p. 102)[95]

Misgendering is a contemporary version of the Hell of Inauthenticity. With misgendering, there is a sense of knowing your authentic identity yet what is experienced as ultimate knowing is in pained contrast with the need to have this truth seen and recognized.

> If people misgender me it's uncomfortable. My heart feels like it's bound tight, I feel frozen. My stomach feels hollow.

Kay's experiences of misgendering have happened and continue to happen fairly often in various contexts. Whether it's "deadnaming," or "calling a trans person by their birth name after they

[95] Cf. Rousseau (1755, 1758, 1782) and Sartre (1944).

have adopted a new name" (Sinclair-Palm, 2017) as occurs repeatedly by various older co-workers at their job or as occurred on numerous occasions during their time in Germany, or being called the wrong pronoun, or being addressed in the wrong way, which occurs persistently at work and in other contexts as well, misgendering is described by Kay as "annoying" on a good day.

> I guess my biggest thing is, customers are gonna do it, because customers are just doing what they think they're supposed to do…But like my big complaint to my boss was these other people they're paid to be here and so am I. If I respect them, they should respect me too, like. There should be a mutual, you know. And I was saying to her that it's like really upsetting because there's no system in place to allow for like gender variance…There's like *nothing* in our materials or our procedures to like talk about it, at all…So like there's this like front desk lady, Amy and she's like really great and really nice and really lovely. But she like *always* calls me *sir* and I'm like every time she does it, do you think that like Kay is like a specifically *masculine name*? Like I don't, get it. (Kay Interview 2016)

On a day when the stresses of persistent misgendering are compounded by the stresses of actualization, achievement, and having enough time to do their work, they experience a double, compounded source of distress.

> Like I'm just worried about way too much all at once and like I'll um yeah it's very much an inability to focus or physically feeling like I have to like keep moving. Like I'll notice I'll like leave work and be really like hopped up and then I'll like walk into a meeting and be like, "this meeting is very chill. I don't need to be like freaking out." (Interview 2015 Kay).

While some of Kay's symptoms fit within those of panic and anxiety disorders, identified cross-culturally (Hinton & Good, 2009), the focus of distress is more specifically around an identity that feels false and in all contexts, whereas explicitly theatrical or not, whether the characters are make-believe or not, Kay is equally vulnerable to feeling distress around inauthenticity or in Bialystok's description towards, "living a pretense."

> …the feeling of being unrecognized, miscategorized, living a pretense, lacking genuine peers and other forms of dissatisfaction. One piece of evidence for the [psychological] intolerability of being an 'inauthentic' trans person is the high rate of suicide among trans people. (Bialystok, 2013, p. 130)

For Kay, identity distress that is misgendering-based can occur both on and off stage. Stereotypical male roles in theatre are uncomfortable and anxiety-inducing to Kay as is the experience of being misgendered in everyday life.

A trans identity distress narrative provides a particularly interesting and relevant case study for understanding authenticity and identity-related distress in contemporary America. While individuals from a variety of backgrounds can experience a sense of (in)authenticity-themed identity distress, Bialystok argues that trans identity is perhaps the only kind of identity that meets all of Bialystok's criteria for authenticity in terms of what it means to inhabit a true, authentic self. As pointed out by Bialystok and confirmed by recent mental health and suicide statistics (Bialystok, 2013; Oswalt & Lederer, 2017), a sense of inauthenticity among trans people in particular is a crisis area that warrants urgent examination.

Theatre: An Ideal Support System for Trans Identity Development

Kay arguably presents an example of a kind of best-case scenario that demonstrates how a trans individual may be best supported in their identity and social development in a university environment. In their Resident Assistant, Kay had a role model for their transformation process and further someone who validated and understood Kay's experience. In this way, Kay was much luckier than many trans emerging adults in American universities who do not have this kind of support system (McKinney, 2005; Pryor et al. 2016). Kay, for one, being at a very progressive liberal arts institution, is in part successfully coping with their non-standard gender identity, because as they described it, and as I was able to observe during class and interviews with other progressive students, they are part of a supportive community of peers. Likewise, Kay's theatre community not only provides dramaturgical tools and metaphors but also a

supportive community in which to utilize and practice them. We examine their theatre community next.

Theatre as Community, Theatre as Understanding

Kay was able to carve out a new name and with it a fulfilling existence within a theatre community that recognizes them authentically and fully. This striving towards belonging and acceptance in the theatre context and the eustress associated with it is important because in other contexts Kay experiences distress when not surrounded by a supportive community and encounters those who do not understand and support their identity choices. As is evident from the existing literature on the alarming mental illness and suicide statistics on trans individuals, in which transgender students have been found to have approximately twice the risk for most mental health conditions compared to cisgender female students, and about seven times the risk for schizophrenia (Oswalt & Lederer, 2017), successful self-identification and emergence is not something everyone who is gender fluid is able to achieve (Bialystok 2013). But some are able find a way to exist that appears to be less negatively stressful and more "comfortable," although everyone, including Kay, experiences roadblocks along the way.

Since their adolescence, Kay has experienced theatre as a community where people are used to seeing different kinds of identities and a space where it was easier to be more authentic. Growing up in the South, the most they found themselves able to push past gender norms was to present as a more feminized male. Kay's mom had always been creative and encouraging and theatre became a natural home. The inclusivity of theatre rehearsals and stages allowed for conditions of greater face-ease and communion. Kay continued their involvement in theatre at Elite Quirky University and as they describe, the sense of belonging and communion was palpable from their narratives:

> Right at the end of Hamlet. There was this nice thing going where we were all friends in the cast. And we were all friends with all of the rehearsal room…everyone's having champagne, it's just really nice.

Participating in the theatre community in both high school and college has been key to Kay's identity development and a sense of empowerment and agency. They are not only validated in their identity choices by their theatre peers and mentors, but they have passed on this validation to others experiencing a similar kind of identity distress:

> …the assistant stage manager friend, he was saying to me, we were like smoking in an alley behind the apartment and they were just telling me that they really admired that I like just like went ahead and just like started going by a different name. And they like opened up to me about how they've been really anxious about it, they wanted to do that too. And then I was like "ok, well if you're anxious about it and you're thinking about it all the time you should probably just do it." And they were like "oh, I don't know, it's [I'm] like really nervous." And I like gave them the advice that my like theatre person from high school gave me, "It's just like fuck it, it's like just do it!" You know. And so we like marched them inside (laughs) and we were like, "this is how it's gonna be," and it was like really great and everyone was happy and supporting them and loving them… and like as we trudged towards 5 o'clock, we talked about how much we enjoyed working with each other and how great it was to like act like alongside each other. And just crying and walking alongside the lake and getting breakfast. That was, like there it was. (Kay Interview 2016)

The passing on of "It's just like fuck it, it's like just do it!" around the act of name changing from Kay's theatre friend in high school to their own theatre peer in college creates a continued chain of social support and action. This chain of support is key to the survival and thriving of a societally controversial and stigmatized identity and it does so in a space where social belonging and social bonding is part of the ethos.

For Kay it appears that theatre has filled a psychosocial need in their identity development. As Kay explains, they always want to be in a show, and when they're not in one, they work on something backstage, like design work. Neo-Futurism provides both a site and set of enabling practices for Kay to continue to exert agency in a broader societal structure that can be harmful to them. It's particularly significant that it's a non-fictional form of theatre where

Kay "didn't have to play a character or their gender" (Interview 2016). Neo-Futurism allows for a visibility and self-expression that does not always have a place in American public contexts (whether in work, school, commercial establishments, etc.) where the lack of recognition and visibility in public spaces is a significant cause for distress.

The case of Kay illustrates how disenfranchised individuals, whether trans or in any other identity category that has not been fully accepted into the societal fabric, may find salve, whether psychological, social, or political, in Neo-Futurism as an autobiographical, non-fictional, interactive theatrical practice. The practice of "breaking the fourth wall", where there suddenly is no divide between performer and audience is particularly crucial in both a symbolic as well as real-time capacity because as in a Brechtian performance, a deeper engagement with the process is required. As will be evident in the following section, Kay can come across as a most adept everyday life performer.

Dramaturgical Attunement and Stigma Management

In order to cope with their identity challenges, based on their descriptions and my own observations, Kay appears to be at the epitome of a kind of dramaturgical attunement[96] by which I mean a skill that involves intelligently assessing and quickly adapting to the scripted as well as improvisational aspects of social interactions. This may include a variety of possible metaphors, pedagogies, and strategies in applying the performer's toolkit to everyday life challenges. As Kay explains, echoing emotional labor research (Hoshchild, 1983/2012; Lee et al., 2018; Lee and Madera, 2019), keeping a cheery exterior is key to maintaining customer rapport in service jobs, and they have learned to work these jobs as one works a theatre exercise: assess one's resources

[96] As I "assess" Kay's adaptiveness I hesitate because this invokes and takes for granted an actualization paradigm: ideas of identity capital are all about constant self-improvement in order to adapt to modern society (Côté, 1996). And yet, the way in which Kay applies their "performer's toolkit" in everyday life is very much done in this mode.

as well as those of one's scene partner and then choose how to play the scene accordingly. This dramaturgical attunement is also a fitting counterpart and prerequisite for "hyper-authenticity" as experienced by the/an audience: "where the authenticity of the subject is partly constructed through the gaze of the beholder" (Jestrovic, 2008). There must be an adaptive reconciling of the unexpected with the scripted or familiar. This is particularly fitting if we take for granted "that life has become stagecraft—a blending of reality and mass mediated experience that evokes life as a movie in which people play themselves" (Rose and Wood, 2005).

Through the lens of a kind of actualization paradigm, Kay may be understood as a quintessential version of what sociologist Anthony Giddens termed an "intelligent strategist" which Côté integrated into his identity adaptation model: "For Giddens, under conditions of late modernity it becomes important for the individual to develop 'agentic' capacities with which to construct reality and act in the world" (Côté, 2002, p.43). This intelligent strategist possesses a fitting set of "intangible" coping skills for dealing with their particular iteration of identity stresses both in micro-interactions as well as on a broader meaning making scale. Kay is somewhat similar (though even more reflexive in terms of their face-work as we will see next), to what we discovered in the case of Sandra (Chapter 3) as a self-aware and self-constructing actress on stage and in everyday life. "The self becomes a reflexive project" (Giddens, 1991, p. 32).

Kay's skillset as an intelligent strategist employing dramaturgical attunement in everyday life outside of theatre is particularly evident in their narratives around their barista job, which they have had for a few years. What is particularly striking is their vigilant awareness and application of back and front stage components, and metaphor in the management of front and face-work. In the following interview excerpt, Kay is constantly and animatedly turning away

from and towards me as audience to demonstrate their backstage and frontstage faces that they are able to skillfully manipulate and transform at their barista job:

> KAY: I guess I'm like really aware now that I put on, not always, but I'll put on like a nice smile (laughs) you know song and dance. Cuz you know we're really hungry for tips, you know. We get paid basically minimum wage so we always do the food service, service industry thing where you just try to milk customers for their money. With the regulars you get to know them after a while, so it's actually nice to be asking honestly how they're doing. And not like "how are you doing? Hopefully it's well enough to give me a tip." [in a nasally voice] (laughs) "I hope you're feeling giving today." Like. You know. And it's like nice.
>
> MARIANNA: To just ask and mean it and talk to them.
>
> KAY: Yeah. Cuz sometimes, they're real people on the other end of the counter, they say real things.
>
> MARIANNA: But sometimes does it not feel real?
>
> KAY: Yeah there are definitely times with customers where like I will physically be aware of the fact where I'm talking to them here and I'm talking to them like this [smiling] and I'm asking them their order and like putting it in the machine. And then I turn around and I look like this [expressionless], as I'm like making their latte. Can't be bothered.
>
> MARIANNA: (laughs) Completely different expression. And then a big smile like that. And then the smile disappears as you turn. Like a comedy-
>
> KAY: Yeah it's a lot! (laughs) And when I do it I'm like oooh ooooh [low voice] that's how I'm feelin' today, all right.
>
> MARIANNA: Like "stage on, stage off."

Here Kay is closer to the Goffmanian "cynical performer" (Goffman, 1967) but also through this instance goes beyond this categorization and demonstrates a contemporary and Neo-Futurist definition of "real:" this means displaying how you actually feel to people you want to have "an honest connection" with because you care about the relationship, not just the tips. Therefore, their sense of authenticity in relation to the interaction depends on how Kay feels about their interlocuter as a person, their interlocuter's understanding of Kay's gender identity,

and their own state of mind in that moment. Kay alternates describes a strategy akin to surface acting (Hoshchild 1983/2012) when they “put on” a facial expression. In the following excerpt, the strategy switches from surface acting to character work that is closer to perezhivania:

KAY: It’s like they can’t see me when I turn around so doesn’t matter.

MARIANNA: Interesting. So you kinda put on the big smile even if you don’t mean it.

KAY: Yeah. Not always but like.

MARIANNA: If you’re tired/

KAY: Yeah if I’m tired especially I’m like. Huh hey… [big sigh] Or it depends the degree to which I’m tired, like sometimes I let them see that I’m tired. Because that’s like easy. And also sometimes they feel bad that you’re tired.

MARIANNA: Do you get tips for that?

KAY: (laughs) Sometimes.

MARIANNA: They feel bad for you?

KAY: Yeah! Sometimes I think that’s what it is. I’ll be like. [makes a face] and they’ll have a whole list of things they want to buy and we have a new electronic machine that I just hate and don’t understand. Cuz we use to have the manual like and it’s like, you know it’s stuff you had to memorize, the prices and everything. But then you knew how much everything cost and it was fine. But this new machine, I’m like, I don’t. There’s like file folders, and it’s like all... I’ll just sit there and I’ll be like [huge long dramatic sigh]
And I’ll like talk to myself, like out loud and I’ll be like: “I don’t know where this is or how this works.” [helpless little voice] And they’ll be like “I’m so sorry.” [quiet pitying voice] And I’ll be like “I’m sorry I just don’t understand this machine, I’m trying my best.” [helpless little voice] (laughs) And it’s like, it’s really honest but it’s also a little performative. It’s like…

MARIANNA: You’re like the helpless little thing

KAY: Yeah the helpless barista who doesn’t know how electronics work. It’s like I’ll make you a latte and it’ll be great but I can’t ring you up cuz I just don’t know how to use technology. (laughs) S’like.

MARIANNA: Ok, that’s funny.

> K: (laughs) Yeah. It's weird cuz I feel like no matter whether I'm trying to be performative at the cafe or not, I'll leave aware of it. (Interview 2015 Kay)

As evident in the above excerpt, which Kay explains is representative of a typical workday, the character of "helpless barista" is not entirely an act. It's a mode that facilitates greater face-ease and they tend to utilize on days when their mind shuts down from too many worries. When it (the identity distress) gets unbearable to them, that's when Kay explains that they see a therapist, there is a sense of self-monitoring the distress for its extremes. Kay is fully aware of the acting metaphors that they apply in understanding how to manage emotion and face in the workplace.

The theatre-life separation appears to be tenuous for Kay. The maiden-in-distress archetype is one that they've adapted into their performance of "helpless barista," which from their description, appears to work well on the customers who read that role sympathetically. This understanding of how to use a relatable sympathetic character for certain customer-as-audience members is directly translated by Kay from Stanislavskian perezhivania (as described in Chapter 3 and used as a foundation in most American acting courses) as well as Neo-Futuristic realness from in front of a stage audience to the consumer audience that occurs in everyday American life particularly in the service industry. In this case, the goal is tips.

"Helpless barista" is also a role that aptly fits the anxiety they say they feel on days when they feel overwhelmed in their life. For Kay being overwhelmed means too many school and work obligations compounded by the stresses of being misgendered. Note that "helpless barista" has a stereotypically feminine gendered character folded in, which is part of what is face-easing for Kay about the role: it's closer to their truth. In its partial truth this character can be understood as a kind of disidentification from the barista role: "…disidentification works as an

interiorized passing. The interior pass is a disidentification and tactical misrecognition of self" (Muñoz, 1997, p. 90).

There is little escaping misgendering experiences and the anticipation of them for Kay. "I mean it's like I think about it [being misgendered] every single day. It's kind of anxiety-inducing all the time." (Kay 2016, Interview) The dress code, which they describe as "utilitarian," is a key part of what has them constantly feeling inauthentic at work. As described earlier, they typically have to pull their hair back and wear long pants and this means that often get read as masculine. As Wight (2011) suggests:

> Gender performance is far more than Goffman's (1977) idea of gender display; there is also a communicative reflexivity to performance. The communication of a gender or a gender identity involves not just a performance, but also a reception, understanding, or interpretation of the performance. (Wight, 2011, p.76)

Just as Kay strives for authentic self-expression, they simultaneously need their authenticity to be accepted as such: thus the hell of inauthenticity described by Trilling (1972). Kay's gender performance is a constant negotiation between their own gender expression needs and that of the normative culture in which they find themselves.

Dramaturgical attunement: Identity Capital or Survival Coping?

Kay's dramaturgical attunement, which can be seen as a form of identity capital of an "actualized" individual, may also readily be reinterpreted as survival-level coping. Kay has to some extent what Goffman (1963) might have called "a spoiled identity," that is, an identity category that is stigmatized and thus puts Kay at a disadvantage during social interactions. Thus, Kay is often forced into various stigma management strategies (O'Brien, 2011) of passing, as displayed through the helpless barista role which allows them to dramaturgically reimagine the restrictive clothing and hair appearance of their job and the way co-workers and customers mis-

gender them at times, or a combination of disavowal and passing, in that they conform to the heteronormative dress-code that they have to follow.

> … For like the cafe you can't wear open-toed shoes, you have to wear something like past your calf, so like pants, or like a long skirt or long dress is ok too. And your hair has to be tied back so it's like at work I end up like looking I guess pretty masculine cuz my hair is like pulled up cuz I'm in long pants and I'm in shoes… you have to move so it's better to just dress utilitarian a little bit. It bothers me because automatically I'm read as masculine at work. (Kay Interview 2016)

Kay's adept and easy pivoting while working is in tension with the psychological pain of being misgendered and the fear of recurrence. Kay employs face-easing practices in dealing with the pressure to achieve in their job and academic career. Their challenges and adversities compound because actualization of one's "interesting" value and image in a competitive environment is a separate pressure from having to cope with the challenges and traumas of marginalized identity. These compounding factors create a high vulnerability for becoming depressed and suffering from anxiety, panic, etc.

The sociocultural conflict that Kay is engaged in managing is further complicated by the fact that heteronormative, gender binary values in everyday American life are omnipresent (Butler, 1990; Wight, 2011) and as evidenced by events like the cancellation of numerous transgender rights and protections during the Trump presidency, in spite of an increase in activism for change in more liberal environments. In fact, "they" was the word of the year for Merriam-Webster in 2019:

> English famously lacks a gender-neutral singular pronoun to correspond neatly with singular pronouns like *everyone* or *someone*, and as a consequence *they* has been used for this purpose for over 600 years. More recently, though, *they* has also been used to refer to one person whose gender identity is nonbinary, a sense that is increasingly common in published, edited text, as well as social media and in daily personal interactions between English speakers. There's no doubt that its use is established in the English language, which is why it was added to the Merriam-Webster.com dictionary this past September. (*Merriam-Webster's Words of the Year 2019,* 2019)

When I ask about their day-to-day anxieties about the possibility of being misgendered on either side of the binary at work, Kay says, “It’s kind of anxiety-inducing all the time.” The binary understandings that they have to contend with, such as being called their government name or the pronoun “he” by older coworkers (an example of this is detailed in Kay’s letter towards the end of this chapter), tend to be essentialist and literalizing in their understanding of the relationship between biology and gender expression (Prosser, 2006; Fleming and Wade, 2017[97]). Kay’s declared identity is “gender fluid” – a move towards de-literalizing this relationship “between the cultural enforcement of categories of sex and gender and their more fluid lived experiences” (Wight 2011, p.74).

In Kay’s performativity during service work, there is also a negotiation between what gender performativity scholars Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2003) differentiate as self-face versus other-face,

> …with the former being a focus on self-image, and the latter being a focus on another’s image.… in performativity there can always be a focus or an acknowledgement of a gender performance being viewed and interpreted by another. In this acknowledgement, while performativity is about self-face in terms of gender identity expression, there can also be recognition of other-face in the performance. (Wight, 2011, p.78)

Self-face and other-face performativity for Kay means a negotiation between their striving towards authenticity and what is considered good customer service which relies on authentic emotional expression. This distinction is significant when it comes to the construction of the “helpless barista.” The contradictions are clear as are Kay’s efforts to find a reprieve in de-

[97] “Recently, numerous states have considered enacting transgender bathroom laws based on the individual’s biological sex” (Fleming and Wade, 2017, p. 1). Fleming and Wade argue for basing bathroom laws on gender identity rather than biological sex. This continues to be a hotly debated topic. On June 15, 2020 the US Supreme Court pushed back against the Trump administrations attempts to shut down all recognitions and rights of transgender individuals; it has been an ongoing battle. “ ‘What the court has done today — interpreting discrimination because of ‘sex’ to encompass discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity — is virtually certain to have far-reaching consequences,’ Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr. wrote in a dissenting opinion that specifically mentioned education and housing as examples” (Sanger-Katz and Green, 2020).

literalizing the way their more masculine clothing is being read through their more feminized and gender fluid, helpless barista performativity which matches their face-work fatigue and thus emerges as a face-easing, acceptance-oriented strategy, an “interiorized passing” (Muñoz, 1997). This interiorized passing pushes against the expectations of emotional cool, put-togetherness, and masculinity which can be an inauthentic burden to Kay.

Kay’s “helpless barista” character takes into account both self-face and other-face, and in that sense they continue to offer what is considered good customer service and consideration which is key to their service industry role, while mitigating (at least some) of the costs of inauthentic emotional labor and stigma management through a more feminized gender role that is somewhat closer to their true self, though it’s not unproblematic in that it complies with the gender binary stereotype of helplessness. Kay has crafted a sympathetic service industry character as part of their coping strategy: they can play the helpless barista with ease as it is recognizable to customers and is better adapted to their identity even if they still recognize that it is still partially “performative” in that it is an adapted emotional narrative and is still not a fully authentic version of them.

As further evidence of their dramaturgical attunement, Kay describes the nuances of managing different characters that they portray and switch between as needed in the workplace in a careful calibration with their audience response. As noted previously, the metaphor of a character with an objective in a particular scene is literalized by Kay in their barista work. There’s a use of theatrical technique in the management of the different faces while greeting the customer to see which face will better match the social situation, looking for social cues in order to have a very clear path towards the goal (of tips), just as an actor in a scene finds the

emotionality that rings true by sticking to the character's motivation (Stanislavsky, 1912; Hobgood, 1973).

> MARIANNA: And you have all these different sides?
>
> KAY: Right. Different faces. The smile face. Whether you turn it around and turn it off. But like the smile face, the really, tired fucked up face. The like, the few instances of it's just an honest face, I don't know maybe it's happy-sad-whatever. You know.
>
> MARIANNA: So three faces.
>
> KAY: Yeah.
>
> MARIANNA: And the honest face is whatever you're feeling at that moment.
>
> KAY: And it might feel a little performative, but it's like the most like simply honest face. Yeah you kinda (laughs) put on a show. It's a little slapsticky. It's like, you don't need to slam a coffee pot, but if you do, it seems worse. You know, it's more extreme.
> I feel like when you go into dealing with a customer, you're not sure which face you need to be wearing but you kinda can just try one. And I feel like, within the first three seconds, you can switch from happy face-like smile face to honest face. Or you can switch from like honest face to smile face or honest face to sad face. Or like, messy face or whatever it is. You know like.
> I guess you're like reading...how you can best handle the situation. Cuz it's, I guess in acting terms you have to figure out really quickly what your tactics should be. Because the goal, not always, but most of the time, is getting them to tip you. Because you're broke!
> It's like should my tactic be: be really nice to them, should my tactic be, like, be messy so they feel bad for me, so that I get what I want? You know. Should my tactic be to be honest with them and ride the situation out and let them feel like they're the one controlling it? Like. To get what I want.
>
> MARIANNA: It's a lot of different paths.
>
> KAY: It's always to get what I want, you know.
>
> MARIANNA : So are you connecting this to a character in a scene - like how to get what they want?[98]
>
> KAY: Yes, how to get what they want. So line by line, what do they want, why, how are they gonna get it, what specific actions will they take to get it? How will they treat the

[98] This clarification is based on the fact that I knew from previous interviews that Kay had made this comparison before. Also it was evident based on my own observations of acting classes, rehearsals, and training, that this Kay was appropriating classical acting analysis where during rehearsal a director is always asking actors to track what their characters want in any given moment.

> other character or like manipulate the situation or the other character to get what they want? You know.
>
> MARIANNA: So you apply it pretty directly then.
>
> KAY: Yeah. The character is me. And the character is the customer, like. You just kinda have to use your skills to figure out which way is gonna work best for you. And it doesn't always work like that. It doesn't always-you're smiling at them and they just shit all over you and complain and bitch and moan and it's like awful. But like but then it's like a change of situation I guess. Like if you think about it that way um…the given circumstances are now different. They're not just a new customer, they're a bad customer and the new objective is get them gone quick. So you don't have to be with the—I don't know. (Interview Kay 2016)

Here we see another facet of Kay's dramaturgical attunement at work. In a moment where they realize that their face-work strategy might not work out, Kay's move is to simply change the identity or character of the customer, to "bad customer," instead of changing their own. The psychologically and socially protective measure here appears to be to assert to themselves that the customer is the one who is failing, not them, and they have a new character role with a new motivation: get rid of them. This is an advanced move in the management of in-person literalized character work, in that Kay constructs a situation in which it is assumed that it is the customer who has failed in their Goffmanian line of presenting the best possible version of themselves or failed to sustain the appropriate definition of the situation. Kay then adjusts their character motivation accordingly: get rid of the bad customer. A less skilled interlocuter might have allowed the customer to set the interpretation of face-work here, such as subscribing to the motto of "customer knows best."

Kay is keenly aware of the divide between being performative and genuine in their face-work and how to actively employ face-easing practices from their actor's toolkit when they have to go into survival mode. This is clear from their highly animated depiction of how they go from on-stage, where they're talking to the customer and giving them the desired social smile to

turning around and saving their energy as they make the customer's latte. Kay demonstrates an awareness of the emotional and cognitive load of inauthentic face-work, emotional labor, and stigma management. They explain that they are controlling their own fatigue and energy levels. The smile is dropped and what is striking in seeing this in Kay's demonstration of it is that it's dropped immediately, like a mask they've ripped off—not like a smile that lingers a little bit or slowly fades as one's thoughts and feelings shift after a pleasant experience or exchange.

As is evident from the excerpts on Kay's face-easing practices in the work place, their use of the "smile face" of the hospitality industry (Burgoon et al., 1990)[99] represents a kind of fourth wall between actor and audience, that is often put up in Kay's everyday life interactions. These everyday life interactions typically mean inhabiting a set of identity constraints that oftentimes feel false and inauthentic. Conversely, interlocuters from acting contexts, represent an exception to these constraints on the self and require less strenuous face-work conditions:

> I think there's a nice thing about other people who have done acting. Because they understand there's a range — they'll treat you the same, smelly and in sweat pants or as the Queen of Denmark. They understand that people have different sides and they accept all of it.

It appears that Kay, like Sandra with her "walking messes," also feels like they can exist and reveal greater, messier, more fluid complexity in front of others who have done theatre and be accepted equally, fully, and without judgment. The fourth wall is down. They do not need to erase aspects of themselves to please the audience. Through these interviews, and no doubt in part thanks to my own involvement in theatre, I received a kind of meta, Brechtian demonstration of the complexity of their identities. Sandra is comfortably messy while Kay is comfortably multiple and fluid. Contemporary identity theorists have been theorizing the

[99] "Employees must maintain facial expressions with a bright smile (Burgoon et al., 1990), since the emotionless expression of the employees can cause discomfort to the customers" (Lee et al., 2018, p. 3).

multiplicity and inconsistency of identities (Ewing 1990) while acting students openly and explicitly live in the incoherence.

In the case of Kay, their identity distress can at times feel most severe during certain mundane interactions because these lived experiences feel more like a fiction, in the sense of fiction as falsehood, than an authentic reality. Their perezhivania occurs and is necessary in some of their everyday life contexts. As a specific example, as demonstrated in the interview, it is employed for an archetypal feminized character that they create and can authentically identify with, in order to make service interactions bearable. The lifting of the fourth wall in theatre contexts, in a space like the Neo-Futurist classroom and stage, allows for the kind of social restructuring where they can fully feel real and therefore be real with others, meaning who they feel themselves to authentically be.

> For trans people, legitimizing the invisible inner self can be equally as imperative as the materiality of morphological contours. Within the movement between inner and outer selves, we may prioritize the invisible. (Cole 2018, p.19)

This legitimizing of the invisible inner self is an apt description of Kay's process: they place great emphasis on sooner or later being able to change their name legally, having the pronouns that they identify with recognized, and having this instantiated in professional settings. These professional settings may include work or their theatre performances and involvements. This is something they openly fight for and address. The following section describes an instance of their ongoing fight towards this legitimization.

Prioritizing the Invisible: Identity Activism

For Kay, the practice of Neo-Futurism presented a more psychosocially adaptive way to exist in front of others because it was not necessary and, in fact, against the practice to occupy a character other than oneself: a clear move away from being focused on self-image actualization

objectives at least in ways that felt fundamentally false. Their confidence was reinforced by the consistent support and understanding of Kay's theatre community and other like-minded peers. "You're interesting enough. Just fuck it," Kay proclaimed a year after taking Greg's class.

Nowadays Kay takes on acting roles that tend to be closer to who they feel they truly are in a move closer to what Winget (2019) describes as "trans-healing" wherein trans individuals develop and perform theatrical, comedic, and film productions intentionally to heal themselves. The prefix "trans" in this context signifies a movement "…*across* and *through* structures of power which transgender people navigate in their efforts to heal" (Winget, 2019, p. 6). Winget provides a case study of trans-healing in the work of trans performer D'Lo, who amplifies his own internal dialogue on stage. D'Lo weaves his complex, multi-hyphenate identification with his cultural, immigrant, race, and gender backgrounds during his comedic performances, voicing the judgments of various authority figures and characters in his life and creating space for his own alternative interpretations of what kind of personhood he strives for. Winget argues that through the amplification of voice, alternative narratives, and through the shared experience of public catharsis, D'Lo heals as does society.

While Kay has not yet developed a nationally popular following or performer activist agenda like the experienced individuals interviewed by Winget, Kay gravitates towards playing trans characters and female characters in queer productions and this in itself is at minimum face-easing and certainly carries healing potential. Most recently in a 2016 student film they played a character that was based directly on them. In a move where their agency does indeed seem to come from self-awareness and understanding of their social interactions (Giddens, 1994), perhaps on some level Kay has come to understand that they determine, ultimately, whether they are "interesting." In this way also they move towards more of a self-driven (rather than

normative image-driven) authenticity, sense of achievement, esteem, etc. If being interesting by Neo-Futurist standards is being present and real, then the more Kay can find ways to take down the fourth wall that blocks their genuine engagement with the world, the more comfortably they can exist within it.

As evident in the following account in Figure 7, written by Kay, sometimes their face-easing practices can mean engaging in acts of social activism to support what they feel is their authentic identity, even though this is a truth that may be invisible to others. When Kay encountered a situation that made them uncomfortable at work, and experienced what Lauren Bialystok describes as "misgendering pain" (Bialystok, 2013), they felt that they did not need to hide their true reaction and wrote a letter to their boss about another employee at work (names changed):

Date: May 23, 2016 03:10
Subject: Misgendering at Work

Hey Sara,

I've been wanting to talk to you about getting misgendered at work but haven't really thought of a good time, so here goes:

I keep getting misgendered at work by other Café employees--not so much by the other Café Lounge Staff, though--they're really awesome about this sort of thing, maybe because I interact with them more directly and more often, and they always go out of their way to apologize and make it right when they slip up. I'm sure people aren't trying to be rude or malicious, but it really throws me off when it happens and makes it hard for me to concentrate on doing my job well. Getting called by the wrong pronouns or

Figure 7: Kay's Letter to their Boss[100]

[100] Image from Kay, 2016.

gendered words like "sir" or "man" has been really bothering me. I know that it's sort of hard to get customers to be better about that sort of thing because they're just behaving how society has trained them to behave, but it really sucks when it comes from other employees in the workplace; it really makes me feel awful when my coworkers and superiors don't take the time to consider how the way they refer or talk to me could affect my mental well-being; it makes me feel so bad when I am left thinking that there is no system in place to make sure that people consider the gender identity of their workplace counterparts. I know that the obvious answer would seem to be to just say "hey, actually...," or things like that, but whenever I get misgendered (especially by other Café employees) I just feel so dysphoric that I can't really do much but stand there with my eyes wide, which isn't productive for fixing the problem or doing my job.

As someone who is transgender, I personally have opinions about how workplaces can try to be better about this type of thing, but I don't know how one would go about implementing such things specifically at the Café. In any case, I just wanted to make you aware of this problem that I have been experiencing, because it really is a lot for me to deal with, especially when it happens at work.

Additionally, Lucy keeps calling me by my government name instead of Kay. I thought it was a one-off sort of accident, but it happened every single time I saw her this week, and it was pretty awkward when it happened because I usually don't even process that she's even addressing me when it happens and then I'm just so thrown off guard that I'll just miss what she says entirely. Honestly, I don't know that I'd even know how to start having a conversation with Lucy about this. I'm not even comfortable enough talking to her to bother trying.

Anyway, I just want you to know that I really do appreciate your efforts to respect my gender identity and to refer to me correctly. I'd really love for us to think together, though, about how we could get other staff members on the same page. Personally, this affects me every single day of my life, and it can make being at work (or anywhere in public, really) difficult and often scary.

Sara, thank you so much for giving this time and attention--it really means a lot to me.

Kay

They/Them/Their

Fig. 7, continued.

Kay's narrative demonstrates a strong sense of agency, self-efficacy, and voice. Kay took up a position of self-validation and power by writing this letter to their boss when they kept getting addressed with a masculine name by an older staff member. It's another demonstration of

dramaturgical attunement and reimagining in the reframing of a challenging social circumstance for your own objectives, creating your own interaction rules to manage stigma, strenuous face-work, and emotional labor, much like their approach to barista face-work on a daily basis.

As described by transgender performer ALOK, presenting their authentic identities can mean being accused of falseness when in fact not presenting their non-conformist gender identity and other creative aspects of themselves is the performative falseness of erasure that can cause suffering for trans and non-binary individuals:

> They accuse us of masquerading, but tell me, what do you call having to repress your creativity, your individuality, your autonomy and your agency in order to be accepted? (Cox, 2021, un-paginated).

In Kay's theatre and film activities they've been able to display their creativity, individuality, autonomy, and agency most fully, whereas in the workplace it's a more complex challenge that they nevertheless are working to mitigate as with the letter to their boss.

As someone in a politically fraught identity position, Kay has been able to take up their liminality as a force for personal and social action in "undoing gender" (Butler, 2004) actions for which transgender works can face much resistance:

> Transgender workers – a vulnerable population economically – must balance political desires to shake up gender with job security. Retaining job security can mean participating in existing workplace gender structures of doing dominance for men and doing deference for women. (Schilt and Connell, 2007, p. 616)

Kay does at least somewhat seem to fall into the trap of "doing deference" with the paradoxical helpless barista who seeks a masculine hero or savior. Yet as the hero is the customer, Kay at least benefits financially, their other primary objective and their performative feminization of the role is an expression of creativity as well; thereby partially but not fully "doing deference." They are attempting to create their own rules to honor the values of authenticity and its relationship to mental health, a value argued for by those who support trans-identifying individuals and the need

for better support of such individuals on college campuses in particular where they often seek a sense of belonging they may not be able to find in the home (Bialystok, 2013; McKinney, 2005; Beemyn, 2005; Dugan, 2012; Effrig, 2011; Spagna, 2014).

The confident everyday activist[101] and intelligent strategist that is evident in the above letter has deep psychological lows, anxieties, and struggles and yet like the performer-activist ALOK, they are learning to embrace their individuality, autonomy, and agency perhaps creating a prototypical form for themselves of what Greenfeld (2013) terms "individualized culture." Kay's is a case where anxiety around authenticity and belonging is strategically self-described and utilized for the purpose of personal and social activism, and Kay's chance at agency in this case is in transforming the behavior of one "misbehaving" coworker. And while there was consistent misgendering that Kay experienced from other coworkers as well as customers, this was the battle they chose to fight in this instance by attempting to provoke the desired recognition of their gender performance. For as Wight suggests, "I only have agency in regards to a portion of my performativity—in my doing or performance of gender" (Wight, 2011, p.77) but if that "doing of gender" is not recognized, then perhaps the only strategy is to reclaim their agency.

For Kay, being an intelligent strategist is particularly essential because non-binary trans identity is by no means a fully accepted gender identity in contemporary America. Kay's intelligent strategizing, at its functional best, means evolving a resilience and skillset at dealing with stigma around their controversial identity and the inherent tensions in presenting self-face and other-face in a dominantly heteronormative environment. In the case of the letter, Kay goes for disclosure, which is perhaps the trickiest stigma management strategy of all. As gender norms

[101] Mansbridge and Flaster (2007) describe "everyday activists" as individuals who "may not interact with the formal world of politics, but they take actions in their own lives to redress injustices..." (p. 630).

are shifting and trans gender and non-conforming gender identities are beginning to be recognized in the United States (particularly in urban centers and especially in liberal and artist-celebrating milieus) on a legal, medical, literary, and popular media level (Bender-Baird, 2011; McCloskey, 1999/2019; Poretsky and Hembree, 2019; Williams, 2020), there may be a kind of social and psychological capital that can be gained from staking one's place openly and confidently before a relevant public.

Through a theatricalized understanding of the traditional norms of everyday life performance, Kay is attempting to transform the definition of appropriate face-work. It is Lucy who must now save face according to Kay for it is Lucy who has failed at maintaining the line of interactional respect that is expected in the workplace among co-workers. Lucy is thus being a "bad coworker" in not interpreting Kay in accordance with the message sent by their gender expression. By doing so, Lucy is not showing proper respect, and is therefore acting inappropriately as a coworker. In theatrical terms, this case of misgendering presents a roadblock to Kay's motivation as a worker who wants to be able to do their job and they self-disclose about their distress. Kay is attempting to push Lucy as well as their boss Sara towards the reflexivity that is necessary on both the part of the individual and their audience, in "gender performativity" (Wight, 2011, p.77).

The statement, "I'd really love for us to think together," hits the supposed shared motivation of the reader/boss who wants Kay to be able to do their job well and to keep the line that they care about sensitive issues especially as this pertains to their employees' wellbeing. It also may help, hopefully, that Kay is not alone in their agenda: redefining face-work on their own terms is a strategy that the trans movement and trans individuals are increasingly using with some success in urban (particularly liberal) centers where phenomena like gender non-binary

bathrooms and the inquiry and adherence to an individual's preferred pronouns are increasingly being introduced or at least advocated for (Rankyn & Beemyn, 2012; Beemyn & Pettit, 2006; Beemyn et al., 2005).

Engagement with the Medical Model

Kay goes so far as to use the term "dysphoric" to describe their mental state in response to Lucy's actions. This is significant because "dysphoria" is part of the DSM-V defined diagnosis for Gender Dysphoria[102]. Through biomedical terminology, there is a kind of legitimization of Kay's experience, albeit a simultaneous pathologizing of it as a mental health disorder, and they reference it by using this term. This is another important tension, because what Kay is politely pointing towards here is that their "disorder" is not just an isolated, individual condition but a social problem wherein they are being mistreated.

While gradually shifting and more socially progressive attitudes in the United States around gender and mental health allow an individual like Kay to imagine that writing such a letter is an appropriate move in their face-work strategy, it's important to note the tension in the biomedical versus the sociocultural location of the problem. A lack of understanding of the social, historical, and cultural dimensions of mental health problems is characteristic of the DSM approach as whole. Interestingly, the American Psychiatric Association gestures towards this lack of understanding in one of its publications: "People with gender dysphoria may be very uncomfortable with the gender they were assigned" (Parekh, 2009). Characterizing gender as "assigned" is a move in the direction of understanding gender and identity as social constructs that can be experienced as false and unnecessary impositions and constraints on the individual.

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[102] "In adolescents and adults gender dysphoria diagnosis involves a difference between one's experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender, and significant distress or problems functioning" ("What is Gender Dysphoria?).

The American Psychiatric Association website calls it “the gender conflict.” They do not name with whom the conflict is, opting instead to describe the desired potential behaviors the gender dysphoric individual could adopt:

> People with gender dysphoria may allow themselves to express their true selves and may openly want to be affirmed in their gender identity. They may use clothes and hairstyles and adopt a new first name of their experienced gender. (Parekh, 2009)

The implied focus here is on the individual, rather than on an approach that also evaluates the social contexts in which individuals’ identities are created or erased and made to feel invisible, creating inauthenticity hell for people like Kay. As evident from transgender and face-work research and supported by this case study, gender dysphoria is a bidirectional phenomenon located at the interaction between the individual and their interlocuters. At a macrolevel, it’s the encounter and incongruence between the individual’s identity expression and society’s receptivity and response to the identity expression.

By contrast, the DSM focuses on a literalization of gender, and locates the problem as incoherence within an individual between biological form and individual desire for gender identity. This both ignores that an individual might not “fit” neatly from birth into one end of the binary and that part of the problem is that society may lack a vocabulary for and openness to gender possibilities beyond the binary. Because of recent social changes in the U.S., Kay is able to take up their agentic position in solidarity with a pre-existing political movement to transform what is understood as appropriate face-work and image management when it comes to gendered interactions.

Yet Kay recognizes that none of these interactions feel entirely authentic, which is unsurprising in that they are combative social encounters wherein Kay has to prove their worth and their right to recognition. These encounters, from the stresses of everyday barista work to a

letter aimed at changing some of the misgendering behaviors of coworkers, represent a need to constantly work in everyday life interactions, which at times Kay calls “a game” which appears to make it more manageable for them. Kay recognizes the need to find face-easing practices and interactions outside of these strenuous encounters, even more so after taking a more classic acting course after Neo-Futurism, which put “the chair test” into context. Kay thinks that they would now be able to “just sit in the chair” more easily after this acting class which combined Meisner, Viewpoints and Blackbox Theatre and focused explicitly on immediate, truthful emotional response but in fictional roles.

> …when you’re actually acting it’s better to not play the game at all. It’s better to just do. And you know sometimes she’d [the teacher] tell you know “in this classroom in this setting it’s a workshop we’re going to be brutally honest. And if someone gets offended, how lucky for them because that’s a really strong emotion for them to get to feel.” But then she’s like “don’t do this in the real world.” Don’t go to a party and be this honest. Like all the time. Like if someone has a big nose, you can tell them here, that’s fine. You can’t tell them at a party. They have big nose. (laughs) That’s rude, this is helpful for art. (Kay Interview 2016)

So while some amount of face-work is necessary to not be considered rude in everyday contexts, Kay has had the opportunity to discover that in theatrical contexts the more uncensored their immediate emotional responses to scene partners, the more “interesting” they end up being to the audience. They have transferred this face-easing insight to dramaturgically reimagining everyday life:

> …I’m becoming more and more ok with like, you know people will gender certain things like clothing or objects. And they’re gonna do that and that’s whatever. Like just do whatever the fuck you want because it doesn’t matter anyway. You know ‘cause like…just do what you want and that can be more interesting and compelling like for you. Than like the painting of like “oh this is what I think I should be going for and so I should like trace it out and like perform that…identity”…So instead of worrying about like, “oh how is that gonna read” which I still do because everyone has anxieties. Um, just being like ok this is just how I’m doing my thing today.

A shift is evident in Kay's reasoning above from audience-focused goals such as how others perceive and discuss gender, to self-acceptance focused objectives which they see as a move away from "anxieties," i.e., "…just…doing my thing."

By our last interview, Kay was able to establish an over-riding stance and position of greater agency and empowerment in regulating their self-system (Hermans, 2006). They combined everyday gender identity recognition activism enacted by the character and self-position of trans-and-non-binary-activist Kay, along with a face-easing goal of self-acceptance enacted by the character and self-position of wise, self-accepting Kay. Notably this also meant accepting others, even those who may not share in, understand, or support their identity distress, as having anxieties. They took on an attitude of not worrying as much about what others are "doing" in their quests for authenticity and, significantly, in relation to this, Kay appears to worry a bit less about others' perceptions and mis-perceptions of their own identity.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has described Neo-Futurism, a non-fiction, avante-garde theatre practice developed in Chicago by Greg Allen and his collaborators. Neo-Futurism is focused on putting up authenticity without adornment on the stage and having performers be themselves onstage rather than playing a character. The chapter then provided an account of my ethnography of Neo-Futurism classes at EQU, where we learned that the ethos of unadorned authenticity often clashed with the students' felt pressure to be extraordinary which were both termed in different times as "being interesting." Lastly, this chapter examined the case study of Kay, a transgender person experiencing identity distress primarily around being misgendered. Kay is a trans person for whom Neo-Futurism offers the perfect context to be fully authentic: their identity expression is taken up in a way that is congruent with their intent. I suggest that Neo-Futurism allows a

reversal of the fourth wall metaphor wherein the fourth wall is more present in their everyday life than in certain theatrical contexts where they have more control over the reality or the reality itself is more receptive to the person they feel they authentically are. The success of non-fiction theatre for Kay offers a possibility for future interventions through non-fictional theatre for trans, gender fluid, and more broadly for individuals experiencing identity distress around inauthenticity.

The case study of Kay is thus relevant for individuals in any identity category who have experienced marginalization, stigma, or a societal lack of understanding of their desired identity expression. It's significant for anyone who feels they have to erase a feature, fact, or characteristic about themselves in order to maintain face; and based on my modest but rich sampling of observations and interviews, that's quite possibly the majority of Americans, particularly middle class Americans as they seem to have the most to prove. More specifically, the case study in this chapter presents potential insights for intervention for other individuals suffering from gender identity distress around inauthenticity.

Kay's efforts to address their distress reveal two primary factors that are key for coping with distress around inauthenticity: the support of an understanding community and a set of imaginative and dramaturgical tools that allow them to shift and reinterpret a reality and a set of roles and expectations that do not match up with their authentic identity. The Neo-Futurist performance venues and their ethos provide a supportive group and its practices help individuals like Kay feel authentic on stage. Kay plays Kay onstage, or characters who they identify with while they utilize theatrical strategies, metaphors, and archetypal roles to negotiate uncomfortable, distressing, or taxing interactions in their everyday life.

CHAPTER 5
Social Anxiety Improv at Cheer Up

"Our culture has finally come around to 'compelling.'"
- Marc Maron, comic and podcaster, 2016

Introduction

This chapter serves several purposes. First, it sets up the history and background for investigating the art of improvisation not only as a form of entertainment but also as a self-help practice. In this sense, the fieldwork settings and participants differ from the other two pedagogies described in this work in that it is explicitly set up as a psychosocial treatment. The classes examined are offered under the auspices of a commercial institution, Cheer Up, offering entertainment as well as improv training courses. Secondly, the chapter provides in-depth description and analysis of the fieldwork I conducted at the program in Social Anxiety Improv (SAI) an alternative therapy combining improv and cognitive behavioral therapy for working adults at Cheer Up, and the insights drawn from that research. And thirdly, it examines a case study from SAI as a means to examine how SAI may be taken up and implemented in everyday life by an individual with specific identity distress concerns.

The core argument of the present analysis is the following: that SAI is a hybrid commercial self-help practice and treatment that attempts to fill a gap in mental health and self-actualization needs and social concerns and one that originated from a more socially astute model of improv games espoused by Viola Spolin in the 1960's targeted at "Approval/Disapproval Syndrome." It illustrates and emphasizes how porous certain mental health and self-help concepts are as they are imagined and taken up by American consumers seeking alternative treatments. It also presents possibilities for recontextualizing the psychosocial pressures of work and social interactions through the use of comedy and simple fictions. In terms

of identity distress experiences, SAI came to serve as an opportunity for reimagining the social pressures around felt expectations for oneself.

In particular, SAI had a specific way of interpreting the widespread improv lesson of "yes, and" which has many iterations in its application:

> The most widely cited lesson of improv training, "Yes, and..." (e.g., DeMichele, 2015; Hines, 2016), addresses the need for improvisers to agree on the reality of a scene in order to move forward in it (Besser et al., 2013). Each improviser accepts the information their partner offers (the "yes,") and adds more to it (the "and") (Jagodowski et al, 2015; Hines, 2016). Depending on stylistic preference (Arnett, 2016), different teachers may emphasize different lessons related to "Yes, and...," such as behave and respond honestly (Jagodowski et al., 2015); find what is interesting or funny and explore that (Besser et al., 2013); or do something, notice what you did, and keep doing that while processing your partner's choices through your character (Napier, 2004). (Felsman, 2019, p. 28-9)

In the case of SAI, "yes, and" is combined with "exposure therapy", a desensitization model of anxiety treatment wherein social anxiety is reduced by degrees, as explained in detail further in this chapter. SAI practices such as "yes, and," and the exposure therapy model, along with simple, comedic, and fictionalized scenarios and social exposure-oriented games, offered participants presenting themselves as "socially anxious" an opportunity to reinterpret themselves in social space. Built into the models, "yes, and" and exposures, are improv and treatment goals that can be taken up as self-effacing goals for social encounters where one might be too focused on impressing others and therefore fail as a result – much as in our Chapter 4 discussion of achieving coolness, authenticity and "plandids" (Russell, 2011).

Our focal and critical case study, Zainab, provides an example of how a fictionalizing and casualizing practice like SAI offered a new possibility for dealing with stigma. The case especially presents insight around identity distress in the status and success dimension, which in Aisha's case meant the pressurized intellectual and career success of a Muslim mixed race woman. Identity distress is explored in its connections to Muslim, Arab, and minority

stereotyping and discrimination, immigrant family challenges, immigrant youth challenges, and pressures and challenges imposed on women. In the broader scheme, we learn about identity distress in relation to the common American expression "get out of your head," as an elusive sense of mismatch for improvisers between individual experience and ongoing social interaction: I once more suggest the achievement of presence, or perezhivania, provides a missing link that is grasped at through a variety of interactive exercises, and social belonging emerges as an ongoing goal in improv classes, SAI, and the social activities around the two.

The Ethnographic Landscape

We now delve into improvisation as a self-help practice, firstly in terms of the broader group ethnography I conducted at "Cheer Up," and secondly through an in-depth case study of an SAI student at this school.

Improv on the Self-Actualization Market

As SAI combines CBT with improv games in a self-proclaimed Social Anxiety "Bootcamp," the focus will be to unpack the tension between the trivializing framework of improv with the dramatizing framework of exposure therapy.

An advertising campaign for "Wellness Improv Courses" at Cheer Up presents its mission as follows:

> Do you love to make people laugh? When you see a smile on somebody's face, does it light up your own? Bringing another person joy can be incredibly fulfilling, whether due to a witty remark or some outrageous rejoinder, people generally love being considered funny. The art of comedy, however, is not innate in everyone. We are ready to work with anyone interested in reawakening their youthful spontaneity, recognize their inner clown, take note of underlying talents, and manage anxiety.

Notice that the passage shifts from a light conversational tone to a clinical term, from "people generally love being considered funny," to "manage anxiety." It's noteworthy that anxiety is only mentioned as the very last item, as if the build-up of discussing humor and comedy somehow naturally add up to anxiety management.

The language of this advertisement echoes what I often heard from students at Cheer Up, where I took Level 1 and 2 improv classes as part of my preliminary fieldwork, some version of "I'm doing this to break out of my shell." The statements came from primarily middle class adults ranging between the ages of 20 and ~65 who were paying customers, looking to change themselves and oftentimes their lives for the better by participating in the classes offered by this venue. Venues like Cheer Up are taking advantage of a perceived gap in self-actualization among the urban middle class Americans I observed and interviewed at this and other Chicago area improv schools: the idea that one is lagging behind in becoming an outgoing, pleasing, and witty entertainer as if this is a cultural, developmental, and mental health standard towards which one should be working towards.

For many students with whom I spoke during the numerous social occasions connected with improv classes (most ended with invitations by the teacher and/or students for drinks at a nearby bar afterwards), another common primary motivation was that they offered a welcome break from the mundane routines of their 9-5 jobs. Yet the phrase I often heard in bars after class is self-referential, "my shell," as if the onus was entirely on them rather than the social context. These individuals were expressing the desire to change themselves, a typical sentiment expressed by American self-help literature and one that scholars have argued is in itself a source of anxiety (McGee, 2005; Effing, 2009). From these statements around wanting to alter themselves, improv students seemed to be pointing towards themselves as needing to acquire something on a

psychosocial level and an organization like Cheer Up was targeting this notion of stunted self-enhancement or even development. Most of the clients were in their adult years, most often post-college and beyond, and from their self-reports they were looking to change aspects of their personalities, particularly their degree of extraversion[103] or their skills in engaging with, connecting, and making impressions on others; and based on their advertising campaign, Cheer Up was more than ready to capitalize on their insecurities.

A venue and entertainer-training school like Cheer Up recommends humor as a means to achieve interpersonal success and in doing so motions towards the deeper objectives at play for their target clientele: career success in jobs that require a certain level of extraversion and overall interpersonal success in a society that is focused on image and an impression of confidence. In its way, Cheer Up is feeding into the popular Self-Help movement with improv on offer as yet another product towards self-actualization. In unpacking this self-help aim, it's helpful to examine the historical roots of Cheer Up and improv pedagogy more generally.

Cheer Up's roots in Viola Spolin's improv games aimed at interventionist social work in 1960's Chicago are only barely visible. Spolin studied sociology and social work at Neva Boyd's Group Work School at the University of Chicago, alongside theatre, and developed improv games as a way to help non-English speaking immigrants assimilate and communicate. This strategy ended up being an effective actor training method as well and led to the founding of the Compass Players and Second City by Spolin's son, Paul Sills. Spolin is considered a founder of recreational therapy as well. In her time, she was considered an expert in both therapeutic as well as artistic applications of improv games. Notably, Spolin's aim through her improv games was to

[103] Focus on extraversion and socio-emotional skill development is another prominent sentiment expressed in the American self-help movement both historically and to this day starting with popular self-help books such as *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Carnegie 1936) or *How I Raised Myself From Failure to Success in Selling* (Bettger, 1947).

combat what she termed “The Approval/Disapproval Syndrome.” This aim has become distorted in the current pedagogy of Cheer Up, which seems to strive to satisfy societal demands through improv, rather than to deconstruct them. In her seminal work, *Improvisation for the Theatre*,” Spolin (1963) critiques external and other-directed society and offers improv games as an intervention:

> In a culture where approval/disapproval has become the predominant regulator of effort and position, and often the substitute for love, our personal freedoms are dissipated. Abandoned to the whims of others, we must wander daily through the wish to be loved and the fear of rejection before we can be productive. Categorized ‘good’ or ‘bad’ from birth (a ‘good’ baby does not cry too much) we become so enmeshed with the tenuous threads of approval/disapproval that we are creatively paralyzed. We see with others’ eyes and smell with others’ noses… Trying to save ourselves from attack, we build a mighty fortress and are timid, or we fight each time we venture forth. Some in striving with approval/disapproval develop egocentricity and exhibitionism; some give up and simply go along. Others, like Elsa in the fairy tale, are forever knocking on windows, jingling their chain of bells, and wailing, “Who am I?” In all cases, contact with the environment is distorted. Self-discovery and other exploratory traits tend to become atrophied. Trying to be ‘good’ and avoiding ‘bad’ or being ‘bad’ because one can’t be ‘good’ develops into a way of life for those needing approval/disapproval from authority—and the investigation and solving of problems becomes of secondary importance. Approval/disapproval grows out of authoritarianism that has changed its face over the years from that of the parent to the teacher and ultimately the whole social structure (mate, employer, family, neighbors, etc.). (Spolin, 1963, pp. 7-8)

Not only was Spolin describing a variety of what have come out in the present study in prominent identity distress themes in her Approval/Disapproval Syndrome, in the themes of status and success, need for belonging, entertainment value/being interesting, in particular, but Spolin’s method was also politically revolutionary and culturally-specific in its way. It aimed to counter authoritarian structures which she viewed as inherent to modern American society and which were so deeply embedded at all levels that they hindered individuals from freedom of self-expression. Spolin taught improv games as a method for being able to interact with the environment and others in an unhindered, in-the-moment, and egalitarian manner, paralleling in

this way much of the original agenda of Greg Allen with Neo-Futurism as described in Chapter 4. It was a strategy for connecting with what she viewed as

> Self: Refers to the natural part of ourselves; free of crippling mores, prejudices, rote information, and static frames of reference…the part of ourselves that functions free of the need for approval/disapproval; cutting through make-up, costume, rags, mannerisms…the covering (survival clothes) of self; self must be found before one can play; playing helps find self. (Spolin, 1963, p. 391)

The contemporary improvisation pedagogy that I observed in several different Chicago improv classrooms, while keeping some elements of Spolin's teachings intact, does not necessarily keep the Approval/Disapproval Syndrome ethos. Some of the instructors observed did express judgment and disapproval of student performances, even in introductory classes.[104] Spolin viewed the goals of success and audience approval as a problematic hindrance reflective of a systemic societal problem that hindered the individual from interacting authentically with the environment. The goal is to focus on in-the-moment reactions rather than focusing too much attention on social approval. For the six contemporary improv instructors I studied under at the schools and venues Cheer Up and Be Free, this philosophy was not evident in their pedagogy, with the exception of the SAI instructors who targeted Social Anxiety. The multiple-named, uncertain, and therefore, for many individuals, anomic phenomenon that I have been terming "identity distress," creates a broad market for a business-savvy venue like Cheer Up that can offer a non-stigmatized (i.e., non-clinical) solution for various stigmatized diagnoses as well as self-image and actualization worries.

As part of its self-help marketing, Cheer Up continues to come up with new terms that implicitly index types of Eriksonian identity crises and to extend its offerings to new groups, often older groups. A few of the latest iterations of Cheer Up's class offerings include: "Humor

[104] This does not include venues which more directly offer Spolin-originated "improv games" as they continue to be called.

Doesn't Retire: Improv for Seniors," "Improv for Veterans," "Improv for Autism," or "Mid-Life Crisis: Improv for Generations X & Y" described as:

> For those whose age may be more mature than their sense of humor, this class teaches improv fundamentals in a relaxed, fun environment with your peers.
> Hire a babysitter, step away from the computer and give yourself the gift of fun. Cheaper than a Ferrari!

What's striking about the focus on identity categories such as middle age, veteran status, or old age, is that these are typically stigmatized social categories in the contemporary US. These improv course themes seem to assume that individuals self-identifying as within these culturally-constructed, socially stigmatized categories such as an "age class"[105] or other inferior category (Shweder, 1998) will buy into both the stigma and the proposed solution.

Implied in the advertising is a vision of idealized happiness that is attainable no matter what stage of life, material capital (e.g. "Cheaper than a Ferrari!",) or stigmatized identity category one occupies. Cheer Up's menu of options echoes sociologist Peggy Thoits's theory which claims that gaining and losing role identities (e.g., motherhood, employment, marriage, moving, etc.) causes the most dramatic shifts in one's self-worth and distress levels (Thoits, 1991; Thoits, 2003) and fits with the Berman's identity distress scale model around the idea of loss or change within these areas. This signals that Cheer Up's ideology (as that of Berman's and Thoits's) fits into the dominant cultural view of ideal American adulthood or at least that they are positioning their marketing towards the standard ideal. While Cheer Up's target client is living life following something like the Five Pillars of Adulthood model (Arnett, 2004), there is also an assumption that they've worked towards these pillars and that something is lacking. They are assumed to be in a kind of existential crisis. In the case of the above ad targeting "middle aged"

[105] "a culturally constructed unit whose unity is proposed or posited as, precisely, not depending upon any category other than 'age' (Gullette 1998).

Americans, that crisis appears to imply that something is missing in their lives, and that improv could fill the gap.

If individuals are feeling heightened levels of distress around a socially-stigmatized category like middle age or feeling ennui or a kind of Durkheimian anomie around an unnameable problem, Cheer Up is offering a semi-clinical solution presented along with the other wellness courses; thus improv for middle age is grouped with Social Anxiety Improv and the "problem" is normalized as solvable by a fun activity. In this way, stigma and uncertainty around particular social identities and categories like "midlife" or "veteran" are folded into a quasi-clinical diagnosis that is ostensibly treatable through comedic techniques. This use of insecurities around stigma as a marketing strategy echoes the understanding of Dan, the head clinician of the Social Anxiety Improv support groups at Cheer Up, for treating anxiety: "We don't want to be cast out from the tribe." His own self-proclaimed group seemed to be "People of Anxiety," and the members could come in a variety of types and yet still find belonging within the shared discomfort of the group; some even complaining afterwards that the group didn't last long enough.

To further complicate matters, in SAI and at Cheer Up overall there was a constant tension between the dramatization and underlining of one's anxiety through the principle of exposures and a trivialization or diminishment of exposures as "not that serious" and living within the realm of comedy. The interdiscursive use of psychological terms in the Cheer Up ad like "crisis" and "wellness" (Cheer Up lists these courses under the category of "Wellness") coupled with jokes that sound like they may be out of an SNL sketch. Identity category specific jokes like "Cheaper than a Ferrari!" create a contradictory message. The message indicates to clients that they have an opportunity to address their psychosocial problem, appealing to what

Kimberly Emmons terms the "self-doctoring drive"[106] which includes the increased use of alternative therapies (Emmons, 2010), but they don't have to take it too seriously or worry about it. Humor is not only medicinal, but it's fun! It's normalized, standard, and can lead to an expanded social circle and a shiny new performative skill set. "It's not that serious," did end up being a common expression among SAI interviewees in relation to their own distress.

There is also cultural resonance in the idea that some identity groups are more awkward than others and simply less "cool." The framework of being in the cool group/in-group or one of the not cool, out-groups, is indexed by the Cheer Up ad: "in a relaxed, fun environment with your peers." Peers are that niche where you can feel like you belong even if you're not one of the cool kids, according to Robert Crosnoe (2011). In his recent study of American high school students, *Fitting In, Standing Out*, Crosnoe found that most high school students join or form their own clique if they're not one of the popular kids, and in doing so create a space of belonging for themselves. This is crucial to adapting to the American high school culture, Crosnoe argues, in that it is a critical protective factor in a culture where one is otherwise stigmatized for "not fitting in." Cheer Up appears to be mirroring the high school strategy in an offering of "peers" with similar uncool or outsider characteristics to its clients,[107] and thus the potential for outsider-identity based peer groups later in life.

Cheer Up is thus identifying (or perhaps creating) a commercial market for "treating" a variety of vague and stereotyped reactions that I'm interpreting as identity and performance-oriented anxieties. This panacea is sold through a clever interdiscursive marketing of improv as a

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[106] Emmons explains the self-doctoring drive: "…we are all doctors, or at least dispensers of medical wisdom, in this new age of self-care. Whether we research potential ailments online, note particular pharmaceutical advertisements in favorite magazines or on television, or consult health-care encyclopedias and self-help texts, we are preoccupied not only with our potential self-diagnoses but also in sharing the results of our investigations." (Emmons, 2010, p.3)

[107] This "clique" coping strategy is relevant to the Social Belonging theme of Identity Distress identified in this study.

solution for all sorts of stigma, discomfort, social dysfunction, awkwardness and even disorder and handicap. It offers the opportunity for semi-therapeutic intervention without the clinical stigma and with the benefits of performance skills, a new peer group, and the cultural capital of an additional positive identity as improv performer, albeit one that congregates around social stigma and outsider identity. It offers hope of continuing to improve myself as part of American society's constantly-proliferated anxiety around never being good enough for a career or a partner, where there is no chance for constant security and one must continually self-improve in a self-help climate that creates what McGee (2005) terms "the belabored self.".

We now turn to the ethnography itself, which begins with the figure at the center of SAI, namely, Dan. My first meeting with Dan marks the beginning of my entry into exploring the phenomenon of the course known at Cheer Up as "Social Anxiety Improv." The lack of clarity and murkiness between clinical problems and having fun, therapy and socializing, and the offer of fun as an antidote to identity crises, presented SAI as a fertile opportunity to explore the very murkiness around mental health experience and self-understanding in the US. As much of the practice seemed to be oriented around feeling comfortable with one's identity, I hypothesized that it would be a good field site for exploring distress around identity concerns.

Meeting Dan

Dan's office is quite large, there's a separate entry way room with two goldfish-type displays embedded into the walls. I walk into the office and when I comment that it's "a nice office" he thanks me and says that he thinks the special low lighting is quite nice. "Soothing," I comment. He agrees. He sits behind a big desk. His assistant sits in a comfy stuffed chair in front of it and I sit in another chair like hers in front of the desk.

He peers into a desktop screen, proceeds to ask me “how is that I envision this?” and “what is it that I want to do?” His assistant, who joins us in the meeting, is much easier to talk to about the prospect of my fieldwork in that she’s openly enthusiastic, less probing, and seems to be less searching for some kind of red flag in assessing whether I’m someone he wants to allow to observe his support group. Dan says at one point that he wants to know how I think and he doesn’t want me to misinterpret the program. He expresses that it is clear to him that the work that psychologists at U of C are going to do in studying his program will not be sufficient. He says he is eager for an “anthropological” perspective.”

“Are you a person of anxiety?” He asks. I ask what that means and he explains it as someone who is sensitive to being judged, to the scrutiny of others, to anxiety-inducing situations. His assistant shivers, as if to illustrate and demonstrate, and shares that she had anxiety when we were talking about a particular topic. He asks if there is anything else I want to tell them. I decide to tell them about my challenging experience as a child immigrant to illustrate how I’ve also always been a “person of anxiety.” I do this to align myself with the view that they are expressing around anxiety, and other mental health experiences and diagnoses, as a phenomenon that is discussed openly in the format of the support group they run. The idea was to facilitate my acceptance into the support group by demonstrating that I identify with and understand from my own subjective experience, a key component of support group participation, what it means to be hyper aware of how other people are perceiving and judging you in everyday American life and how uncomfortable it can be. This was not difficult to do nor did it feel inauthentic or forced since from my subjective point of view, anxiety was indeed pervasive and easy to identify with experience for me. Exhibiting an understanding of what it meant to feel like

an outsider, then, seemed like enough to gain entry, along with demonstrating that I understood what it could feel like not to fit into the usual standards of American perfection.

Dan seems curious about what I might contribute to his understanding of anxiety and explains his own in the following way, and this is a position that later got reiterated a number of times to the support group:

> The reason why people have social anxiety, is that we're afraid of being rejected by the tribe. If the tribe doesn't accept us then our chances of survival - possibilities of food, shelter, sex, get diminished big time. People of anxiety are afraid that they won't be accepted but rejected and can't tolerate that outcome.

The assistant leaves a few minutes before I do and he announces that he and I will have a few more minutes to talk before his appointment. It's clear when his next patient arrives because we can hear a chime.

"Very good job, you did well today!" He quips. "As did you!" I echo his half-mirthful tone. There is a separate door through which to exit. A funny moment occurs at the elevators: He walks me out and says, "these elevators cause many of my patients to panic." I look to understand what he is indicating and observe that there are no regular buttons indicating up and down directions on the wall next to the elevator doors—rather there is a main control system in the wall where you punch in the number of the floor you want to go to and it tells you which elevator by number, and there are several, will take you there. "I tell them just let go," he tells me. I miss the first elevator. As I wait for the next, I can hear his voice repeating and echoing "just let go," as he walks off. From the beginning, Dan positioned me almost as a patient in the way that he addressed me—e.g., assuming that I needed to "just let go" – that as I had gained membership as a "person of anxiety" this meant that I would experience the same anxieties as his (other) patients. Throughout my fieldwork I was able to experience what it meant to be taken up

as a “person of anxiety” by Dan and everyone else, in spite of my explicit ethnographic researcher role, which was announced on the first day of class.

“Success Stories” and Social Belonging

Notably, SAI subscribed to a success story model that most closely mimicked the narrative of Hollywood success: that of the beloved entertainer. It coupled this with self-help success stories by celebrating its Wellness course students through their various events and performances on stage. In this way, SAI simultaneously invoked Hollywood success and the self-help genre.

One day, “success stories” were brought into the support group as a kind of show and tell. These success stories were those self-proclaimed “socially anxious” individuals who had successfully become professional or pseudo-professional improvisers and really found a sense of identity and validation through improvisation ostensibly as a result of participating in SAI in the past. These individuals had integrated improv into who they were and were ready to tell their success story to an audience.

For these folks, “improviser” was an important acquired identity and often was narrated as their true, eudaimonic self emerging: according to their narratives, what was perceived to be their identity before was misunderstood or false. Now they could share their true selves and talents with the world. In this way, Cheer Up and SAI elevated a kind of liberation narrative when it comes to turning one’s biggest social anxiety nightmare into a story of successful comedic performance in front of a live audience. I later learned that these individuals were also often part of a speech-making group, which was an additional offering by the same group of therapists and social workers, and they spoke about feeling quite strengthened through the exposures that this group provided, thus applying CBT principles to other self-help practices.

Strategies such as "success stories" were likely employed both for encouragement but as also as a form of advertising because SAI was quite monetarily expensive; for qualifying individuals it was partially funded by insurance but nevertheless there were several complaints among interviewees that it was too brief and expensive.

Regular Improv Classes - Safe Spaces and Hot Spots

Since the SAI students had to take a regular improv course[108] simultaneously with their support group course, I started taking one myself. It helped me to understand better what students were learning alongside the support group classes, as well as demonstrated to Dan that I was serious about doing the study and expedited my entry into the support group. (He had asked me to take these courses as a prerequisite.) The following description of my first improv class experience is meant to help illustrate what improv classes were like at Cheer Up, generally, and the kind of exercises, particularly the naming game and "pass the clap," which were regularly integrated into the support group activities. It also illustrates the awkwardness and performance pressures and the refuges or "safe spaces" and supports from these pressures that are co-constructed in the regular improv as well as generally in the theatre classroom.

My first improv class seemed to me to be a romantic kind of social experiment. I had only taken a few theatre classes in the past, and studying various theatrical forms was part of my participant observation. What was striking to me from the beginning, whether at a major commercialized theatre school, or a private university classroom, was how comfort was constructed between the students and teacher. The invisible contract signed by all had to do with the co-construction of what many term a "safe space." Theatre and social change researchers Nadon and Bowles describe a safe space as: "a process and a working environment in which

[108] This course was slightly modified for students with Social Anxiety, I was also able to take a course with the teacher who normally teaches the SAI students to get a sense of her teaching style.

everyone feels included, respected, and clear about the ‘rules of engagement’ (Nadon and Bowles 2019). In improv classes, the rules of engagement were typically regulated by explicit game-playing rules as in the following field notes excerpt:

> The room is windowless and extremely air-conditioned. There are 8 other students, and we spend the first 40 minutes or more playing theatrical “ice breaking” games. The first several activities just have to do with walking around the room in various directions and responding to each other in pre-assigned ways such as saying “hello as if you’re a pirate.” After several games of moving around in ways that are somewhat directed “don’t move in circles,” “if you make eye contact say hello,” and in other ways that are entirely up to the individual, i.e.,improvised, the focus shifted onto name-learning games. This meant pressure to memorize and many expressed their stress around this pressure. In an exercise such as “make a motion and say your name, then make that motion and repeat somebody else’s name and motion,” already there is the sense of not wanting to let down the group, name-learning is a shared mission, and by all appearances everyone is equally clueless about each other’s names therefore no one wants to single themselves out by failing. Danger of failure is imminent as early as name-learning. A few of the students definitely look scared and apprehensive but giggle throughout. It is improv, after all, and for me and others it came with the expectation that it’s supposed to be funny, it’s supposed to be weird. And that’s supposed to be ok. But according to a scholar like Lauren Berlant, on some level isn’t all interaction awkward, funny, weird? Isn’t all interaction on some level a constant coordination of expectations with the possibility of failure? Communication is so easy to screw up. Perhaps it is therapeutic that the rules of communication are laid out so clearly in improv.
>
> Trust is built because everyone is on equal footing in a shared endeavor and failure of one is failure of all. In fact, failure is often “funny” and in this shared humor there is the allowance for one to fail safely in a shared struggle. It’s funny when it becomes challenging to follow the rules of communication as group members challenge each other yet simultaneously the success of one means the success of all and this collaborative effort results in more of a “laughing with” rather than a “laughing at.” One game, “pass the pulse” or “pass the clap” consists of five rules that the instructor teaches one by one. Each rule adds a layer of complexity, one more practice to remember, and one more element that anyone can spontaneously throw in, so that the number of possible expectations and outcomes increases with each added rule. Thus, the “unexpected” is controlled within a space of the “expected,” and in this way arguably improv does present a potential reprieve for precarity distress, at least as long as the teacher is not too critical.
>
> The final game that we learn is called “Hot Spot.” The teacher explains that on the stage in theatre there is always a hot spot, when someone is up, when the attention is on them. He says that the most important thing about the hot spot is to not allow for abandonment. He throws his arms out and makes a silly grin, as

> if waiting for his friends to help him out on stage and yet they don't. In this way something as painful and feared as "abandonment" is made humorous. It's part of the rules of the game but there is also an emphasis on shared needs, mutuality, comraderie. There is an emphasis on "groupness" here, a shared identity as improvisers-to-be, students with shared goals that can only be achieved with everyone's shared participation. Thus the social contract is formed on Day 1.[109] (Fieldnotes, Cheer Up, 2016)

In the Social Anxiety Improv "bootcamp" support group that I observed and participated in, there was a combination of improv games, cognitive behavioral therapy lessons, and support group sharing along the lines of a classic "Hello, my name is X and I have a problem" model in which individuals bond over a shared problem in a confessional format of group solidarity and group identification. One theme that emerged in post-college life for Social Anxiety Improv students was the pressure to be interesting and engaging in various competitive work and social environments. For those who are not comfortable being performers or loquacious conversationalists, situations with "pressure to perform for others" such as in high pressure corporate settings, can be experienced as quite troubling. The Social Anxiety Improv bootcamp students whose support group class I had the opportunity to observe had a deep fear of these situations which required impressing others, whether it was at a business presentation, a large social gathering, or one-on-one interactions such as dates. For these individuals according to their own descriptions of why they were involved in improv in the first place, not being interesting or impressive or engaging enough meant complete isolation, failure, and possibly total social or professional death, i.e., their version of social defeat (Luhrmann, 2007).

This class was the first of many that I would attend. In total, I attended the level 1 and 2 classes at Cheer Up and a level 1 class at another local improv venue which was newer and lesser known than Cheer Up but of high local repute as well. My overall observations from taking the

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[109] This name game is the kind of activity that happens at the top of most improv classes and a similar kind of name game happens at the top of Neofuturist classes.

classes and then socializing with students at the popular bar outing afterwards provided an understanding of the culture around improv and the primarily middle class adults who choose to enroll in improv classes. What I discovered was that at least a fifth of students were there to "get out of their heads," to work on their social and/or public speaking skills in some way, to work on making themselves more easily extroverted, to meet people, and to enrich the boring, mundane quality of their 9-5 lives. Where then does this idea of improv as self-help, therapy, and coping for this idiom of distress come from?

Some companies explicitly market improv as a method for coping with "get of your head" syndrome. For example, todayimprov.com offers:

> "How do I get out of my head?" This is the question that, in my experience, improvisors ask the most. I've asked it. Most everyone has.
> How do I get out of my head? Here's my simple answer: you can't. You're in your head every single day. That's where we spend most of the time. Your brain and ego want to control your actions. That's why it's hard at times to improvise. Your brain and ego take over and say, "I don't want to do this. I'm not good at this. Please tell me the answer and the steps first. The unknown is scary." Your soul wants to play. Follow your soul. Don't freak out, there is hope. Here are a few ways you can help with that feeling. Remember, when you're in your head, you're not in the present moment and space.

With pop psychology and a hint of spirituality woven into the discourse, improvisation is offered as a way "out" by this Los Angeles-based company. They offer improv training and coaching for "actors," "business," and "everyone else" perhaps by "following your soul" into what sounds like their interpretation of presence or *perezhivania*.

Along with "everyone else," at Cheer Up, there were also students who sought to be professional or semi-professional entertainers, stand-up comics, improvisers, actors, etc. but from speaking to level 1 students in particular, only about a quarter or even less of the ones who took classes at Cheer Up (this fluctuated of course) had such ambitions. (These proportions flipped completely for Level 2.) Still, it was evident from the existential rants in bars afterwards that Cheer Up had tapped into a market of self-improving white collar professionals who were

uncertain, confused, and seeking to better fit a workplace culture (often corporate) and other high pressure, image-oriented social situations in which they felt they did not adequately measure up.

Relevant to our investigation are previous findings on successful humor production as a means to success in workplace and other highly image-monitoring environments in the US. Researchers of workplace success have studied ideal levels of "self-monitoring humor production" in the American workplace (Turner 1980), demonstrating the pressure on individuals in the contemporary American office space to incorporate entertainment skills into their face-work. As will become evident from the analysis on Cheer Up, for shy individuals and those prone to social anxiety, this humor production pressure can present an additional performance challenge and source of distress around one's identity processes.

Identity Anxiety in Everyday Interactions for SAI Students

SAI students were individuals who had explicitly chosen to be a part of a pseudo-clinical version of improv as a mental health treatment. SAI instructors explained that even the most seemingly basic interactive exercises could prove to be challenging for individuals with anxiety and the course was designed with this in mind. For example, one SAI exercise was to have a conversation in which you have to repeat aloud the last statement that your interlocutor made before you formulate your response.

The idea, as explained by the teachers, was to force SAI students to listen to what their interlocuter was saying instead of anxiously planning their responses in advance while their interlocuter was still talking, a common behavior of social anxiety as identified by CBT. Creating new rules for face-work in which interlocutors were given extra time to consider each other's sentences constructed a space where greater social and interactive success was possible

for these individuals. They had a greater chance of interesting each other simply by doing a better job of expressing interest in each other.

The ability or skill to just go with it, the "yes and" philosophy and ability to create extemporaneously, is certainly practiced in these classrooms. For socially anxious individuals, "yes and" philosophy and practice were presented as skills that can be beneficial for adapting to modern workplace and other social contexts where they may feel uncertain about the most successful route to interaction – according to self-report and follow up interviews, this was helpful to some individuals, particularly those who adopted a more playful and less serious attitude to their everyday life interactions. As for the support group, it helped, according to self-report, those individuals who were able to share about their experiences of social anxiety continually with each other. Overall from their descriptions, it helped them cope with a sense of isolation, spoiled identity, and disconnect that they might have in their anxiety experiences and which they typically were not able to discuss comfortably with anyone in their lives.

SAI students were both patients and consumers, and this vague combination seemed to make them both more vulnerable and simultaneously less convinced and committed to attending "class." The majority of SAI interviewees, with a few exceptions, expressed in interviews that they did not "trust" Dan. They said that he was "unprofessional," and several cited an incident that made them deeply uncomfortable. The incident in question happened during a check-in during one of the first few classes, when a moody, outspoken middle-aged white man, Rod, muttered that he wanted to kill himself. Everyone appeared to hear him, as concerned facial expressions were immediately visible but the head therapist, Dan, just looked at him calmly with his usual cheery demeanor, seemed to take it in stride, and kept talking as if nothing had happened. This erasure, this lack of verbal acknowledgement or discussion around Rod's

mention of suicidal ideation on the part of Dan the clinician was something that reverberated back in angry, frustrated responses during my one-on-one interviews with SAI students. For several students it was the ultimate proof that Dan was unqualified as a therapist, “unprofessional,” and did not know how to run a proper support group, that he had failed to take care of Rod and everyone else at the time. Here was a moment when this hybrid therapy-improv activity came apart in being incapable of supporting a more profound suffering, subjectivity and vulnerability when it was expressed and in this case did surface. In this way, SAI did not entirely succeed as a “safe space” either clinically or in performance discourse since the rules of engagement were not comprehensively enough defined and made explicit particularly when it came to individual narratives that didn’t fit within the vocabulary or discourse of the curriculum.

The incident and lack of clarity around the rules of engagement also demonstrated how vastly different the students were in their degrees and types of suffering, reasons for coming to SAI, and experiences with previous mental health interventions as well as performance and theatrical classes. While a few had been referred by therapists, others had been looking to try regular improv to enhance their social interaction skills or make friends and then saw the ad for SAI on the improv venue’s website and decided that it might be a good match for their needs.

While there was a theme in complaints about Dan’s professionalism from a number of students, there were other clinicians managing the group about whom there were no such complaints. Components of this practice were described as helpful in the self-reports within the support group and in a number of the interviewees in their one-on-one narratives, particularly the social support and the literalization of dramaturgical metaphors such as “yes, and.” The majority of the individuals who found a benefit in SAI, described to me that they would want it to have

more continuity (it only lasted two months) so as to have a place to go to and a continuous community to belong to.

Everyone I spoke to was looking to find friends and to enhance their social support networks. Socializing outside of class was highly encouraged by the group facilitators and everyone was on an active email list where individuals could invite each other to events, organize get-togethers, and stay in touch. This open-ended friend and socializing aspect seemed somewhat successful in that it allowed students to make friends who they continued to see after the group ended (although certain awkward extra-group encounters were recounted in interviews as well) and it was also questionable at times to other students who were expecting a more traditional mental health support group structure which maintains rigid privacy boundaries. SAI was thus questioned by many students regarding its levels of professionalism as a mental health treatment in a variety of ways. As a hybrid phenomenon between mental health treatment and comedy training, parsing it was not straightforward for its participants.

There were also discrepancies in what the students thought the class was and how it matched their own various official and unofficial diagnoses – some thought it was just meant for generalized anxiety, while others thought that maybe they had social anxiety but they weren't really sure—Dan surveyed this expressed uncertainty during class. "Would you want to take Improv for Panic Disorder? What about Improv for Depression?" For Dan this was ostensibly an opportunity to generate more classes and clients. He could accommodate a greater range of conditions in the future, imagining improvisation and CBT as a kind of cure-all for the varieties of disorder proffered by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual.

This ambiguity around what exactly is being treated is what Kimberly Emmons terms "strategic imprecision" when describing discursive practices around depression (Emmons, 2010).

> Self-doctoring practices emerge as natural responses to the discourse's fuzzy definitions. (Emmons, 2010, p. 64)

SAI is certainly an example of a self-doctoring practice where individuals usually elect to sign up in an ambiguous effort at self-diagnosis and treatment, and Dan is facilitating and appealing to the "self-doctoring drive" that leads individuals to take up such practices with his enterprise. Emmons argues that "Situating depression as both normality and dysfunction, the discourse simultaneously supports two opposing understandings of the illness: that it is a severe medical condition ("clinical depression") and that it is a common emotional experience ("the blues")" (Emmons, 2010, p. 64). This observation holds true for social anxiety in how it is envisioned by SAI where everyone in society is implied to potentially be a person of anxiety and perhaps it's just a matter of admitting it. In fact, Debra Hope explains at the start of her workbook about social anxiety that "If you are like most people, you have had many such experiences" (Hope, 2010, p. 1).

Hope does provide a distinction between normal and severe social anxiety grounded in DSM logic: for some individuals social anxiety makes them truly miserable and is debilitating, thus it's a question of severity, which is why "SUDS" or Subjective Units of Distress, demonstrated in practice throughout this chapter, are so important to her theory. The act and metaphor of measurement implies containment and scientific control in opposition to irrationality and chaos: "Like Susan, we are going to ask you to become a rational scientist and analyze what your ATs really mean." (Hope, 2010, p. 4)

However, measurement, and the role of the self as an objective, rational scientist measuring and correcting for one's flawed subjective experience through one's subjective observations, is inherently paradoxical and perhaps impossible to fully parse. In the case of measuring "SUDS" (as well as the above-mentioned "AT's" explained in detail in the next

section) the strategic imprecision lies also in the subjective-objective ambiguity: at which point does the flawed subjectivity end and the rational objectivity begin? The distancing metaphor is evident but how to make sense of reality and of oneself as scientist versus sufferer, of the experience of illness and its severity if one is in a role play that both necessarily fragments and pathologizes one's thought production while enabling the role and discourse of scientist of the self? Further, in her examples, Hope focuses on the audience as the objective measure of one's flawed reality judgments, once more putting into question the self as a rational scientist. This paradox and at times incoherence in Hope's theory can foster a similar kind of paradox and incoherence in SAI students when they fully engage with it and implement it discursively; this will be evident in the case study of Zainab in the latter half of the chapter.

Social Anxiety Improv Bootcamp

The following sections detail the practices and structures of SAI and provide a glimpse into how it operated at the level of the group through annotated fieldwork excerpts.

Class Structure

The bootcamp class was held in a formal hospital wing on the 14th floor of a downtown skyscraper and organized in the following way: The facilitators usually started by having the "check in" which meant everyone sits in a circle of chairs and takes turns sharing a high point and a low point from their week. I was typically included in the high-sharing, which included a large variety of things like family events, dates, work-related incidents, etc. The check-in is usually followed by the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) lessons of the day, which are based in the workbook *Managing Social Anxiety, Workbook: A Cognitive-Behavioral Theory Approach* by Debra Hope (Hope et al., 2010), that all of the students are supposed to have a copy of and be following along with. *Managing Social Anxiety* involves a series of lessons about

cognitive distortions that individuals with social anxiety are likely to experience. Cognitive distortions or “thinking errors” are defined in Hope’s workbook as “the problems of logic that characterize many AT’s.” (Hope et al., 2010, p. 6) AT’s stand for “Automatic Thoughts” which Hope defines as “negative or irrational thoughts about oneself, the world, and the future.” (Hope et al., 2010, p. 6) Thinking errors which gave away the illogical nature of AT’s include “All or Nothing Thinking,” “Mind Reading,” “Fortune Telling,” “Catastrophizing,” “Disqualifying the Positive,” “Emotional Reasoning,” “’Should’ Statements,” and “Unproductive and Unhelpful Thoughts.” These various AT’s were discussed and referred to by the instructors often throughout lessons, as the idea proposed by Hope is to gain a new perspective, what she terms “cognitive restructuring” by identifying these logic errors in one’s thinking patterns. Notice these labels and the distancing mechanism that the embedded metaphor allows. This labeling activity allows the anxious individual to distance from their anxious thinking as an observably flawed and therefore “fixable” process.

The CBT lesson is typically followed by a few improv exercises up on our feet, which typically include the games Pass-the-Clap, Punch-Blast-Kick, and a few other improv games that are more anxiety focused, like a “small talk” exercise for example where students are asked to pick someone in the room and make small talk. Class is usually wrapped up by a last bit of sitting in the circle of chairs and having further discussions and CBT lessons on the whiteboard. As “Managing Social Anxiety” has quite a bit of material, there is an effort made on the facilitator’s part to cover as much as possible within a relatively short period of time, meaning 8 classes. A typical ending of class is to talk about the planned exposures for the week. These exposures are at the heart of SAI, based on the assumptions of “exposure therapy” or desensitization theory. Desensitization theory, first conceived by Joseph Wolpe in 1958 and still

popular among cognitive behavioral psychologists, postulates that continual exposures to the feared stimulus will decrease the fear response. In Wolpe's terms: "Reciprocal inhibition is a process of relearning whereby in the presence of a stimulus a non-anxiety-producing response is continually repeated until it extinguishes the old, undesirable response" (Wolpe, 1958, p. 1).

In contemporary psychological terms it is described a bit differently. Exposure therapy, as defined by The American Psychological Association is

> a psychological treatment that was developed to help people confront their fears. When people are fearful of something, they tend to avoid the feared objects, activities, or situations. Although this avoidance might help reduce feelings of fear in the short term, over the long term it can make the fear become even worse. In such situations, a psychologist might recommend a program of exposure therapy in order to help break the pattern of avoidance and fear. In this form of therapy, psychologists create a safe environment in which to "expose" individuals to the things they fear and avoid. The exposure to the feared objects, activities, or situations in a safe environment helps reduce fear and decrease avoidance. (https://www.div12.org/)

Dan structured SAI around the avoidance model of exposure therapy. For example, when students showed up late, this was a confirmation of them as avoidant, socially anxious individuals staying away from the scary exposure that he assumed participation in SAI was for them. He often would get everyone to clap when someone was late, in a recognition of having beat the anxiety. Another example of this was when we were asked to state words for failing (e.g., "I suck" "I failed.") which were then written on the board. We then went around in a circle saying these expressions of failure out loud and then clapping for each other. When we went around to each individual person, the instructions were to say something aloud about failing that you've said to yourself. When I said "I'm a failure," there was a resounding round of cheering and applause. I experience a strange sense of comradery at that moment: it was something we shared, it was an admission that might be stigmatized in another context but was celebrated here as a successful moment of exposure.

Based on exercises like this one, Dan's expressed theory of the causality of social anxiety is that of a fear of "being cast out from the tribe." His understanding of his clients' fears as an overall fear of rejection from society is not without basis. In my view, the fears are more subtle and specifically related to societal inequities and stigma concerns as well as to their individual identity statuses and objectives. Based on their self-reports during group sessions and one-on-one interviews, it appears that participants are experiencing various forms of a fear of social defeat or fear of an encounter where one is rejected or "fails" in some way and is thus "inferior"(Steele, 1990).

Luhrmann (2007) built on Steele and Aronson's theory of stereotype threat, which was based on research with African American individuals, to understand how stereotype threat, "the threat of possibly being judged and treated stereotypically, or of possibly self-fulfilling such a stereotype" (Steele and Aronson, 1995, p. 798) works in encounters with homeless individuals. "This threat can befall anyone with a group identity about which some negative stereotype exists, and for the person to be threatened in this way, he need not even believe the stereotype" (Steele and Aronson, 1995, p. 798).

> Stigma can be understood as an internalized correlate of social defeat (Corrigan 1998; Goffman 1963), but the stigma must be activated in an encounter to generate the emotional experience of loss, the phenomenon Steele and Aronson (1995) call "stereotype threat." Social defeat is not so much an idea that someone holds but a human encounter—an important distinction, because to alter individuals' ideas you can use psychotherapy, but to alter their encounters, you must change their social world. (Luhrmann, 2007, p. 152)

Luhrmann identified particular idioms of speech that tended to signify inferiority to these individuals. In understanding the way participants in the present study experienced what I'm terming identity threat, I'm further building on these theories of stereotype threat. The participants in the present study occupied a range of identity positions and their particular stigma

concerns at times were hooked into broader stereotype threats, which influenced their distress experiences and processes. SAI classes consisted of relatively diverse groups of mostly middle class individuals of a variety of races, ages, genders, religions, cultural, and educational backgrounds.

Thus while they might have experienced stereotype threats in their everyday life which contributed to their distress, those experiences were specific to their identity categories and were generally not shared with other group members. Yet they often expressed identifying with each other's experiences of anxiety and fear of failure in social interactions. Their shared idioms of distress were constructed around expressions like "I'm a failure" which were summoned by Debra Hope's CBT language of "cognitive errors" in thinking about how others would perceive them. They fit neatly into the "get out of my head" movement in that their cognitive processes were understood as flawed and overloaded by negative thoughts that they were generating on over-drive. Group members described a sense of relief and connection, or in the language of the present study, greater face-ease, with the others in being able to identify with these shared so-called social imperfections in not living up to the image of an ideal, constantly positive mindset, i.e.,cognitive errors and distortions as described by Hope in their social anxiety workbook and taught by group facilitators during lessons. Notably, these lessons were taught without critique and fully took for granted the metaphor of the participants' minds as a flawed machine.

This lack of social-cultural or historical discernment of discrimination and trauma-related suffering was evident in specific individual stereotype threat experiences. These experiences would find their way into sharing sessions and group discussions and were interpreted by group members as well as group facilitators as nothing more than examples of social anxiety. Thus more category-specific experiences were listened to, empathized with, and all indiscriminately

categorized together as “social anxiety.” Their specific identity threat experiences were grouped together as an overlying clinical problem and a category capacious enough to fit everyone’s worries and problems. To assume that they all belonged to one “tribe” meant overlooking all the underlying tensions in identity dynamics, stigma, emotional labor, and face-work in everyday American life. Yet some of the base discomfort, challenges, and feelings of inferiority were shared and this allowed for some experience of at least temporary “groupness” if overly broad and thus potentially unsatisfying as a long-term solution.

Individual challenges were both expressed, highlighted and simultaneously lumped into a monolithic pathology. While this pathology was on the individual to fix, the unnamed potential problems of systemic racism, sexism, ageism, etc. were tapped into as a result. Individuals would discuss their specific fears in sharing sessions and the very encouragement by facilitators of SAI students to socialize outside of class, pointed towards a need for acceptance of one as “normal.” Thus face-easing practices were unofficially embedded in the emails full of informal social gathering invitations that were sent out to all of the students. Unofficial social outings and get-togethers were not taken up by all, but those who did told me in interviews that these were opportunities for socializing they may not have had otherwise.

One interviewee who sought a more typical, structured, and clinical group reported finding this practice of encouraging socializing as unprofessional and strange. This interviewee was onto something in that SAI existed in a paradoxical hybrid of diagnosing its students as disordered, attempting to fix their social skills, and identified pathologies through a behavioral model of human development, and simultaneously, unofficially, offering them an alternative social context through the opportunity of these outings. While I didn’t attend most of these get-togethers, as the spaces I was occupying as a non-clinician and non-patient already felt

incredibly delicate to me, I did learn about individuals' experiences of them from interviews. In particular, it seemed that the regular bar and restaurant outings were quite important for some students as a source of social life. One middle-aged interviewee even described a potential romantic entanglement with another student that didn't work out; nevertheless, the group sessions in their confessional, sharing formats about anxiety experiences, appeared to allow for an increased face-ease outside of the formal class setting for some students and crucially outside of their other everyday contexts.

Points of personal commonality were further emphasized in class by the instructors who would usually talk about themselves "as a person of anxiety" as this shared membership and normalization of anxiety-thinking was a key part of the ethos. During the second session of SAI, the instructor, who is both a social worker and experienced improv performer, tells the story of her own anxiety before an audition for Cheer Up. "The stats are that 20 percent of the people in the room won't like you. That makes my anxiety higher" (Fieldnotes, Cheer Up, 2016). There were attempts both to normalize and, paradoxically, to pathologize "social anxiety" by the instructors. While the sharing of one's stories and speaking about being anxious was presented as a norm within the boundaries of the class, the barometer for anxiety intensity (measured in SUD's) as well as the hybrid of mindfulness and CBT expressions around "shutting down your monkey brain," were generally pathologizing in presenting anxiety as a malfunction to be monitored and corrected. This echoes the paradoxical rhetoric of Bipolar Support Groups in the US (Weiner, 2011).

Both clinical and colloquial pathologies were drawn upon as further common identifiers of shared group belonging. While "I suck" is not necessarily a stigma or stereotype threat category, it does invoke the feared, undesirable category of the self-loathing individual with low

self-esteem, or simply the undesirable, vernacular American “loser” or “failure” category. This category is more amorphous, as the failure could manifest in a variety of unexpected ways and therefore is perhaps especially terrifying in that the individual doesn’t know when their own self-doubt may sabotage a social encounter and cause social defeat. This lack of trust in one’s agency and control over one’s insecurities and thereby one’s success in social encounters, as well as a lack of control over one’s insecurities as unruly symptoms in how they manifest is a self-perpetuating cycle for the individuals observed and interviewed in SAI. These self-perpetuating symptom cycles are in alignment with the “catastrophic cognitions” perspective of panic in various psychocultural understandings of it where fear of symptoms (whether somatic or cognitive) can lead to panic attacks (Hinton and Good, 2009). As the self-sabotaging expressions were recognizable in group sessions, there was a notable communion over the achievement of saying such feared pronouncements aloud in front of others and relating to the fears expressed. Indeed the approval in a group setting of the confession of self-evaluative failure seemed to diminish and normalize it to some extent.

The unfolding of the bootcamp progressed in a varied manner. There were two different SAI groups, each with their own support group class time, one on Tuesday and one on Thursday evenings. I attended both. Attendance was extremely variable -- there were around 10 people enrolled in the Thursday class and 6 in the Tuesday one but attendance fluctuated in both classes so much that there was one day when only one student attended. Based on the self-report of about half of the students, this did in part seem to be a reflection of the fact that attending class was indeed itself experienced as a huge “exposure.”

SAI (Social Anxiety Improv) Support Group Excerpts

The following are annotated fieldwork excerpts from the Thursday SAI support group. First, I present an annotated excerpt from week 2, followed by analysis and then an annotated excerpt from week 6, followed by a second analysis.

Week 2

This excerpt begins towards the second half of class after the participants have shared their weekly highs and lows and finished an improv game. Note the group narrative as it is co-constructed throughout. While I argue that the underlying shared challenges of this group are relatable face-work, emotional work, and stigma concerns, SAI facilitators anchor the construction of the narrative around shared symptoms. CBT focuses on distorted and problematic thinking patterns of social anxiety. Each group member is given a CBT workbook, Managing Social Anxiety: A Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy Approach (Hope et al., 2010) and assigned reading in it regularly which correspond to the lessons discussed in class. Anna, the group facilitator and instructor, a trained social worker and experienced improviser,[110] states that she has anxiety of repeating herself which heightens her anxiety. On the board, she writes:

Intensity
SUDS [Subjective Units of Distress]
0 l----l-----------------l 100
20

Anna explains that "In class you should push this to 30, 40, 50, even to 60." Several students take turns sharing recent anxiety experiences with the class, in some cases giving indicators of their anxiety levels in SUDS.

[110] This combination of experiences in the group facilitators and instructors, was key for structuring the hybridity of SAI: instructors built on their backgrounds in both improv and therapy or social work in order to teach and build SAI as a practice and set of relatable understandings. Thus they often used examples from their own life experiences with both anxiety and improv, sometimes simultaneously, to help build this simultaneously normalizing and pathologizing hybridity.

In a display of catastrophic cognitions around a specific panic symptom (Hinton and Good, 2009), Troy, a lean African American man in his 30's wearing a suit, pulls a white handkerchief out of his coat pocket:

> I always have this handkerchief. I have it for social and public speaking. Because the truth is I always have all this embarrassment and feel this scrutiny around sweating. I just, start to sweat and I can't control it. I can't always predict it and it's super frustrating. I'm worried that people will think I'm not confident, not cool enough. As if there's a strobe light to my thoughts...the truth is nobody who knows me would guess I'm here.

Troy displays an identity anxiety of not being able to maintain the line of being "cool" and "confident" around his profuse sweat as a symptom and reveals his sense of inauthenticity and unease in certain professional and social contexts with a terrifying "strobe light to his thoughts." As Majors and Billsen (1993) established, in the maintenance of "cool" there is much at stake for black male identity. "Cool pose" is a deeply fraught position in its frequent inauthenticity with one's emotional experience:

> Striving for masculinity presents dilemmas for the black male because it is so often grounded in masking strategies that rest on denial and suppression of deep feelings. On the one hand, cool pose embodies the kaleidoscopic brilliance of the black male self. People are drawn to the power of the cool black male because he epitomizes control, strength, and pride. (Majors and Billson, 1993, p. 2)

The sweat threatens to sabotage the performance or at least expectation of coolness elicited by Troy's phenotype and likely a practice of "moderate blackness, a strategy of emotional restraint" (Wilkins, 2012, p.58), among middle class black men in white dominant environments who work to subvert stereotypes of angry, violent, black men – fitting the violent black male stereotype both historically and currently prominent in the United States (Conwill, 2010). Winters presents an image of "black fatigue" of the cycle of racial stereotypes: "…the picture that is painted of the Black man in America has not changed much since slavery—that of a scary, threatening, criminal, less-than-human menace to society," citing that at least 25% of men of color report

being on guard in the workplace. (Winters, 2020) Grier and Cobbs (1968/2000) argue in *Black Rage* that the psychology of being enslaved continues to do harm and to create a certain kind of person:

> To be a bondsman was to experience a psychological development very different from the master's. Slavery required the creation of a particular kind of person, one *compatible* with a life of involuntary servitude. The ideal slave had to be absolutely dependent and have a deep consciousness of personal inferiority.

Face-work and the guarantee of social defeat during interaction is thus ingrained historically for African Americans like Troy, with stereotype threat as a consistent obstacle in both academic and professional settings (Steele and Aronson 1995; Robeson et al., 2002). Wilkins (2012) offers that middle class Black men engage in emotional and identity work to secure their success in white settings through performances of themselves as easygoing, sophisticated, mature, and apolitical. Troy's stigma concern of being in an anxiety support group is evident, "nobody who knows me would guess I'm here"[111] indicating that his very presence in the group could betray the truth about how false his appearance of cool and confidence feels to him. After Troy shares, Becca normalizes the embarrassing symptom aspect of his experience:

> That reminds me of a girl who couldn't control her blushing. She would get all these splotches on her chest and she'd get all these scarves to cover it.

Then Sally, a white female takes her turn to share her story. Like Troy's, it turns out to be one of failing at self-image actualization, a failing to become what is expected for her identity:

> I'm 23 – this is supposed to be the time of my life. My anxiety attacks started in middle school, parents were in an awful marriage.

[111] Significantly, Troy's participation only lasted for three classes. It seems his confession and the threat to his stigma of staying in a potentially stigmatized mental health group for too long was too risky for maintaining his cool and confident image.

She goes on to describe her fears of others' evaluations, from her mother to anyone who might judge her. Sally then laments her failure to self-image actualize in the way she (and ostensibly her parents and society based on her age, background, and abilities) imagines she should:

> …I know I have so much more potential. My SUDS are often at an 80. I'm emotionally depressed. My hands shake, I sweat, I want to cry…I was going to be a teacher but I'm not in the program anymore and I'm not sure what will happen.

For Sally, "not being in the program anymore" appears to be a kind of social defeat. She had a competitive, self-actualization aspiration, she got into an educational program that would allow her to attain a career status she was seeking, but she wasn't able to finish the program successfully. This identity defeat in finishing school and achieving the identity of teacher appears to be unbearable for her psychologically and her suffering is emphasized by physical symptoms: "My hands shake, I sweat, I want to cry."

To Sally's story, Anna responds with: "It's that fear of not knowing what will happen..." Troy adds, relating his own struggle to the pretense of image and expectations: "People will try to tell you what you are like, what you feel like." Many of these students struggled over attaining self-image as imposed by societal standards of success[112]. At this point, Rod, a 40-something white man, turns to Troy in his own fraught acknowledgement and confirmation of the social importance of cool pose, and makes what appears to be a complicated attempt at communion over catastrophic cognitions and symptoms:

> Whoah man, from the beginning I thought you were a [dead] ringer, I was going to wave my white flag!

---

[112] The focus on self-image actualization rather than self-actualization, especially as Perls (1969) described it as the actualization of not oneself but of a self-concept, is problematic, and even more so when it is about an amorphous stigma concern, a broad-ranging identity threat category in which both you and an evaluating outsider (i.e., Sally's educational program) have deemed you a failure.

Rod's response appears to be an attempt at a shared recognition of the struggle and discomfort around living up to image expectations of so-called authentic gender, racial, and emotion expression. The submissive defeat indicated by "wave my white flag" in relation to the maintenance of cool, combined with "I thought you were a ringer," invokes metaphors of masculine combat and passing as socially and emotionally well. Troy nodded, appearing to take Rod's statement as a point of communion over shared masculine pressures and anxieties.

Anna then attempts to weave in Dan's anxiety theory about clan belonging into the emerging group narrative around shared fears. "We have this fear of social death, that if we're not accepted, we won't get food, sex, etc." Then Maya, an Asian female in her 20's, relates another example of the kind of social fears targeted by Debra Hope's curriculum and SAI:

> I've been going through it [social anxiety] most of my life, it [social anxiety] started when I officiated volleyball and had to do public speaking....

Then Anna continues, integrating Hope's theory of the necessity of confronting anxiety head-on through exposures:

> Let's make space for the anxiety rather than fight it. Now I want you to pair off and work together to find exposures for the week.

Debra Hope builds up to exposures to regularly facing "situations that make you anxious" (Hope et al., 2010, p.1) as regular homework in her workbook and in SAI this notion of exposures-as-homework is implemented to have students hold each other accountable. The students pair off and consult with one another about their exposures for several minutes. [113] Then we reconvene. The students share their planned weekly exposures one by one:

> SAM, 30's white male: "For me it's all about procrastination. I'm going to pick up my music theory books this week. I've been avoiding them, I'm a perfectionist."

[113] As someone who was understood not actually to be a student of SAI but a researcher, exposures were something I did not participate in.

ROD: "I'm going to submit that job application."

Several others talk about their planned exposures. Max, a white male in his 30's, creates a goal that appears more shared and which emphasizes acceptance and ease rather than actualization and work:

> MAX: My goal is less negative thinking. I relate to Sally being uncomfortable with certain topics. We're all too hard on ourselves. There's an app I like called headspace.
>
> TROY: My plan is to display profuse sweating in a public place, a bar. <u>I'm going to go running first so that I show up to the bar already sweaty…You know our challenges are so distinct, yet we're all in the same bucket.</u> This is a learning and growth opportunity for me."
>
> SALLY: I'm going to say "yes" when people want to hang out. We do a great job of feedback [here] and helping each other out.

Another student, Zainab, tearfully echoes Sally's sentiment after class when speaking with the instructor. "I'm 24 and this is supposed to be the time of my life." Whatever age the students were at, and several were upwards of a decade or two more than Sally and Zainab, the common theme that emerged was that they were not living or enjoying their lives as they thought they should be; they were not living up to their ideal self-images of happiness and found this distressing. The comradery emergent over shared challenges and perceived inadequacies, likely stigmatizing in other spaces, came through as a source of perceived empowerment.

"We're all in the same bucket," declared Troy in response to the others' narratives. His story in particular is a singularly powerful example of how keeping the line can be explicitly aimed at cultural expectations and stigmas which in his case are racialized. Notably, this integral sociocultural component of anxiety process and experience is overlooked in the CBT trifecta proposed by Hope of behavioral, physiological, and cognitive components of anxiety (Hope et al., 2010) which overlooks the importance of taking account race and intersectionality in clinical

settings (Conwill, 2015) as well as psychocultural expectations of emotion expression such as cool pose.

> The essence of cool is to appear in control, whether through a fearless style of walking, an aloof facial expression, the clothes you wear, a haircut, your gestures or the way you talk. The cool pose shows the dominant culture that you are strong and proud, despite your status in American society. (Majors and Billson, 1992, [no pagination])

Troy's "hot" sweat symptom is particularly antithetical to "the cool pose" for African American males as it threatens rather than maintains the image of being in control. His handkerchief acts as a literalized protective "emotional shield" (Majors and Billson, 1992) and compensates where his physiology fails. Troy's complex relationship to his expressed fear of failing to achieve a cool demeanor during casual social encounters is understandable. While it can be expressive and powerful as a status statement and coping strategy, it also has dire psychosocial consequences for African Americans (Majors and Billsen, 1992; Wilkens, 2012) . Jackson (2017) likens Black men's emotion suppression to the "surface acting" described by Arlie Hoshchild (1983/2012):

> …we can understand Black men's work to evoke a sense of emotional detachment, while suppressing feelings of vulnerability as emotion management. (Jackson, 2017, p. 4)

Jackson (2017) also suggests that middle class Black men in white dominated environments are burdened with an additional effort of emotional work in order to mitigate stereotypes and to "…ignore, trivialize, and reinterpret everyday racism." (Wilkins, 2012, p. 58) From his account, Troy did not feel a sense of identification, authenticity, or perezhivania with coolness, or with the expectations of his white peers, and yet felt the pressure to perform and maintain an invulnerable image in order to avoid social failure and achieve self-image actualization during everyday interactions. This meant masking his sweat symptom, even creating the self-effacing goal of working out in order to achieve cool pose, as otherwise the symptom could be interpreted as

indicating a harmful vulnerability to himself as what Wilkins (2012) describes as an "upwardly mobile Black man."

Troy's tensions aligned with those of Cheer Up: improv through SAI offers a path for the maintenance of "cool" in face-work through a simultaneous trivializing and dramatizing of one's anxiety experience and importantly, an erasure of identity concerns as a critical factor. Troy knew that his anxiety might manifest externally as sweat at any moment and this in itself created a heightened sense of unpredictability. He was thus always prepared. The handkerchief allowed him to both trivialize and hide the sweat (the anxiety), which for him was in a literalized iconic relationship revealing his failure at coolness. Yet could he trivialize the handerkerchief itself and more importantly everything that it was intended to conceal?

Based on Troy's explanations of the handkerchief in Group, it helped erase the implications of uncontrollable and socially unattractive outpourings of sweat. Yet the handkerchief was also a constantly present indicator of the threat itself; likely retrieving it could also trigger Troy to sweat or to sweat more. For the fear of the symptom itself and his complete lack of control over its arrival and quantity was by his account overwhelming: how to control this threat to his well-curated image as a cool guy among his co-workers? His idea, however, was not exactly to expose himself to his fear in a new way through a "yes, and" or "it's not that serious" attitude whenever the sweat appeared. Rather than addressing the underlying anxiety, his approach was to experiment with a new method of masking the symptom: if he went for a run and showed up at a bar afterwards, then he'd have a socially acceptable explanation for being sweaty.

Week 2 Analysis

The Week 2 excerpt exposed the complex range of sociocultural tensions and expectations that are not directly addressed by CBT and surface during group discussions of anxiety. Working

out only reinforced Troy's apparent push to demonstrate a cool, confident and strong African American masculinity and yet the techniques of SAI only provided attention to the symptomology and its apparent illogical and neurologically faulty nature according to CBT philosophy; SAI facilitators paid no attention to the sociocultural and historical elements which were arguably a key component of Troy's suffering. Similar personal accounts of physiological responses and worried thinking patterns allowed the participants to bond over a shared experience, while leaving the sociocultural aspects of the process such as frequent stigma concerns as emergent and yet rhetorically unrecognized components.

Socioculturally-specific narratives such as Troy's concern around gender and racial display or Zainab and others' fears of not living up to societal age and happiness standards were expressed aloud but not dealt with by facilitators. This neglect occurs either because of a lack of sociocultural training and understanding, or because of the influence of popular American discourse in which these culturally rich narrative expressions are set aside as the messy babble of the "monkey brain," a popular self-help metaphor for demoting the role of certain kinds of thoughts and actions to irrational, primitive, or unnecessarily negative thinking. Imaginings of this distancing metaphor are varied depending on the self-help movement and self-landscape it is mapped onto whether it's survival-oriented brain regions or self-absorbed mental obstacles to enlightened spirituality[114]. In the case of SAI at Cheer Up, it indicated a realm of irrational thoughts and behaviors to correct with CBT which typically meant setting them aside as

[114] The monkey brain metaphor indicates a busy-bodied, self-judging ego in American Buddhism-based mindfulness discourse, while stress-management metaphors imagine the monkey brain as an irrational mess of stress signals wired for a basic survival mode that is unhelpful to modern human functioning. It depends on the source and they are far-ranging. For example, according to Heidi Hanna, director of the American Institute of Stress, i.e.,"The Stress Detective," the topology of our brain as well as our everyday social functioning is divided into three levels: lizard, monkey, and human. Hanna writes that "most mammals lead with their 'monkey brain,'" (Hanna, 2018 [no pageination]) fueled by our most basic responses to fear and desire. When the monkey brain metaphor was mentioned by SAI facilitators, the metaphor appeared to draw vaguely on both the primitive brain process and negative thinking themes as well as the overriding irrationality theme.

"irrational". Thus the self is imagined as a constant internal conflict between rational and irrational parts. The rational user of SAI will overcome the monkey mind part of oneself, that is, the self is imagined as split and fraught. "Irrational" included anything that could be labeled as "negative thinking" with the risky implication that any interpretations of one's subjective experience, e.g. others' judgments as negative, termed "mindreading," are irrational nonsense to be ignored or set aside in an "Automatic Thoughts" category as Hope terms them in her workbook (Hope, 2010).

Rationality is thus Debra Hope's proposed remedy for anxiety. Hope appeals to readers to become rational "scientists" when it comes to their own anxiety and irrationality:

> …because you feel so badly, the situation must be going badly. However, the conversation could be going just fine. In fact, your anxiety may not be noticeable to the other person, it may not be affecting your performance even if it is uncomfortable, or the other person may not be concerned at all with how you are feeling. Remember that feelings are not facts, although we often act like they are. Another example of emotional reasoning is the man who felt very anxious at formal parties such as wedding receptions. He had worked all his life as a carpenter, and he felt foolish and out of place being all dressed up and having to talk with people he did not know well. His AT [automatic thought] was "I feel so foolish, I must look really foolish." In reality, he looked quite handsome in a suit and tie, and other people were often as worried about making small talk with him as he was with them! Just as in the previous conversation, he is confusing his feelings of anxiety with the facts of the situation, in effect substituting feelings for facts. This is rarely a wise choice, as feelings of anxiety are part of our psychological experience, but they may have nothing to do with how well we behave or how others react to us. (Hope, 2010, p.9)

Hope describes a man from a lower class background who is expected to maintain face with individuals that are likely to judge him negatively for his status. Hope reassures him that as his appearance was "handsome," he had no reason to worry. Yet we know based on the case of Robert in Chapter 3, that this man likely erased aspects of his life story – or "systems of oppression" (Conwill, 2015) during conversation, or perhaps fumbled for topics that would allow him to pass in this higher class gathering. These intersectional vectors of oppression may include

class, gender race, sexual orientation, and others "to produce differences in people's lived experiences, thereby privileging some and repressing others" (Conwill, 2015, p. 122) as in the case of Hope's carpenter, who appears to automatically feel inferior in a setting that marks his lower class status. Further, if Troy were the man in Hope's example, he would additionally have to manage racialized performance tensions and expectations. Sociocultural expectations, stigma, bias, and tensions are neglected by this theory of the unreliably anxious individual yet in a later article Hope acknowledges the importance of mental illness label-related stigma concerns and embarrassment for individuals (Anderson et al., 2015); the need to acknowledge stigma from multiple angles (including but not limited to diagnostic stigma) was illustrated by the case of Troy.

In addition to the need for an awareness of systems of oppression with which American interlocuters must contend during everyday interaction, an examination of Troy's (as well as the individual in Hope's example) would benefit from an awareness of their self-system (Hermans, 2006) and its relation to the identity distress paradigm offered by the present work. It appears that Troy did not have a dominant or face-easing self-position that allowed him to feel confident in social interactions; certainly not one that allowed him to feel authentic in everyday life. Instead, social encounter in both professional and casual settings were experienced as oppressive and resulting in a physical stress symptom over which he experienced having no control. Providing a sociohistorical, cultural, and performative understanding to revise current psychological frameworks around identity and everyday distress could help remedy these apparently hopeless and mysterious experiences common to everyday sufferers of anxiety and stress.

Further Details on SAI and its Clinical Approach

Dan's interpretation of exposure therapy meant imagining and experiencing participation in the group as a kind of exposure in itself by constantly putting participants on the spot. Whether the shared discomfort was treated by SAI's practices or generated by them was not always clear. Broader identity insecurities being a social outcast, as Dan described it, seemed vaguely shared. Perhaps ideally SAI was a combination of both generating and treating anxiety if this was to fit a kind of perfect behaviorist treatment-through-inoculation model. The activities were framed in such a way as to mimic supposedly shared nerve-wracking scenarios such as public speaking, which were expressed as anxiety-inducing by at least half of group members. Some additionally participated in speech-focused practices like Toastmasters Clubs.

Successful image and positive face value as determined by the perspectives of others in SAI are necessarily placed in the position of irrefutable, "science" and "facts"-based reality and further the idea that the individual should try to live up to positive self-image performance is taken for granted by Hope as a normative standard to strive for, while subjective experience is understood as wrong, unscientific, and potentially pathological. This kind of theory of reality necessarily neglects systemic problems and thus potentially reproduces them complicating what is being "exposed" in exposure scenarios meant to serve as inoculation for one's faulty reasoning.

While creating group belonging, the facilitators guided it around the narrative of these individuals as faulty processors of information thereby constructing and reproducing a failed, outsider status. The group was structured in such a way by facilitators as to expect an anxiety experience for participants and even for facilitators, based on Dan's assumption that all involved are "people of anxiety." From my vantage as someone who does not typically experience the kind of social anxiety this group purported to treat, the expectation of stress itself induced stress

at times when Dan would create exposures for me such as clapping for me on a day when I arrived late. This pointed attention to an unsuccessful performance of punctuality and all the potentially negative social impressions it could generate were only one aspect which I experienced as stress-inducing. I was confused about what it was he was responding to: was my performance successful in that I showed up at all and beat my purported anxiety or unsuccessful in that I showed up late? When a pedagogic authority figure draws attention to you in an ambiguous way, it can be an unnervingly unclear judgement of your performance and can necessarily generate anxiety as it does for many performance students.[115]

For the students, the pressures of social encounters were often already discomfiting enough that their "SUDS" were high from the act of social gathering. This dynamic demonstrates the bidirectional nature of anxiety. It is not solely produced by the individual and their faulty information processing system, but by an interaction with certain stressors; these were conditions where one was expected to experience anxiety as a result of being continually exposed to feared social encounters.

The following field notes excerpt is from a week towards the end of the 8-week course. Participation had significantly dwindled. As expressed in interviews, the exposures got to be too much for some, while the class was deemed ineffective by others, and was likely further compounded by the fact that it was near the start of the holidays. These notes reveal a fear of failure on the part of the course facilitator who found herself in this particular session instructing only one student. As will be evident, in the absence of other students, who were essential for the

[115] This experience of not knowing if what you are doing is pleasing to your audience and teacher is in line with the "via negativa" pedagogical technique which capitalizes on the uncertainty and discomfort of the performance student which will be discussed in Chapter 6.

functioning of SAI, Anna kept attempting to recruit me to contribute and reinforce the group narrative.

Week 6

Only one student, Zainab, shows up. It's the most awkward support group experience ever…What's striking is that from the beginning Zainab talks about her frustration with how the program is going for her. It sounds like she is blaming herself for not having started it at a good time, for not waiting until she is more settled to start this program. Anna's response is to say that it's hard to tell what the right time is but that it's true that everything works differently for different people.

Zainab also is frustrated (and I've heard her say this before in previous weeks,) that her anxiety is increasing with each session rather than decreasing. She brings up an incident from a past week that appears to have disturbed her: "That man who talked about suicide the first week really freaked me out. And just the other day he told me that I have a beautiful name." She says she realizes that her trajectory compared to his is very different because he started in such a different place, and that's what she tries to tell herself.

Zainab says she was surprised to learn the other week that this program is specifically for "Social Anxiety" and not "Generalized Anxiety." She assumed it was for generalized but she states that she would have still taken this one if there were other options. She talks about her worries regarding work a bit. How she was told she's actually the most popular person there which was very surprising to her. But then she thought about it and realized wait, I do make an effort to talk to everyone. Notably, here she appears to be practicing a self-monitoring of her cognitive "errors" as the program teaches.

She brings up meditation, as they have it in her office, but she says it doesn't work for her and she didn't particularly like it. At this, Anna says that she should try mindfulness which is a

bit different than meditation, she explains. Anna looks at me for help, but I say that I'm not sure. Anna says that meditation is a separation from reality, a distancing, and mindfulness is about being present. I make a vague remark that maybe it's interpreted differently in the US but indicate that I will go along with what she's saying. (Which I note to myself sounds like a pretty confused understanding of mindfulness and meditation which are closely interlinked.[116])

Anna states we'll do a short mindfulness exercise that she will time for five minutes. "Close your eyes. Imagine a stream of water flowing. Every thought that comes to you is a leaf. Notice each leaf fall on the water."

(I experience this exercise as terribly uncomfortable and frustrating.) Anna asks us both what did we think of the exercise. Zainab says that she had many leaves. I say that my stream became a leaf. Apparently we both couldn't stop thinking. Throughout the class, Anna writes out the CBT lesson of the day on the whiteboard, incorporating Zainab's experiences and hers only in the absence of other group members: "Protective parent, Socially anxious situation"
As the class is largely depending on student sharing and group games we soon run out of material and Anna opts to end class almost an hour early.

Week 6 Analysis

Based on the above excerpt alone, one might assume that this bootcamp was all in all a failure: there is only one student who showed up and the instructor attempted to turn to the researcher as a filler participant. But it may not be so simple. One of the key features of Social Anxiety Improv was the combination of Exposure Therapy, i.e., the idea that exposure to the source of one's fears inoculates the fears, a behaviorist approach, and the "yes, and" attitude from improv detailed in the introduction, which encourages a notion of trust and support for the unexpected during social interactions where one develops and jumps into whatever unexpected development occurs. The

[116] Cf. Cassaniti, 2018.

“protective” parent refers to Zainab’s protective mother, who contributed to her case of social anxiety. Zainab also later explained that these sessions were an important step in her understanding of herself, in terms of the sharing of anxiety experiences, including the facilitators’:

> I think it was a huge step forward to interact with other people that felt this way and not feel like I was like an anomaly for feeling the anxiety that I felt. Um. And..and I think learning about like exposures and I know when Anna would get up there and talk about what you were feeling and how it’s like deeply ingrained in us to like you know behave this way.

Anna’s white board lessons reflected Zainab’s expressed need to be in control, her plan to implement an exposure of connecting with someone at work, and what she later in interviews described as the necessity to be risk-averse:

> That’s one thing that I’ve been trying to implement in my life is thinking about the worst case scenario. ’cause a lot of times, the worst case scenario isn’t even reality, so. And I think I am very worst case scenario. I think I’m very risk…my actions have shown that I’m very risk-averse. Um. [pause] And. So I’m always thinking about the worst case scenario. Basically everything that Dan said about…..just again like the whole idea of saying “yes, and” not being so afraid of everything was really helpful for me. Like the fear of not being perfect…

Thus, from this point of view, the whole session in itself is arguably the essence of improv and perhaps is why jumping into class itself was itself an anxiety-inducing prospect full of exposures and given its intentionally challenging demands.

(Never) Being Good Enough to Engage

In contrast with Troy, SAI students like Zainab and others came up with exposures that involved exposing themselves to the possibility of negative social judgment and negative social outcomes, like asking for a recommendation letter, confronting one’s music career by engaging with some musical work, or simply partaking in social situations with a myriad of factors beyond their control where anything might happen; a full “yes, and.” The students, like Zainab, who had

any self-reported level of success with this method were those who utilized the playful "yes, and" as a new interpretation onto everyday life situations. This meant a change of attitude towards uncertainty within potentially image-threatening social situations.

The pressures to be interesting and engaging were prominent in individuals' various competitive work and social environments. In addition to anxiety around status and success, I consistently found SAI students to be concerned with being able to be interesting and captivating enough to keep others engaged with them upon first encounters. Dan would relate such social anxiety to deep fears of complete social rejection with somewhat opaque reassurances like "…and yet the court jesters made it." The nod towards comedy as a survival strategy is there, though perhaps not deeply understood, and as the model of psychology in SAI is behaviorist, there didn't appear to be much space for deeper meaning-generation but rather a focus on symptomology and reverse conditioning of adverse reactions as well as a sense of group solidarity.

For individuals who were profoundly uncomfortable with their own psychophysiological reactions, adopting the "yes, and" attitude could offer a profound shift in perspective. In this way, there is a potential "yes, and" or at least partial acceptance of their own symptoms (though as detailed earlier, the Hope's CBT theory simultaneously casts the self as unreliable in subjective emotional experience and anxiety symptoms. Troy is incorporating a kind of narrativization from improv where a new story "*yes* I'm sweating *and* this is because I went for a run," is created for his sweat though in his case he is utilizing the storytelling pre-emptively, he is scripting the scene from the start, without leaving space for unpredictability or most importantly, input from his interlocuters. He is certainly not shifting into a view of people out in the world as trustworthy improv scene partners. If he were fully adopting an improv "yes, and"

ethos, he would engage in playful storytelling as the events unfolded and accept uncontrollable occurrences, such as the danger of unpredictable sweating without a scripted introduction. As it is, the sweat is too threatening to the self-image he is trying to maintain and therefore it appears that taking chances on the unpredictability of sweating as a result of anxiety in social encounter is not something he is willing to risk.

Other individuals, who engaged in a more “playful attitude” and in-the-moment storytelling, shifted their entire expectations for face-work. The line that they had to maintain no longer carried the stakes of their entire self-esteem, but rather the expectation was to be a playful interaction partner like in improv. In the following interview excerpt, Laura, a white female SAI student in her late 20’s, describes her anxiety about deadlines how implementing a different attitude based on improv games helped her cope:

> …[the anxiety is] slow boiling, boiling for a while...Often it has to do with like deadlines. Like um the closer a deadline gets the more stressed out I get. Procrastination is like a big word. To unpack that there’s other issues underneath like self-esteem and self-sabotage and indecisiveness and seeking perfection and you know all those things. I think it’s that’s the largest problem I have with it, with anxiety. Deadlines and meeting people’s expectations.
> But one thing with improv it teaches you to, it’s not so serious. You don’t need to be too conflicted about it. You know, it’s just not so serious. So with writing and deadline type stuff I’ve become a little bit more saying like, well it’s not perfect, it’s fine. I can live with that. Not very well, but a little better.

For Laura, it was key to revise her idea of having to demonstrate herself as perfect – illustrating the connection between improv and the status and success dimension of identity distress. The line that she needed to maintain was no longer perfection but one of a willing interlocuter who can nonetheless say “it’s not so serious.” This idea was echoed by those interviewees who appeared to have the most success in implementing improv as an intervention. Zainab was one such interviewee who echoed this idea during interviews. She has pronounced anxieties about speaking up in the workplace and in social situations. For Zainab her anxieties around everyday

interactions at work and in social encounters are compounded by cultural and racial expectations, making hers a particularly rich case study to examine in greater detail and one that is relevant for unpacking fears around contemporary American xenophobia and racism and ways of reimagining oneself within these stigmatizing contexts that can be linked to pronounced identity distress.

The Case of Zainab: Muslim American Self-Experimenter

Introduction

Zainab's case provides an example of identity distress that manifests around the stigmas of race, religion, and gender, Muslim-American and immigrant cultural contestation challenges, compounded by a fraught childhood and upbringing. A conflict between her parents became manifest as a conflict within herself and compromised her sense of agency and coherence. I argue that while she was attempting to find a hybrid identity and spaces of belonging like other experimental Muslim emerging adults (Abdelhadi, 2019), the hybridity and spaces of belonging she did discover were insufficient to solve her identity struggles in other contexts because the anxiety involved a deeply-embedded and conflated set of psychocultural self-positions. For Zainab this meant looking to alternative therapy practices. She literalized metaphors from CBT and improv, and while her self-directed experiments did not fully solve the complex dialogic impasse at the heart of her distress, they did provide opportunities for new levels of agency, insight, and hope. As Zainab's case of identity distress is arguably the most acute and complex of the three focal interviewees, I first provide her narrative in chronological order as the chronology was pinpointed by her as an important aspect of her narrative and allows for a more thorough understanding of the development of her distress, followed by my analysis. It is noteworthy that Zainab's narrative did not unfold in a fully linear manner during interviews. She indicated times

that significant events occurred, but the linear presentation that follows is my own construction for the sake of biographically-sensitive analysis and progression of events which is relevant for unpacking this case of identity distress.

Zainab's Narrative – Chronologically Ordered

Early Life: "You're a representation of us"

Zainab Sophia[117] was raised in an observant household by her parents, both of whom were practicing Muslims. Her mother was an immigrant from Africa and her father was a Muslim convert from a Caucasian American Catholic family. As the only daughter in her family, Zainab grew up very close with her mother, deeply attached and idolizing her: "I was always pretty much attached to my mom's hip, growing up." While Abdelhadi (2019) found that Muslim parents tended to more often practice intensive monitoring with their daughters' behaviors than with their sons, Zainab believes that it's her deeper desire for her mother's approval that makes her more vulnerable:

> … I have brothers and I feel like they approach their relationship with my mom really differently. Like my little brother just like does what he wants and he doesn't really let things affect him…I feel it's natural for a girl to want her mom to like support her.

For Zainab, her mother's approval was paramount. When she first explains her fraught relationship with her mother in the following, the narrative induces tears:

> I don't even know how to label it beyond *not easy* but like my mom's like an amazing person like I definitely want to preface with that, but she's like you have to do x, y, and z and these need to be your outcomes. Like there's no room for mistakes…there was like no room for like *my own voice*[118] (starts to cry) …

These kinds of tropes such as room and voice, indicating a struggle for expression and agency, permeate her narrative.

[117] This is a pseudonym as with all of the participants. It was chosen to approximate the set of cultural, religious, and ethnic issues at play in the original.
[118] Underscoring emphasis is mine and italicizing emphasis is the interviewee's.

Zainab attended private Muslim schools for elementary and middle school where the other students were also Muslim minorities with Arabic first names, but this was not representative of the area where she grew up and she was always aware of her differences, highlighted by the stark contrast at Muslim school: "I grew up in a really white like neighborhood." As Zainab is of mixed race and cultural backgrounds, her parents named her in such a way that these identities (as well as what has become her continual identity conflict) are reflected in her names, "Zainab Sophia," with her Arabic first name and her Western, American and Caucasian-sounding middle name.

When Zainab described her family, it was clear that she had little control over what her family members called her or many major actions she had had to take. Her father's side of the family called her "Sophia" and everyone else called her "Zainab." She found the inconsistency of this upsetting and she struggled emotionally when family members on her dad's side of the family asked her whether she had decided to go by one of the names more consistently, compounding the identity conflict further.

Adolescence and the Story of Her Names: "A Strung-Out Battle"

Her parents had a marital conflict in her adolescence in which Zainab became the weaponized, symbolic terrain, or "turf" as she calls it, of two factions battling over land.

> I literally felt like turf sometimes. And <u>I feel like, like turf that they could battle over and use me and like.</u> But not like, it sounds worse than it is…Well I never saw anything wrong with what I was doing, *ever*. And my mom always saw issues with what I was doing. And. I was always getting pos-I'm really close with my grandmother, my dad's mom and <u>she was always giving me positive reinforcement and I was always getting negative reinforcement from my mom</u>. It was like everyone was giving me different, <u>it was different messaging and I felt very like stifled in like many ways.</u>

Her two names, which signify two vastly different sociocultural identities while simultaneously signifying the identities of her mother versus her father, ended up at the symbolic heart of the familial conflict wherein the two sides of her family used different expressive tactics throughout

the “battle.” Notice the open “hot” emotional expressions of disapproval by Zainab’s immigrant mother, deemed inappropriate in most American contexts, and the more passive aggressive strategies by her paternal grandmother and father’s relatives throughout.

> ZAINAB: My dad’s family calls me by my middle name. And in high school I wanted to start going by my middle name ’cause it was easier to say, and, that was a huge blowout between me and my mom. Like a *really huge* blowout. And I really think that that, I think that I need like therapy. And I have found therapy but I think that that was um. Like I actually see that as like a *watershed* moment in my life. As like a moment when like, watershed in a bad way. I think it had really negative impacts on like *myself* and the way I view myself. And my perception of the control that I have around my life.
>
> MARIANNA: So can you tell me more about that moment, like what happened? So you started going by your middle name?
>
> ZAINAB: I really wanted to, but I didn’t. It was this really strung-out *battle*. Up until like, up until last time I went home was probably last Christmas. And I brought it up *then*, *again*.
>
> MARIANNA: It’s still going?
>
> ZAINAB: More or less yeah. (laughs) I just keep wanting to seek, I keep wanting my mom’s approval. Although I keep telling myself I won’t get it, I need to live my life the way I want to but there’s still a part of me that’s like. ’Cause there’s still a lot of ammo thrown out in that argument and um my parents did not have a smooth relationship for parts of my life, and like it almost like reminds me of that.”

Since her early adolescence, around age 15, when her parents’ marital conflict began, Zainab Sophia found herself in the passive and dominated position of turf between two opposing forces who would verbally disregard the distress that their symbolic struggle was causing their child. Both familial sides had very high stakes in the results and while her mother demonstrated “hot” emotions and disapproval, her father and his side of the family played it cool while passive-aggressively suggesting that she should “just go by Sophia.”

> I think to the outside world it’s just a name [Zainab Sophia] and a nickname but to me there’s like it carries like a whole narrative. Like to me it carries like all the anxiety I’ve ever felt and like not being happy in high school and college.

To add further complexity to the problem, “Sophia” allowed for less strenuous social encounters and greater face-ease in American, non-Muslim contexts. One summer after Islamic middle school, when Zainab had enrolled in a public high school, she attended a social justice-themed summer camp where everyone struggled with her first name. At the camp she had to spell her name out for everyone. Frustrated, she decided to try going by her middle name, “Sophia,” while at the camp but afterwards, Zainab’s mother expressed her disapproval saying that “the camp I went to was stupid and that’s why I shouldn’t have gone.” This was one incident in a series of difficult events around Zainab’s names and attempts to have a sense of control around her identity and face-work challenges.

> ZAINAB: Like this was something I really wanted to do. Like. Especially as someone that’s so visibly one identity and to have that constantly projected on you I felt like telling someone what to call me was a way of like controlling… like I have control over this narrative. <u>I have control over, like who you’re, what I am. Right?</u>
>
> MARIANNA: Uh huh.
>
> ZAINAB: And it just <u>didn’t seem to be a big deal to me</u>. Like I had been called that anyway, <u>so to me it wasn’t that serious</u>. But apparently <u>it was a big deal for my mom</u> so I um just kind of like I’ve always tried to not think about it but it’s always floating around in my head.

In addition to her fraught relationship to her sense of self-trust and self-efficacy, Zainab’s external identity display is another aspect where the complex relationship with how she is constructed and understood by herself and others is evident:

> So my first name is Arabic and people always think I’m Arab. And I’m not. Like that’s not my culture I don’t, that’s not something I identify with. And for me going by my middle name was just like, ok it sounds kind of like… I don’t know, “Sophia” … It’s like hard to place that so like it’s more nebulous so I feel like there’s more room for what I actually am in that. You know? I think of myself as a very like global...I mean I’m biracial I’m two different things.

Zainab’s external identity markers, (i.e., her Arabic first name, her skin color) do not present the full story of her identity. In fact, she expresses frustration at being mis-identified as

Arab, "that's not my culture," and she expresses a desire for "more room" to convey more of her identity through her name-choosing. Meanwhile, her father's side of the family, the Caucasian and Christian side, all of whom live in a different state than her parents, always called Zainab by her middle name, "Sophia," and over the years they have continued to casually nudge her to start using her middle name: "Why don't you just go by Sophia…" her aunt and grandmother would say. Zainab explains that her grandmother "can't even say" her first name and calls her "Sophie." In recent years, maintaining a good relationship with the father's side of her family became important to her.

> I always write them, 'cause my nana will send me cards…when I was younger I wasn't as in to my dad's side of the family's life. My mom really like tried to keep us like close to *her* and she tried to control what we were getting…So as an adult I've been very intentional about having relationships with my dad's side of the family…a week after I moved here I flew out for my grandmother's birthday. I'm very conscious of like being in their lives. But I um my grandmother and I have always been close. She keeps it real, she has a good head on her shoulders. I feel like she's a really good person in my life because she's encouraging but when she thinks I'm doing something wrong she's very clear about it and she'll tell me why and she'll talk to me, and doesn't just like say <u>that you shouldn't be doing this for x, y and z. Or just you shouldn't be doing this period</u>.

As encouraging as her grandmother was in contrast to her mother's discursive practices of frequent discouragement of Zainab's initiatives, her expressed preference for "Sophia" or "Sophie" continued into her granddaughter's adult years. Rather than yelling or threatening her, her grandmother exerted pressure in a more "nice" way in terms of American face-work. Nevertheless the pressure to use her middle name is evident in the narrative and it emerged around the time that her parents were having marital trouble:

> I'm gonna say this was the height of like—well my parents get along well now, their relationship has like changed significantly. Like when I moved back in as an adult, it was like really different. They get along, thank God, they get along really well. But um. Yeah I think high school was like the height of their, disagreement. I think I remember having lunch with my grandmother and she was like <u>"oh I really like your middle name."</u> And like. <u>There were always things being said like passively</u>

> about how like I can be less of, my mom. But not in like a negative way. I think everyone was just expressing what they know to be right or best um.

Once more, Zainab's father's side expressed their interests more "passively" and "not in like a negative way" in that their emotion display was less hot and not reprimanding, and yet Zainab felt the pressure. The conflict between Zainab's parents contributed to her self-doubt and low sense of self-efficacy. She describes a memorable episode in the development of her self-doubt and confusion when she was about 15 or 16 years old:

> I didn't think I was intuitive. I wasn't even like looking internally, it was very external. It's difficult to like trust them [my emotions] when you're upset about something and someone is telling you that have no reason to be upset or it's like *dumb* that you're upset. I remember crying. Literally like crying to my mom about this and she was just like *whatever* like this is the dumbest thing ever. I remember being in high school being in her car and being upset by it. It's just like…"what are you getting upset about, this is ridiculous." That's probably paraphrasing her if not her exact words. If somebody came to you crying and you like responded that way. I don't think they'd be able to trust their emotions. After that experience. Um. But me crying about something and her responding that way started when I was younger. My dad is obviously always on my side but like just didn't really I mean he…My lived experience is so different than his. Like he just didn't know how to…I mean he was always telling me to do what I want. Which like in hindsight I wish I'd listened to him, but I mean I grew up listening to my mom telling me not to listen to my dad, explicitly.

Zainab's experiences of confiding about her identity struggles to her mother during her adolescence and having her distress dismissed as "ridiculous" and her father's simultaneous inability to understand her distress contributed to her sense of alienation and growing self-doubt. Neither of her parents could relate to her experience, although in very different ways, and arguably this lack of dialogue contributed to her struggle to cultivate a productive inner dialogue within herself. After some deliberation and some "freezes" in her memory as she relates the story, Zainab traces her anxiety and anxiety episodes in the form that they exist now to the transition period between private Islamic middle school and public high school where she was suddenly in the minority both ethnically and personality-wise.

> I think I was I've always been quiet, like a quiet person, but I think I got like a lot more *nervous* about things and like *careful*, when I was in middle school. Yeah I felt it for many years, actually. Many, many years. Well and I don't know if this is precisely what it was, but, I went to the private school until 8th and then I went to public high school. Actually I think it started in high school. Um. I think I was a lot-really self-conscious. [gets more confident-sounding]
>
> …during the day I was very stressed about being like, myself, right, in this school. And then I just I was just very like overwhelmed. And then obviously I wasn't getting along with my mom. And so, there was like no part of my life where I felt *comfortable*. You know. I think that's where being like a perfectionist and also having to be very intellectual also came into play. I was like "ok, I can't, I'm not x, y, and z but I can like get like really good *grades*. Like I can study *really hard*. And like have all the info. Um. And my mom'll leave me alone. And, I can be in school and no one's gonna bother me in *school,"* so it's just a very like quote unquote easy way of needing to do what I needed to do. I think I went from like a really controlled environment to a really like not-so-controlled environment…I just remember like never doing what I ever wanted. Because like, there was no positive reinforcement for me…I'm an introvert, so...I think that's a barrier of entry into like anything in life, like I really do. I think I remember wanting to do stuff, like express myself and like *do things*. Like I can think of one example of wanting to pierce my nose, and I never did that. It was like the end of the world.

American public high school was a drastic cultural change and adjustment from Islamic middle and elementary schools but Zainab's attempts to do what she wanted and express herself as was ostensibly more normative for adolescents in this "not-so-controlled environment," such as with the nose-piercing wish or the name change, were not supported by her mother. This search for an Americanized identity authenticity particularly with experimentation of various forms of self-expression and learning, continued into college as did her struggle to get approval from her mother for her attempts to have more standardly "Western" and American coming-of-age experiences.

Identity Experimentation During College and After

The following sections present Zainab's history of identity experimentation during college and then in subsequent episodes during her post-college life. College presented a classic

"developmental moratorium" which was important for Zainab and she also continued her identity experiments in her post-college life.

Identity Experimentation Attempts During College

In college, Zainab lived away from home for the first time (albeit it was less than two hours away and she visited home every two weeks). She also reduced her involvement with the Muslim community.

> I don't think I stepped into a mosque for like all of college. Like I'm very spiritual, but I really could not get myself to step into a space with other Muslims because I was struggling so much in defining my own identity.

Zainab became closer to being what Eman Abdelhadi describes as "experimental," a Muslim American who explores their relationship with the Muslim community by distancing themselves from it and its practices either temporarily or permanently (Abdelhadi, 2019).

During college, Zainab also continued to contend with the struggle that began in her adolescence: wanting to feel like she had agency over her life story yet desperately wishing for her mom's approval. Her mother's identity objectives for her did not always align with her own: "…she [Mom] just doesn't understand that what she believes is best isn't necessarily what's best." One issue where their identity objectives didn't align was around Zainab's yearning to study abroad. Every attempt to travel was negated by her mother:

> I just want to see the world. And you know, learn another language, or..." I remember that being at like the forefront of like what I perceived my college experience to be and I think from like my freshman until like my junior year I'd bring it up and I'd be like "I really wanna go abroad" and I think like my whole life I had always looked for approval from my mother and I was very much like a rule-follower and so when she said "no" to doing something I wouldn't and so I *never* ended up studying abroad as an undergrad. Um…My best friend moved to Europe after we graduated…I wanted to go see her so I bought like a flight and then I went and told my mom and she just like was not on board with it and like pulled everything out of the book: "You take too many days from work," like she said some stuff about the friend I was going with and she just kind of like I don't even know *what it is*. (crying) If it's not what she wants it's not right…

Though she was tearful at this point in the interview, Zainab describes that she finally managed to follow what she wanted in visiting her friend abroad:

> I mean I ended up going. But that was one of the first times. Like I can probably count, on my hand, my one hand how many times I've done what I wanted instead of listening to her…My hypothesis is that has a huge impact on why I get so anxious. Because I just don't trust my instincts. My whole life they've been like invalidated. It's something that I'm trying to work on as an adult.

It's significant that the choices that her mother invalidated were all typical Western rites of passage: choosing what you're called, moving away from home, studying abroad, reimagining your identity.

Research on young adult Muslim identity processes in America categorizes as "departures" those individuals who choose to disconnect and permanently leave their Muslim community and as "detours" those who do eventually re-embed in the Muslim community in adulthood (Abdelhadi, 2019). Women much more frequently become departures than men. Abdelhadi (2019) found that 27% of the female "experimental" respondents in her study were detours whereas 73% were departures. Perhaps Zainab's mother was fearful that in her travels and other Western identity explorations, her daughter would not return. About a year after college, Zainab managed to make another Western coming-of-age move that she knew her mother wouldn't approve of: taking a job in a location far from home.

The Move to Chicago

After repeated struggles with her mom over opportunities away from home, Zainab finally took a non-profit job in Chicago, a city that was much farther than a short bus or train ride away. She managed to do so by not mentioning the plan again to her mother until the day before the flight.

> So I mentioned it once. And there was like just a lot of like "you're never gonna get a good job after this." Um. Stuff like "my student loans are gonna be impacted" and just everything. Like "it's not right" for whatever reason. (laughs) Like literally that.

Zainab's coping comes across as a kind of discursive and cognitive erasure of the conflict and of the decision she was not going to reverse:

> I just tried not to talk about it. And I didn't really prepare for it. Like I just kinda tried not to think about it and just did my work and lived my life and knew I was leaving at a certain time.

She packed her bags a few days before and at the airport her mother did something unprecedented:

> …she actually said "I'm proud of you," which I've never heard in my life. Like I've never gotten that from her. So she did say that at the airport which is like a really big deal.

The move to Chicago marked an important period in Zainab's identity development. She was living in a new city far from home and working at a non-profit job her mother had not sanctioned. She even joined a spiritual community center where she felt really comfortable being herself and engaging with like-minded others, most of them Muslim.

> …it's a collective, we get together like once a month and we have different events. And I volunteer for them and there…it's just a really chill environment with like a bunch of young people, like. And professionals. Well all ages really but uh it's a very like non-judgmental space and um.. That's where I go for like my spiritual… It's predominantly Muslims. It's a lot of converts and like reverts and like young people. First of all the content is relevant. The conversations we're having are relevant to me, the young professional. A lot of the people that I hang out with in the space are Muslim and they're really cool people and I value them.

Since she had distanced herself from the Muslim community as part of her identity experimentation in college and didn't have many Muslim friends during that time, it was particularly meaningful for her to have Muslim friends peers in Chicago whom she had chosen to seek out rather than the situation in her private Muslim school where it was not "self-directed," as she describes. The dramatic line was "non-judgmental" behavior to demonstrate the positive face value and identity objective of acceptance and a community based on shared spirituality rather than traditional appearances, such as hijab-wearing. As for the conversations that were

relevant to her, she explains that women were encouraged to question patriarchal aspects of religious practice in the dialogues there, something that would not have been indulged in other religious spaces in which Zainab had participated in the past. She appeared to have found a hybrid forum for dealing with cultural contestation that worked for her. Even the fact that her name, Zainab[119], did not match her ethnic identity was easier to manage there:

> I think people do still think I'm Middle Eastern even in that space [the community center]. Because of my first name. But. It was fine. They're always like, how did that happen? (laughs) I think that I um I'm more concerned with like living a meaningful life. Like I don't want to be so wrapped up in my head about my identity, and what people think I am. <u>And that was part of the onus for wanting to go by my middle name because I don't want to have a conversation about my background. Like I don't wanna be so wrapped up in it. I don't think it's that serious.</u> Like. <u>There are other parts of me that are like really interesting, it's not just like, my background that's like fascinating.</u> (laughs) I have other things to offer as an individual, like.

In this spiritual community space, Zainab is able to laugh off the discrepancy with her name and embrace the way she would like to be seen by others that is not just for her background. Further, she has made it her mission to make this a comfortable, face-easing interactive space for like-minded others who are more concerned with spiritual discourse than the appearance of religiosity:

> That's why I volunteered there because I wanna be supporting this space. Creating this comfortable space for people to <u>come like engage their spirituality and like not feel judged and… Just a really safe community space…I think there's a lot of judgment in religious communities in general and I think that we're really intentional about making sure that people are coming as they are</u>. No matter what your practice looks like. You can come here and be a part of this community and learn about, God and like…you don't have to cover your hair, in this space. Like you don't have to be dressed any type of way. You don't have to believe exactly what we believe, like. You can come here, spend time with us, have a cup of tea (laughs) and like, listen.

While she had established more agency and coherence for herself than before in certain contexts, Zainab still experienced acute episodes of identity distress in relation to many others.

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"Yeah existing feels like work sometimes…It feels like a lot of work to like go through the motions of my life right now." She found herself having severe anxiety episodes in relation to the roommate she had chosen to live with when she moved to Chicago: "it felt like work just like walking into my apartment." This was the same roommate she had had in college in whom Zainab identified a pattern of control-through-discouragement similar to her mother's, with the example: "…when I told my roommate that I was going to talk to the landlord, she was like 'people aren't nice when money is brought into the equation.'" Zainab further explains that her move to Chicago was her seeking out a change from a pattern of being influenced by someone else's authority-claiming behavior, i.e., originally her mother's and more subtly her relatives', over her choices and yet she ended up repeating the pattern with her roommate:

> I'm gonna say that [the move] was 70% to remove myself from an environment where I had that around me. Which is ironic, 'cause I walked back into it.

Zainab remembers "specifically feeling tension in my chest" when she was first contemplating living with her college roommate again:

> So I didn't wanna live alone when I moved here because it's the first time I'd ever been away from like home in a city I wasn't familiar. And it was the only option that I had at the time. And so I went through <u>even though my intuition was telling me not to [live with her], like the full first week of October being like, "this is not what I should be doing."</u>

In spite of her feelings of discomfort and doubt, Zainab deferred to the advice of an old friend who "told me to go live with her and I was like 'ok.'" She explained that this pattern of deferring to others was one that she traced back to believing as a child that "her mom had all the answers and that she was gonna like guide me." For Zainab, this belief in her mother's judgment meant a lack of belief in her own. This doubt in her own judgment and greater trust in that of others' had now become an underlying assumption that she generalized to any third party willing to take on the voice of authority and expertise.

I had to be very intellectual about it. Because emotionally I was very like *upset* about it…I felt that it wasn't right. But I've felt that things *weren't right* in the past or like things *were right* and never like acted on them because I had always *deferred* that judgment to like my mom. Or like someone else. Like I had this habit of like deferring judgment and like needing to be validated. Do you know what I'm…like…trying to say- does that make any sense? (voice trails off)

The split she describes between "intellectual" and "emotional" information points to the struggle to have a productive dialogue with herself. It was around the time when she was feeling overwhelmed with her anxiety in relation to these old patterns with her old college roommate that she decided to try improv and discovered SAI.

Experimenting with SAI Techniques

I honestly knew I'd wanted to do improv - I'd been thinking about it since last year. Because of my anxiety. And I really felt like it [anxiety] was stifling my ability to like, live. And be like, my full self. And so I really wanted to just like let go of that and I figured if I threw myself into something where I was so uncomfortable it would help. (laughs)

Participating in SAI was the first time she had the chance to identify with others who had similar anxiety experiences.

For the first time, those feelings of anxiety were like validated. Because I'll have like, conversations with my dad about how I feel anxious. And he'll say things like "I don't get it, I don't see it." Not in like a, in like a not-nice way. He's genuinely, he's not anxious, he's not someone who experiences anxiety. He's like accomplished, he doesn't see. I think it's hard for other people to know what anxiety feels like if they don't feel it. 'Cause I know I had a conversation with my friend last night about it. And she was saying that she doesn't feel anxious. We were talking about our seminar and she was saying 'I don't feel that anxiety to make a comment or a criticism in the group,' but for me that's really difficult. And so in that moment I remember thinking during that conversation: 'I can't even imagine how freeing it must be to feel that way, in that setting.' So it's the same thing with my dad. He doesn't understand it. And it's just not, it's not tangible. I think a lot of mental health things are not tangible…

The ritualized sharing of anxiety experiences in SAI normalized and validated what Zainab had not been able to explain to others in other contexts.

Those conversations that we were having were conversations that I didn't know we *could have*. Because no one else had ever validated—had ever shared their experience that way. And you know Dan would say, 'oh that's totally normal, like I went through that, and I have people that go through that.' And like 'you can overcome it'…Yeah I just feel like if

> someone hasn't experienced it, there is no language they can use to share that with you, to speak about that experience…

This discovery of a shared language and even a normalization of anxiety experience even prompted Zainab to attempt to prolong the engagement with some of the individuals whom she had met and shared with at SAI.

> I think that I mentioned to a few of the folks before we had left that I'd like to get together bimonthly. To just like be a support system and be on top of each other in terms of checking our—whether we're doing our exposures and really encouraging each other…Especially for the shared community. For a lot of us I think it was *the one space* where it was being recognized.

Thus there was a face-easing component for Zainab to a shared discourse around anxiety experiences, in that they were validated interlocuters at SAI, but further it's notable that she wished to prolong the accountability of "doing our exposures," as a shared self-help effort, and one that she found useful.

Though she didn't end up maintaining much contact with the other group members after all, Zainab was able to continue to reframe her own everyday experiences through the combined tropes of "yes, and" and exposures. She found them to be useful coping tools from SAI which she implemented.

> …that whole mantra of "yes and" was really helpful. Because for me that was a really interesting way of looking at life and situations that might be difficult because I think that my life before that was very much like "no" and "let me ask you this set of questions to determine whether or not I wanna move forward with this." "Yes, and" was like me accepting something that's coming my way and then taking a step forward from there.

Calling "yes, and" a "mantra" points to her integration of an improv strategy into her perspective on everyday challenges. In addition to this new "yes, and" attitude of "accepting something that's coming my way," as if everyday life were an improv game, the trope of exposures appealed to Zainab as a science-minded thinker wishing to self-doctor. She started implementing

exposures in earnest during and after SAI in a variety of social counters in her life that caused her distress.

> ZAINAB: I'm trying to say "yes" to invitations to hang out more. Normally I just.. um. I'm trying to be more open to spending time with people I don't know. And getting to know different people, and doing different things like. I went to a cabin getaway with a bunch of people. I think it would've normally given me a lot of anxiety. But I was like "just go away, like this is not that serious." Like I was able to talk to myself kind of, "this is gonna be enjoyable, like whatever the outcome is," like. Um. I'm just trying to say yes more. Like "yes and." (laughs)
>
> MARIANNA: what do you feel pressured to live up to in that case, in these more personal hang out situations?
>
> ZAINAB: Like I went to a dinner a few weeks ago. One of my friends invited me to a dinner with some of his friends that I didn't know. And I was really nervous because I'm introverted, sometimes I just sit there quietly. And like somebody has something really like interesting to say and I'm just like sitting there listening. And that's just the anxiety sometimes.

In the above excerpt, Zainab displays mixed meaning making around her penchant to not be garrulous. She calls herself "introverted" as a cause for being "really nervous." Then she notes, "that's just the anxiety sometimes." It appears her embedded questioning of her behavior is both of her personality as insufficient and potentially as a pathology. The understanding of these interactive challenges as "illness" is murky in her narrative and either way the doubts about her adequacy as an interlocuter continue while simultaneously there is a new intentional voice and dialogic quality in her thinking and engagement with anxiety as a voice or entity: " '…like this is not that serious…' I was able to talk to myself kind of." In implementing the improv-derived attitude of "not that serious" and "yes, and" Zainab is also demonstrating more confidence about engaging in the distancing metaphor of everyday life as a performance and her own performing abilities. The self-doubts are still present at times, however:

> Sometimes I wonder if like people will…the worst case in my head—is like this person is not gonna wanna hang out with me any more because I have nothing to offer and everyone else in the room does. I think sometimes people do that. Sometimes I think my boss does

> that, if I'm not speaking up in a meeting. I don't know if that's what she *thinks*. I try to tell myself that's not what she *thinks*. But. Sometimes I'm wondering if she thinks that I'm *not an asset* to her team.

Zainab continues to try to engage her doubts in dialogue, an indication of the growing effort to integrate an alternative perspective into her thinking: "I try to tell myself that's not what she thinks." This correction of her thinking is representative of correcting the cognitive error of "mindreading" described in Debra Hope's workbook and taught in SAI. The mention of "worst case scenarios" was also discussed in SAI and is discussed in relation to the cognitive error of "forecasting." Both mindreading and forecasting are assumptions of the negative social judgments that are being made in the moment or that will happen in the future, respectively.

> I'm pretty sure it's easy to forget me. You know that saying that opportunity loves moving targets? You need to be a moving target. I don't know how to define it. To me that's like, from like a business perspective, to get noticed. Say like your boss puts together a team of like people for a special project, if they're not aware of your competencies, why would they pull you for the special project?

The concern about not contributing or standing out sufficiently in social situations echoes her characterization of her anxiety as a discomfort that she is always carrying, the metaphor signaling a burden that Zainab feels is always with her and she implies here that improv for her was an opportunity to change:

> …I feel like why would you wanna spend time with someone that isn't contributing in any capacity. …But it's not like I don't have anything to say. I'll have something to say but I won't say it. Because that's like me being my anxious self-you know…I mean I don't have those expectations of other people. I mean I like quiet people, like. I think that's why I was drawn to improv in the first place, because I have like this *pressure*. This discomfort that kind of like carries me everywhere. That I carry with me everywhere right. Like this *standard*, that I feel like I'm not meeting.

Zainab's description of a constant sense of pressure is strikingly reminiscent of Freud's description of anxiety as a message from the ego indicating that a "traumatic situation is imminent" (Freud, 1936; Schneider and Saragnano, 2013) wherein she's feeling a constant

possibility and threat of failure. Whether it's a contribution to the discussion in a professional meeting, or added entertainment value in a social encounter, the pressure to live up to a certain image of the positively contributing interlocuter is always with her in spite of the obvious contradiction where it is possible to reimagine herself without pathology: "I mean I don't have those expectations of other people. I mean I like quiet people." A separate characterization of her "anxious self" is significant because again it indicates a developing dialogue and reimagining of the voices in her mind and her ability to manage them.

Zainab explains that exposures are something that she needs to keep pursuing as a kind of continual self-treatment, as she describes a marked improvement in her everyday anxiety as a result of SAI and applying exposures to her life. In doing exposures, Zainab also notably combines the SAI practice of considering "worst case scenarios" with the trope of performing on stage to her everyday performances and this strategy appears to be work:

> ZAINAB: …Dan also used to say like "think about what you wanna be and like visualize that." That was really helpful too. Like visualize how you wanna be, how you envision yourself. That was really helpful. So for example, I had to give a presentation, um. To my Non-Profit A supervisor and a few of my Non-Profit B supervisors and a few of my coworkers. And. I was really nervous cuz I was worried that I wouldn't be able to answer their questions. That my content wouldn't be on point.
>
> MARIANNA: And that was the worst-case scenario part?
>
> ZAINAB: Yeah. I was really nervous that I would basically show my anxiety. Um. But. I just was like…I mean the presentation ended up being almost perfect because on some level I was trying to envision myself trying to execute it seamlessly. I mean I told myself I didn't have an option. Like I have to do it really well. Like I had to do a really good job.
>
> MARIANNA: And so you did.
>
> ZAINAB: So I just did. Like I…I-I got anxious once when a slide came along and I didn't really remember the content. And I just went through it really quickly and I spoke really quickly and someone put that out [i.e., mentioned it] later but…. I just felt like I had to like perform. And so I did, so…It wasn't that scary afterwards…I mean I pause a lot when people ask me questions. I thought that that was an issue, but no one seems to care…So,

one of the few pieces of feedback I got was that "you're being *thoughtful*." So, I thought that was nice. (laughs)

MARIANNA: So he took it as being thoughtful instead.

ZAINAB: And it is me thinking. Like the reason it takes a few minutes to answer that question is 'cause I'm actively searching my brain.

She notices that the work of exposures has to continue as a regular practice in order to mitigate everyday anxiety however.

ZAINAB: I need to get more exposure. Like it's one thing to do it in a controlled environment. It's another thing to like, live it…I really think that the only way to help myself is through exposures. I think that's true. I need to keep doing things that make me really uncomfortable. So I'm trying to do that.

MARIANNA: 'Cause for a while it was working?

ZAINAB: For a while, yeah. During improv I was speaking during every single one of our seminars. 'Cause there was that reminder biweekly. A reminder that this is real, and it's something you need to work on. I honestly just feel like, life just moves so quickly that it's hard to remind myself that when something does happen outside of the day-to-day, you're gonna feel really anxious and so you need to be doing things in your day-to-day to make sure that anxiety isn't as bad. You know? So if I have to give like a presentation, if I have to deal with some situation that gives me anxiety, like. In order to be prepared for it I need to do the like, exposures in my day-to-day life. You know.

MARIANNA: So what would that look like, doing those exposures in your day-to-day life?

ZAINAB: Like…having conversations with people in different departments or like, going to my supervisor, say that she's busy, like sometimes I really have trouble interrupting someone. But sometimes I really need to. So that's an exposure for me. Like realizing that I do have something really valid that needs to be addressed. I've been trying to be more assertive in general, in my life. Like I volunteered to be a greeter, at the community center. I dread it but I did it.

MARIANNA: And how was that?

ZAINAB: It was fine, it wasn't hard. Oh I talked to my landlord. (laughs) That was really hard. I thought I was gonna cry. But I didn't.

MARIANNA: Why did you think you were going to cry?

> ZAINAB: Well first of all I was going to her to ask her what my options were. ’Cause I was doing that thing again where I defer decision-making to like an external, to like a third party.

While she has made several exposure efforts to desensitize herself, her anxiety in instances which require independent choice and decision-making is particularly fraught. In the above example Zainab fully reproduces the pattern developed with her mother where she “defers to a third party” instead of making her own choice. Further, as she illustrates, distressing social interactions with female authority figures would still sometimes cause an anxious freezing reaction in Zainab:

> ZAINAB: I try to tell myself every week to ask one question in the Non-Profit A seminars as my, exposure. But like last week when I raised my hand to talk about using data in a compliance setting, I just like *froze* [for] the whole rest of the class I was half listening and wondering if I looked stupid. (laughs)
>
> MARIANNA: At what point did you freeze?
>
> ZAINAB: So I answered her question and then she asked me a follow-up question and I’m pretty sure I was turning like beet red. I was like uh am I gonna know the answer to this? I don’t know if I have the answer, like. I don’t know what you’re asking.
> Like I was thinking ‘what happens if I don’t know?’ ‘What happens if I don’t know the answer? And I show it?’ I think I ask myself in every incident that I have like ‘what was *wrong*?’ and like ‘why I was feeling that way?’

Zainab reported multiple moments of such freezing in interaction. Her reflection on her questioning and doubts in the moment of freezing allows Zainab to deconstruct an important source of her anxiety, the pressure to maintain the line of herself as “intelligent” in demanding academic and professional interactions since her school days:

> Um and I think that it might be because I think for me, a lot of like my identity has been constructed around being intelligent and that’s something that I’ve always had to fall back on. Like even when I didn’t have other things. And so, in high school, like I was a nerd, I studied a lot. In college I’ve always had really good *grades*, and like I’ve always had that as like—it’s always been like a safety net, in like difficult times, something I can fall back on. And I think that other people think that too. And I think that that makes me feel really pressured.

Zainab's narrative displays a pattern of struggle to cohesively construct herself as an active, self-confident, and capable agent in interaction. Based on her telling, the line of "nerd" or "intelligent" is a fraught one as it is riddled with performance pressures. She finds such moments of freezing frustrating because they tend to happen in contexts where she has ample expertise and know-how, yet the pressure to succeed and live up to an ideal image of herself can still overwhelm. It's particularly frustrating as she finds she can't access her own mind in such moments, contradicting the intelligent identity she has worked ardently to develop:

> But I when I'm feeling really anxious there aren't even questions in my head, it's just like blank. And I'm like "oh my god, I don't know!" You know? It's like a moment where I'm like frozen.

She further links the overwhelming pressure she feels in these instances back to the pressure she experienced in her childhood from her minority community, particularly at the Muslim schools she attended. Zainab was pressured to grow up into a positive representation of her Muslim and racial minority community and to counter negative stereotypes of Muslim women with successful displays of intelligence:

> I think that I always felt like pressured, especially as like a Muslim woman I feel like—there are folks that might think that I like I'm not as intelligent…You know I think that sometimes people make inferences about you and I've always had like, especially in high school I think I really wanted to disprove that…I think there's also pressure as a minority to be *really smart* and I think that also came in to play. And just being like a Muslim woman was another layer being added to that. I mean it was never vocalized, per se, but …in *my minority community* there was a lot like "you need to be the best at like whatever you're doing because you're a representation of us." And that was like vocalized often…I went to a private school for a while, an Islamic school for a while and I know I had teachers who said that. And I remember like, hearing that.

Zainab's experiences of feeling pressure to perform and freezing recurred in multiple contexts and, as she hypothesizes above, so did the "layers" of meaning, i.e., the combination of fraught adolescent development history, institutionalized pressures, and sociocultural stigmas and stereotypes for her various minority identities. I argue that these sociocultural and

developmental layers of identity distress occurred whether or not she was aware and monitoring for them at the time. Notably, the freezing trope she employs to describe herself in pressured work scenarios is similar to the turf trope when describing her position in her familial conflict, in that they both describe her immobilization in stressful social encounters wherein she is expected to live up to a positive face value that may seem unachievable.

For Zainab, as illustrated in the Non-Profit A excerpt above, stressful social encounters were typically encounters that were competitive in that they required successful intellectual performance during interactions and where there was someone of higher status or authority to impress, usually a female. In these instances, she isn't always displaying the dialogic counter-position that she began to develop in SAI.

> So we had this meeting the other day with my boss and her right hand woman, me, and someone from finance and just a bunch of different stakeholders. And I remember thinking "oh I need to bring up this project about the system we're on, we need to do training. Oh I need to bring that up." But in my head I was like "I don't think that's relevant. And everyone in the room is going to be like "I don't think that's relevant." *But then someone else said it*…and that like happens consistently.

Arguably, the expectation for interlocuters in such meetings to independently enter into and contribute to discussions is an unspoken standard. This standard is truly difficult for Zainab to meet, and she mixes her interpretations of this difficulty as reflective of her introverted or simply quiet personality. Yet her industry expects this skill and to some extent Zainab appears to be on a continual quest to remold herself to better measure up to her job description.

"Yes, and" as well as framing distressing everyday encounters as exposures offered Zainab a new perspective which she dramaturgically reimagined as part of her developing strategy to cope with her everyday life anxiety. She continued to evolve her understanding of "yes, and" and exposures to continue to "experiment" on herself and learn from it after participating in SAI.

One Year Later, Post-SAI Chicago and Hostessing

After Zainab's non-profit contract was up, she was intent on staying in Chicago. She struggled for several months to find a new job. While couch surfing and unsuccessfully looking for a job in her field, she decided to go for what she called "a huge exposure" and her most challenging self-doctoring attempt yet to work on her inhibitions in social settings: she took a job as a restaurant hostess.

> I think that I had heard from people that a really good like way to…you know, become like "quick on your feet" and you know like "social" is like "to work as a waitress." Or like "as a hostess." And I know that that's like a really challenging job so I was like "ok, I'm just gonna do *this* for a few months." And it proved to be a lot more challenging than I thought and *that's* when I was like, "ok this is a full-blown exposure." I'm basically doing an experiment on myself. (laughs)

Even though she "wanted to quit every day that I went to the restaurant before I went in," she convinced herself that she needed to stick with it for both financial and self-therapeutic reasons:

> I was like, ok I really have to do this for myself because A, I need to pay my rent (laughs) it was like ok "there's personal stuff I need to get out of this and also practically I need, like income." So, I mean honestly like in hindsight I could've like pulled all my money like out of my 401k and not have had to work. But I think a part of me really wanted to put myself through this exposure. Because I saw how uncomfortable it made me.

It's notable that Zainab tracks discomfort, reminiscent of SUD's, as an indication of potential progress in her self-doctoring and self-enhancement aims. Zainab had never had a service industry job before and as someone coming from a white collar background, it appeared to provide both a novel and lower stakes psychosocial training ground: "…this is like not a serious job, I'm not gonna be here forever." She found herself immediately overwhelmed by the very discomfort she thought she needed to be exposed to. Emotional labor, face-work, and quick improvisation in the face of unpredictability and chaos are arguably the bulk of the work.

> Honestly in hindsight I don't know how I got through it. It's stressful to have like…So I was managing seating arrangements, people were coming in and I was seating them. I was also managing all the Grubhub orders over their phone and that came in on their iPads. And obviously that involves communicating with the kitchen and like bar. Um. So it was

> like *a lot* of work. And a lot of like communicating with people — a lot of times people you don't know. And a lot of like needing to make executive decisions…You have to be really quick on your feet...I wasn't very good at it at the time…

It's evident that taking the hostess position provided Zainab with the opportunity to expose herself to her anxiety around communication, competent performance, and successful decision-making in a completely foreign environment. It thus lacked the pressure of previous expertise and allowed her to comfortably inhabit the role of novice and learner.

> I will say that I asked a lot of questions at the restaurant because it was like a really unfamiliar environment for me. This was another big thing I learned at the restaurant: is like you don't need permission for everything. (laughs) And I think that's just like a product of the way I was raised and went to private school and whatever. Like, I think like that day I was asking like a million questions and I remember at one point the restaurant was like really quiet and I was like "oh, do you want me to help with this?" And he [the manager] was like, sort of like, "whatever, do what you want." And I think that like…the reality is I was literally like being like a little kid. Like "you don't need to ask any questions," just like, "Do whatever you think is right." Just like "you're a competent adult." (laughs) So I think that was like a huge takeaway for me but that was something that caused like the most discomfort.

The validation of her boss fully trusting her to make the right decisions was an important revelation for Zainab. So much so that the lesson transferred into her next job.

> And so now at my current job, I don't go to my boss with a million questions I *figure things out* and make executive decisions (laughs) like whenever I can and that makes everything better.

When Zainab mentions that she removed her hijab for the hostessing job, I ask her to explain why and she tells me that it would've been harder to do the job if she had kept it on.

> ZAINAB: I definitely think that it would've been harder if I was covering my hair. Because it was so stressful, you have to learn a ton of like procedures in a short time and like apply them in basically on an ad hoc basis because a restaurant is not a predictable environment at all. So I thought it was hard because you're dealing with different personalities, your co-workers have different personalities. I will say that I noticed that I was good at letting things roll off my back which is something I think I learned through CBT and improv. Which is like really important in that setting. 'cause people can - like if their meal's late people will yell at you or you know whatever, um. Which is something that I don't know that I could've handled before. But…it was like really challenging.

MARIANNA: So what about not covering your hair made it easier, exactly?

ZAINAB: I think I would've been even more self-conscious than I already was, and I was *very* self-conscious.

MARIANNA: Just about fitting in?

ZAINAB: About…no it was about *being able to do my job well*.

When pressed to explain further, she realized aloud that it wasn't technically an obstacle. She attempted to parse her own logic of removing the hijab:

> Yeah I think you hit the nail on the head in terms of saying that they're two totally different things like. (laughs) I think that they're just two things that I really have a really hard time with to be honest. Maybe they're possibly *not connected*. Um.
> But everything sort of comes together and gets jumbled like in terms of anxiety (laughs) and what makes me anxious and stuff.

The "two totally different things" she's referring to here are expressing her Muslim identity through clothing and being competent or, perhaps more importantly, living up to the identity of American social and workplace competence. While she is not entirely conscious of why Muslim identity expression is "jumbled" into her anxiety in this instance, she does come away from the experience with a take-away about the importance of self-image for her anxiety:

ZAINAB: Between like learning that it's more than the way that I'm like expressing myself…it's more than just like my identity that gives me anxiety. And…the thing about just figuring things out and not needing permission for everything I think. Those are the two big things that I learned…

MARIANNA: Was it about doing the job well? That was the main concern?

ZAINAB: Yeah. And like *appearing competent*, definitely like self-image, you know? …Like appearing like a confident human being and not appearing like, super anxious.

This need to appear competent and confident gets played out in what she describes as her "hardest day," but she also downplays and laughs off the importance of it here as "not that serious:"

> Actually my last day was the hardest day because there was this one lady that didn't understand. She was a little older and she didn't understand how our credit and debits worked...I did the refund and her slip didn't say like "refund" or something, it was a very like simple nuance. Um. And I just didn't know like, I didn't know what to say to make her understand. (laughs) She just clearly, I mean clearly she wasn't believing me because like she wasn't familiar with our system, right? And she thought that she was right or whatever so I just tried to explain it. So I just like called over the manager and it was fine, he like explained it to her or whatever. I remember that being like really hard. She like made a comment about like how educated I was. (laughs) Or about like what level of education I had. Yeah it really didn't get to me but I was just like I think I was more frustrated by needing to call my manager over to help us…

Significantly, Zainab's most challenging day was with a higher status older female who hit on her deepest self-image concern: to be perceived as competent. While she apparently lets the education comment "roll off her back" she admits that it was "really hard" to have to call the manager over. "…clearly she wasn't believing me because like she wasn't familiar with our system, right?" In her coping in this instance, Zainab appears to have separated the pressure of the stereotypes she was always supposed to be countering about Muslim and minority women's competence from a more seemingly straightforward wish to appear "competent." She was even forced into the pattern she is focused on transforming: deferring to a third party. Further, Zainab appears to be erasing potential racialized and gendered prejudice on the customer's part in why she wasn't believing her.

Zainab's incident with the disgruntled customer bears similarity to the unequal treatment encountered by female flight attendants in Hoshchild's work and their strategy to bring in a male flight attendant to cope with difficult passengers (Hoshchild 1983/2012). While research on working-class women of color in the workplace revealed that they are "expected to manage their emotions in ways that suppress their negative emotions in order to cater to their clients (Kang, 2010; Romero, 2002)." (Jackson, 2017, p. 11) Zainab's encounter also echoes the issues around Troy's narrative as a black man in a white setting and his inability to understand or control his

anxiety symptoms in maintaining an unperturbed, cool, confident image in order to counter negative stereotypes, indicating a complex psychological distress process around being subjugated to a dominant White superordinate framework (Sediqe, 2019). Both Zainab and Troy do not seem ready to be self-aware or articulate about their own particular identity development processes as Black Americans around stigma and racial consciousness, which Janet Helms (1984) first theorized as being a complex stage development process beginning with self-hatred, denial, and ideally ending in self-acceptance. Zainab's emotional labor in her polite response and interpretation of the discriminating customer appears in this instance "to ignore, trivialize and reinterpret everyday racism" (Wilkins, 2012) as well as everyday sexism thus arguably the denial is evident. For Zainab, it may not necessarily be exactly the stage development process around stigma and race described by Helms, but the fact that there are evident levels of denial and an incoherence around her stigma consciousness, indicates a need for more future attention and work on how stigma consciousness develops over the life course along a range of possible trajectories for individuals of different backgrounds and subjectivities.

Back Home One Year After Chicago

About a year after finishing SAI, Zainab had moved back to her hometown and back in with her parents. She had just started a job where she was already excelling, appreciated by her new boss, and feeling much more confident. She attributed these improvements to the improved coping skills and strategies she had derived from CBT and improv.

> ZAINAB: I will say there has been like a significant improvement since the last [interview]. And I would say that it has to do with learning like a lot of like coping. Yeah I guess it's having learned a lot through doing CBT in Chicago and like improv. It has helped a lot with like my own perspective on things and then um just feeling like I have a little more control over things. Given that I've like moved to Chicago and like moved back and just done a lot of like, made a lot of bold moves independently that's helped me a lot with like trusting my gut and stuff.

> MARIANNA: Can you give an example of how CBT and/or improv have helped, that you've noticed?
>
> ZAINAB: I think like especially the thoughts that are like blown out of proportion. So I have a really concrete example that happened recently. So I was working on a project at work that I had never worked on before. So I had to put together like a budget and like a work plan, basically from scratch. Independently. And this was obviously something that I hadn't done before. And I started doing it and there was someone on the team and she was like ok I'm a resource, reach out to me. So I sent her a few emails, you know spoke to her on the phone. And then I remember like being self-conscious about asking her a lot of questions. Which has happened a lot. And then I, my boss sits like two seats in front of me, um and he got a phone call, and like, and answered it and he was like "oh yeah she's new" or something along those lines. And I was like "oh my god, he's talking about me" like "this girl on my team is calling him and telling him that I'm like really incompetent that I can't do my job and that I ask too many questions." Um. And then I was like, I told myself like "this is so irrational, like, it could be anything, like I'm just like not gonna think that and I'm just gonna continue working on this." Whereas normally I would've been not able to do my work 'cause I would've been so fixated on what that was. Um. And then yeah and so the day progressed and he came by my desk later and he was like "one of the managers you met called, he was wondering what your name was, he wanted to invite you to something." So it was totally unrelated! (laughs) And I totally blew it out of proportion in my head. Um. But like that grounding technique was like really helpful.

The counter-position she has adapted into her thinking from SAI allows her to pause her own Automatic Thoughts – in this case mind reading. This counter position has developed into what she now calls a grounding technique, signaling that it is more deeply embedded in her self-system and effective.

Zainab had in fact received one-on-one CBT therapy for her last 6 months or so in Chicago, thus the improvements due to "CBT" were not only solely referencing her initial CBT lessons in SAI.

> Well I think it [therapy] helped with guiding my responses to emotions…I think it like helped me develop a healthy relationship with my emotions…What prompted me to like find a therapist was my relationship with my roommate…I just reached a point where I didn't know how to handle it…I discovered that I consistently disregarded like my own gut feeling and my own opinions on things that were happening. Especially that were happening directly to me. Um and, definitely a lot of like self-esteem issues. A reoccurring theme of like women being bullies was definitely a salient one and just like me being really passive and just like allowing that to happen. Um as a pattern, and that oh that I'm a highly sensitive person.

She hopes to continue to pursue both CBT and improv for the "tangible" changes and improv in particular for its pleasurable "enjoy life and have fun element" now back in her home city. She described her anxiety as better than a year ago, yet still occurring at times about her self-image, particularly at work where some of the interaction struggles from before have continued.

> ZAINAB: …recently I've been feeling a little anxious before I come to work…so um there's definitely still some social anxiety in terms of feeling anxious about meeting people or going to a big event or if there's like an office goodbye party or something…that's why I definitely still want to continue looking for like a program or improv because there's definitely still more work to be done. (laughs)…I mean it's weird because I'll have to go to a client's site, like…last weekend I was at the client site two days in a row and I'm not nervous. Or I'll have like a fleeting thought because it's almost like I know I have to perform. I have no option but to be like on my A game.

Zainab demonstrates a new confidence about "performing." She also expresses worry about the unpredictable nature of work and it being a "new environment" and simultaneously shows her SAI techniques in practice as she works on being more outwardly social and conversational which she still finds challenging:

> …I mean it's never been easy for me to just like walk up to someone's desk and be like "oh how's it going" or you know I remember one of the hardest exercises for me in improv was interrupting a conversation…a lot of times, people will be like gathered around someone's desk and be like having a conversation and that would be really difficult for me, to break into. Although a few times I've been really good at like getting up and being like, "Hi," (laughs) and just joining people's conversations and they've been really nice….It's a habit I want to develop, being like conversational and like pleasant…But I make a point of saying like "good morning" to the boss when he comes in. Because at first I was worried that he would not have time to say "hi" or something. (laughs) I don't know, for some reason, "he'll have a lot to do, he won't want to say hi," but that's also very irrational, (laughs) so I've been saying 'good morning' and trying to be more welcoming. Because I do genuinely want to connect with people…

Zainab's previous struggles with entering group dialogue are still present but they have been mitigated through practice and her reframed attitude which diminishes anxiety through a counter-position of rationality and lightness. In the later interview she laughed often (marked in the excerpts,) and it was often after noticing her own negative expectations and automatic thoughts.

Another major shift now that Zainab has moved back home is that she expresses that it's less stressful living there than in the past because she knows how to manage interactions with her mother more successfully. In the following comment, she implies a line and set of objectives in her face-work, i.e., herself as a confident and competent adult whom her mother validated as such, a status that was idealized, unrealistic, and therefore anxiety-inducing in the past:

> …I feel like I know that I just can't have some conversations, like I definitely, in previous years, was trying to like develop this idea of an ideal relationship that I had in my head. Um. But now I'm just like, much more like, you know, talk about my day, talk about how your day went, not have any serious conversations. (laughs) You know nothing that could lead to an argument. And I think the fact that I'm actually thinking about moving is testament to some personal growth, because I think I'd be like "oh my god, I can't move, I need to save money." or "I need to be close to home, or whatever." Like I realized that I need that space. So I'm actually like going to move forward with that plan, eventually.

Her new coping strategies and self-validating experiences appear to have helped her to reframe herself socially in relationship not only to her mother but to anyone with whom she might have a distressing social encounter.

> Yeah it definitely helps to see people [I know], when I work through an entire week and don't do anything social, it makes me feel even more anxious, and it almost makes me feel like I need to be even more like…I don't know maybe because I'm not getting the social interaction outside of work, I struggle with it even more, like during the work day. It's like I'm craving it more but I'm having a harder time. (laughs) But I obviously have a harder time at work with new people. So it just makes it even worse.

It's striking that for Zainab, social encounters with old friends are important to mitigate the stresses of social encounter at work. Apparently the benefits of engaging in face-easing social interactions are transferable to higher-stakes contexts and it's important to engage in easier, lower stakes face-work (such as with friends) regularly in order to decrease anxiety in other higher-stakes contexts (such as with new coworkers).

Overall, Zainab describes her current work environment and culture very positively. She emphasizes that in part her success in her current position is attributable to the hostessing exposure:

> …[my boss] also said that um I've been doing a good job learning things on my own. Which I attribute to the lesson that I learned as a hostess. Like I've been really intentional about trying to figure things out myself. Because the answer is always out there. I had to give one presentation so far, and it went well. I feel like the environment is also very much like you just have to do it. [It] isn't a space where you can be like shy. (laughs) …it's made me realize that I can be myself…as long as I'm doing a good job and being diligent…You know like, inquisitive and like creative. So it just it's felt like a really good fit…People are helpful…I can take ownership over really big projects, and I really like that.

It's notable that unlike in 2015 when she called herself anxious or introverted, she now calls herself "shy." This implies more a sense of acceptance around shyness as a personality trait. At the same time, her determination to continue practicing exposures indicates that she is continuing to attempt to train herself to act more extroverted. Zainab explains that she needs to institute exposures more at work in particular.

> …the other day at work I remember thinking I'm too comfortable…it's so easy to just sit here at my desk and grind away all day and have a totally legit excuse for not like asking someone to go to lunch or something. I'm hiding from the exposures. Yeah I think it would be an exposure (laughs) to just like get up and ask someone to got to coffee or something. It's an exposure because it would be really difficult for me, as it stands right now.

She expresses being worried about her shyness coming across as a lack of confidence, nor does she want to confirm stereotypes about Muslim women. This concern with her image as both competent as well confident continues to be prevalent in her face-work in the workplace in particular:

> Yeah I think you have to be confident, especially in front of clients. Like I think it's just bad for business to not be confident. (laughs) I think that's one part of it and another part of it is also being a Muslim woman I don't want to give off the impression that I'm like helpless. You know, give in to that stereotype? Does that make sense? I want to be projecting the confident woman that I am. So I think it's probably like 70/30, like 30 percent projecting confident Muslim woman, and 70 percent like, in my profession I need to be presenting well. I mean I don't mind being quieter socially, but I know it's important

> to connect with people. And I want to connect with people and sometimes being very very quiet is a barrier to that. Like sometimes you - you often have to put yourself out there.

Zainab is “putting herself out there” most recently through a dating app. She has reframed her idea of what kind of person she can date after a positive experience dating a non-Muslim person in Chicago. While this idea has been expanded to non-Muslims, whomever she marries would have to agree to her bringing up their children in the Muslim faith. While she could be understood as a “detour” (Abdelhadi, 2019) to some extent in that she has experimented and has now returned and is near her Muslim family and community, she simultaneously continues to venture out beyond it as well.

Summary and Conclusion

This section provided Zainab’s narrative in chronological order and in her words through a series of interview excerpts from two years of in-depth interviews from 2015 to 2016. It covered the primary time periods in her life relevant to her identity distress narrative. From childhood through high school, Zainab faced a number of identity-related challenges which continued to impact her in her emerging adult life. Her family was in a conflict which was expressed in a struggle over her two names, and any name-choice she made seemed to be met with disapproval. As an adult, she turned to a variety of self-help practices to try to cope with the anxiety she had developed over independent decision-making and confident self-expression. In the following section, we will delve into a further analysis of her narrative and insights that can be drawn from it regarding identity distress experience and process at large.

Analysis: Anxiety Mitigation as Self-Organization

Introduction

Zainab focused on becoming a more active agent in her life. I thus examine Zainab's identity distress narrative as one of a thwarted American protagonist. Her position as a mixed race, Muslim, first generation woman with a complicated family and early identity development history, constitute a collection of self-doubting voices and internalized identity performance pressures. I argue that Zainab's efforts at self-doctoring are, at their root, a search for enabling perspectives for her internal dialogue, and thereby more empowered positions for her identity repertoire in everyday life. I suggest that her efforts represent an expansion of her dramaturgical attunement in challenging contexts as well as the push towards a more organized, cohesive and coherent dialogic hierarchy of the self-populated by more self-confident characters with a narrative that she has a sense of ownership and agency over.

Building on Hermans' (2006) dialogical theory of the self as a theatre of voices in which an organized hierarchy is imperative for everyday functioning, I argue that the dominant cause of her distress is a cacophony or lack of organization in self-voices and positions which she is able to begin to reorganize and shift through the self-doctoring perspectives and practices she implements. The mitigation of anxiety becomes her new dominant identity objective which organizes Zainab's self-system and supports her overriding mission of self-empowerment. In turn, the face-easing practices and perspectives she discovers and integrates from SAI and her implemented exposures, become central in helping her facilitate the successful achievement of her identity objectives and a self which she feels she has willfully constructed rather one shaped mainly by external forces. Nevertheless, the orientation of her dominant identity objective is still somewhat conflicted between acceptance and image actualization in that she both seeks to be accepted as she is while continuing to feel the pressure to disprove certain stereotypes.

Overall Challenges

This section details the overall challenges faced by Zainab in her mission to establish and perceive herself as "competent," both in her personal and professional life.

Dominant Narratives: Striving for Creative Ownership

> Affirmed most clearly in the internalized life stories of especially generative American adults, the redemptive self plays out images, themes, characters, plots, and scenes that resonate with some of the most cherished and contested narratives in the American heritage, ranging from the Puritans to Oprah. (McAdams, 2008, p. 26)

Zainab consistently strived towards a self-as-active-protagonist, as is evident in her struggle to be confident, self-assured, and importantly to take action instead of being controlled by the will of others. Yet Zainab isn't striving for a sense of superior greatness which McAdams warns can be the downside of the idealized American life narrative. Instead, her aspirations are less ambitious and far more foundational in terms of American personhood as a phenomenon that is self-made, authentic, and self-driven, as she described in 2016: "…like you don't feel ownership over who you are. Your competency and your capabilities."

Her striving for "ownership" emerged from a number of competing priorities and compounded challenges. These included the early and ongoing challenges presented by her family conflict, the stigma concerns and expectations tied to her cultural, religious, and ethnic identities and made explicit at her private Muslim school, and the American ideal of exploratory personhood which presumably shaped the identity development of her secular summer camp, public school, and college peers. Symptomatically, these early obstacles appear to have resulted in a difficulty to express herself verbally during one-on-one interactions and this was evident from SAI observations as well as during our 2015 interview.

The following section illustrates the way her symptoms emerged as obstacles to what I'm referring to as "creative American self-making," an objective at the heart of Zainab's struggle

and one that is championed by contemporary self-help movements which facilitate the construction of a "therapeutic selfhood" and narrative:

> As a cultural schema, the therapeutic narrative compels one to identify pathological thoughts and behaviors, to locate the hidden source of these pathologies with one's family past, to give voice to one's story of suffering in communication with others, and to triumph over one's past by reconstructing an emancipated and independent self. (Silva, 2012, p. 507)

This popular cultural narrative of a triumphant therapeutic selfhood (in line with McAdam's redemptive self) is common in groups like AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) and is evident in SAI discourse, a crisis heterotopia with a similar though far from identical model.

Silva (2012) argues that therapeutic selfhood allows for a more flexible, alternative pathway towards adulthood[120] when more traditional pathways (i.e.,marriage, children, job security, etc.) are uncertain or less desirable. Muslim traditional selfhood is also relevant for Zainab's identity negotiation process. While Zainab considered herself Muslim and wasn't opposed to the traditional markers of Muslim female identity, she also exhibited a desire to experiment and create her own more flexible version of it. The more dramatic negotiation of her religious identity aligned with her therapeutic self-reimagining through SAI as it was all part of her move to Chicago.

Contamination: Obstacles in Zainab's Narrative

When I first interviewed Zainab in 2015, I encountered a stylish, 24-year old Muslim woman wearing a hijab that matched her outfit. This put-together look was in striking contrast with her speech patterns. She seemed desperate to talk and yet every other sentence, I found myself needing to encourage her to speak or to finish her sentences; demonstrating my interest. Often she would ask for affirmation about the usefulness of her words.

[120] "Adulthood" may be glossed as both a sense of American identity achievement and adult status or in self-help discourse, significant growth and transformation as well as progress towards identity objectives, or a sense of "growth."

ZAINAB: …it's not like I don't have anything to say. I'll have something to say but I won't say it. Because that's like me being my anxious self-you know.

MARIANNA: You're anxious that what-

ZAINAB: That I'm not gonna make any sense. (laughs)

MARIANNA: That you're not gonna make any sense!

ZAINAB: Or that it's not funny…Or that it's like dumb, that what I have to say is like totally not…

MARIANNA: Totally not what?

ZAINAB: Like relevant.

Even when she could laugh at it, this self-doubting pattern was continually present in her speech in 2015, not unlike one discernible character second-guessing another, so that she would often make statements and then second-guess them aloud. These speech patterns in which Zainab constructed her "anxious self" through our dialogue are identifiable as "parallelisms" or "…autobiographical narratives in which narrators both represent and enact analogous patterns can make particularly salient contributions to self-construction," (Wortham, 2001, p. 153) as Zainab both described and simultaneously enacted her self-doubt pattern during interviews. Further, Zainab's self-construction through our interviews perhaps felt like a continuation of the witnessing component of SAI bootcamp where we met: I could bear witness to her growth, which Silva (2012) argues is critical for the construction of therapeutic selfhood which must include this interactive, performative component of witnesses or an audience to construct "…seemingly personal markers of adulthood that are in fact culturally patterned and dependent on social recognition for validation" (Silva, 2012, p. 519).

Progressing beyond her second-guessing pattern was particularly important because it can also be an understood as a "contamination sequence" (McAdams, 2001) wherein the protagonist

is stuck repeating an original scene of failure. The origin of Zainab's second-guessing pattern is by her account the self-described "watershed moment" when her mother blocked her desire to go by "Sophia" in high school. She was thereby blocked from the "not-so-controlled" identity discovery process of her freer American peers (e.g. blocked from name changing, nose piercing, studying abroad,) and further from a sense of being able to successfully process her own authentic, self-originated emotional and stress signals or "instincts":

> My hypothesis is that has a huge impact on why I get so anxious. Because I just don't trust my instincts. My whole life they've been like invalidated.

Since this key turning point,[121] Zainab had been stuck "circling the same ground again and again," (McAdams, 2001, p. 6).

> I just keep wanting to seek, I keep wanting my mom's approval. Although I keep telling myself I won't get it, I need to live my life the way I want to...

Zainab describes attempting to make independent choices about her life and identity and fails whenever her mother or others voice doubt or disagreement throughout high school and college. It appears that Zainab internalizes a voice of doubt that overrides her own decision-making later as an adult even in the absence of literal others around to cast doubt.

Coping with Islamophobia

Her anxious self-doubting pattern was in direct conflict with the pressure she felt to prove herself as a confident rather than helpless Muslim woman.

> …being a Muslim woman I don't want to give off the impression that I'm like helpless. You know, give in to that stereotype? Does that make sense? I want to be projecting the confident woman that I am.

This stigma is not without consequences. Sediqe (2019) found that Muslims with higher stigma consciousness are the ones who have experienced more stigma-related discrimination and are

[121] Turning points typically signal important transitions or changes in life narratives (McAdams, 2001; McAdams, 2009).

more likely to distance themselves from an American identity while Haddad (2006) found that due to negative stereotypes, Muslims who veil are more likely to experience discrimination.

> There is no question, however, that as a symbol the veil or scarf or head cover symbolizes to most Americans anything from repression to backwardness. (Haddad, 2006, p.39)

In terms of intellectual stereotypes, according to her narrative of her Muslim private school days, the Muslim community's response in Zainab's case[122] was to expect her to work to disprove the stereotype. Zainab's most confident early identity as a good student and "the smart one" was thus a critical weapon against the dangers of the image of Muslim intellectual inferiority. Yet given the research on Muslim intellectual inferiority stereotypes, it's not surprising that in spite of her past confidence in it, "the smart one" identity is fraught for Zainab:

> French-Arab students underperformed when the verbal task was presented as a measure of intellectual ability, compared to French students. When the task was presented as non-diagnostic, their performance equaled that of French students (Chateignier et al., 2009, p. 219).

Further, it's notable that Eijberts (2016) found that highly-educated second generation Muslim migrant women in the Netherlands tend to choose "concealing" as a strategy in dealing with stigmatization, altogether eliminating the visibility of their religious identity:

> For instance, Loubna…a career-oriented law student, implied during a focus group discussion with fellow second-generation women of Moroccan descent that she does not wear a headscarf because she fears that it could jeopardize her career. (Eijberts, 2016, p. 10)

These findings suggest the intensity of the struggle with demeaning intellectual and other inferiority stereotypes in relation to visible identity markers for Muslim women. I argue that these stigma-related pressures are present for Zainab and that lower stigma consciousness may

[122] Notable alternatives exist to subvert the intellectual inferiority stereotypes that exist, such as indicated by work on *Muslim Cool (*Khabeer, 2016), wherein the stigmatization and stereotype threats faced by Muslims and African Americans are combined by Muslim American youth into a hybrid identity and coping process.

serve as a protective factor for her in certain instances, along with altogether concealing a visible Muslim identity from interlocuters. [connection to synthesis and processing later on however??]

Mixed Family Conflict: Contaminated Cultural Contestation

It's significant that Zainab explains that her first name felt like a misrepresentation of her identity, but she had "tried not to think about it" because "it was a big deal" for her mom, i.e., this was likely the identity objective of ethnic maintenance for her African immigrant mother, who was notably in conflict with her Caucasian American-born father. Zainab herself appears to minimize the importance of the name conflict at times.

> And so I was like "oh this is like a really easy fix. This is really not that serious." (laughs) It's like "most of my close friends know that my dad's family calls me this." My dad goes back and forth between my first and middle name.

Here, Zainab echoes the father's side of the family with their passive aggressive tactics, as described earlier, to get her to switch to her middle name in overtly diminishing the gravity of the decision while covertly influencing it. Taking up their position as her own served her in the context of a secular American summer camp. Her move to use her middle name allowed her to uphold the positive face value of a person at camp who was easy to meet and relate to and now included the identity objectives of "full self" or authenticity, likeability and social belonging, and control over her narrative and sense of agency.

Zainab's efforts toward agency formation are noteworthy given her need to reconcile a more traditional, "controlled" structure with one premised on creative individual exploration:

> What is vital in the late-modern context, then, are the resources that the individual can muster in dealing with both the lack of normative structure *and* the residual burdens of older structural barriers. In opening up the "black box of agency" in its relation to structure, the identity capital model proposes that the personal resources acquired developmentally become important in late-modern contexts, those psychological resources that can facilitate the agentic movement through, and negotiation with, various social contexts… (Côté, 2016, p. 13)

I suggest that the sense of agency that is necessary for negotiating a Muslim American's path was a resource which Zainab had struggled to take up. The challenges of what O'Brien (2013) terms "cultural contestation" in this case meant an endless conflict between different family members' identity objectives for her. Furthermore, it's likely that the act of making her own independent choices, more typical to American coming-of-age culture, seemed like a rejection of her mother's immigrant background and of the identity objective of ethnic maintenance. Research on acculturation gaps between immigrant generations demonstrates that parent-child gaps in acculturation in US identity are related to family conflict (Birman, 2006.) For Muslims specifically, a high match between individuals' and their family's heritage culture identification may act as a protective factor for mental health (Asvat and Malcarne, 2008).

Cacophony: A lack of organization in self-hierarchy revealed

In their conflict about Zainab's identity objectives and names, neither side of her family seemed to provide her with a mediated learning experience that instilled confidence in her own independent decision making. In fact, I argue that their disparate pressures, as well as the varied, high stakes expectations internalized from her private Muslim school and her public American school, came together in what Hermans has termed a "cacophony" which:

> …develops when all hierarchy has been abandoned, lost, or was never built. Without any hierarchy, intrapersonal or interpersonal dialogue appears as a dizzying array of self-positions with each self-position speaking without order and/or without reference to one another…The cacophonous narrative resembles a group of characters more or less speaking at once or constantly interrupting one another without reference to what had been said. (Hermans, 2006, p. 152)

"…everything...gets jumbled like in terms of anxiety." I argue it is this very jumble of characters or a lack of hierarchy in her self-system that can make it difficult for her to fully understand her own reasoning and desires. Her internalized objectives have been so in conflict that she has been

made into “turf,” a conflict zone for others wherein she experiences no clearly dominant voice or position of her own as a result.

Seeking Alternative Self-Positions

This section describes the ways in which Zainab sought alternative, distress-mitigating, and face-easing perspectives and strategies and ultimately developed a new character version of herself in the form of the quick-on-her-feet American hostess [strategic self-experimenter]. She was simultaneously self-doctoring (Emmons, 2010) with SAI techniques; re-parenting and re-socializing herself by searching for new, alternative perspectives, role models, and witnesses to her therapeutic transformation; and adopting perspectives from the American self-help movement which emphasized self-actualization, while also seeking acceptance and greater face-ease.

Implementing SAI techniques

The combined dramaturgical and therapeutic metaphors offered by SAI presented an appealing and enabling hybrid opportunity for Zainab. She could exercise her “good student” identity and her business identity which offered her a kind of optimization mindset to take up the therapeutic metaphors of exposures and “yes, and” of improv. These metaphors appear to fit well into an application of “it’s not that serious.” During the course itself, Zainab continued to struggle with her distress but she was diligent about showing up and doing the homework.

“It’s not that serious” also likely represents an adapted and yet specifically American Muslim stance that Zainab has taken towards identity performance for as she explains in our 2016 interview: “Honestly, being Muslim and American are probably the two most salient components of my identity…” She needed to lower the stakes of her everyday lived experience. But was she really seeking something new here? Her identity choices were what her family members had been saying and contradicting through overt diminishing and covert augmenting.

Here she was engaging in a dramaturgical practice that could allow her to both reframe it and embody it in a way that helped her cope. SAI practices allowed her to literalize this seemingly easy-going protean attitude that would take something as high stakes as the identity choices of immigrants and their children, and diminish them into, quite literally, fun and games.

There were a number of ways in which she implemented exposures in various realms of her life: from saying “yes, and” to more social activities, to approaching her landlord about an issue with her lease, something that she had been terrified to do. It appears that reframing discomfort-causing events overall through these cognitive behavioral and improvisational metaphors gave Zainab the distance she needed to lower the situational stakes of these interactions: they were now treatments, experiments, or improvisational games, where the final outcome was less important than the act of simply participating.

The SAI process in itself allowed for a mediated enhancement of her cognitive authority, through in-class practice as well as teacher and peer encouragement. “…taking on cognitive authority and hence responsibility for a task by actively appropriating others' mediational means is basic to the formation of mediated agency” (Wertsch et al., 1993, p. 349). By her account, the naming of anxiety as a shared, and “valid” obstacle for a community of interlocuters with similar experiences was in itself deeply enabling for Zainab and further they bore witness to her story thus lending it meaning and authenticity (Silva, 2012).

The “quick on her feet” American hostess: from contamination to redemption narrative

I argue that the implementation of SAI as a new perspective created both a new hierarchy of self-positions for Zainab and a revised image of herself. She created an active, quick-thinking American protagonist; the quick-on-her-feet, improvising, carefree hostess who was successful in everyday work encounters simply because she had to be. Unlike her blocked attempts at self-

directed action in her adolescence, Zainab's exposures were by her accounts mostly highly successful and they now emulated a kind of "redemption sequence:"

> …the storyteller depicts a transformation from a bad, affectively negative life scene to a subsequently good, affectively positive life scene. The bad is redeemed, salvaged, mitigated, or made better in light of the ensuing good. (McAdams, 2001, p. 474.)

Zainab's new playful, experimental metaphors of "yes, and" and exposures propelled action, and one of the most significant experiments she undertook was the hostessing job wherein she took SAI into a real-world setting which she found very uncomfortable, and therefore "had to do it."

In our 2016 interview, Zainab described a pivotal turning point: the encounter when she realized her boss thought of her as competent. Zainab had kept asking her boss "a million questions" at her new hostessing job and he responded with "whatever, do what you want." It's noteworthy that her boss's act of both naming and witnessing her competency, or agency and cognitive authority fully brought the new "competent adult" character to life. Zainab from that point on took in the self-position that "you don't need permission for everything." Thus she was able to get the validation she was seeking. This event also marks the transformation from a contamination sequence of constantly ineffective and blocked protagonist to a redemption sequence of personal growth which kept recurring, particularly in her descriptions around her current job and living situation in 2016: "Like I've been really intentional about trying to figure things out myself. Because the answer is always out there." She was thus experiencing herself as a more empowered protagonist in her own narrative.

She began to integrate more positive interpretations of her behavior by others by 2016 and to create distance from her doubts which still occur sometimes: "I try to tell myself that's not what she *thinks*." Through implementing a perspective that was open to a more positive interpretation of her pauses, she was building confidence for herself as an interlocuter and was

"freezing" less often during our 2016 interview just as she was in her everyday life and seeking reassurance less often. The more face-easing interpretations of Zainab's challenges appeared to allow for more confident and easily-flowing dialogue as evident in fewer pauses, tears, and more laughter throughout the 2016 interview. She also reimagined her image of her slowness to respond in the workplace as "thoughtful" rather than "incompetent."

Her new perspective of exposures allowed her to begin to experience certain anxiety-inducing contexts as opportunities for success. Zainab now treated her relationships with coworkers and bosses as opportunities for learning and self-improvement. This learning and treatment-focused approach allowed for a mediated agency in the form of encouragement of her independent decision-making to begin to form in a more pronounced way with her new boss than it had with previous authority figures and contexts. Interestingly, Viola Spolin's original anti-authoritarian, egalitarian aim of improv, presented a good fit for Zainab's struggle with authority. It presented an appealing face-easing strategy: in an improv game everyone is equal. Imagining everyday encounters as exposures to playfully enter into with supportive team mates likely allowed her to distance herself from her fear of social failure in front of authority figures.

Muslim American Experiments: Seeking Affirmation and Face-Ease

In her process of self-help seeking, Zainab has turned to mentors and employers as surrogate American self-esteem boosting parents or the mentors she felt she needed in her identity development. "In millennial minds, managers aren't just bosses; they're coaches" (Son, 2015 [no pageination]). Her identity exploration and contestation as a young Muslim woman aligned with her therapeutic selfhood pathway in that she wanted to experiment with spirituality, dating, friendship, alternative practices, and sought validation and recognition among likeminded others in all of these areas.

Chicago, a city far from her hometown, ended up being a versatile and distant enough laboratory for all of Zainab's self-experiments: from SAI, to the communities she participated in and the various non-profits where she worked; all places where she discovered both validation and thus face-ease with others who demonstrated the kind of understanding and recognition she found fulfilling, particularly on an egalitarian footing from peers where there was less of a sense of having to compete to prove your worth. Authority figures held important transformational positions. Their words and acts of observing had the power to propel her growth into newly empowered self-positions and characters that she felt validated to perform. From the conversation with her landlord who turned out to be a therapist of anxiety who validated her distress experiences, to the boss at her restaurant job who gave her permission to not need permission, to the "encouraging" boss and co-workers at her most recent job near her hometown who made her feel like she was a valued, promising employee, to an older female alumna who ended up mentoring her and importantly, validating her right to take risks and to fail:

> She actually encouraged me to like make this move [to Chicago]. And she's been very encouraging. And she introduced this concept of like "A, you're in charge of your destiny," that's like another thing that, that I don't think like that's relayed to anyone, and then like "You can make mistakes." And then like "I'm a person, I've made mistakes."

This idea of being able to experiment without fear was one she continued to strive for and this is echoed in the improv and her other experimental activities in Chicago, from dating non-Muslim men for the first time to joining a spiritual group where one could simply share space with others regardless of religious markers, beliefs, or appearance. In all of these spaces, she found voices of acceptance which were important and relieving for her, particularly in the way in which they enabled her to mitigate stress in face-easing contexts and thereby construct her own emerging views and values.

Continued Challenges

Introduction

This section deals with the ways in which Zainab's identity distress struggles and uncertainties were not completely resolved though they certainly appeared to be lightened by the various self-doctoring and face-easing practices in which she engaged.

A more active if at times confused protagonist

SAI implies that anxiety is like a contamination sequence that the individual can't quite control, a malfunction of the monkey brain, and that exposures are potential tools for agency and redemption. Due to a lack of openness to meaning-making beyond the CBT vocabulary, it's tricky for SAI discourse to provide an opportunity for full integration of one's internal voices into a coherent and cohesive dialogue. Zainab was able to mitigate the threat of social defeat, or distract herself enough through "yes and" and the self-effacing goal of an exposure (Russell, 2011), in order to prove her competence both to herself and others and by her account to subvert a stereotype. Yet her case exemplifies the tension between success and wellbeing in contemporary American understandings of personhood. As anxiety symptoms are antithetical to an image of success, it's critical to hide, eliminate, or prevent them at all costs. They are so deeply threatening to the performance of a confident character, that actual wellbeing may become secondary to the performance of wellbeing. The problem is that for someone like Zainab for whom a primary objective is to disprove an Islamophobic stereotype, impression and image management are everything and this can come at a high price. It's not entirely surprising then that the cacophony wasn't completely gone in the 2016 interview. The tense combination of increased activeness with continued confusion about her discomfort is particularly evident in her hostessing narrative.

When I questioned Zainab about why she removed her hijab for hostessing, she kept insisting that it had to do with competency and not wanting to be self-conscious. She was not making the link between competency and identity or that for her "being competent" was a desired identity objective and positive face value. Further, this lack of dialogue between her own ideas such as with "…this standard that I feel I'm not meeting" and the resistance to competency having anything to do with identity was a continual theme. She explained the hijab-removal choice as a way to mitigate an overload of anxiety and workload in the restaurant environment as if it had nothing to do with its cultural significance and stigma.

> I think I was just self-conscious about not being able to do my job well… And that's all it was about. It wasn't about like my identity. (laughs) You know, like that wasn't at the table. It was literally like, just like my competency. (Zainab Interview 2016)

She continued to think about her competency through the lens of the exposure metaphor in terms of experimenting on herself as way to gain greater understanding of her anxiety in discovering that "it's not just about how I'm presenting," thus the experimenter self-position was an empowering and versatile one in that the dramaturgical metaphor allowed Zainab to try out different modes of both presenting and imagining herself. When I kept asking her to explain the connection between competency and wearing hijab, she struggled and came up with:

> I think that they're just two things that I really have a really hard time with to be honest. Maybe they're possibly not connected. Um. But everything sort of comes together and gets jumbled in terms of anxiety (laughs) and what makes me anxious and stuff.

The pressure and desire to be a good student, to make her mother proud and all her other family members happy, to be a good representative of her Muslim community, to prove herself as likeable, successful, and competent in America, but also to feel like she is controlling her narrative in doing so, the logic and coherence of her identity objectives seemed to become jumbled for Zainab around such a symbolically-loaded choice as hijab removal. I argue that

Zainab was in fact uncomfortable being Muslim in a white[123] setting. She wouldn't necessarily describe hers as a reaction to Muslim stereotypes, but that's what it appears to be. Her stigma consciousness was thus apparently low as a part of her coping in this context.

Her enthusiasm to use "yes, and" rather than consider the likelihood of prejudice in this setting becomes apparent in her narrative about a frustrating encounter with an elderly female customer who questions her "education" and in reality, her competence, when Zainab isn't able to comply with her request. "I think I was more frustrated by needing to call my manager over to help us…" Even in the absence of hijab, this elderly customer's behavior towards her could easily be interpreted by Zainab as discrimination against her skin tone, gender, youth, or some combination, and this would be a likely interpretation. Instead, Zainab imagines a benign explanation: "…because like she wasn't familiar with our system, right?" Thereby instead of "mindreading" negative assumptions, which is considered an automatic thought in CBT, she creates a naïve, well-meaning intention for her interlocuter. Significantly, Zainab had to call a male authority figure[124] rather than being taken seriously on her own.

It is evident that she seeks face-easing practices and metaphors to mitigate her identity distress. Notably, the face-easing spaces described by Zainab are not competitive but communal in orientation, thus pressure to perform is not an important component. She also has a new logic and order of importance to her priorities and identity objectives, with the mitigation of her own anxiety as an objective that sits at the top of the hierarchy. Exposures operate for her as a clever way to give off the impression of friendliness while focused on the self-effacing goal of treatment. This may mean that other important objectives like self-expression get subordinated in

[123] Devos & Banaji (2005) found "American" is synonymous to whiteness.

[124] This mirrors the gender discrimination Hoshchild observed in female flight attendants' struggles both in the assumption by customers of their lower and inferior status and authority to that of male flight attendants (Hoshchild, 1983/2012).

certain contexts to her primary objective of self-doctoring, but the advantage is an organizing principle, and the position around her choices that is internally rather than externally guided, meaning she is closer to the "competent" member of American society she strives to be, or in work instances, at least closer to a successful performance of one. This can mean denying her non-white, non-minority, and therefore un-American (Devos & Banaji, 2005) challenges. Further, for someone whose sense of internally-guided action was invalidated early on, to now be guided entirely by a felt experience, even a discombobulating one, can be interpreted as self and agency-affirming.

> In conceiving of all suffering as the result of "mismanaged emotions" that can be repaired at the level of the psyche (Illouz 2008:247), the therapeutic narrative gives actors a sense of control over the disruptions and uncertainties inherent in modern day life. (Silva, 2012, p. 507)

Her reimagining of herself extends to her Muslim identity and the pathway to traditional selfhood that typically define it. In 2016, it's significant that she mentions that most of her friends are now married while she is in no hurry. She explains that marriage is expected by her age which is 26 at the time. Her declaration about taking her time, and her new perspective that the individual doesn't need to be Muslim, indicates that even while living at home, she continues to follow what suits her even when it's not exactly what her community expects. Her increased agency and cognitive authority also extend to managing her relationship with her mother. She avoids potentially anxiety-generating interactions by carefully regulating the topics covered:

> I know that I just can't have some conversations…in previous years, was trying to like develop this idea of an ideal relationship that I had in my head. Um. But now I'm just like, much more like, you know, talk about my day, talk about how your day went, not have any serious conversations. (laughs) You know nothing that could lead to an argument.

It appears that she is careful to avoid topics of importance to herself that could lead her back into a contamination pattern where she is seeking approval and validation from her mother and not

receiving it. What indicates further progress in terms of distancing herself from the original conflict is her decision about her names:

> I mean I think that if I were to go back in time I would [use Sophia at my job] but just the thought of having to handle that is just an overwhelming thought…just like I don't have…I feel like I have a lot on my plate as it stands. And I just feel like you can't win every battle. (laughs) And I feel like I'm also just much more comfortable with "Zainab" now that I've made the decision, to just like, be Zainab everywhere.

This perspective of "you can't win every battle" appears to be an important development in her thinking. In order to find balance in her complicated set of identity objectives, which represent a complex mix of American therapeutic and exploratory self-construction oriented as well as traditional and experimental ideas of Muslim selfhood, she has to concede certain battles to her mother and perhaps to her community; her sense of self appears to extend to her community and to her mother at times and this adds to the complexity of her negotiations. Perhaps if she makes certain objectives lower priority, such as her names, she can more fully assert her agency, competent image, and authentic sense of self in others such as feeling like she can be both expressive and respected at her new job. Either way, this does appear to be further evidence of growth in creating a hierarchy if not always a fully coherent dialogue in her self-system.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has presented a description and analysis of Social Anxiety Improv, an alternative therapy combining improv and cognitive behavioral therapy for working adults. After presenting the way a myriad of issues emerge in class, some of which fit within the vocabulary of SAI and allow for a sense of belonging though specific cultural issues not examined as such within the discourse, I lay out the focal case of Zainab. Both the case of Zainab and the dynamics

of the SAI support group demonstrate the interactive and dialogic nature of everyday mental health.

Zainab is a particularly illustrative case of the potential appeal of the ambiguous meanings of an alternative therapy like SAI which is a fusion of entertainment training, self-help, and treatment and the uptake of such a targeted self-help practice into an individual's self-system and internal as well as external dialogue potentially helpful for parsing inner confusion. Zainab's adolescent identity development as the self-declared battleground for her parents' marital conflict, created a tangled web of cultural meanings and personal stakes. SAI's categorical ambiguity serves Zainab in that she utilizes medicalized and psychologized strategies for self-improvement as part of her search for coherence in her cultural identity development and adaptation as a first generation mixed race Muslim woman.

In Zainab's case, the development of severe identity distress manifest as anxiety can be understood as a heightening of invalidated desires that in her adulthood emerged as a mix of chaotic, overwhelming signals in the moment. The Social Anxiety category, locatable in standardized terms from the DSM and Cognitive Behavioral models, presented a universalizing opportunity for Zainab's cultural identity development. She discovered a sense of validation in that her distress experience is relatable to others, and it provided her with a revised, and more empowered (if imperfectly so) organizing principle for her self-system.

Overall, Zainab demonstrates the potential benefits and limits of a hybrid of improv and CBT for identity distress. For Zainab, Social Anxiety Improv presented actionable steps to take, encapsulated in apt, mobilizing and empowering metaphors. As an empowered self-experimenter of potential treatments for her anxiety, she became more in tune with monitoring and managing her anxiety levels in various social contexts. Zainab used these metaphors to experiment with

stigma management around anxiety, enhanced cognitive authority, and a sense of herself as a more active and competent protagonist in contexts which she had always found daunting, thus increasing face-ease in her life. Zainab appeared to enhance her dramaturgical attunement through combining "yes, and" for a fully playful and yet purposeful application of "it's not that serious." "It's not that serious" was a sentiment that came in part from the covert tactics of her family members in attempting to sway her in a familial cultural struggle but which she had reinterpreted as her own license to trust herself and make the quick decisions that were necessary for her career success.

As for its limits, SAI failed to acknowledge the very real risks of prejudice and stigma in everyday life; a dangerous omission of the prevalence of discrimination. The approach also lacks an understanding of stigma consciousness, racial consciousness, racial identity development, Muslim identity development, gender identity development, and any other aspects of stigma beyond those around diagnostic and pathologizing labels. Unsurprisingly then, SAI did not seem to have helped integrate a comprehensive understanding of her stigma concerns or experiences. Further, coming to the conclusion at moments that she is "intuitive" after all, she integrated her own emotional processing in a way that Debra Hope's approach would not necessarily advise, as again, the metaphor of the monkey mind is unsurprisingly not conducive for coherent and cohesive self-integration. The case also demonstrates the need for both culturally sensitive as well as dialogically-rigorous approaches for treatment of identity-related distress which both activate the protagonist but also allow them to more consciously identify and manage their self-positions.

CHAPTER 6
Clown Play at Elite Quirky University

Introduction

This chapter first presents an ethnographic study of *le jeu*, or 'clown play,' a French performance practice, as it is currently taught in the U.S. by Jay Torrence and second, a case study of Alex, one of the students in Jay's class. I will situate and analyze Jay's pedagogy and my experience of it as participant-observer in relation to other major traditions of clown practice and clown play. Alex is a salient case study because he is a neuro-diverse individual with a particular set of social interaction challenges who has discovered helpful everyday life application of clown play, comedy and improv. The goal of this chapter is to explore clown play as a space for deconstructing and potentially treating neuro-diverse identity, face blindness and autism distress. These challenges contribute an additional perspective in terms of stigma, emotional management, and face-work in relation to the tools and insights offered by comedic performance pedagogies and clown in particular.

The Ethnographic Landscape of "Le Jeu"

This section pinpoints the historical origins of "le jeu" in the world history of clown practices and identities and then connects these foundations with the current ethnographic landscape. Jay's version of clown play is introduced and the pedagogies he utilizes are contextualized.

Historical Origins

Though popularly known in a variety of simplified and superficial forms, the clown has a rich and complex cross-cultural history as described by Tobias:

> …clowns reside in many worlds, often straddling the boundaries of fact, fiction, ritual, art and reality. This group is comprised of many and varied types known as: fool, court-jester, buffoon, theatre clown, mime-clown, silent film clown, *alazon*, *eiron, bomolochos*, *commedia dell'arte* clown, street clown, circus clown and ritual clown." (Tobias, 2007, p. 37)

As scholars of clown history explain, there is "no simple answer to that seemingly simple question 'What is a clown?'" (Tobias, 2017, p. 37, citing Swortzell, 1978).[125] Clowns are also referred to and can exist in the form of "…comedians, comics, drolls, farceurs, humorists, Harlequins, jokers, mimes, mummers, pranksters, tricksters, wags and wits" (Tobias, 2007, p. 37). David Robb explains that the clown is by its nature an interdisciplinary phenomenon, interacting symbolically with the artforms and types of popular culture in which it appears (Robb, 2007). The clown's frequent role, status, image, and function as "the other" is notable because it constitutes a societal coping mechanism with contradiction, aversion, and discomfort:

> The clown's illusiveness, hybridity or transmutability may form a critical counterpart to rigid social homogeneity or ideological dogma; its mask may serve as a projection of a society's illusions or repressed utopian longings; or it may function as an ironic celebration of the 'other' that is feared, denied and substituted by falsehoods. The clown may even serve as an image of the 'other' that society hates and wishes to banish. Its mask, whatever form it takes—white face, red nose, grotesque features of any kind—is essentially a blank space on which anything can be projected. Author and audience conspire mutually in this projection, be it of longing, loss, love, sadness, fear, loathing or hostility. It can be a grotesque reflection of a commonly experienced contradiction, disorder, lack or void. The clown aesthetically resolves that contradiction and fills that void. (Robb, 2007, p. 1)

Perhaps because the clown is often portrayed as the failing "other," clown pedagogy often explores failure in a performative social encounter. The clown's existence in the stigmatized "other" category is thus representative of the losing side, or the feared social defeat outcome of a social encounter (Luhrmann, 2007). Clown pedagogy thus offers a fascinating

[125] See Swortzell (1978) for further history.

perspective onto the stigma management aspect of identity distress as a contemporary, interactive process.

Entry into the Field and Firsthand Insights

Contemporary clown performance in the United States has numerous schools and teachers, each with their own distinct style and discursive practice. My foray into this world began with Jay Torrence's "Le Jeu" class at EQU, as a well as a viewing of his play *Burning Blue Beard* by the Ruffians who combine clown beats, i.e., a partially-scripted series of moments which depend on audience engagement, with fully scripted material, and an exploration of other clowns, classes, and clown performances in Chicago from Commedia dell'Arte to 500 Clown. Since then, I've had the opportunity to explore clown culture in New York City, where I briefly trained in Commedia dell'Arte with Virginia Scott and consulted with Eugene Ma who is a renowned Clown teacher at Columbia, Yale, and Harvard. I developed a clown character and performance for Jay Torrence's class, which I performed at the end of Jay's course at the university as well as for a roomful of academics at the 2016 ICQI (International Conference for Qualitative Inquiry) in Urbana, Champaign.

From my experience as participant-observer, the modes of presence (Piette, 2016) taught by clown play are perhaps even more full of intervention and therapeutic potential for treating "get out of your head" syndrome or identity distress process than iterations of Stanislavskian *perezhivania*, "yes, and," etc. The aim of clown pedagogy is essentially to re-socialize the student into a childlike reimagining of the world through the eyes of their inner clown. The pedagogy calls for a constant "softening" of the brain (Bayes, 2019) or, as Piette called it, "mental looseness" (Piette, 2016).

In this case, the dramaturgical reimagining means relocating knowledge and consciousness to the body and in childlike curiosity. Through clown play exercises, I found the neutral, natural, and childlike innocence and pleasure in the practice described by clown masters and other researchers (Purcell Gates, 2011; Lecoq, 2013; Purcell Gates, 2017; Bayes, 2019; Fieldnotes, 2016). To find and cultivate one's inner clown is to channel a state of pre-socialization wherein one discovers colors, sounds, images, feelings, sensations, and interlocuters much as an innocent child discovers all of these phenomena for the first time.

The audience in clown play is also discovered as if for the first time. As clearly detailed by Christopher Bayes and Virginia Scott in the various exercises described in their book, the clown comes on stage to discover the audience (Bayes, 2019).The clown is to be so in-the-moment as if they were just born and every experience and sensation and most pivotally of all, discovery of other beings, is heightened and dramatized through that newborn lens.

Contemporary Clown from Lecoq to Torrence

The primary idea of le jeu, or clown play, as taught by Jay Torrence, is to engage the audience through eye contact and constant adjustment to the audience reaction and a very empathetic, entertainment-oriented, and playful and pleasurable kind of face-work. "It is essential to have fun and our school is a happy school. Not for us tortured self-questioning about the best way to walk on stage: it is enough that it be done with pleasure" (Lecoq, 2013, p. 56). Le jeu, literally meaning "the game" or "playfulness," is one of the central tenets of performance as developed in the meticulous methodology of Jacques Lecoq and taught to Jay by Lecoq's student Philippe Gaulier.

Lecoq developed his training system,[126] based in clown, with the help of many collaborators, some of whom, like Philippe Gaulier or Pierre Byland, went on to open their own schools. Every teacher has their own particular approach, and Jay (the focal teacher of this ethnography) is no exception. Nevertheless, the basic tenets of contemporary clowning include le jeu or playfulness, complicité or togetherness, and disponibilité or openness, as well as status, validation and listening (Balfour et al., 2016). Performance studies scholar Tim Etchells defines play "…as a state in which meaning is flux, in which possibility thrives, in which versions multiply, in which the confines of what is real are blurred, buckled, broken. Play as endless transformation, transformation without end and never stillness" (Etchells, 1999, p. 53). This flux and adaptability of play is at the heart of what makes a good performer, according to Masters Jacques Lecoq and Philippe Gaulier. Both schools boast impressive alumni lists with lauded contemporary performers, writers and teachers in theatre, television, and film from Ariane Mnouchkine to Sacha Baron Cohen, Julie Taymor, and Simon McBurney.

The development of "true play" was essential to the students' progression through Lecoq's program. The transformative powers of play are only possible through dynamic interaction skills with the audience, i.e., "the external world" as explained by Lecoq:

> …true play can only be founded on one's reaction to another. They have to understand this essential fact: to react is to throw into relief suggestions that come from the external world. The interior world is revealed through a process of reaction to the provocations of the world outside. (Lecoq, 2013, p. 32)

Yet this mastery of "play" is not only reserved for great performances and lauded performers.

[126] Lecoq is typically credited with being the primary person to initially develop clown into a pedagogy, with the help of his collaborators (Purcell Gates, 2011).

In the documentary film, *Les Deux Voyages de Jacques Lecoq*, Lecoq explained that "Theatre for me is an extension of life…the theatrical or artistic illusion can be the extension—the same laws govern both"[127] (Actes Sud Éditions, 2016).

Lecoq first developed his performance pedagogy as a post-World War II response inspired in part by his experiences as a physiotherapist helping war veterans regain control of their bodies after paralysis. Scholar Simon Murray suggests that new theatrical practices like Lecoq's "…reveal a strong feeling of optimism following the defeat of Fascism, and a sense that artists could – and should – empower themselves to invent afresh the rules of their particular creative work…the post-war landscape of Western theatre had to be re-mapped with different conventions and methods" (Murray, 2003, p. 14).

Lecoq built on his experiences and the philosophy of dramatist and mime trainer Jacques Copeau, who taught that the modern body was dulled and atrophied of its sensations and thus Lecoq began to develop an intervention to revive it (Murray, 2003). Lecoq incorporated elements of mime, Greek tragedy, and Commedia dell'Arte in his pedagogical experiments. With the help of Italian sculptor and mask-maker Amleto Sartori, Lecoq created special masks for his training program. He pursued a kind of essentialist authenticity, which he called a "universal poetic truth," in his studies of performance. This truth was ingrained in the body and its movement. It was to be discovered through what Lecoq called the "mimodynamic process" (Lecoq, 2013).

Via Negativa versus Unconditional Positive Regard

In Lecoq's mimodynamic process, words and structures in all languages, colors, music, poetry were to find their essential form through embodiment. Lecoq's initial intent was not necessarily to focus on clowns but rather to train actors, but the clown role ended up being a

[127] This is my translation from the original French which reads as follows: "Le theatre pour moi c'est un prolongement de la vie…L'illusion theatrale ou artistique peut etre le prolongement – ce sont les memes lois qui diriges la et l'autre" (Actes Sud Éditions).

place where the deepest human truths were uncovered and thus clown play became an essential part of his training system:

> My main discovery came in answer to a simple question: the clown makes us laugh, but how? One day I suggested that the students should arrange themselves in a circle – recalling the circus ring – and make us laugh. One after the other, they tumbled, fooled around, tried out puns, each one more fanciful than the one before, but in vain! The result was catastrophic. Our throats dried up, our stomachs tensed, it was becoming tragic. When they realised what a failure it was, they stopped improvising and went back to their seats feeling frustrated, confused and embarrassed. (Lecoq, 2013, p. 143).

It appears that Gaulier and others have worked to repeat this exercise in disorientation that Lecoq discovered in asking the question of how the clown makes us laugh (Purcell Gates, 2017). It produces a disorienting search for the laugh and relationship with the audience as well as with the self:

> It was at that point, when they saw their weaknesses, that everyone burst out laughing, not at the characters that they had been trying to show us, but at the person underneath, stripped bare for all to see. We had the solution. The clown doesn't exist aside from the actor performing him. We are all clowns, we all think we are beautiful, clever and strong, whereas we all have our weaknesses, our ridiculous side, which can make people laugh when we allow it to express itself. During our first experiences of this, I noticed that there were students with legs so thin that they hardly dared show them, but who found, in playing the clown, a way to exhibit their skinniness for the pleasure of the onlookers. At last they were free to be as they were, and to make people laugh. This discovery of how personal weakness can be transformed into dramatic strength was the key to my elaboration of a personal approach to clowning, involving a search for 'one's own clown', which became a fundamental principle of the training. (Lecoq, 2013, p. 108)

Lecoq's discoveries about the transformation of weaknesses into strengths is not only a powerful insight for theatrical training but arguably for individuals' contemporary everyday worries around social failure.

Gaulier in particular is open about being harsh and critical of students in a vague and disconcerting stream of profane put-downs, but as his former student Phil Burgers explains, "…once you can handle the insults, something inside you cracks and you can begin" (Logan, 2016 [no pagination]). According to Lecoq, the defining skill that determines whether actors

could move on to the second term was their ability to play. Lecoq's description of true play and "players" sounds much like the careful balance between rootedness in reality, the self, and imagination of *perezhivania*:

> There is a huge difference between actors who express their own lives, and those who can truly be described as players. In achieving this, the mask will have had an important function: the students will have learned to perform something other than themselves, while nevertheless investing themselves deeply in the performance. They have learned not to play themselves but to play using themselves. In this lies all the ambiguity of the actor's work. (Lecoq, 2013, p. 53)

Gaulier tracks laughter as a marker of success and as evidence of one's clown being near, and if students are not funny, as in not leading to lots of laughter on the part of the audience, he tells the students right away (BBC Newsnight, 2015). Based on her ethnographic observations of Gaulier's pedagogy, Laura Purcell Gates (2017) argues that authenticity and selfhood in clown play is a complex, moving target with which the clown student must contend: it calls into question their sense of their authentic selves. As with the other two pedagogies examined in this dissertation, within the foundation of clown training is an embedded theatre as/or life double aim as voiced by Lecoq:

> …theatre education is broader than theatre itself. In fact my work has always nurtured a dual aim: one part of my interest is focused on theatre, the other on life. I have always tried to educate people to be at ease in both. My hope, perhaps utopian, is for my students to be consummate livers of life and complete artists on stage. Moreover, it is not just a matter of training actors, but of educating theatre artists of all kinds. (Lecoq, 2013, p. 23)

This double purpose is particularly evident in the psychosocial work on the self of the pedagogy which involves making "visible their inculturated embodied habits" (Purcell Gates, 2017, p. 1). This "stripping away" (as Jay calls it) of their cultural habitus or social masks (Bayes, 2019) may make visible contradictions that clown play students may be living and aspects of stigma and otherness (Robb, 2007) around which they may have identity distress.

From Lecoq's meticulous training of actors and theatre artists to the hopes that it would serve his students outside of the theatre, clown play has now come to have both performative and therapeutic social work applications. In fact, there are clowns who are specifically oriented with a kind of social work and to some extent activist function such as clowning for refugees where "recuperative laughter" is utilized to help with trauma (Peacock, 2016), elder clowns who work with the elderly or targeting patients with dementia, or hospital clowns who work with critically ill patients in hospitals to brighten their outlooks and utilize play to dramaturgically shift the rules of reality (Warren and Spitzer, 2011; Balfour et al., 2016). The aim of these clowns is to help individuals cope by discovering opportunities for playfulness and therefore hope in highly rigid environments and life circumstances. These are face-easing practices and modes of dramaturgical reimagining targeting individuals living in the most constricting contexts rather than performers. It is not surprising then, that Clown Play, as an "extension of life" is an insightful lens onto it.

In Jay Torrence's class, the approach to "Le Jeu" I experienced and observed[128] had an adapted hybrid method drawn together from his own toolkit, which included training and experience with Philippe Gaulier, 500 Clown, the Neo-Futurists, and others. Jay's approach was not as harshly critical of students as the clown classes in Paris (see Purcell Gates, 2017,) nor was it "play" as a kind of therapeutic social work. Instead, because the class was in a hyper-competitive university environment where the students were often shy, anxious, and a broad mix of theatre and non-theatre students, Jay adapted the class to what he perceived as these students' specific needs and to how they were able to psychosocially meet the demands of clown play. That is, while a few were seeking to hone their clown, performance, or comedic skills, many

[128] I fully participated as a student in "Le Jeu" as I did with Neo-Futurism.

seemed to be not only beginners in clown, but struggling in foundational aspects of social interaction. Jay worked to expose the students to a variety of clown histories and types throughout the classes while integrating a variety of physical exercises, emotional exercises, and games to train these very new “beginner clowns” as he called them.

In contrast with the harsher French masters, Jay Torrence would act as an unconditionally enthusiastic and loving audience throughout his version of the “stripping away” process. His students could practice a level of emotional vulnerability display that was atypical to their everyday life. As the ethos of play was normalized in class, along with experimentation, interaction, and emotion-sharing, students were able to explore and adjust their facial and bodily responses to the teacher’s.

Jay was successful in creating what applied theatre practitioners (Solano & Solano, 2013) aim for in a “safe space:” not only was he sensitive to and inclusive of student needs, but the rules of engagement were clearly laid out. Further, there was no “wrong” way to do anything that was emphasized. Rather, the primary goal was to share one’s experiences and to stay in contact with the audience no matter what was happening, even if your activities on stage were not achieving the desired result. One of the primary ways in which this trust was established was through the development of the “neutral pose,” a state of neutral state readiness in clown performance originating from mime training and then adapted into “the neutral mask” by Lecoq, where an idealized, neutral, almost mechanized place of physical readiness was the ideal starting place for receptivity and interaction (Purcell Gates, 2017; Lecoq, 2013).

Emotion exercises could consist of individual, partner, and group work. There were also games and sometimes an activity called “flocking” in which at least one person had to be a leader and all the rest had to be followers and these roles could be transitioned by a spontaneous

choice on the parts of the players. In flocking, even though a transformation was spontaneous, the change of role itself was typically based on carefully observed micro-movements as communication between participants. A number of times there was a discovery exercise in which one person would find a non-verbal movement, action, or sound (possibly a combination) and their partner would direct them to either make it bigger or to change it into something else. There was a continual study of both size and impact of response as well as change of direction.

The students in "Le Jeu" were shy, and as was evident from their own expressed observations and constant hesitations to perform the exercises, unused to connecting with their bodies, emotions, and others. One student in particular, Tim, grieved in an interview after the class had ended for the term that he missed the physical exercise, as the warm-ups and exercises in the class had been his only form of exercise (Tim Interview 2016). The popular idea of needing to "connect with your body," such as that touted by the "be comfortable in your skin" movement first described in Chapter 2, is emphasized in this performance practice though it de-emphasizes self-image (in fact, self-image at best can become caricatured in this practice,) and is primarily authentic feeling, experience, and connection-based.

Clown play may be interpreted as an opportunity for a more holistic, healthy life, and even as providing a body-based authenticity in physical and emotional truth that students may be neglecting. Highly competitive college students like Tim who feel "disconnected" (from physical reality,) might disregard their physical health in demonstrating an extreme attitude toward hyper intellectualism. In a social context where the sacrifice of physical and/or emotional wellbeing appeared common for the sake of academic success, Jay's pedagogical approach, strikingly gentle in contrast with the notorious French masters and focused on foundational components, seemed fitting. In spite of the striking gentleness in demeanor and critique practices, Jay's

pedagogy included fairly intensive physical training as well as socially interactive and game components which were challenging for students like Tim.

> Our warm up consists of inch-worming and other various floor-crossing exercises, stretches including yogic ones. The exercises we do today are interspersed with us "walking," and then reaching out arms to "find a partner"--so whomever happens to be next to you whom you touch or whom touches you. (Fieldnotes, 2016)

Also, from the beginning in Jay's class there was an emphasis on learning to connect with others but in a more physical way than students may be used to – physical connections between individuals were foregrounded as was spontaneity and speed which likely helped students to overthink less, much as in Neo-Futurism. Here is one telling example from my own classroom experience:

> Next, we play pass the clap which turns into pass the emotion. Jay points out to me that I have a tendency to judge everything "I don't know what that is" and that "it's very rich and great and fun to watch." But that I still have to accept what my fellow clowns are passing to me. (Though there is an option to block/decline the pass by crossing the arms and holding them up like a shield.) In this exercise you can pass the emotion, decline to pass, or take it and play with it. Play takes the most guts. "Try to stay with it, stay in the shit. See what happens, it could turn into something else." (Fieldnotes, 2016)

In the above excerpt, as both my audience and teacher, Jay is pointing out that my show of judging behavior, unbeknownst to me, is pleasure-inducing for him. This behavior creates "fun" for the audience. Jay appears to be locating my clown, or what could eventually become my clown. This is a softer, more positive kind of via negativa: Although I am a little confused, Jay is being more articulate, specific, and consistently affirming rather than negative and completely vague. Also, as he says that I do this behavior he's observed and it's affirmed as a positive phenomenon, perhaps this is a habit that is imagined as more "natural" and authentic to me and/or my clown rather than one that is unnatural and imposed by society. Here Jay is affirming an authentic behavior rather than stripping away an inauthentic one, a practice described in the following section.

Notions of Authenticity in Clown

This section explores notions of authenticity which are central to the seminal clown traditions on which the practice of contemporary clown pedagogy and "clown play" are built. Authenticity and truth live in finding one's clown which is excavated through a variety of discovery processes integrating face-easing practices to alleviate the distress which often accompanies public exposure and vulnerability.

"Stripping Away"

The method of "stripping away" socialized habits in movement is also something utilized by Jay and is reflective of the body-based authenticity paradigm of Gaulier, Copeau, and Decroux (Purcell Gates, 2017). It is possible through clown play exercises to observe one's habits, physical responses, sensations, and emotions by exaggerating them into caricature (Jay Torrence, Interview, 2016). In the case of stripping away, play is utilized to reimagine insecurities by taking away their original power and transforming them into something else. Especially if one shares one's sense of failure with the audience, pointed out by Leslie Buxbaum Danzig in her analysis of LeCoq's discovery of authenticity through uncovering students' sense of embarrassment and failure:

> The goal of being funny in that exercise ironically was reached through exposing the emotional impact of failing as a result of caring. Similarly, the students' admission of failure to the audience puts them in relationship with their audience. At the moment of admission, students and audience share the experience of failure from opposite sides of the footlights. (Buxbaum Danzig, 2007, p.81)

When the audience is imagined as a play partner and hopefully acts as an accepting one, failure can thus be reimagined. Failure becomes a point of mutual understanding and recognition; to some extent the clown may strive towards an acceptance, a celebration even of inherent human inadequacies and errors. In the case of my judging behavior, Jay is both affirming it while

pointing out the danger of what might point to a standoffish attitude. He advises me to not let it keep me from working with my scene partners. Is it an enculturated bad habit then? At the time, the advice signals to me to outwardly “share” the expression of my emotion like a “gift” in Jay’s words with the audience but to not let the feeling itself inhibit me.

Openness, disponibilité, is another key tenet of clowning, after all. Jay does distinguish between poised and actor-like versus open, like a clown. His dichotomy bleeds into everyday life authenticity:

> Actors have been taught to move their body where maybe in their head they’ve concluded this is “poised.” They’ve been taught to control their voice. They’re like a radio dj - “this is how I’m an orator, and I’m standing in front of people.” It’s different for different people but it’s the same training. Actor role--mode: almost a character--it’s like you are in a performative state, the performative state. More like formal performative. Some people move through the world like a clown, with sincerity, honesty, and openness. (Jay Torrence Interview 2016)

There is an implied understanding here of being a clown on stage and “moving through the world like a clown” as related strategies and phenomena. It points to the tenets of clown play, here with a focus on “sincerity, honesty, and openness” as tenets applicable and beneficial to everyday life encounter.

“Sang-froid” and Face-Easing Aims of Masks, Natural, and Neutral

> Copeau’s use of masks for pedagogical reasons developed unexpectedly when a student in his class found herself frozen onstage—what Copeau (1929, p. 16) described as a freezing of the blood or *sang-froid”* (Purcell-Gates, 2017, p. 5).

Copeau saw masks as a way to help his student mimes get closer to what he envisioned as their natural, pre-socialized state. Lecoq, in part wishing to avoid *sang-froid* and to target the release of the body and bodily truth and consciousness, used face-easing insights from Copeau in his own development and use of masks. Lecoq’s training follows a system of discovery that begins with silence and neutral mask readiness.

The neutral mask was an expressionless mask developed by Lecoq to teach actors to focus on being ready to react with their body—Lecoq's training program starts with the neutral mask and ends in clown. As one of his students describes in a National Theatre podcast focused on Lecoq's teachings:

> It's a mask that doesn't have history. It doesn't have attitude, it's not tired. It doesn't have the human difficulty of fear or anticipation. It is only the energy of the thing that it sees in front of it (Brennan, 2011).

Gaulier, one of Jay's teachers, also uses the neutral mask as part of his training system.

For Jay's version of "Le Jeu" class, Jay taught a "neutral pose." There were no literal masks for us to use, rather we were to keep our expressions, both faces and bodies, neutral and ready. In an exercise not dissimilar to the chair test from Neo-Futurism in Chapter 4, each student was asked to come on stage (in this case they were "on stage" as soon as they entered from behind a curtain) and to stand in front of Jay and a seated audience of their peers in a neutral state. The following excerpt includes a description of the neutral pose exercise and is illustrative of Jay's pedagogical approach. Similar to the chair test, sustaining a "neutral" pose brought on a self-described awareness of defenses for participants.

As the teacher would tell students to relax specific anatomic areas where he noticed tension, it was easier than in the chair test to see embodied tensions in tight shoulders, in clenched hands, in tight mouths, and in terms of students' attitudes and receptivity to the teacher and to the audience members. The exercise appeared to work on cultivating empathy and theory of mind skills in addition to cultivating a neutral baseline from which to have empathy and a neutral receptivity for your audience. The ideal neutral state is to maintain a position of perfect and immediate responsiveness. The following fieldnotes excerpt has a variety of examples of

how “neutral” came through and was interpreted by different students and Jay as their interlocuter.

> We work on our neutral poses next with Jay, one by one. It's especially interesting to watch Jay working on Steve. Steve was a student that Greg accused of constantly acting (during Neo-Futurism class). In this exercise, Steve is sent back behind the curtain about three times before Jay seems to consider him close to neutral enough to proceed. "Poor Steve, he's so inquisitive/curious." Steve tends to keep his head and body quite erect and pointed. His emotions are "dramatic" as Jay says and “intentional.” This is similar to what Greg Allen pointed out but Jay is gentler in how he states it, with warmth and a laughter and delight in your “gifts” where he is inviting you to laugh with him—it always did not feel like a criticism or personal attack and in Greg’s class there was at times the possibility for students to interpret it in a personal and negatively critical way and many did so vocally after class and during interviews. (Fieldnotes, 2016)

From this exercise we discovered that neutral is a relaxed, baseline state from which your clown character is ready to react. Jay modeled the neutral state for us as he stood in front of us, taking the role of both audience and teacher. I found it striking how supported I felt through this exercise. The interaction was primarily focused on non-verbal communication in that Jay’s facial expression acted as an affirming and ready mirror to my own. If I showed any expression he would mirror it, but if I stayed neutral he also kept his face and body in neutral, with perhaps a glimmer of a smile in his eye expression, which made the neutral skew towards positive, if anywhere. Fear was met with reassurance; I noted that the way Jay conducts this exercise is akin to a parent encouraging their toddler to take its first steps. Every attempt is encouraged. It’s notable that unlike in other approaches, like Gaulier’s, there was no literal mask to hide behind, opening perhaps a heightened possibility for vulnerable experience and underlining the importance of Jay’s kinder stance as a teacher which I observed to be face-easing for myself and others.

An international graduate student in her mid to late 20’s in the course, Rupie, described neutral as a way to gain self-consciousness:

> …it was tremendously helpful to be able to understand what minute gestures or movements were actually conveying to an audience. Reacting as the neutral on stage to audience members was interesting - some were less engaged, but the ones that were giving you their full attention - it was almost like a conversation was happening there, without words or intentions. It took a little time to get there, to let go of self-consciousness to a degree where that kind of engagement could happen (I'm not sure I ever managed to let go of self-consciousness completely). But it was relaxing, and informative to do.

Rupie was a student who was able to gain both pleasure and information from the exchange with the audience, once, as she describes it, she was able to let go of some of her self-consciousness. Tanya was a student who perhaps struggled the most, particularly to "let go" in the neutral exercise:

> Tanya received the most criticism from Jay. He kept trying to get her to release her smile. [He would point out gently that her smile was a guard that she had up, and "having guards up" and "a wall" were all descriptions Jay used.] "Tanya got the most responses but then she would drop them, shy away from them/put her guards up." I watched her watching him. He'd smile at her, she'd start to laugh, then when she tried to go back to "neutral" he would tell her to "release her smile." (Fieldnotes, 2016)

The "guards" identified by Jay connect to what clown teacher Christopher Bayes describes as the two typical "social masks" that students tend to have and as both teach primarily in the US these observations do come across as culturally specific. These two social masks are the "cool mask" and the "nice" or "polite mask" (Bayes, 2019). The nice mask is of course also the mask that anyone working in customer service is trained to use, the smile-signifying emotional labor described by Hoschild and used adeptly by Kay in their service industry job, described in Chapter 4. In clown play, the nice mask is understood as a false mask that prevents fun and audience-enjoyment and therefore an authenticity that can only be shared and enjoyed if the performer takes off the mask and is more vulnerable. "Smile only when you are happy," Bayes directs (Bayes, 2019, p. 63). Interestingly, in interviews Tanya explained that she had no clear sense of who she was or how she came across to people, which may help explain her difficulty to

lift the mask. Here social masks imply a sense of self as one that exists beyond them or that is not dictated entirely by them.

Meanwhile, Rupie seemed successful within the context of the class yet did not necessarily experience "finding" one's clown as authentic:

> I thought it interesting that we were being pushed to "find" our clowns rather than to take on consciously clown personas. I don't really experience myself as someone with a coherent personality, and I found that being a clown meant learning to depict sincerity (which is very culturally specific!) instead of doing any kind of "deep" digging to bring "true" personality to "the surface" as it were.

Though Rupie's response to sincerity seemed to be a Goffmanian "depiction of sincerity" rather than an essential truth, this did not stand in the way of her becoming quite popular with the other students as a clown collaborator. This is likely because her focus was entirely on what was expected by others, and delivering on sincerity as it was understood by them. This objective of depicting sincerity for others arguably organized and sat at the hierarchy of her clown's self-system (Hermans, 2006). She thus delivered on an essential tenet of clown play, "complicité"[129] or togetherness.[130]

Rupie's approach to clown play and performance was less about herself as a character and more about a constant responsiveness she was cultivating[131] that seemed to allow for effective, collaborative play and the tenet of complicité. It appears that in the collaborative aspect of clown play, Rupie was indeed successful as well as sincere and authentic. A number of students invited her to participate in their final performances and what is authentic rather than imitative in her experience of clown play was her enjoyment of working with and responding to

[129] Complicité was developed in "Le Jeu" class through a variety of exercises such as emotion exercises and flocking, described earlier in the chapter.
[130] The application of complicité will be displayed in greater detail later in this chapter in an excerpt about a relational clown duo called Tiny and Dumpling.
[131] In terms of the origin of one's clown character and their emotional experiences, as Jay stated, emotion could come from a real place or it could be portrayed.

others. Pleasure is another important aspect of clown as taught by Gaulier, Bayles, and others: "I really enjoyed working with people - that is one of the most rewarding parts of doing any kind of performance, unless you don't get along with your co-performers at all. That, more than an audience reaction, drives me really" (Rupie Interview 2016).

One aspect that Gaulier, Lecoq, Bayes, and other clown masters appear to agree on is that laughter is the audience's authentic recognition of their pleasure and of the authentic performer. "There is no pleasure to be found in the nice. It is like a coat hanger in your mouth because you have trained the muscles in your face to smile as a kind of costume or disguise" (Bayes, 2019, p. 00). So just as the performer drops their facial armor and seeks their fun and pleasure in collaboration with their most important scene partner, the audience, the audience itself then responds with appreciation to this authentic pleasure-seeking.

This location of facial armor in specific physicality seemed to be particularly effective in impacting change. The following fieldnotes excerpt presents an example of how an unwelcome facial performativity is identified and successfully transformed through this physically-specific method:

> The biggest transformation today with this exercise appears to be with Steve. Jay tells him to loosen his jaw and this does wonders. It becomes evident that Steve is constantly making an effort to hold a tight-lipped jaw. (Fieldnotes, 2016)

Steve appears to have a habit of wearing the "cool mask" (Bayes, 2019) which once "stripped away" allows him to make progress in his training in that he "loosens up" in his playfulness overall beyond the facial expression. There is a sense that Steve is confining the authentic body and self "beneath" this tight-lipped, jaw mask. This authentic body and self appears to be more ready to play once the nice, smiling mask is released: achieving face-ease and a greater sense of

authenticity through clown strategies may mean developing an awareness of and thus being able to release our social masks.

Locating the Clown, the Self

For some students, it was hard to create a clown identity because that would mean pinpointing their own. Further, in the broader context of clown training tradition (Lecoq, 2013; Jay Interview, 2016), this course was only a short introduction and it would be a bit premature to expect to fully discover one's clown. Clown Play did create a context where certain uncomfortable and perhaps contradictory face-work tendencies emerged both in class and during the final clown performances. "I never came to a final answer who my character was," says Alex, a first year, male student in the course:

> I tried to accentuate my own skeptical or critical headspaces. One of my clowns was the very proud, dismissive clown. Because that meant all I had to do was have a distasteful opinion about whatever I was going at. That was one I felt good about. I also felt good doing the innocent clown. (Alex Interview 2016)

When crafting a clown character, there is the type-sourced foundation of different kinds of clowns and archetypes whether it's the innocent Red Nose or the lovesick Pierrot. During clown play exercises, one finds oneself within these types, little tendencies observed by the teacher and other students, such as in mimicking exercises when we were asked to exaggerate each other's walks, that can lead towards a character and then builds one's idiosyncratic experiences into the archetype. The idea is that we are helplessly embedded in types in the everyday of which we are not necessarily fully aware, and clown seeks a playful exaggeration, experimentation, and unpacking of the inherent contradictions of "type." Therefore, an effective clown character should connect both interdiscursively with types of cultural and social experiences, personal quirks and idiosyncrasies, and the inherent contradictions that emerge as human desire and curiosity reacts to these types and ways of being. "...the clown's appeal lay in

repeat performance, his bond with the audience a function of his integrity across events, an embodiment of collective memory. In him, the audience knew itself" (Preiss, 2014, p. 00).

Alex was another undergraduate student for whom social interaction was an incredible chore. He focused his final performance on a truth about himself as well as social interactions that he explored and caricatured in his bit. What Alex created was closer to the sophisticated professional clown persona described by drama scholar Louise Peacock that does indeed have a complex, self-aware origin in one's individual personality with insights to share with one's audience:

> …a way of looking at the world that is different, unexpected, and perhaps even disturbing,' adding that 'to be a clown is to create and express a total personality.' ...The clown clowns not simply to amuse his audience but because he has observations about the world, about life, to communicate them, and play becomes a conduit to aid that communication. When a clown performs, the audience sees the ideas and attitude of that individual conveyed by an adopted persona that has developed out of the individual's personality and which could never be adopted and lived in the same way by anyone else." (Peacock, 2009, p. 19)

In the second half of this chapter, I will unpack the broader personal impact of clown and comedy in a case study of Alex, for whom these performative practices provide a particularly salient salve to everyday life face-work and identity distress challenges.

Conclusion

A student clown's authenticity in clown pedagogy is understood as something that must be excavated by the clown teacher as audience, demonstrating to the student what is appealing and worth developing. Various strategies such as mask work allow for the cultivation of an atmosphere of greater face-ease during class engagement, allowing for a location of true aspects of oneself from which one's clown may emerge. Via negativa or a more affirming approach to "stripping away" like Jay's, can accomplish an unveiling of socially embedded behaviors and defenses which may with training and cultivated awareness be shaped into audience-pleasing

clown behaviors. These behaviors, revealing real and relatable social discomforts, may be turned into successful caricatures of one's real personality and experience and thus into entertaining and relatable clown personas which hold the attention of the audience with their exaggerated yet truth-based emotions and behavioral ticks. As the class was only the length of one college-length term, it wasn't possible to fully develop a clown persona within this time-frame. However, a foundation for clown characters was evident in many students' final performances.

"Living in the Shit"

Reimagining Social Failure

Clown play as taught by Jay, with its experimental attitude towards interpersonal engagement during performance, can also provide insight on failure in everyday interaction, such as the kind experienced by the stressed, self-actualizing students at EQU (specifically worried about being original and unique enough). In clown, experiencing social failure or defeat is called "living in the shit." "Living in the shit" also means being able to stay in a situation in which the audience isn't engaged, impressed, or interested by what you're doing and yet you carry on as a clown character anyway.

> The clown began as an extension of the audience, but ended as something new. Feeding off of their energy instead of depleting it, he produced not their docility but simply himself, a free subject to oppose them as trickster, as taunter, as nemesis. (Preiss, 2014, p. 90)

A clown character is an exaggerated, caricatured, playful, and emotionally expressive version of yourself that draws on your pre-existing psychological and social tendencies. In Clown Play, you are taught to keep trying different things in order to win the attention and interest of the audience while simultaneously pursuing your own expressive agenda. Many of the students in the clown play classroom struggled to either maintain eye contact with an audience of their peers or to relax for the exercises centered on emotional and physical communication with

others. This reticence and how Jay deals with it shows up in an incident involving a student in the course named Lana:

> There is a point during this exercise when Lana looks so sad and helpless during "play" it feels like she might cry. Jay gets her to stay in this for a long, uncomfortable while. She cups her hands over her mouth and nose and peers over her fingers in desperation while making a high pitched, squeaking, pleading sound. She sounds like a helpless, lost baby bird.
> "Support her." he says to the students. My response is to feel sorry, to feel sad empathy, possibly to want to comfort her or to at least recognize her helplessness and sadness. Jay points out to her that "something great happens whenever it's passed to you. It always changes naturally. You do so many great things naturally. You always have a lot of panic (Lana and everyone laugh at this) but you do a lot of great natural things too and the point is to learn to play with them, explore them, stay with them." This reminds me of the moment a little bit ago when Lana's hair fell on her face as she was playing with a gesture. Jay encouraged her to use the hair on her face as a gift. She ended up turning it into a gesture where she kept blowing the hair off her face. "Look at this," Jay adds internal dialogue to her gesture, "what a great thing I've invented! This is so great. We love this." (Fieldnotes, 2016)

Despite Lana's difficulties, Jay is again very encouraging, focusing on what Lana is doing well in her play, "…you do a lot of great natural things," signifying the natural and authentic clown play which comes from her and her emerging inner clown, which he is seeing much evidence of in spite of her "panic" which is also funny to all and not necessarily negative. He encourages, participates in and to some extent co-creates her play as she discovers the gesture of blowing the hair off her face and he expresses his delight. He lets her know how much the audience "loves this" and saying "we love this" makes it a shared delight and play thus cultivating a delightful relationship between performer and audience.

In terms of taking some of these skills beyond the classroom, the skill of being able to fail and to be able to move on to new interactional tactics in clown play was described by students as encouraging in terms of dealing with intimidating classroom presentations and other social interactions in their everyday life. In the following, Rupie describes her experience:

> The first ever clown class, where we got an intro to this idea, was followed by me having to do a tough presentation on Marx for another class with my potential PhD supervisor that I had right after. Foolishly, my presentation plus all my notes were on a file on my laptop that got corrupted *just before class* (I didn't have any backups), leaving me mortified and terrified. I wanted to disappear. This idea about failure kept coming back to me though - and while it was not a pleasant class at all, I ad-libbed my way rather haphazardly through the presentation, acutely aware that all my hard work was gone, something about this clown philosophy + performance tool kept me going. While it wasn't using failure in the same way as a clown would (I was trying rather hard to *not* appear like a failure, to keep it together and not let my panic show), it definitely gave the failure new meaning."

Rupie was able to use clown play to dramaturgically reimagine her failure during an official presentation gone wrong. Rupie's experience is reflective of how the confrontation and normalization of failure, and likely even more importantly, the playfulness around it, was a new and potentially helpful perspective for the highly competitive, high-achieving students at EQU.

The skill of being able to fail and to be able to move on to new interactional tactics in Clown Play was described as encouraging by students in terms of intimidating classroom presentations and other social interactions in their everyday life. Clown as a new set of strategies for face-work around failure was described as helpful by some students in allowing them to practice various ways of being interesting and unique enough in the ways EQU seemed to demand, by offering playful emotional pathways for dealing with anxieties around performance in everyday life. For some, like Lana, the practice of basic interactive skills, such as being able to hold eye contact, was in itself groundbreaking.

While Jay's clown play class is not in a medical setting, it is nevertheless in an institutional setting where the emerging adults with whom he is engaging are often overwhelmed by the expectations of achievement, performance, and face-work expected of them by professors, administrators, peers, and at times, parents. Thus the greatest and possibly most psychologically-damaging convention (Greenfeld, 2005) that could be upended in such a high-achievement

focused institutional environment is arguably the expectation of absolute success in all endeavors. Instead, students are encouraged by Jay to create challenging, perhaps to some extent failure-prone or failure-emphasizing scenarios where they are expected to engage with social failure and the prospects of it, while simultaneously striving for success. I suggest that the possibility for clown play to serve as a social intervention within a high pressure (university or other highly competitive) institutional environment is considerable, and it is not surprising that Jay believes that all freshmen should be required to take it.[132] Jay is recognizing a need to reimagine failure for these students, a skill that is integral to clown play.

"The Audience is Perfect"

In clown performances, the very act of being interested in an activity as well as in the audience were key ingredients to being interesting to the audience. Being interesting to the audience meant at the very least being worth paying attention to. As contemporary clown master Christopher Bayes explains, playfulness is key to developing the quality of being interesting to the audience:

> When the audience sees playfulness enter and consume your body, immediately they say, 'Oh, you are a more interesting human being because of your desire to play.' Your ability to be open and your desire to find something that is brand-new makes you fascinating to watch in that moment (Bayes, 2019, p. 70).

Jay would often say "the audience is perfect,"[133] meaning it was important to adapt and meet the audience where they happened to be at and use whatever they gave the clown or didn't. Jay explains what failure for the clown is:

> Oh I did this thing and nobody cares. No one responded the way you wanted them to respond so that's the shit. You're in the shit, you're a failure.

[132] This idea to normalize failure is in fact present in certain university strategies such as the "Failing Well" program at Smith College ("Failing Well: Campus Series Helps Students Rethink Setbacks") or in the teaching of such pedagogical essays as "Shitty First Drafts" by Anne Lamott and "Fail Fast" as part of the Columbia University Writing Curriculum for Freshman or a course at University of Washington called "Learning from Failure" ("Congratulations, You Failed").

[133] "The audience is perfect" is a saying that emerged from Adrian Danzig 500 Clown about the philosophy of collaborating with the audience to build the show according to Leslie Buxbaum Danzig (2007 ?).

It's that playfulness that Lecoq described as being the key, playfulness in relation to failure can be understood therefore as a kind of adaptive dramaturgical reimagining that is built into clown (as was applied in the case of Rupie described earlier). It means taking a situation where you are failing to engage the audience and to tune into your audience and imagine a new, more effective way to connect seamlessly and quickly in response to what you sense will work. "Clowning demands being affected by everything, to be vulnerable to what is actually happening in the moment. To be affected is the counterpoint to the familiar image of clown in the United States, where experience and therefore vulnerability are masked behind thick coats of a made-up never-changing unaffected smile" (Buxbaum-Danzig, 2007, p 81). This understanding of face-work from the point of view of the audience can be an important take-away from clown for successful everyday life interactions, particularly for individuals like Lana who were challenged by the basic expectations of American face-work, such as eye contact, and even more so by the possibilities of interactional failures or losing face. In challenging individuals to playfully showcase their insecurities around face-work on stage, there is the invitation in Clown Play to rewrite successful face-work: success in clown in part means keeping the audience interested and sometimes this means keeping them interested in the showcase of your public failures and insecurities and turning them into strengths as first proposed by Lecoq (2013).

What is implied by Jay's clown teaching strategy is that it's not only that the audience is perfect, but if you as a clown are also at all times the audience then you are also perfect even in your failure to engage the audience at times. You are perfect in your imperfections just as the audience is, your worries, insecurities, and quirks are gifts to share. In this way, the "audience is perfect" attitude was taught: it was two clowns, whether Jay and a student or two students, in neutral receiving each other with this attitude of mutual acceptance.

Clown play as taught by Jay was akin to Carl Rogers' unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1951), an approach that is certainly contrary to the dominant experience of individuals in contemporary American society where the sense of being scrutinized and judged by one's audience exists as a continual potential source of anxiety. Rogers himself was part of the humanistic movement in American psychology that began in the 1950's and offered an alternative model to and critique of the reductionism and pathologization of behaviorism, psychoanalysis, as well as the biomedical models. If clown play were indeed offered as a kind of alternative treatment, or required freshman training as Jay suggested, then it could fit easily into the vein of the humanistic movement: "The goal was greater awareness of one's own actual experience in the moment and authentic engagement with others, goals not well-served by academic psychology, clinical psychology, or the culture in general" (Aanstoos et al., 2000, p. 4). The philosophy undergirding the kind of clown play taught by Jay, as a strategy for awakening or supporting individuals through upending societal norms in ways that help them interact and be in the moment, is thus close to the ethos of humanistic psychology.

Medical clowns, also positioned close to the mission of humanistic psychologists, demonstrate how clown play can work as a practical intervention for (situational) identity distress: they serve to alleviate the everyday stresses of hospital life through a direct upending of the lack of control of chronically ill child patients (Buxbaum-Danzig 2007). In Buxbaum-Danzig's description of Big Apple Clown Care, she discusses the importance of the clowns' empowerment of the children, through actions like letting the children decide whether the clown(s) can come in or not, something doctors and nurses do not do. "It's all about what they want from the experience" (Buxbaum-Danzig, 2007, p. 87). In Goffmanian and identity anxiety terms, the clowns produce a kind of liberating mockery and upending of face-work conventions

in the hospital setting. "Each clown will develop individual ways to play with conventions using tricked out doctor coats, musical instruments, surprising objects, character status and type…" (Buxbaum-Danzig, 2007, p. 85).

Similarly, Balfour et al. (2016) describe the elevation of status with dementia patients visited by a clown duo. This clown duo, Dumpling and Tiny Lamington, are described by Balfour et al. (2016) as "relational clowns" who draw "…from a legacy of European clowning that has at its heart a philosophy of spontaneity, connection and respectful playfulness. The engagement between a relational clown and a participant is conceived of as a non-threatening encounter, designed to break the institutional tedium, and enable a different kind of relationship to exist" (Balfour et al., 2016, p. 2). They focus on a clown tenet closely allied with le jeu, that of "complicité," or "togetherness," which emphasizes a smooth and equal unity between performers in how they inhabit a world together and play off each other (Lecoq, 2013). In the following excerpt, the two clowns play off of each other and the responses of Margaret, the patient who they have discovered had once been a competitive water skier, as well as with the surrounding patients and staff:

> Tiny pretends to stand on a water-ski board, while Dumpling seeks advice from Margaret about whether or not he is doing it right. Tiny keeps getting it wrong and falls off the board. Margaret stands up and says: "I should be on there" and so the Lamingtons [the clown duo] invite her up [to the stage]. Supported by accompanying sound effects and mimed movements made by Dumpling, Margaret stands and pretends to water-ski with the relational clowns on either side. Her spouse watches on and tells us that they used to water ski together years ago and that this was something that she had enjoyed immensely. She had stood on the shoulders of her water skiing partner and was a very talented water skier. During the play Margaret's face is bright and she laughs along with the Lamingtons. She appears lost in the play as the three of them "ski" through the corridors and around the room – with Tiny providing commentary and sound effects to accompany. The other residents watch and smile and laugh along. A few clap the performance. Some of the staff get involved too, with one in particular adding to the play by calling out, "Ah! I am getting wet from the spray." (Balfour et al, 2016, p. 6-7)

Here, as aptly demonstrated by Balfour et al. (2016), the clowns play with the rules of social reality to work with Margaret's memories and to create a revised and reimagined context in which she can take on a more empowered, authoritative role. In this intervention, the clowns let Margaret, as a primary and perfect audience member, dictate what was worthwhile for them to do and they let each dramaturgical beat play out for as long as she showed interest and engagement. Importantly, this reimagined reality is supported by all involved, including the other residents and staff, allowing for a fully self-affirming and face-easing experience for someone who is usually both disempowered in terms of agency and disconnected from a shared sociocultural reality due to her dementia.

As taught by Jay, failure in clown could be interpreted as stagnation, a lack of attention and interest in what one is doing and worse, the audience's lack of attention and interest. For the clown ultimately exists for the audience, exists to see and be seen, to feel and be felt. If one "stays in the shit," as advised by the teacher, something else might develop, something might grow, something new might be discovered and new life kindled, new attention, new curiosity, new fuel. That's the renewing energy of play. The discoveries the clown makes while playing all depend on how beats are developed, and what happens in-between each beat: "Clown has like a beat, a huge emptiness, and then another beat. You hit a beat, anything can happen and then you're exploring and developing until your next beat" (Jay Torrence Interview, 2016). The audience might respond with enthusiasm or your efforts and explorations might fail or they might lead to unexpected places – it mostly depends on discoveries in the moment and particularly in relation to the audience.

“In Their Heads”

At the completion of the course we put up final clown performances for each other for which we developed original clown characters and beats. Lana, the young woman who had struggled with eye contact, showed striking progress during her final clown performance. With a wide-eyed look and frozen posture that read as heightened fear and yet embracing the situation, she performed a bit where her clown character was a weight-lifter who struggled to lift a fluffy teddy bear to Rambo music blaring in the background. As Lana explained to the class afterwards, the weight of lifting the fluffy teddy bear was not what Lana struggled with but rather with the metaphorical weight of the gaze of others and her connection with them as she intentionally placed herself in the limelight in spite of her fear. Jay had often commended Lana as her eye contact improved over the course of 10 weeks. She said that she was glad for the opportunity: it was hard to look at people directly and in fact she said that she typically didn’t.

When I interviewed Jay after the completion of the course, he remarked that Lana’s growth was particularly remarkable: “One woman really struggled with eye contact. It was amazing because she was like I’m recognizing that I don’t look at anyone. That’s a huge step and I was really into her journey. She’d look at us when she talked towards the end!” Jay talked about the overall therapeutic benefits of Clown Play for many students especially the extremely pressured and stressed out students:

> In my classes my students go somewhere often. Especially at EQU where everyone is so stressed out and in their heads--which is the opposite of clowning. They have to learn that you can’t logically approach clown, you just have to experience it. They’re the type of student who is not interested at all in giving up control, not at all interested in failing, not at all interested in knowing what’s supposed to vs. what can happen. It’s about teaching them a different perspective…They’re used to being smart, and knowing ‘how I get you to think I’m smart.’ They’ve played those games, jumped through those hoops. But how do you take care of yourself when you fall flat on your face?

This idea of “a different perspective” is critical as it’s about transforming students’ understandings of their identities in live, vulnerable interaction. It’s interesting that Jay comments on the students being “in their heads,” the identity distress idiom around fear of social failure that has come up throughout this study. He appears to mean “in their heads” in a way that is obsessed with control, logic, and the self-image actualization of “how I get you to think I’m smart,” here falling within the inauthentic and unnatural habits to strip away through clown training. In the clown play classroom, these kinds of mannerisms do become evident where Jay might point it out himself, as he did with me at one point in my “judging” stance, or the student might notice an expressive habit on their own through the performance process. Jay has observed that these students don’t know how to fail socially and then move forward; something a master clown can do effortlessly.

Learning about face-work through clown was helpful and arguably a beneficial intervention for some students in allowing them to practice various ways of being appealing to their audience by offering playful emotional pathways for dealing with anxieties around performance in everyday life through practice of interactive skills, such as being able to hold eye contact while directing each other to express emotions at different intensities. For Rupie, it was a learning experience through observation that allowed her to learn about emotional communication and was rooted in everyday life: “I definitely drew on how I experience emotion in everyday life for the exercise in class - not to get behind the motivating cause of the emotion or anything, but how small changes in breath and bodily tension are recognized by others as communicative of certain states of being” (Rupie Interview 2016). Students were able to explore and adjust to the teacher’s and each other’s responses to their movements, actions, and facial expressions.

Conclusion

A few of the distancing and separation metaphors used in clown pedagogies include the "little voice," or how Christopher Bayes refers to the agency of the body (Bayes, 2019), the "puppeteer" vs. "the puppet" in how consciousness is located in the body within Decroux's mime training (Purcell Gates 2017), or being "the beautiful one" and being yourself versus "the horrible actor" in reference to the way Gaulier talks to his students about finding their clown (Purcell Gates, 2011). With Jay, the metaphor lives in implied dichotomies of neutral versus not, stripping away of something false in search of something better underneath, "delicious" versus not, etc. This deliciousness could include authentic emotions, as Jay explained "even sadness can be delicious to the clown" (Fieldnotes 2016).

The not-delicious opposite isn't named as such. It's more of a "relax your smile" approach, as an implication that the "social mask" as Bayes calls it, is false. The affirming and accepting metaphor in Jay's class signified that there was a kind of delicious ephemeral gift you had to share with the audience that he could help you to see and appreciate. Jay's implied theory of the delicious is similar to the paradoxical theory of self discerned by Laura Purcell Gates (2011) in Gaulier's pedagogical discourse wherein "beauty" was imagined as both innate and locatable by the audience and Purcell Gates discusses the disorientation this creates in students. The search for this beauty is necessarily confusion-inducing if one is searching for a single origin of beauty as authentic selfhood and Purcell Gates pinpoints at least two locations of this beauty: in the performer and in the imagination of the audience. Yet the focus and language of positive regard, affirmation, and acceptance in Jay's class is different from the negative "you are horrible" approach of Gaulier. With Jay, there is a sense of a mediated agency and cognitive

authority established through co-creation and encouragement, which was affirming and helpful of progress for EQU students.

As Lecoq said "…we are all clowns" (Lecoq, 2013, p. 108), I argue that the successful performative self in the form of a clown is thus inherently mediated through interaction as is the successful performance of self in everyday life. Importantly, the clown is audience-driven. Clown play and performance is paradoxical in that one must "fail" to succeed and yet in ways that the clown student learns are "delicious" to the audience. In training, clown students discover the unexpected "delicious" things that they might do and express for others so that they might replicate them during performances. Thus a focus is created around the experience of shared delight. A constant mirroring between student and teacher is necessary to learn what is and what is not delicious.

The takeaways for identity distress are that the experience and even perceived consequences of social failure are to some extent a flexible, mutable phenomenon wherein understanding the bidirectional complexity of "play" can allow for a reimagining of failed encounters. Through the lens of absurdity, social failure can even be perceived as beautiful. Thus an alternative lens is offered as well as a means to change and adapt in the moment with the possibility of constant and perhaps even delightful discovery. This possibility of transforming socially undesirable presence into delightful discovery is likely why clown play is successful in helping individuals with and in a variety of socially failing, stigmatized, or "other" categories and conditions.

There is a symmetry to clown play as a cultural and psychosocial tool: while throughout history the clown has represented "the other" on stage, conversely the clown can help "the other" integrate into society in everyday life. Individuals who are othered may "play" with othering

structural and conditional aspects that they encounter and which may cause a sense of social defeat. This includes not only normal individuals, but also individuals with dementia who are offered new possibilities for imagining that do not have to rely too literally on their failing long-term memories or young children confined to hospitals who get to reimagine the dehumanizing and othering aspects of their contexts (Buxbaum Danzig, 2007; Balfour et al., 2016). Play offers a constant reimagining of reality for those willing to engage, and this also includes dramaturgical reimagining for neuro-diverse individuals, like Alex, whose focal case study is presented in the following section.

The Case of Alex: Neurodiverse Bouffant

This section presents the case study of Alex, a student in Jay's Clown Play course. I conducted 4.5 total hours of interviews with him. First after the Clown Play course ended in 2015 and then again in 2016, these years coincided with his first and second years of college. I also attended one of his improvisation performances on campus with his improv troupe.

Overview: Face-work sans Faces

Alex is a tall, lanky, 19 year old man of upper middle class background, with one Latino and one Caucasian parent. He mentions his parents often and with an obvious affection. They are doctors who married late and have changed careers and reinvented themselves numerous times. They appear to have set an example for him of a less traditional, more open-ended and experimental American self-discovery and coming-of-age process which Alex intends to follow.

Changes I observed in Alex from the freshman to sophomore year interview included: a new major, a little weight gain, an increase in confidence, and an increase in anxiety-management skills; he also started seeing a therapist and became more comfortable socially at EQU overall, oftentimes referring to his best friend Tim in the sophomore year (2016) interview.

He dresses neatly and simply: button-up shirt, khaki pants. He is soft-spoken, inquisitive and thoughtful, and always made the effort to answer my questions thoroughly. By our second interview at EQU library, as with most of my interviewees, our interaction felt much like checking in with a friend, even though with Alex there is always a palpable calculation in the way he answers questions, giving the sense that he is making an effort to hit whatever the target might be in his efforts to self-reflect, sometimes furrowing his brow in concentration and always trying to make sure that we don't veer off course too much. He is eager to help me out as best he can in fulfilling my stated mission of understanding his relationship to his identity, anxiety, and clown play.

For Alex, the alternative social rules and understandings of comedy and improvisation make possible what he describes as an "anxiety free space" and this is what interested him in studying Clown Play. "You win people over when people are laughing, they're definitely listening," he tells me. In our earlier 2015 interview, he had explained that comedy was more joyful and preferred participating in it over drama which he saw as a wallowing and "he never wanted to wallow" or to "cut open the trauma," as in certain of the practices in a solo performance course that he gave a mixed review of. The following year, this attitude towards drama became more complex as a result of certain philosophy courses he took. Though he still found that some of the more "drama" or pathos-oriented courses produced work that were only representative of a narrow a portion of the population or "upper middle class and wealthy white kids making experimental art," as he described the student body at EQU, his own relationship towards drama began to shift. He began to regard drama as a practice that perhaps did have something to offer that was more substantive and relevant to a broader range of experiences than he had previously thought.

Comedy, on the other hand, has provided an important coping strategy for Alex who has a number of developmental and psychological challenges which were not apparent to me in public or during classes, but which he gradually told me about over the course of our interviews. These challenges include being on the autism spectrum (revealed by Alex towards the end of our 2015 interview), partial face blindness or developmental prosopagnosia (revealed by Alex during our 2016 interview and a condition that is often comorbid with autism), and an official autism diagnosis and generalized anxiety disorder (revealed during our 2016 interview and commonly co-occurring with autism). He started using more diagnostic terminology towards the latter half of the first interview when he first revealed being on the autism spectrum.

While Alex differed from my other interviewees in his more explicitly declared and marked neuro-diversity, his use of comedic and theatrical techniques to achieve his identity objectives, manage face-work and potential stigma is, for precisely this reason, one of the most revealing cases to examine. Like so many others with or without his limitations, Alex experiences identity distress around face-work and it is compounded by his developmental challenges. Participation in comedic performance, clown, and improv have offered a particularly important coping strategy for Alex and analyzing the process in precise intellectual detail has been an important part of this strategy.

The "anxiety-free space" Alex described provides an interesting instance of a type-sourced interdiscursivity (Silverstein, 2005) as appropriated by an individual from his subjective experiences. Alex is someone who has been in therapy as well as in communication with school psychologists for most of his life and therefore is no stranger to clinical and therapeutic terminology. He has also been involved in various forms of theatre and improvisation since early in high school and the psychologized terminology of performance pedagogies has become

natural to him as well. His current label of his improvisation practices as an "anxiety-free space" appears to have emerged as an interdiscursivity because of the considerable overlap in purpose and discourse in the theatrical and therapeutic spheres for Alex. It is his own meaning-making (Cohler, 1993; Schiff, 2014) around this coping strategy that has allowed him to feel like the positive, socially adapted individual he strives to be.

Early and Late Diagnoses

Therapeutic and educational interventions came into play for Alex early on: his childhood was riddled with developmental challenges. He grew up in what he describes as an isolated suburb and since both of his parents were doctors, they diagnosed him with anxiety early on and sent him to therapy: "I had an issue in 4th grade where I was leaving school a lot cause I would throw up from being nervous." He had acid reflux from the nervousness and says that he had so much trouble making friends that his parents had him switch schools five times. Given the challenges of image management for someone with any perceived "disability," and the existing stigma around autism (Hull 2017; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Holliday, 2015; Russell and Norwich, 2012), it seems significant that he only revealed that he was on the autism spectrum towards the end of the first interview.

A year later in the follow-up interview he shared that he had now been officially diagnosed with autism as well as "developmental prosopagnosia," or partial face blindness.

> I'm on the autism spectrum but my parents never got any testing done but over the summer, I was able to go do that and after five hours of all these photos and pictures they were like "oh you can't see faces huh," and I said "oh I thought that was just sort of everybody that they didn't like recognize each other and they figured out other ways to recognize each other." And I guess because I can't normally work off of social cues, facial expressions, things like that that everybody else does…

Alex's prosopagnosia meant that he had to develop a strategy for recognizing individuals in his life from early on:

> It's that I just don't have the same acuity for it [face recognition]. I can pick out individual features. Um. And I use that to recognize certain people and like typically I lean towards non-facial features like hair, size, uh silhouette. My friend Tim wears massive glasses, that's how I can pick him out. And eventually I do get to the point where I recognize people without having to do that extra step of having to figure out who they are but it does take me a lot of time and a lot of time with them, getting to know them.

These new official diagnoses appeared to provide an important shift in self-understanding for Alex.

Given his late diagnosis, it is conceivable that his parents avoided getting the diagnosis earlier for fear of stigma, like many parents of children who exhibit autistic behaviors but fear that labeling will bar their child's chances of success and thus strive "to retain their 'normal status.'" (Russell and Norwich, 2012, p. 240)

> The basic dilemma for these parents is whether to suffer potential drawbacks such as stigma, devaluation and rejection, or risk losing resources and opportunities that might be released by a formal identification. (Russell and Norwich, 2012, p. 230)

Or it's possible that Alex's parents were focused on the social anxiety diagnosis in early childhood because it's common among neurotypicals as well and thus less stigmatizing. However, Alex's parents were likely more informed than most in that they were doctors and he says they diagnosed him as "an overly anxious kid early on."

When Alex was 10, he explains that he was socially isolated, had no friends, and his parents took notice:

> In fourth grade things became compounded and my parents became aware that I was not doing well, and so they put me in to seeing a psychiatrist as well as getting after school help, uh which was part of the whole, um, spectrum disorder thing was uh I didn't realize it at the time but they weren't just tutoring me on like, classes, they were tutoring me on um being more interpersonal, being more um communicative…

Thus even without an official Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis, Alex's education appears to have had an aspect of it that resembles training in what some researchers term "camouflaging:"

> …developing explicit strategies to meet the social and communication gaps resulting from an individual's ASD, which we call compensation. These camouflaging techniques include specific non-verbal communication strategies and guidelines for successful conversations with others. (Hull et al., 2017, p. 2526)

And yet, Alex himself doesn't seem to see some of these strategies as compensation at least not in an inauthentic sense, the way in which researchers of social camouflaging (Hull, 2017; Livingston et al., 2019) describe it as "masking" for undesirable traits and stigmas.

> I've always been on the spectrum. I've had other issues like difficulty writing and reading and um uh I was just generally not very emotionally intelligent. Um. Through maybe high school probably. And not in like an immature way, but I just didn't have the faculties or methods for dealing with my own emotions and other people at the same time.

The only potential indication of a sensitivity or concern with the potential stigmas of autism on Alex's part was that it took him a bit of time to reveal to me that he was on the spectrum or that he experienced spectrum-related challenges but conversely, he had only received the official diagnosis by our second interview and this seemed to bolster his confidence in understanding his own cognitive processes and in being able to discuss them.

Whether they are taken up as typical challenges like by Alex, or stigmas to conceal, a review of 24 studies examining the common co-occurrence of social anxiety disorder and autism concluded: "It is unsurprising that individuals with ASD experience anxiety and worry about social interactions" (Spain et al., 2018 [no pagination]). Either way, these are two co-occurring conditions that Alex must cope with at all times.

> I guess … the frustration about, the ultimate flaw in that is you can't have perfect control in how you're perceived and you can't have perfect control over how you present yourself. But there's still a drive to do so whether it's something small like picking an outfit or something large like coming into a classroom and thinking, I'm gonna sit towards the back of this class and not participate too much. Or...yeah small things. Like I sit in the same seat on the bus every day, because it's the one between the handicapped seats and the driver, so it's the only *single isolated seat* in the bus. And I know that whenever I can, I wanna sit there because I know I won't have to share a bench with

> somebody or I'll have elbow room. It's wanting to put myself in the best place whenever possible. And obviously that gets frustrating and stressful, 'cause it's impossible.

Alex's description of using avoidance strategies is in line with how Gottschalk and Whitmer, in their recent post-Goffmanian work, describe avoidance:

> …avoiding contact, withdrawing, using go-betweens, waiting to see what line one is allowed to take, presenting oneself with modesty, offering belittling claims, showing lack of seriousness, self-censoring, performing courtesies, tactful blindness, and staying off topic and away from activities which would lead to the expression of information that is inconsistent with the line interactants are maintaining. (Gottschalk & Whitmer, 2013, p. 321)

In order to maintain the line and identity objective that he is pleasant, "a positive force," he uses avoidance and meticulous planning to eliminate unpredictable interactions and potential identity threats in public spaces.

When avoidance such as "sitting in the only isolated seat in the bus" isn't possible, Alex aims towards general positive affect for himself, the people around him, and for predicting how to achieve that affect through his careful planning strategies as well as through intellectualization and careful meta-study of how face-work is supposed to operate. This method has been in place since his childhood: as previously indicated, in elementary school he received some form of after-school lessons on social interaction from one of the teachers. Nowadays he continues to use intellectual analysis to compensate for his emotion and context-reading difficulties, a seemingly intuitive process for individuals with high face-processing acuity. Alex uses intellectual analysis to deconstruct the irregularities of the grammar and what he calls "faulty logic" of social situations.

Diagnostic self-understanding seemed important to Alex as was the integration of his new diagnosis, being able to pinpoint both the terminology and mechanism of the problem: terms like

acid reflux, *anxiety, therapy, prosopagnosia*, occupied a quotidian place in his vernacular. It was perhaps helpful that his combined diagnoses appear to fit the profile of college students with HFASD or High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder particularly in terms of his use of avoidance, irritability with unpredictability, and penchant for rituals.

> Social anxiety may be an especially likely co-occurring problem among young adults with HFASD, though it may be expressed in atypical ways (e.g. irritability, increased rituals). Social anxiety disorder is characterized by avoidance of interpersonal situations, fear of negative evaluation, and poor social interaction skills, which are also consistent with the clinical expression of HFASD. (White et al., 2011 [no pagination])

There is a sense of agency that individuals cultivate through being able to name, describe, and intellectualize their psychological and clinical concerns with a position of authority in relation to the condition through practices of self-management or an adept relationship to clinical terminology (Summerson-Carr, 2010; Weiner, 2011).

As with all study participants, the Berman scale wasn't entirely reflective of the intensity or scope of Alex's identity distress, but in this case the scale helped stimulate relevant discussion. I tried it out in our 2016 interview and he rated himself as moderately distressed in a couple areas (career and future goals) though it was clear from the interview that at more stressful times of the academic year his distress is of a severe intensity rather than just "moderate" and he explains that it is something that he is learning to keep in check. For him the often symptom-based, Wellbeing dimension of distress was a simplified one, as somatic symptoms were clear for Alex because of the training he had received from his therapist:

> I still get ulcers uh in my mouth from time to time just from raised acidity and again, stress. But, they last less long um when...because now I realize that that's like a physiological thing where if I've been stressed for two days on end, if I start to feel a little sore, rough spot on my cheek it's like I know I gotta *calm down* take a step back. Maybe take a mental health day, just figure out a way to lessen the load and make things easier. And they do go away in anticipation of that sometimes, if I stop things ahead of time.

As evident in his attention to the physical manifestation of his distress, Alex's identity distress has an important symptom-based dimension which he both monitors and responds to. Through therapy and self-monitoring, he has come to know how to interpret bodily symptoms such as the acidity and ulcers in his mouth and even to manage them. Working within the self-management paradigm, popular within American therapeutic discourse which "posits a stable and rational patient/consumer who can observe, anticipate, and preside over his disease through a set of learned practices" (Weiner, 2011, p. 452), appears to be effective for Alex as he speaks to himself in directives to regulate symptoms. He recognizes these symptoms as cues for reducing the stressors in his life (primarily having too many academic and extracurricular commitments similar to many other students at EQU). Alex takes advantage of the symptoms as a way to anticipate and plan for anxiety and maintain some control and sense of agency with simple directives to himself: "calm down," "take a step back."

Planning is critical for Alex in a variety of ways that go beyond planning for stress symptoms: immediate future and present orientations in his self-management practices are critical.

> Even now I'm very capable of eye contact, I just often choose not to make eye contact just because it's very overwhelming on a sensory level, I just find it easier to focus on say the conversation, or uh other things when I'm not necessarily making eye contact because there's less coming in and I can be more internal.

Another of his primary identity anxiety concerns centers around preparedness towards everyday events in his life going well, both everyday interactions with others and the environment in particular. Successful preparedness thus represents his version of the "good enough" life (Winnicott, 1971) where internal ideals and external reality are at least somewhat aligned. For Alex, this alignment means effective planning.

For Alex, everyday face-work is complicated by his various socio-cognitive challenges, particularly the added "load" of compensation work for successful interactions and likely stigma management which he has been practicing since childhood:

> Compensation may require high amounts of additional cognitive resources (e.g. EF [Executive Function]) and therefore be prone to break down when these resources are depleted, hence promoting fatigue and anxiety. Alternatively, those individuals who experience greater anxiety might be more motivated to compensate, or anxiety could mask autistic symptoms in the ADOS [Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule]. (Livingston et al., 2019, p. 106)

Alex's compensation efforts could therefore further contribute to the high load and at times overwhelming anxiety experiences signified by the physiological symptoms which remind him to engage in some face-easing practices: "take a mental health day." This effortful and at times exhausting aspect of face-work was paralleled—as in a "parallelism" wherein the interviewee constructs themselves through illustrative speech patterns during an interview described in Chapter 5 (Wortham, 2001)—by signs of Alex's interactional fatigue towards the latter half of our interview: he had been talking quickly throughout, with some stuttering, and as the interview progressed he would increasingly say things like "I lost my train of thought" or "what I think you're saying is" and have to take more pauses in order to focus and understand what I was asking. Meanwhile, shared laughter and humor appreciation during the interview did seem to offer a reset that allowed Alex's speech to flow more easily. As openly-autistic comedian Rick Glassman explains about laughter: "…you can control how people feel about you for a minute" (Maron, 2021 [no pagination]).

Alex's Mode and Materials of Engagement

As an important expansion of the myriad biomedical and diagnostic understandings of autism which primarily describe the common neurological and social information processing difficulties involved, Fein (2018) describes autism as a "mode of engagement." She argues that

examining the “cultural materials” with which autistic individuals engage is imperative and “inextricable from the cultural materials through which his modes of sociality have taken form” (Fein, 2018, p. 136). Fein describes the case of an individual who makes meaning of broader life questions and decisions through their knowledge of financial logic, for example.

In Alex’s case, particularly as emotion expression and communication through its typical everyday channels felt less accessible, the combined cultural materials from psychological, intellectual, biomedical, theatrical, and comedic perspectives appear to be important to his sense of being in the world:

> I had a very short fuse, that if I became upset it would ramp up to a 100 right away just cause I didn’t know how to process that kind of emotion or uh really any emotion in the extreme just was a lot. Um. Or at the very least I could handle it but I couldn’t deal with other things at the same time. Even now I still I’m very averse to multi-tasking or dealing with multiple issues at once. I’m very narrowly focused…in a lot of things. But I don’t know if that’s personality or just difference…From therapy, I know that I need to take time to do it…that it’s not something where I’ll know the right or best most beneficial response right away. Um… Uh emotions are something you have to process and sit through. And take time to be with.

His self-described emotional management difficulties as well as his “narrow focus” are typical for individuals on the spectrum (Fein, 2015) but what’s striking is the multifaceted and, in his case, intellectual and academic ways in which he is coming to understand himself. Thus academia, comedy, theatre, psychology, etc. are cultural understandings and systems which as Fein argues, “complete” Alex:

> The people I’m talking about, when I talk about autism, are those who are most dependent upon culture to complete them, for whom organization and planning, the connections from *a* to *b* and onward from there, happen less within the brain, and more between the brain and the world. (Fein, 2018, p. 131)

Sometimes Alex is focused on what he has learned through therapy as in the earlier excerpt. At other times, he talks at length about what he is learning in his philosophy, music, performance and art theory classes; utilizing his coursework as a continual meaning-making exploration.

> Now that I've gotten better at coping with everyday anxiety, it's just sort of shifted, so I don't have to worry about things in day-to-day life. Life itself is a worrying affair. Philosophy and art are the two spaces where those emotions are something I engage with…I read enough that I feel like I have the language to express feelings of, whether it's existential angst, frustration, or just despair at times.

While his coursework gives him various kinds of vocabulary that he appreciates integrating into his own, it is the community and embodied practices of his improv troupe which seem to be the most powerful for his understanding of himself and his engagement with the world and its structures.

> I found improv helpful because it gave me all these rules that allow for outcomes that are positive regardless of how well I'm engaging.

Theatrical and improvisational techniques contributed a key face-easing component in that they lowered the stakes and the possibility of failure in social encounter. It was also arguably Alex's way of building up a sense of cognitive authority where he could be in control of his own decisions and assessments based on the information he was able to accumulate through other means and it allowed him to build a performer-identity based selfhood in which he was confident and wherein he found more success and ease than in other contexts.

Social Belonging through Shared Humor

Humor has been an important component of Alex's meaning-making and sociality-building process overall, and this lines up with research about gifted individuals on the spectrum:

> … specific types of humor, such as philosophical and mathematical humor are preserved in very gifted individuals with autism/Asperger syndrome. Paulos (1980) in his book on mathematics and humor points out that 'reversal or permutation of the grammar of a sentence often results in humor' … 'a grammatical or combinatorial humor such as found in spoonerism, puns, transformation etc'. He also refers to 'a deeper sort of humor' based on misunderstandings derived from the 'confusion of the logic of a given statement or situation', which he defines as 'philosophical humor.' (Lyons & Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 526)

He describes an example of his humor, written for the troupe:

> ...a sketch I wrote once is about one person sitting in a chair and another person walks in and the person in the chair says "oh you're here! Please *take a seat.*" And the person goes up, grabs the chair and runs.

Alex explains that what's really compelling here is the shared understanding about social rules of conversation, which are violated here in that the conventional invitation to "take a seat" is taken literally to mean take a seat and run (away) with it.

Alex's improv troupe and its shared humor processes were instrumental in his development. This is by no means unique to Alex. The following excerpt demonstrates how a shared deconstruction scheme not unlike that of Alex's troupe operates in a famous troupe called "Asperger's R Us," interviewed here about their very specific brand of humor by Shaun May:

> All the guys in the troupe are a specific phenotype of Asperger's and are interested in wordplay and absurdism, and it was something we all just innately understood. Like, when Ethan was 12 the stuff that he liked was me just randomly screaming in ways that didn't make sense. That really cracked him up and I thought, 'this guy and I are going to get along really well'…The puns that we all enjoy, and the really fast wordplay, are something that a lot of the people who we do interviews with get pissed about because we're just punning off each other over and over again. They think it's inside jokes but it's just incredibly quick wordplay that they don't follow. So they don't realize what's happening and they think they are being left out of the conversation when, in reality, they are being left out of the conversation but just because they are not quick enough to follow it. (May, 2013, p. 104)

Much like the individual interviewed by May, Alex discovered a formulaic, face-easing structure of shared subjectivity in his developing friendship with Tim.

> …we were friends before we joined this but now it's kind of *become* our friendship in that we have a rapport of making bits and jokes and getting on each other's nerves intentionally and sarcastically. But now that we have a space for that it's also really fun because we can play around and experiment with that rapport with the aim of creating art of some kind.

Alex and his troupe members have even developed a short-hand for describing the way in which they communicate, "clickhole speech." It loosely refers to the humor website clickhole.com – according to Alex the idea being that the language is "unnecessarily logical and

complicated and eloquent." Clickhole speech makes sense as a comforting communication strategy which structures space, time, and even character objectives:

> When we were creating that internal space, we like we obviously wanna give ourselves stuff to work with, so a fish tank inside of a submarine doesn't make much sense at all, but there must be logic there. And that's kind of the point is, giving ourselves weird situations we have to justify and reason out through these bizarre characters, um. Like a very clickhole thing was the fact that one of us uh I think my friend Tim, his whole bit was that he was a student on a research grant who was sent to count all the fish. Which is *absurd* but it still has an internal logic and there's a task for him and he has to complete it. He's there to count the fish, and he's got to make that work or give us a good show for why that doesn't work.

Alex's improv troupe is notably focused on world-building and each improvised context is a heightened, more absurd version of the real world. They refer to these as "casual hellscapes" which he contrasts with his experiences at Cheer Up where he trained as well:

> …we [Alex's improv troupe] do characters, but we're much more invested in the world, like the kind of, we call them "casual hellscapes." Just because they're these absurd, ridiculous worlds but because these characters live in them, they're casual, because they just have to cope with them…Whereas taking classes at Cheer Up I realized it was more about having good dialogue and good scene-work just putting together good rapport between two fleshed-out, three dimensional characters.

These "casual hellscapes" point to an important difference in focus in the two improv contexts. This focus of his improv troupe onto external structures, onto culture itself[134] rather than on scripting techniques of character development and scene structure is arguably important for Alex, which Fein (2018) suggests is key for the autistic mode of engagement. Fein, drawing on Beck's notion of institutionalized individualism (1992; 2002), argues that the autistic mode of engagement, which involves a meticulous, focused, and deliberate study of cultural systems, practices and structures in order to engage with them (whether through fantastical role play rules or other explicit external structures), is reflective of a paradoxical erasure of social structural

[134]Casual hellscapes also appear to be imaginative crisis heterotopias (Foucault, 1984) "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, 1984, p.3).

rules from typical socialization processes. (This would explain why Alex's parents hired specialists to teach him everyday interaction and emotional expression rules when he was a child, for example.) This erasure is arguably a symptom of late modern societies which place the burden of path-making on the individual as if they exist in an order-less vacuum, making the individual seem as if they are completely spontaneous and self-driven in their actions, particularly visible in the case of autism:

> They are more symbiotically reliant than most upon culture to complete themselves, yet the culture they find is one that denies the very impact of shared social structures in favor of explaining all phenomena on an individual level of analysis. (Fein, 2018, p. 142)

Fein (2018) cites Beck's (1992) example of television as a form of institutionalized individualism which both standardizes and isolates the individual, and this institutionalized individualism is resonant with the self-focused trends traced here such as in self-help, self-doctoring, and self-making or self-socialization practices. In the case of the autistic mode of engagement, explicit self-socialization with a focus on external structures to guide this process is apparently necessary for social adaptation and integration and illuminates what is perhaps a less explicit but nevertheless challenging process for neurotypicals.

Alex's Spa Character:
Autism, Uncertainty Tolerance and Self-Construction through Play

Alex's final clown play class performance was of him as a clown character who runs a very particular and obnoxious kind of spa which he self-consciously used to make fun of himself and his everyday life challenges.

> What I loved about the spa character was it was a little disconnected. It was like "this is relaxing and lovely and everything's going great." He was so invested in this concept of the spa and my character believed that this could make life more relaxing and better. Even though it was clear they [the spa "clients"] were so uncomfortable. ….It was this character that had bought into his own expectations so much that he wasn't going to acknowledge the way things were actually going. I had to spin people's responses as "this is relaxing and this is wonderful and I'm doing you a great service."

Alex makes fun of his own disconnection from the external world with the spa clown; the lack of awareness around displeasing his audience, which in everyday life might be taken up as failure here is turned into comedic gold, a "delicious" sharing with the audience—which is where clown play lives as taught by Jay. On a broader level, embedded in Alex's clown is both a societal, relational, and self-oriented commentary, which has been a primary purpose of clowns historically. As the embodiment of the "other" and of contradiction itself, David Robb explains that the clown provides "the foil for the shortcomings of dominant discourse or the absurdities of human behaviour" (Robb, 2007, p. 1). Robb goes on to explain that historically a society projects whatever it needs to onto the image of the clown.

> It can be a grotesque reflection of a commonly experienced contradiction, disorder, lack or void. The clown aesthetically resolves that contradiction and fills that void." (Robb, 2007, p. 1)

For Alex, the need to contend with his own "otherness" overall and the everyday contradictions he experiences are embodied in his spa clown. The spa clown concept originated from Alex reflecting on his own paradoxical and therefore comedy-rich practices:

> I have this relaxation routine…Like I know that when I get home and my work is done, it'll eventually boil down to uhh sitting at the computer, turning it on, setting up the other monitor, putting on a tv show, going back to the kitchen for water, like there is a routine. And uh the thing that I found to be the <u>source of comedy is that I'm being so stressed about destressing which is inherently kind of a funny thing</u>. What I thought about for the clown thing then is a relaxing space being like a spa, that isn't like relaxing, that's stressful. And just playing with…expectations, the fact that my clown wanted to, was already in this relaxed state and just wanted to bring people into it but as a result of being overbearing or too forceful in their relaxing, it became stressful for the people there.

Inspired by his own flawed, comedic everyday process, Alex's well-meaning but socio-emotionally clueless and overbearing spa clown subverts social expectations with every beat. Every supposedly relaxation-inducing move by Alex's spa clown, only made "the client," a volunteer audience member from the class, more uncomfortable, completely subverting the

fantasy “spa experience” (i.e.,relaxing, mood-lifting, euphoria-inducing, etc.) into more of a comedic nightmare. Alex reflects on his final in-class performance and the unexpected and counter-intuitive actions of his clown character:

> What I thought about it, my favorite part in the beginning was handing out the free massage coupons - what a great thing to get. But then finding out that it’s this hellish experience - well maybe not hellish, but uncomfortable and vulnerable and strange and. I kept massaging the person that won and then spraying a bedroom mist, which was essentially just water. So I could spray it ad infinitum and just keep it on the person. They would obviously dry off so I was not worried about it. And then I was like, oh there’s other things about a spa that could be uncomfortable if they’re unwelcome. Like lotion and creams like at the spa that’s great, cause that means there’s moisture and there’s comfort. But if you’re at like a show and someone’s got a lot of like aloe vera on their hands it’s all like cold and on your neck and you’re not into it then it’s a whole other thing. And obviously I heightened the stakes by making it four simultaneous massages, putting the clown under more duress in having to manage that and watching him get *frustrated*.

Early on in our interview it came to light that Alex has been extremely anxious about social interactions in everyday life in part because he finds it difficult to deal with the unpredictability of them. With this clown character he gets to construct the expectations for himself through a heightened world that mimics the real one and yet is his own version; he even controls the stakes. Thus he is able to understand the faulty, sometimes self-contradictory logic of the spa character and his interlocuters. This seems to be a noteworthy success for someone with ASD as various aspects of self-processing and self-construction tend to be particularly challenging with routinized behaviors often characterizing daily, self-created structures:

> ASD is defined by social and communicative difficulties and a tendency for routinized behaviors (APA 2013). Notably, recent research has shown that individuals with autism have difficulties not only understanding others, but perhaps more primarily in constructing their own sense of self. These difficulties are manifest in reduced self-awareness (Lind 2010), poorer autobiographical narratives (Brezis 2015) and difficulty with future decision-making (Lind et al. 2014). (Brezis et al., 2016, p.114-115)

In light of all these typical uncertainties regarding, others, self, and future for individuals with ASD, Alex takes up the spa character as a tool to reflect on, animate, and thus more clearly

construct his sense of self, i.e.,he is able to have awareness and control over his emotional experience by controlling those of the clown, (this heightened character version of himself which he refers to in the third person,) in that he has constructed a scenario where he controls the conditions and amount of duress which lead to the clown's frustration. The imposed structures and rituals for relaxation and essentially self-management is a mirror onto Alex's everyday worldbuilding. The spa character caricatures and thereby illustrates his coping with institutionalized individualism. He goes on to explain the parallels and felt-connection between himself and his clown character:

> The connection I felt was I tend to ritualize down-time, I like to have a routine for relaxing, like I'm going to change into relaxing clothes, I'm going to make x caffeinated beverage, I'm going to put on this show from Netflix and then it'll all culminate when I sit in the armchair and it's all right here. Even with relaxing it's gotta have some plan. That character felt close to home in that he would create a plan in how relaxation would happen, and *nothing* would derail that plan.

It appears that theatrical heightening through his clown character allows Alex an opportunity for sense-making of faulty logic and also a fostering of increased self-awareness of himself and his everyday life behaviors, including his routinized behaviors and emotional experiences. Further, comedic and performative practices seem to have provided Alex with tools to create a powerful voice and position from which to strengthen his self-system (Hermans, 2006) and such a strong protagonist-like voice and embodiment (McAdams, 2008) is the social expectation in a late modern, western society like America where "institutionalized individualism" is the norm:

> Today even God himself has to be chosen…in order to survive the rat race, one has to become active, inventive and resourceful, to develop ideas of one's own, to be faster, nimbler and more creative – not just on one occasion, but constantly, day after day. Individuals become actors, builders, jugglers, stage managers of their own biographies and identities and also of their social links and networks…The life of one's own is thus completely dependent on institutions…institutional guidelines appear on the scene to organize your own life…many sets of guidelines – in the educational system, the labour market or the welfare state – involve demands that individuals should run their own lives… (Beck, 2002, p. 23-24)

It's more than an organization of life that is dictated (if paradoxically,) by various institutions, it's also an individualized organization of self and because of his heightened need for explicit self-organizing principles as an individual on the spectrum with highly self-individualized parents, this demand is particularly evident to Alex. Alex chooses tools to contribute to his intangible identity skillset (Côté, 1996) from organized systems of engagement which suit him best to organize his self-system and to his individualized approach to life, or "individualized culture" (Greenfeld, 2013).

Dramaturgical tools in particular have equipped Alex to construct a comedic performer version of himself who is particularly empowered to achieve his identity objective of being someone who forms positive connections with others and leaves a pleasant, positive impression. He knows that this positive impression is achieved through the clear indication of laughter from the audience as well as a mutual understanding between scene partners that leads to fun and funny scenes built on clear interaction rules and a trusting rapport. The importance of complying with the dramaturgical system seems beyond question for Alex. He explains the power of "yes, and" during improv in how it has enabled him during performance to embody the ideal version of himself which, significantly, is as an "in tune" interlocuter:

> It's so I can have the effect of being in tune with the conversation even though I may be intellectually incapable of or at least debilitated in my ability to understand or figure out what's going on. Uh. In terms of just like, interacting, person-to-person.

"Yes, and" thus provides a preset rule through which Alex can practice social communion and connectedness. This special attention to collaborative play, meaning making, and storytelling through "yes, and" means that within clown vocabulary, Alex could be described as an avid practitioner of complicité, togetherness, and disponibilité, or openness and these are crucial skills for Alex to be able to draw upon. The heightened, relatable, absurdist character versions of

himself which Alex inhabits and whom his performance partners support in any unexpected, faulty, or funny move, is integral to Alex's self-processes as they connect to an external system, perhaps to life itself as a casual hellscape. Alex's empowered, performer-identity based selfhood, in its contribution to his sense of face-ease, self-processing, and connection with others, is in line with research on the benefits of embodied role-playing and characters for individuals on the spectrum (Greenspan and Wieder, 2006; Booth and Jernberg, 2010; Fein, 2011; Fein, 2015; Williams, 2016).

Fein (2015) found that children and adolescents with ASD at a fantasy role-playing summer camp created fantastical character versions of themselves to cope with the paradoxes of their everyday challenges. This was evident in children who chose to embody half-demons: characters built on the metaphors of struggling with extreme, overwhelming emotions. Another relevant example is the documentary "Life, Animated" about Owen Suskind, an individual on the spectrum who learned to understand himself and interact with the world through Disney characters, sidekicks in particular. Owen's identification with sidekicks created tension with his father who imagined that his son must have a more active role, rather than being one of "the supporting characters," those who support the story lines of others but don't have a "life of one's own" (Beck, 2002, p. 26). Most remarkably, in a move to live up to the agentive protagonist his father and brother both pushed him to be, Owen created a character version of himself called "The Protector of Sidekicks." The story which Owen writes about this character comes across as a metaphorical version of Owen's origin story. The Protector of Sidekicks finds himself lost in a forest, battling dark, complicated forces with all the Disney sidekicks by his side.

Not unlike the Protector of Sidekicks, in his real life, Owen successfully creates a Disney Club in order to forge bonds with others on the spectrum who also connect better through larger-

than-life characters; often imagining themselves as sidekicks. In the scenes showing the Disney Club, Owen does appear to be a kind of hero to the other club members in that he creates a space where they can celebrate their connection and love for Disney sidekicks; he even goes so far as to bring celebrity voice actors to share with the group and impersonate these characters live. Perhaps the point here about individuals on the spectrum striving to find their place in the world isn't about taking on a protagonistic role, as McAdams (2008) would argue is the key for a sense of successful American identity achievement, but rather it's to be in a shared, egalitarian, and mutual understanding with others around an interactive context. The goal of self-discovery for these individuals isn't competitive but rather supportive, accepting, and communion-oriented.

These autistic individuals, in their connection and mutual-understanding focused objectives, are able to connect over the shared external structures e.g. supporting Disney characters, that neurotypicals may ignore. The autistic mode of engagement is thus already especially equipped for role-play and the parsing of self in relation to highly elaborated story worlds. In the following passage, Fein quotes the founder of a fantasy summer camp for young adults with Asperger's:

> They really could embody a character. Because I think they really could imagine, identify – and had identified, through their reading or fascination with fantasy literature or video games. And they could understand how to be that character. (Fein, 2010, p. 57)

For Alex, rather than a completely fictional character alter-ego that allowed him to engage with the world in a meaningful way, he cultivated a confident, comedic performer identity, that could launch into absurd, exaggerated characters on stage whose obstacles reflected heightened (and shared) versions of his own everyday obstacles, as well as engage in performative strategies to enhance everyday life interactions and meaning-making. Further, like Owen Suskind or the children at the fantasy role-playing camp for whom community formed

around their characters was an important component, Alex's confident performer was also part of a community of performers with whom he could inhabit an easeful crisis heterotopia. I argue that in Alex's case, it is the empowered performer identity who puppeteers and lives through these absurd characters whom he regulates according to the rules of improv, play, and teammate knowledge; this identity is the one that trumps all his self-described limitations from both autism and anxiety and allows him to exist in the world (or in "a world," which exists both externally and in his self-system) as a fully connected and accepted interlocuter.

Being able to dramaturgically "play" and manipulate everyday realities thus emerges as an impactful tool in identity distress mitigation, in this case offering an alternative pathway for neuro-diverse individuals. As emphasized by Jay, in clown the ability to play, to occupy a childlike sincerity, attention, and sense of discovery towards the environment, is crucial. How "childlike" exactly may vary depending on whether you are a red nose clown, the most innocent and naïve clown, wearing "the red nose," what Lecoq termed "the smallest mask in the world," developed by Pierre Byland (Lecoq, 2013, p. 109), or whether you are a bouffant, "bouffon"[135] in French, the conniving trickster who manipulates the audience in order to laugh at them, himself, and their shared human folly. This is the clown type which Alex was emulating in his student performance, though his piece was more focused on his own folly perhaps than that of others

[135] In a section of her book titled "Vicious Play," historian Louise Peacock elaborates on the bouffon and Lecoq's pedagogy:

> Lecoq identifies two levels of parody offered by bouffons. The first parodies through mimicry and can be identified as the friendly stage of bouffon performance. Beyond this level comes a second, potentially more spiteful, level in which the bouffon parodies deeply held convictions. It was this level of parody which prompted Lecoq to experiment with creating strange body shapes for bouffons (effectively whole body masks). This corporeal transformation has its roots in the tradition of the medieval King's fool and prevents the parody from becoming too spiteful. In transforming themselves physically, actors playing bouffons were able to make the unacceptable acceptable. (Peacock, 2009, p. 29)

A contemporary example of a bouffant is "Red Bastard," a "…spandex-clad firecracker who can make an audience cower with a single glare" (Ramanathan, 2011, [no pagination]) whom I witnessed in a 2017 performance of "Lie With Me." By boastfully confessing his own worst lies to the audience, Red Bastard was able to successfully persuade audience members to publicly confess their own transgressions, to their apparent shock.

who were highly surprised and amused by his contradictory choices (and his clown's commitment to them) for the purpose of "relaxation."

Regardless of clown type, the attitude of openness and curiosity to whatever happens is always present, and this "attitude" is one which Alex finds to be useful both on stage and off and which fits with the "yes, and" of improv which he also finds useful. Aspects of his performances and the playful characters Alex embodies on stage thus continue to live with him in non-theatrical contexts. The clown, not unlike an individual with autism, lives in a developmental limbo yet unlike an individual with autism, is excused from most of the norms and mores of adults, and yet still knowing them from a distance and rediscovering them through the clown perspective. Neutral pose could be interpreted as an attentive, observing state, standing outside of many social and cultural norms and expectations, observing them, observing one's own emotions. Each feeling, sound, gesture, is given focus, space, and room to grow. The clown is the ultimate observer, reactor, and exaggerator of human experience and interaction, interacting with the world in a way resonant with the autistic mode of engagement which for Alex involves both distancing and keen study.

Prominent Identity Distress Themes

Of the various types of identity distress emergent in this study, one that is especially relevant to Alex's case as dramatized by his final clown performance is that of "precarity distress." With the term "precarity distress" we refer to Lauren Berlant's (2011) sociological and aesthetic description of a state of "precarity," of the unpredictable and uncertain everyday present, "Its performative desire has become to redirect and bring new tones to the forced improvisation of a contemporary life that is increasingly not only without guarantees but without predictables" (Berlant, 2011, p. 2). This precarity theme emerges in a particularly remarkable

version in Alex's case because his concern is not with being able to predict a distant future, or the achievement of the pillars of success, that is, career stability or marriage, perhaps because his parents were constantly switching careers and married late, but rather with his ability to predict the present moment itself. For it is in the present moment itself that Alex is partially face blind and therefore his constant efforts and anxiety center around preparing for every contingency of everyday interactions. Alex's approach towards coping with uncertainty aligns with current autism research which finds that uncertainty avoidance and anxiety around uncertainty is common for autistic individuals (C. Boulter et al., 2014; J Rodgers et al., 2017). Alex looks to his self-presentation and organization oriented father as a role model: "I just think that the presentation of having everything together goes along with *actually* having everything together."

Alex's version of a good enough reality is one where he is able to plan for every contingency as much as possible in order to manage social interactions successfully. There is a level of compensation evident in his meticulous planning efforts, in order to "to exceed what nature has given" (Hull, 2017, p. 2524), but beyond that Alex's efforts do not appear to align fully with other camouflaging practices and experiences identified among autistic individuals (which some researchers argue are more common among females on the spectrum) such as "masking" and "assimilation" which appear to include a self-aware "hiding" of autistic characteristics and a sense of falseness in this hiding. As one of Hull's interviewees comment:

> It's mentally exhausting constantly having to be something else, literally never being able to be myself, and kind of sad too I guess? I even stop myself doing certain tics and things automatically when I'm by myself and that kinda sucks, that I'm not even me on my own. I guess I'm letting down the side a bit by hiding my autism; I am very vocal about stigmas and stereotypes with mental illness, and do talk about my anxiety openly, so I don't know why autism is different. Female, 20 (Hull, 2017, p. 2534)

This young woman's experience mirrors the surface acting problem indicated by Hoshchild (1983/2012). Apparently certain autistic individuals do not feel a sense of authenticity in the

camouflaging work that they do and as this is necessary for *perezhivania* in everyday life roles and interactions, their face-work, emotional work, and stigma-management efforts are particularly taxing. For Alex, who also appears to have a lower level of stigma consciousness (Pinel, 1999) than the 20 year-old woman quoted above, there is no sense of inauthenticity evident in his face-work planning narratives. Rather, while recognizing that certain interactions take more effort and energy than others, he envisions presentation and internal experience as having a one-to-one relationship and it's his responsibility to figure out the best way to handle and prepare himself.

Alex says that he doesn't have a worst case scenario, but rather experiences a constant frustration that things don't turn out as perfectly as he'd like. His anxiety is what in CBT terms is described as "anticipatory." The following excerpt is Alex's narration of how he manages precarity anxiety around getting dressed in the morning:

> Weather today took a turn for the beautiful but also it got really hot. It was very sudden, I was not prepared for it. I remember I woke up and I thought "God this changes everything" 'cause the weather's been pretty steady the last two weeks: I've been able to pick a pair of pants, pick a shirt, and put on my hooded sweatshirt. Also, just maybe methodical but having expectations confirmed. Then suddenly today then it's 80 and it's like "oh I have to find shorts I have to-" you know, as insignificant as clothing can be, it still raises that momentary anxiety of like "I gotta figure this all out again, what's the weather like now, how am I gonna dress, am I gonna be good for riding a bike, good for class," and yeah just um' maybe that's more like performative stuff but just "how do I adjust my outfit and my bearings to this new environment."

As illustrated in this excerpt on getting dressed, Alex's precarity anxiety is about the future several hours to moments from the present now where a weather change could mean a "new environment" [indicating a difficult to envision or adapt to a reality in constant flux – too many fluctuating levels and internal-external calibrations to manage.] His focus is on preparedness for every situation and his face-work begins with his outfit. [run-on:] As each context has its specific needs and controlling and planning for those as best as possible appears to be important in his

adaptation to being unable to predict other aspects of interactions like how his own physical and semiotic image and face (and face-work) and that of others will be managed. His overall preoccupation is with ideal, "happy" outcomes which essentially means making himself and the people around him happy.

> I didn't hear this personally but when I left band another kid said to my mom: "Yeah Alex is great, he's just, Alex." And I found that very affirming because all they were doing on a very basic level was saying my name with a positive inflection. And that's enough. Just that I want to be a positive force in people's lives rather than a negative one.

The likeability dimension is therefore an important aspect of his identity distress, and it is mostly focused around eustress or positive stress. He isn't concerned with being the greatest entertainer necessarily, rather he has found his access point to others through laughter. He finds it "very affirming" when he learns of evidence of maintaining a reputation as someone who is "a positive force." Notice that there is little nuance in these positive characteristics, they exist on a broad emotional level; it's enough for others to say his "name with a positive inflection."

This fulfillment for broad-based positive audience response runs parallel to the fulfillment patterns of the comedian or comedic improviser. One of the introductory improv classes I took as part of fieldwork featured a teacher who had developed an algorithm for measuring audience laughter as a measure of his success as a performer. This kind of simple relationship between positive audience response and status is one that Alex has appropriated into his everyday management both on stage and off as an improviser and, as will be evident, it is an interdiscursive combination of clinical self-management and theatrical audience engagement. In improv, an accumulation of laughter is indicative of success while in clown play, the audience is considered "perfect;" it is simply a matter of keeping them entertained and emotionally engaged. These two modalities, the monitoring of the self as a medical subject and engaging with and regulating the audience through the rules of comedy, allow Alex to construct an agency around

both his own medical and developmental limitations and the unpredictability of interacting with others.

Finding Comedic Formulas for Coping

The strategies that stand out in Alex's coping and highlight the spaces in which he appears to have found a particularly strong sense of belonging, involve comedy and playfulness.

Carving Out An "Anxiety-Free Space"

At EQU, Alex is part of a student improv group on campus where they play highly structured improv games in front of an audience, mostly long-form with a few short-form games as an audience warm-up. He describes this improv group as an "anxiety-free space" where he can have an intersubjective connection with like-minded others in which they use comedy to take apart the absurd logic of culturally taken-for-granted notions:

> Everybody in that space is trying to equally elicit the same thing which is laughter, with different degrees of success and failure. But everybody's better off when you're all invested in each other's successes and forgiving of your failures. And I think that in terms of anxiety, I think that success and failure are something that are inherently evaluated by other people. And so that makes it, it's the reason people don't just start doing standup in the middle of the quad. It's that regardless of how funny they are people will just evaluate it as "this is some weird guy shoutin' around the quad." So...I guess that's the great thing about improv, or I find that our improv rehearsals are great because they're just a dedicated space to just express anything in the same mode of finding what's funny doesn't quite make sense - or finding what's absurd or what has a strange faulty internal logic to it. One of my favorite ones is one day my friend Tim was just pointing out we're all like oh this is kinda weird, this is dumb, and my friend Tim goes [does a funny high pitched voice] "what's up with gender?! What's up with that?! There are expectations based on anatomy- wha why?!" and I thought "yeah that's pretty fucked up." And again it's this space where you can kind of – nothing is sacred and people often misinterpret the term "nothing is sacred" to mean "everything is irreverent." It's not that, it's that everything is equally stripped down to its components. Which is, in my mind at least, absurd internal logic, meant to exist in this substratum of meaninglessness that perhaps underlies all art…I find it helpful to be mindful of carving out a space where you take nothing for granted. Or are intellectually questioning or perhaps are cynical or satirical of everything you can be.

Alex finds it helpful to understand the rules of culture, language, social interaction, etc. and their at times "faulty logic" (typically meaning paradoxical) such as the social construction of gender, which he is able to process as constructed, or "absurd," through the co-constructed lens of his improv troupe members and his overall intellectual, social, and self-discovery process as a college student exploring the liberal and creative arts.

Throughout the narrative that he constructs during our interviews, Alex places himself as intellectual onlooker onto his own life, often remembering and indexing what he thought in incidents that he narrates about himself, and changing vocal inflection for direct quotes from himself or others. To him, the interaction rules within comedy, and the agreement on a line and a shared face among his supportive troupe members (i.e., the goal to deconstruct faulty logic together and support each other's choices on stage) provide him with the kind of structure that does not exist in "absurd," unpredictable, precarious everyday life. And yet his training, like-minded community, and experience does appear to help him manage his energies in terms of an embedded understanding of face-work, face-ease, and how performative and improv principles can help him understand and interact with others in any context, even a more taxing one:

> Cause for me, the emotional, physical, mental, uh energy I have to invest to have a good interaction with strangers or distant relatives is significantly higher than with people I know…Maybe there's a parallel to be drawn with improv. Like it's easy to do improv with people you've done it with for a long time cause you know each other's tricks and tropes. I know if I need a character with a low, deep voice, let me get Mike out here. Cause he does the best funny deep voice characters. Um so those are the people I'm comfortable engaging with, and I can do it much more fluidly. But if I'm improvising with people I haven't done it with before, I have to remember those rules, or think about trying to think about what kind of improviser they are. "Are they gonna make this about us, are they gonna make this about some other *thing*, is it about the world we're in."

The improv space eliminates some unpredictability: one already knows the attitude of one's interlocutor towards unpredictability as one of "yes, and," and as Alex explains if it's someone he's familiar with, he already has a sense of how to work with their performative

toolkit. In the following interview excerpt, Alex describes his understanding of an overall practice of both readiness and affirmation as lessons from Clown and improv:

> Jay [the Clown Play teacher] talked about a ready posture, and that had to do with your state of alertness and preparedness and your ability to deal with unexpected things. So I guess that's kind of an attitude thing. Whereas in terms of improv, "yes, and" is this thing that everyone loves to tote, it's the key to living a better life and things like that. I think uh just living or expressing through affirmation is a great thing, "yes, and" is just I guess the language for it. I definitely do find it's a useful thing if you're not sure how to proceed, at the very least, give affirmation and contribute something even if that something is nothing. That's just a way to stay engaged with be it a conversation, a class or...just being able to engage with other people is confirming that they're on the right track and then giving them something yourself. That's what I like about improv is that um <u>ultimately you're working together to create a good conversation</u>. Even though you're seeding in humor and irony and all these other little tricks for the audience watching, forgetting all that, you do have to produce a coherent conversation, dialogue with another person and "yes, and" is just a very simple and effective formula for doing that. It's "don't disagree about basic facts." And "*find new points of tension or agreement within that*."

This kind of distanced, deconstructionist approach towards comedy has been found as typical for those on the autism spectrum (May, 2013; Lyons & Fitzgerald, 2004; Paulos, 1980.) The "yes, and" strategy is an apt encapsulation of the understanding and shared subjectivity that Alex is able to maintain with his improv troupe, the understanding he aims to reproduce to the best of his ability in everyday life.

> I know my thoughts on what's absurd and what's bizarre aren't original. I'm not the only guy with anxiety in this world. But what I find compelling about comedy is it's not muddling in shared misery rather taking a very conscious choice to embrace the comedy of it. What's funny about how absurd about how pointless and meaningless this can all be. That not only are you poking at like societal and personal things that have weird inconsistent but internal logic, not only are you—when we do that in a show, we're no longer joking about what's strange and what's kind of absurd but rather we're demonstrating and expressing to a whole group of people what's absurd and what's illogical in some ways. There's something compelling about exploring that realm together with other people. Pushing at the bounds of our ridiculous existence collectively.

For Alex, then, comedy is the ultimate communal bond through which he can feel connected to like-minded others and participate in a shared perspective on "our ridiculous existence" as a

shared, collective project. In this way, he is not only *not* "the only guy with anxiety" but he's also not alone in the challenges of growing up as a young man in modern society. Autism researchers have postulated that quite possibly the most challenging area for students with ASD is adjusting to the social demands of the college setting (Welkowitz & Baker, 2005) and in Alex's case his improv troupe provides a space where he can relate to his peers in a fulfilling and "anxiety-free" way.

Anxiety-free spaces (or zones) are also characteristic of what Donald Winnicott describes as a "third realm" of experience (Winnicott 1971)[136]. This existential space is a place for those illusions (play, creativity, imagination, testing one's boundaries, dreaming) that make the reality of life livable. For Alex, the issues discussed by Winnicott, relation between self and other, interior and exterior reality, etc., can present a complex disconnect. The socioemotional safety of his troupe is very important for his development as he still struggles sometimes with unexpected encounters in particular. Alex described a discomfiting social situation that occurred during his first year of college when he walked into the elevator in his dormitory, when another dorm resident unexpectedly exclaimed aloud "Laundry day!" This moment felt deeply disconcerting to Alex:

> …I had ridden those elevators numerous times and not had to do that [engage]. Or if there was a stranger, just not have to engage them. You know, it's "the look at your phone til your floor and get out." But because they engaged me it was – "I'm going to have to respond." At the very least there was a quick physiological response. Like a quick shot of adrenaline, like "get ready to talk to this person." Which is ridiculous, because it's such a low-stakes situation. But anxiety isn't rational in that way. It's "you weren't prepared but now you suddenly have to be as prepared as possible." And in hindsight, the stakes were so low because I could've sworn in her face, spit on her shoe and walked out right there. And I'd be the same person. In that moment it's still wanting that ideal outcome whenever possible which in that case was [in a funny lower voice:] "oh yeah and you know this other thing, well have a nice day, yeah." Just again, kinda fulfilling the

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[136] Winnicott describes how the relationship with a transitional object, made possible through the mother's "good enough" attunement, opens a third realm of experience that works to conjoin and articulate the disjointed and disarticulated relation between interior and exterior reality, subjectivity and objectivity, self and other, inter and intra-generations of care.

> expectation for how an interaction with a stranger in an elevator should go, should end like. How it *should* be. Obviously there is no perfect interaction with a stranger in an elevator just because that's not something anybody evaluates.

In this encounter, suddenly Alex's typical face-work strategy of avoidance was not possible. He is made extremely anxious by the encounter because he feels unprepared for it, and yet he feels that he must respond. As Goffman explains:

> During interaction the individual is expected to possess certain attributes, capacities, and information which, taken together, fit together into a self that is at once coherently unified and appropriate for the occasion. Through the expressive implications of his stream of conduct, through mere participation itself, the individual effectively projects this acceptable self into the interaction, although he may not be aware of it, and the others may not be aware of having so interpreted his conduct. At the same time he must accept and honor the selves projected by the other participants." (Goffman, 1967. p. 105)

As Alex has a limitation in perceiving certain social cues, he compensates by being especially in tune with the Goffmanian need to maintain face and the line of his interlocutor. While he explains his difficulty in the moment through anxiety as a kind of confused actor, "anxiety isn't rational in that way," his self-described limitations from autism are also at play in a variant of face-work that has integrated both anxiety and autism-oriented compensation strategies:

> Respondents [compensating autistic individuals] often described these techniques as 'rules' or expectations from others that had to be met, even if they themselves felt these rules were not necessary." (Hull et al., 2017, p. 2526)

He is hyper-aware of needing to project his "acceptable self," which in this case is projected through a "yes, and" strategy in a situation such as the elevator encounter in which he did not anticipate needing to exercise any kind of active face-work other than avoidance. This dilemma is reflective of Alex's desire to be perceived as a pleasant person who leaves a good impression and makes others feel positively after interacting with him. Therefore, in spite of his frustration with having to interact with the stranger in the elevator at all, he does not actually "swear in her face," or "spit on her shoe."

Alex's maintains his identity objective of leaving a "pleasant impression" or likeability in the face of identity threat, through simple, easily recognizable and modifiable physical movements or verbal expressions. Alex's gauge of whether he has managed to maintain a line is focused on isolated contextual cues as his perception is limited to separated behavioral (simple actions), visual (only parts of faces and bodies,) and verbal cues (such as "he's a great guy"). In the case of the elevator encounter, the best way Alex was able to maintain his line was by refraining from the externalizing behaviors e.g. "swear in her face," that would express his frustration.

Recontextualization of Mistakes

Alex demonstrates that his identity distress around social belonging can be mitigated through notions of membership and shared understanding, particularly around interaction rules:

> One of the things I remember about clown is that the bad situations and the tensions that come up, aren't contrived. The trouble is making them look genuine. And a way that I found that Jay worked around that was by creating genuine situations in which real mistakes would happen and then have to be dealt with. And I guess I find that to be kind of a comforting notion to know that mistakes can be kind of recontextualized as an opportunity to spawn something new. I guess it's kind of like the, I've heard storytellers and comedians say this: we're halfway through a bad situation but realize this is real bad, let's see where this shit goes. And they get a great story out of it or a great experience. I don't know if I've ever consciously applied it. But thinking about it now I definitely find it to be a useful thing. Just to be able to move on from a mistake. Because there's nothing you can do about it, except going forward. Not try to erase it or change it but take what you have. And improv definitely feeds off of that a lot.

Being able to comedically recontextualize mistakes, particularly mistakes when one's performance is being evaluated, is a key strategy for Alex in identity distress management. Improv, clown, and on-stage performance contexts allow for practice for recontextualization of mistakes in any situation. In Alex's case we don't see him saying "it's not that serious" like the SAI students. Instead, he deconstructs the logic of social reality where there's a need to simply

accept things and “go forward” because there’s nothing you can do about it and so replaying the supposed mistake over and over again in one’s memory would not be helpful.

Self-Actualization through (On-Stage) Performance

Performative contexts also allow Alex to be the ideal version of himself such as in his analysis here of one of his improv performances:

> ALEX: Oh, during the submarine show, I mistakenly repeated the name I had been given back to the person. And that’s how we both ended up with the name Gerarde.
>
> MARIANNA: I remember, everybody then became Gerarde!
>
> ALEX: Exactly. And then the joke became trying to renegotiate our relationship given the fact that we had the same name and that gave rise to this whole animosity and frustration plot. So I think I definitely applied it in improv.
>
> MARIANNA: And that became really funny
>
> ALEX: Right and saying hello to the two Gerardes. Then it became about who was Gerarde 1 and who was Gerarde 2, repeating in that way. I think that’s a thing that happens in real life. People have the same names. You’ve got classes where that happens and that’s a source of confusion. That happens in real life cause I’ve met lots of other Alex’s, and Alexanders, and then we have to renegotiate – “you’ll be Alexander here, great. Ok I’ll be Alex here.” It then becomes this established logic of naming that you then have to support and bolster and justify. And again, it’s absurd as anything else but that’s just what you’re focusing on at that time. I try not to dwell on mistakes. I can’t think of one in particular right now. But yeah just in general I think it’s better to move forward with whatever you have rather than try to salvage what you may have lost.

To Alex, everyday life is far more absurd than comedy, where the rules of interaction are clear and the line and face-work are a shared endeavor. The way he and his troupe were able to transform his nervous “mistake” of calling himself “Gerarde” during the improv show into a moment of comedic success around “the absurd logic of naming” is an important metaphor for his identity distress management, and the management of his perspective on everyday life precarity, uncertainty, and unpredictability. The Gerarde incident is also a utilization of “yes, and” or an “affirming approach” in accepting the narrative turn that comes and adding to it.

Alex also appropriates “yes, and” in coping with the uncertainty around everyday life social encounters, as reflected in his description of the “nod and smile:”

> I find it a useful thing as like a reflex or a habit to “yes, and.” Oftentimes if like, I don’t hear what somebody says but I don’t wanna make a big deal out of it or it probably wasn’t important - it’s just “the nod your head and keep going.” It keeps things running smoothly, or at the very least the appearance of that. And that’s a good thing. And it does the trick. The thing with improv is you’re essentially generating real life. And we do it in a weird way but other people do it in a sad way in a funny way, but you do have to generate at least some kind of simulation of what real life looks like. Or what real life could look like hypothetically. So I think it makes sense that the tenets that apply there apply just as well in real life: You know being respectful of other people’s words, taking turns talking, just simple things that make everyday communication better, make *presented* communication work better.

Alex uses dramaturgical devices like the “nod and smile” translated through improv from “yes and” as a way to make everyday life interactions feel more manageable. Identity distress around precarity is at times a serious struggle for Alex and these dramaturgical devices translated into everyday interactional coping mechanisms appear key to his comfort in interacting with others whose faces he can’t quite see and emotions he can’t quite read. Similarly, Alex’s concern around emotion-focused communication is simplified through his strategy of focusing on whether he leaves others with pleasant experiences of himself.

For Alex, it’s interesting to note that deconstructing and being able to follow the rules of “presented communication” is at the essence of being able to function. There doesn’t appear to be a distinction for him between a more or less authentic self. A presented self that operates in a well-adapted manner is good enough and fits into the optimal scheme of what Alex is able to achieve. In this way, the biomedical model that diagnoses him as autistic, anxious, etc. and which he uses to self-monitor himself as a medical subject with a variety of biological symptoms and limitations, is reimagined in the anxiety-free spaces of improv, clown play, and comedy. In these anxiety-free spaces, he finds dramaturgical devices through which to analyze and

normalize what may otherwise have been taken up as forms of stigma and these devices then contribute substantively to Alex's dramaturgical attunement and toolkit for managing identity distress. What is often described in theatre classes as your "toolbox," a combination of skills taken from a variety of methods for optimal performance depending on the needs of the individual actor and the scenarios at hand, becomes for Alex his toolbox for everyday life, and is arguably part of his intangible identity capital skill set (Côte, 1996) which Alex is purposefully developing.

Concluding Thoughts: Identity Distress and Agency through Play

The case study of Alex's identity distress management demonstrates how a meta-understanding of the internal logic of social situations, whether on stage or off, whether faulty or not, can operate as a compelling coping skill. For individuals who struggle with precarity distress, as well as, potentially, belonging distress and likeability distress, takeaways from clown play, comedy, and improvisation allow for an alternative set of dramaturgy-based coping strategies and this can be applicable for both neurotypical and neuro-diverse individuals; in this case coping meant adapting to the challenges of both anxiety and autism as well as the social and medical implications of these diagnoses. The clinical complexity of this case also demonstrates the advantage of a non-pathological sociocultural construct like identity distress for capturing the interplay of contemporary coping, mental health, identity, and image-making processes.

In this case, Stanislavskian perezhivania, and our connection with it as audience, is explicitly twofold: Alex examines his own faulty logic as well as that of his clown character because for both everything needs to be planned perfectly in order to be able to relax successfully. For Alex, the most helpful imagining lives somewhere between fiction and nonfiction wherein an exaggerated version of himself can struggle openly on stage. There is no

stigma around being neuro-diverse, just an absurd character in an absurd scenario that is highly relatable to the audience rather than distanced by preconceived notions of a stigmatized category like autism.

Understanding the potential absurdity here allows for a kind of empowerment and cognitive authority through play. When the rules of the context as well as one's own internal logic are deconstructed, they can be played with and most importantly, in a social environment where one is supported in the experience of absurdity. The dramatic line becomes the shared deconstruction and playfulness with the faulty logic, and this is where humor and comedy offer perhaps one of the most potent coping strategies of all, particularly for those who experience societal reality as an overwhelming, illogical entrapment. The comedic coping strategy can allow for a sense of agency and that is also constantly the self-conscious search of the actor and the dramaturg in American theatre when they ask: where is the protagonist's agency? Alex's self-system construction process is both a neurodiverse and contemporary American mode of engagement. He draws on therapeutic and medicalized meaning-making, the model of his parents' own experimental self-discovery narratives, perspectives from various thinkers which he integrates from his liberal arts education, and perhaps most impactfully, a performer-identity-based confidence to playfully engage and hold agency in everyday life challenges from an affirming, neutral pose crafted to leave every interlocuter with a pleasant impression.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: Final Theoretical Formulation, Data Analysis, and Future Prospects

Introduction

In light of the three case studies presented, this chapter presents a concluding analysis of the research project as a whole. Having presented the three case studies, we can now bring them together to address the questions we posed at the outset about the ways performance practices can both provide insight onto as well as serve to alleviate identity distress, i.e., "impression management distress," understood here as an everyday, interactive process. Final data summary, analysis, and a new model for understanding identity distress and dramaturgical coping as a process are presented. The chapter concludes by highlighting broader psycho-socio-cultural implications of the findings. It offers suggestions both for further research on identity distress along a number of relevant sociocultural themes and individual identity objectives, as well as potential practical applications for its mitigation.

A Proposal to Re-Evaluate the Structures and Theories that Contribute to Identity Distress

As this study argues, the ongoing problem with everyday identity distress-related suffering is not inability or inadequacy of the individual but the pervasive *idea* of the inability and inadequacy of the individual rather than of the institutional, commercial, and media structures that perpetuate these ideas through pathologizing categories and messaging and an unclear path for solving them through an isolating system of "institutionalized individualism" compounded by a societal system which prioritizes other-pleasing (Riesman et al., 1950/2001; Côté, 1996) over self-knowledge and self-directed objectives that would allow for a more coherent and manageable self-system hierarchy. Further, psychological anthropology has amply

documented the social nature of mental suffering and recovery in a myriad of sociocultural contexts and it is therefore critical to cultivate an understanding of the micro-processes of this social nature in order to mitigate this suffering and to construct better policies, therapies, and interventions accordingly. I argue that lasting change needs to begin at the level of foundational understanding of everyday mental health coping in relation to social processes which can then begin to shift the vocabulary that impacts guidelines and policies around the way in which institutions relevant to these processes operate e.g., continued and expanded revision and re-evaluation of the sociocultural astuteness and underlying theories of the DSM. Based on the educational and semi-clinical field sites in this study, educational institutions and clinical or semi-clinical practices at all levels need to recognize the interactive, dialogic, and social and cultural nature (both in group-scale and pair dynamics) of psychological health and experience and to work to recognize and de-stigmatize everyday mental health challenges.

A significant contemporary challenge is that current understandings of mental health are generally limited to the two extremes of diagnosis: (mentally) "well" and "ill" in terms of who is imagined as worthy of treatment, intervention, or support and this is reflected in the current discursive structures such as in relation to the so-called "worried well" who are ambivalently treated and understood by the healthcare system (Grey et al., 2020). Developing a clearer language for the grey area, e.g. identity distress process, face-ease, distancing metaphors, etc. or gradations of mental health in-between these two polarities means developing a clearer understanding of everyday mental health conditions. These conditions may precipitate deeper states of distress thus helping to disambiguate symptoms that seem mysterious and inexplicable to the sufferers themselves. Consider, for example, what might have happened had Troy in Chapter 5 been offered the tools of this study around identity distress to work with in a face-

easing support group who shared this vocabulary around the relationship between inauthenticity, stigma, and face-work: Troy might have had a better chance to express, be supported in, and reimagine his identity distress process. In the event I observed at SAI, the other participants were able to identify and empathize with having an ambiguous and uncontrollable physical symptom, but there was no deeper understanding established among the group beyond these surface-level descriptions of these mysterious and ambiguous symptoms.

The evidence in this study of individuals engaging with emotional and mental health process through theatre training suggests that a more precise, non-stigmatized language for the challenges of everyday suffering can also facilitate the development of interventions as well as preventative measures for states of deeper distress and mental suffering. These states of suffering may perpetuate in part because individuals may feel more comfortable hiding rather than addressing their distress for fear of social defeat and failure. Theatre pedagogies such as the ones explored in this study offer to participants face-easing activities, spaces, and a non-stigmatized psychosocial vocabulary teaching a combination of tools. Importantly, these tools honor both the individual and the individual as part of a group with shared rules of engagement and a sense of belonging and face-ease around recognized, authentic self-identity. "Face-ease" is a way to counter the stressful realities of everyday face-work, emotional labor, and stigma management, all potential contributing factors to identity distress; as demonstrated here, participants transferred certain theatre skills and tools into face-easing practices and perspectives for everyday life because they lightened the pressures of stressful everyday social encounters.

Dramaturgical Practices for the Mitigation of Identity Distress: New Strategies for Coping in an Image-Oriented Society

Dramaturgical practices were taken up by participants as part of identity distress coping and this illustrates both the dramaturgical nature of everyday coping as well as how existing

dramaturgical pedagogies may be beneficial. This section firstly elaborates on the protagonist-selves that the three individuals in the case studies constructed in their dramaturgical re-imaginings and secondly, presents a detailed analysis of how the "get out of your head" movement operates for study participants. This movement, first described in Chapter 2, represents a common form of cultural meaning-making around a particular kind of identity distress connected with a desire to live a more agentic, self-driven life. The three pedagogies offer different strategies for addressing this idiom of identity distress.

Creating Characters to Help Manage Stigma Distress

As Kay, Zainab, and Alex each have to contend with stigma-related challenges, their attempts to craft empowered protagonist-versions of themselves integrate strategies adapted to cope with these obstacles. Further, the empowered characters of each suggest new organizational hierarchies of their self-systems where these empowered self-positions may dominate to better serve their identity objectives. Their complicated, uncertain, anomic, and high pressure environments did not offer them clear paths for self-development, coherence, or integration, and yet, as Beck (1992; 2002) suggests, they were expected by society to be highly individualized selves within the invisible workings of a standardized system. Thus each felt compelled to forge their own way through a combination of available narrative structures.

These new narrative structures allowed for the reorganization of their self-systems with clearer, revised identity objectives in relation to dominant identity objective orientations that didn't always align with their interactional lines and contributed to experiences of in-the-moment identity or impression management distress. For Kay, narrative self-organization meant a combination of therapeutic personhood, everyday activism, trans-healing, coming of age, and empowered self-discovery through dramaturgical techniques to facilitate their identity objective

of acceptance through societal transformation. Zainab addressed her complex set of stigma concerns through a combination of therapeutic personhood, a revision of the traditional Muslim woman role expectations and narrative, the American self-discovery narrative, the insights she could glean from transformational figures, and the empowered, improvised self-making experiments she conducted on herself after partaking in SAI. These varied sources facilitated what appeared to be a more streamlined self-system: Zainab's primary organizing principle came to be the mitigation of her own anxiety particularly as it occurred in non-Muslim, often white-dominated American professional settings. Alex's identity-organizing structures involved a biomedical and diagnostic model for sense-making around his diagnoses, the freeform career pathfinding model from his parents, intellectual sources of meaning-making from his studies, along with improvisational, comedic, and clown techniques for both adaptive and meaning-making purposes. Alex overcame the isolated, difficult periods of his childhood through an adult protagonist version of himself that was strikingly bouffant-like and appeared to represent the most empowered, dominant character in his self-system: he could humorously critique his own absurdities and those of others and thereby elevate his social status and sense of agency.

All three individuals in the case studies achieved a kind of perezhivania (to varying degrees) in that each achieved some sense of being an empowered protagonist or puppeteer who pulled the strings of characters with whom they "worried with" or "experienced with." In other words, the empowered self-positions derived from these pedagogies and other (often related, such as Zainab's hostessing position) self-treating experiences allowed them to have an enhanced dramaturgical toolkit.

Kay, an adept actor and activist, experienced with their characters on and off stage and adjusted with heightened dramaturgical attunement and awareness to each scenario. Zainab, an

empowered self-experimenter, "experienced with" her everyday characters in encounters that were distressing but ultimately an important part of her self-treatment and growth. Alex, a smart bouffant, experienced with the on and off-stage attempts of his characters to accept the unpredictable and often absurd situations they encountered. Thus each individual integrated cognitive-emotional and dramaturgical distancing metaphors around their empowered self-as-protagonist position which created a sense of agency and ability to both adapt to the oft threatening nature of everyday encounters and to make meaning of it in ways that were face-easing and affirming. They each demonstrate how the typical image-oriented American identity distress concerns of being perceived as funny, engaging, interesting, authentic, successful, etc. are compounded by their stigma concerns and intersectional challenges.[137] Perhaps most importantly, these case studies demonstrate how the work of the shared imagination upholds these re-imaginings at a communal level and is key to mitigating these challenges.

"Get Out of Your Head:" Time-Space Processing, Identity, and Mental Health

Based on how distress experiences are described by participants and imagined on a broader sociocultural level, they can be characterized as a time-space processing problem wherein the individual struggles to understand and act "in the moment" and to be perceived as someone who does. At the same time, *perezhivania*, exemplified by performers perfectly "living with" and in control of the roles and the correspondent realities they are presenting, offers a supple interactive structure for manipulating the complexities of everyday face-work. Everyday

[137] Including systems of discrimination around gender, race, religion, mental health status or diagnosis, disability, etc. around which the three were impacted in individual combinations to them described in Chapters 4-6. This was particularly evident in the case of Zainab whose identity distress was compounded by systems of discrimination around race, religion, gender, as well as mental health. For Alex it was primarily around the multiple challenges and diagnoses of autism, prosopagnosia, and anxiety which his parents had worked to render invisible and for Kay it was primarily around gender, sexuality, and mental health,.

interaction is a time-structured mechanism for which theatre provides intensive training as well as potential mitigation for this deictic aspect of identity distress.

The identity distressed participants of this study frequently struggled with time in terms of worries around both their past as well as future acting selves and potential negative judgments. Their processing of memory could also become disorganized at times of heightened distress. This heightened distress in its disruption of everyday functioning was re-enacted by interviewees when discussing distressing incidents as evidenced by speech patterns and heightened difficulties with recall and self-understanding. These parallelisms (Wortham, 2001) during narration[138] are notable: in understanding it as "social anxiety," symptom(s) of distress tend to be feared in and of themselves as causes of potential social failure or defeat. Their frustratingly uncontrollable appearances are narrated as mysterious and antagonistic forces by participants who have not integrated these publicly visible responses into their self-understandings[139].

The capacity of theatrical reimagining to help with everyday time, self and social interaction-processing in such cases is promising.[140] The vernacular expression "get out of my head," indicating the difficulty to stay present, was used by students, teachers, and interviewees in all three ethnographic contexts fairly often. "Get out of my head" was distinctive from what research participants were trying to alter about their experiences of time-space reality. I offer that

[138] These parallelisms were especially visible during interviews but they were notable during other times as well, such as during Social Anxiety Improv support group sharing sessions.
[139] This integration of responses and symptoms versus not manifested in a number of ways which included a range of iterations in participants, such as fear of sweating in social situations by Troy or fear of one's mind freezing in professional presentation contexts for Zainab both of whom had lower levels of awareness with Troy having the lowest, while for Kay their response of visible cognitive fatigue at their café job was already integrated into an adaptive, performative character for whom the fatigue response fit the identity.
[140] Greenfeld (2013) argues that individuals suffering from some of the most severe forms of mental illness have no sense of time as they are living in an internalized chaos wherein they cannot consistently locate or identify themselves. As to these individuals' identity objectives, this implies a total disorganization and lack of clarity. Further research could explore these insights for more deeply distressed mental health conditions around time, identity, and self.

there are several possible levels of meaning to this trope, involving different types of desirable externalizations from current internal preoccupations:

1. Externality: to escape your internal anxiety cycle and connect more with external reality;
2. Physicality: A post-cartesian assumption that you need to connect with your body and not just your mind and that this involves paying attention to the body (such as through mindfulness practices);
3. Personality: to become or act more extroverted;
4. Sociality: to relate and socialize more with others, not just with yourself.

In fact, an externalization of the self in one of these time-space desirable ways appears to be an overall goal of this expression. This goal of externalization implies that an overly internalized self-experience and thus an overly isolated life is not ideal, and there is the implication here that it may be best to escape from yourself and your own dysfunctional, toxic thoughts. The expression implies that staying "in there" too long may be risky or harmful in some way. The desire and idiom to "get out of your head" is targeted by self-help trends about "being present," by mindfulness culture, and by "get out of your head" gurus. What isn't taken into account by this idiom-as-movement is that the harmful external conditions "out here" can alienate and produce the harmful internal conditions "in there." This particular idiom of distress, focused on the challenge of managing socio-cognitive experience, is thus part of the prescriptive process of the dominant biomedical structure as well as mainstream everyday dialogue.

All three performance pedagogies proliferated the ideas of this movement; living up to its tenets through various psycho-dramaturgical strategies. In Social Anxiety Improv, focused mainly on externality and sociality, and perhaps in the long-term, personality, "getting out of your head" meant circumventing internal anxiety loops and being able to engage and

communicate with others through such practices as speaking up in a timely manner, practiced through improv exercises and group sharing. In Neo-Futurism and Clown Play, it meant a difficulty in letting go of one's inhibitions in order to inhabit "neutral" or "the chair test" and to be "real" with the audience. Clown Play had an additional focus on physicality as part of the training and practice: authentic reality meant connection with the body through movement and awareness of movement. Once more it is implied that contemporary American anxiety and distress has to do with a kind of deictic disconnect paralleled by a somatic-cognitive disconnect. This appears to be the case in the distress experiences of the participants in this study, for whom "anxiety" implies a difficulty to mentally stay still and present with one's immediate reality, body, and interlocuters.

Theatrical practice offers an antidote: presence in theatre means "staying" with the live audience just as good stage actors have to allow for perezhivania. SAI suggests that the presence problem is shared by many in everyday life and in the admission of this problem, the hope of a shared time-space reality emerges. Theatre thus provides potential practices for a shared, co-created time-space with agreed-upon rules of engagement. The time-space processing and identity performance components of identity distress may be mitigated through theatre pedagogy and more specifically, practices like SAI which appear to address the "get out of your head" idiom-as-movement. Such practices should be taken up critically, however, as this idiom-as-movement is an iteration of identity distress that is conflicted on a sociocultural level between image and acceptance orientations: the phrase can just as easily be taken up by the individual as a judgment call on one's social inadequacy or as a useful piece of advice for less anxious, disconnected, and therefore better living.

Synthesis of Findings and Recommendations for Research and Practice

This section synthesizes insights and findings on identity distress coping processes and the application of various face-easing strategies for particular identity objectives as taught by different pedagogies and then offers recommendations for future research and practice. Advantages of each of the three pedagogies are described in consideration of particular student needs in relation to specific sociocultural contexts as well as pedagogical or therapeutic settings. Possibilities are proposed for individual and systemic interventions.

Identity Distress Coping Processes Compared: The Importance of Authenticity

This dissertation proposes understanding the identity distress process as a non-pathologized framework for understanding everyday mental health and suffering in the modern US in relation to social encounter as an alternative to prior approaches to identity distress (e.g., Berman et al., 2004; Hernandez et al., 2006; Berman et al., 2009; Kamps & Berman, 2011; Gfellner et al., 2011; Wiley et al., 2011; Wiley & Berman, 2012; Berman & Montgomery, 2014; Berman & Weems, 2016) and more broadly to the inadequately understood nexus of everyday mental health suffering and identity in everyday life (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, 1987, 1994, 2020; Erikson, 1956; Arnett, 2011; Higgins et al., 1985; Li et al, 2001; Schwartz, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2011; Seaton & Beamont, 2011). Authenticity, meaning making, and image management emerged as prominent aspects of the identity distress coping process, reflecting values embedded in American impression management, as well as the complexities of American identity-making, inseparable, arguably, from the goal of the American dream in which the ideal individual is a free, protean, self-made success story.[141] The emergent theory, model,

[141] In this dissertation, identity distress is traced in college students in elective performance courses as well as post-college age adults who have elected to participate in a self-enhancing improv program. This population was chosen in part because of Berman's research (2008, 2014) on the correlation of identity distress with periods of psychosocial moratorium such as among college students (who self-reported high rates of identity distress concerns,) as well as on the initial interviews gathered on

and overall framework presented here builds on the work of several theatre-as-metaphor and social interaction focused scholars. The study draws most closely from the paradigm of face-work proposed by Goffman (1967) and that of emotional labor proposed by Hoshchild (1983/2012) along with acting theories (Stanislavski, 1954; Tust-Gunn, 1995; Burgoyne, 1999), Luhrmann's insights on social defeat (2007), Goffman and O'Brien's insights on stigma and stigma management (Goffman, 1963; O'Brien, 2011), and Herman's clinical theory of the self as a theatre (2006).

The Future of Face-Ease: Coping Strategies and Recommendations

Each performance pedagogy when theorized as part of the identity distress coping process, offers a variety of specific strategies that may help individuals cope with a range of self-presentation worries and identity distress backgrounds. Firstly, it's critical to institute de-stigmatized perspectives and a correspondent de-stigmatized vocabulary, i.e., "face-easing practices" or "coping," which signal a wide range of potential activities and do not imply pathology. Secondly, face-ease and dramaturgical strategies for augmenting it provide a productive approach. These findings and strategies may be implemented by future research or academic and public-serving institutions to both cultivate a better understanding of a non-stigmatized range of everyday suffering as well as to better equip individuals for coping with identity or impression management distress.[142]

D , Identity Objectives and Face-Easing Practices, which follows, fills in the final column from Table 2A (from Chapter 3). Various combinations of strategies and interventions in relation

theatre trainees in the preliminary phase of this study. It was assumed that these two research groups would be particularly articulate in their identity distress coping attempts and indeed they were.

[142] Whichever term proves more helpful with building a de-stigmatized and de-pathologized everyday mental health and coping vocabulary should be used.

to particular identity objectives are provided in Table 2B. Table 3 then elaborates further on what the examined performance pedagogies may offer in future interventions, suggesting dramaturgical tools that can be helpful for achieving particular identity objectives from each of the three primary performance pedagogies explored in this study.

Table 2B. Identity Objectives and Face-Easing Practices

Identity Objective Orientations

Identity Objectives vs. "Worst-Case" Fears	**Image Actualization Oriented Objectives (social or audience-perception and self-image-oriented)**	**Acceptance and Self-Oriented Actualization Objectives (communion, self-authenticity-oriented)**	***Face-Easing Practices (i.e., coping strategies involving dramaturgical metaphors, perspective shifts, etc.)***
Status & Success vs. Failure	Status, hierarchy – being perceived as high status	Not worrying about power differences, equality, non-judgement	"It's not that serious," -distancing, we're all the same - lowering the stakes
	Being perceived as a success	Self-Esteem	"living in the shit," - accepting, "it's not that serious" - dismissing, minimizing
	Competence	Cognitive authority or a sense of agency in learning	red nose clown - embracing childlike curiosity and lack of knowledge, commedia dell arte: embodying class differences through mask work
Likeability & Engagement vs. Being Shunned, Ignored, Disliked	Being considered authentic	Sense of Authenticity, being "full self"	the chair test - share private self/life
	Being considered present	Presence: "I want to get out of my head" – being able to experience/share time-space reality in a non-anxious way	"neutral," sharing emotions with audience, "perezhivania" – "worrying with" a character-self
	Being considered interesting	Communing over shared interests or experiences	your life is already interesting - being real on stage, the audience is perfect
	Being considered funny, engaging	Communing over shared humor	absurdism, play, improv games
Social Belonging vs Rejection	Group membership	Comfort, anxiety-free connection	"Unzipping the Walking Mess," sharing rituals, heightened emotional expression in Clown Play
		Being accepted in group or category that is authentic to you	
	Doing what is dictated by society, your cultural group, etc.	Valuable friendships, relationships	Connecting over shared vocabulary, experiences, humor in any of the practices e.g., Clickbait humor in improv troupe
	Wellness – appearance/	Wellbeing - feeling	Subjective Units of Distress (SUD's)

Being in control vs. Being out of control	Being taken up as put-together person	Sense of Coherence, Self-Understanding	Dramatizing the past in Neo
		Sense of agency	Telling own autobiographical story in front of an audience - it's a "real" show, life/culture is absurd and/or illogical distancing
		Self-Trust	Exposures, Clown Performance
	Being perceived as adaptable	Wanting to embrace precarity, to understand death, ontology, lack of control	Planned happenstance, "yes, and," meaning-making

The final column in Table 2B presents a variety of coping strategies and interventions addressing the identity objectives highlighted by each pedagogy.[143] Note that the identity objectives categories listed are primarily from an etic or experience-distant, scientific perspective and that emic, experience-near idioms such as "get out of your head" or "be comfortable in your skin" could be described as being made up of a number of these categories in varying degrees, depending on how they are subjectively taken up. Critically, the possible interventions described in the final column of Table 2B should not be misinterpreted as a replacement for clinical therapy or other existing approaches. Rather, they are offered to encourage further research on these strategies and others (not necessarily limited to theatre pedagogies though certainly there are many others that could be explored) which can serve to address identity objectives and their corresponding "worst case" fears.

Interventions which foster counterpoint perspectives and enhance dialogic thinking such as absurdism or "living in the shit" may help young to middle aged adults transform stagnant patterns and may be worth exploring further and in younger age groups as well. It's also important to note that particular components, e.g., theatrical exercises, metaphors, counter-perspectives, etc., may be taken from these practices and adapted to specific contexts, e.g., a high

[143] See Appendix A in conjunction with Chapter 3 for detailed descriptions of the emergent identity distress themes or dimensions on which the identity objectives are based. A theoretical and data-based set of identity distress categories based on a small n, these qualitative categories may be a useful based for future qualitative and quantitative explorations.

school or hospital setting. Given the prevalence of these experiences and the severity of the consequences for some students when anxiety goes unaided, it's worth considering these kinds of theatrical interventions (for research and implementation) as a component of undergraduate orientation as well as for elementary, junior high school, and high school students insofar as concerns about identity arise at these ages.

The coping and face-easing strategies targeting specific identity objectives, as adapted by college and post-college age adults, are adapted at a time when the social structures individuals had encountered in the past had already "othered" and inculcated them into an often confused and distressing, audience and image-centric, actualization cycle where how to please the other and not fail or be stigmatized was a constant uncertainty. Some participants were indeed "disconnected" from having inner-directed and organized or solidified dominant identity objectives or a sense of inner mental and emotional stability in the face of constant identity threat and interactional failure. And while this study offers a variety of insights into how to potentially help these adults adapt and gain the skills they need to cope, it is perhaps even more important to recognize that the system(s) which make adults feel endlessly inadequate require re-evaluation. The strategies in 2B could be applied to foster a greater sense of community, trust, and acceptance for individuals in various settings, thereby augmenting face-ease. This data also indicates the potential benefit from additional studies focused on identity objectives rather than DSM-based mental illness diagnoses, as this allows for the development of more nuanced, accurate, and less pathologized directions for both intervention and research. As the identity objectives identified in Table 2B comprise a non-exhaustive list based on this exploratory qualitative study, they are intended as a solid starting point for future larger-scale, quantitative and mixed methods studies of identity objectives as well as face-easing practices.

Advantages of Each Pedagogy for Different Kinds of Students

Table 3, presented next, illustrates how particular pedagogies may be applicable as part of the individual identity distress coping process or for group interventions for particular identity objectives. The first three columns name the three performance pedagogies discussed in the case studies and then list the various practices characteristic of each pedagogy. The practices have been grouped within the first three columns so that the identity objectives these practices address appear in the same row and grouped in the fourth column. Thus, for example if you were interested in addressing authenticity, you could draw on Neo-Futurist practices of being "real" in front of an audience or mindfulness to connect with your own experience more, from SAI. Note

Table 3: Coping and Face-Easing Strategies Taught by Performance Pedagogies

Coping and Face-Easing Strategies Taught by Performance Pedagogies			
Social Anxiety Improv -Suited for those who like gamified, social experiment metaphors, play, interaction rules, and skill building as a direct lesson. -Offers alternative attitude towards dominant cultural norms	**Neo-Futurism** -Suited for artists or anyone needing a confidence boost in their creative voice and versatility -Good for exploring authenticity -Challenges dominant cultural norms	**Clown Play** -Particularly useful for shy, introverted individuals -Self-presentation and confidence-enhancing, good for emotional expression and release -Good for fear of failure -Challenges dominant cultural norms	**Identity Objectives of Individuals**
mindfulness	Being "real" (in front of an audience)	Coming from a "real" place, then exaggerating	**Authenticity**
CBT - exposures	Games that bring out spontaneous response from audience - positive or negative, funny or sad	Humor, games	**Control, Coping with Precarity**
CBT - tracking degrees of anxiety	awareness of own self-consciousness & off-stage/on-stage awareness -- way of being when know audience is present vs. not	"The audience is perfect" -- stretch out positive, affirming interactions with audience, finding neutral	**Presence, self-esteem, "get out of head"**
CBT - learning about catastrophizing in social encounters , and other tendencies, workbook exercises; Listen & Repeat - CBT + improv	stories and aspects of everyday life can make the best theatre, most interesting, performative, engaging -- own autobiography as theatre --> stake claim that one is interesting, captivating; creativity & sharing games i.e.,one's mind is interesting, one's experiences are interesting	Eye contact, continuing to engage an audience	**Engagement, being interesting, "get out of head"**
practicing "small talk," "Yes, and"	earnest theatrical power of own emotional response to constantly changing life	"Living in the shit"	**Self-trust**
humor, games [lighten significance of interactions, provide strategies for coming up with things on the spot]	knowing own insecurities	Ability to fail - ability to "live in the shit"	**Success, Status, Self-Esteem**
Sharing - finding common ground [improv +CBT]	Repeated opening ritual, shared personal experiences	Awareness of different clown characters, characteristics - in world, in personality	**Communion**
Support group - there are others like me	Shared vocabulary, acceptance of identities and subjectivities of performers	leader - follower games --own tendencies to lead or follow	**Social belonging, acceptance**
Greater awareness around anxiety levels and responses specifically	knowing one's fears, insecurities, narratives	knowing one's fears, insecurities; ability to laugh at self and own proclivities -- teacher demonstrating, gently, with delight, everything is a "gift"	**Self-awareness**

that the identity objectives listed here are more acceptance-oriented, but some of these practices address image-oriented objectives as well. As is evident in Table 3, in each practice, special attention is paid to social interaction skills, ability to deal with the unexpected, ability to fail, audience engagement skills, as well as self-management tactics and skills.

The emergent identity objectives in this study, whether authenticity, communion, acceptance, presence, etc.,[144] can be made explicit as shared group identity objectives to work towards. Part of the difficulty of achieving such objectives in everyday life is that they may be experienced by the individual as if they are alone and unique in holding such objectives. Use of group practices that provide explicit voicing of the rules of engagement could allow for a less alienating experience of working towards such objectives with the aim of transferring this sense of community and trust to everyday life as well as importantly providing more supportive and communion-oriented social structures in individuals' lives. While minorities and individuals with marginalized or stigmatized and intersectional identit(ies) are particularly vulnerable to heightened levels of identity distress, all those who participate in modern middle-class life, (particularly the more shy and introverted and the non-conforming to certain social standards of success), may be vulnerable.

Both Neo-Futurism and, more blatantly, Clown Play challenge dominant cultural norms whereas Social Anxiety Improv offers an alternative attitude towards them. Neo-Futurism offers a sophisticated strategy for image management that can deliver a democratized confidence boost for artists-in-training or anyone needing to appreciate their own creative voice. Success in the uptake of an autobiographical performance practice like Neo-Futurism requires a prerequisite confidence in one's uniqueness or at least a willingness to believe in it enough to offer it to one's

[144] Cf. Chapter 3 and Appendix A.

audience as it is intended for pre-professional performance trainees. The individual must be prepared for a fraught and at times contradictory experience that is typically aimed more at performance success rather than healing, thus this kind of strategy is not ideal for someone experiencing a heightened lack of self-esteem around public self-presentation.

Clown Play also comes with its challenges, particularly for those with fears around social failure, but may prove beneficial for extremely shy or identity-worried individuals, particularly if the teacher is a nurturing one as was the case with Jay. The rules of engagement in Jay's classroom were the clearest of the three teacher-practitioners (with emotion expression and feedback expectations detailed carefully for all,) and this did seem to help to establish it as a "safe space" in which everyone felt at ease to be both vulnerable and to play with and exaggerate vulnerable emotions. As taught by Jay, Clown Play is potentially useful not only as a training for those who want to become professional performers. It necessitates a willingness to playfully yet openly share one's insecurities and failures in front of an audience and as this is a gradual process that one builds up to through exercises, it seems to be applicable more broadly as a self-presentation and confidence-enhancing strategy.

Meanwhile, Social Anxiety Improv does not necessarily challenge dominant cultural norms, but rather offers participants a lighter, more playful attitude towards them. SAI takes for granted the need to please a judgmental audience and provides social skill-building as well as exposure to phobias through gamification and humor of small talk, work presentations, etc. as well as a lighter attitude towards turn-taking in interaction. The practice gamifies everyday interactive rituals through improv games while lowering the stakes. It also trains participants in cognitive behavioral techniques which ask individuals to track heightened subjective distress response in interactions. The setup was paradoxical at times in that it intentionally provoked

distress responses in participants. The at-times uncomfortable setup of SAI did not work for everyone, while proving beneficial for certain individuals like Zainab who were able to translate in-class methods to everyday life coping.

The Overall Synthesis of Participant Data and the Resultant Model

This section provided several descriptive overviews of the findings from the three pedagogies and how they can be utilized to help individuals cope. The following section shows the dynamics and further applications of these findings.

Identity Distress Coping Processes Six Stage Model

For self-enhancement focused individuals in the US, everyday suffering often appears to center around authenticity of identity expression. In part, this is because it is particularly challenging to not make the most audience-oriented choice in an audience-oriented society. This is also due to the valuing of authenticity in contemporary America, as well as how discrimination against difference is inflicted as a normalized aspect of American image management wherein authentic experience and stigmatized identities are hidden to both please the audience and protect the self from potential bias or discrimination. This section distills these findings into a six stage model, including stages of suffering, reaction, immediate outcome, coping, synthesis, and longer term outcome. The model is illustrated with two visual figures, the second of which incorporates participant narratives in detail.

Six Stages of Coping Along Individual Trajectories

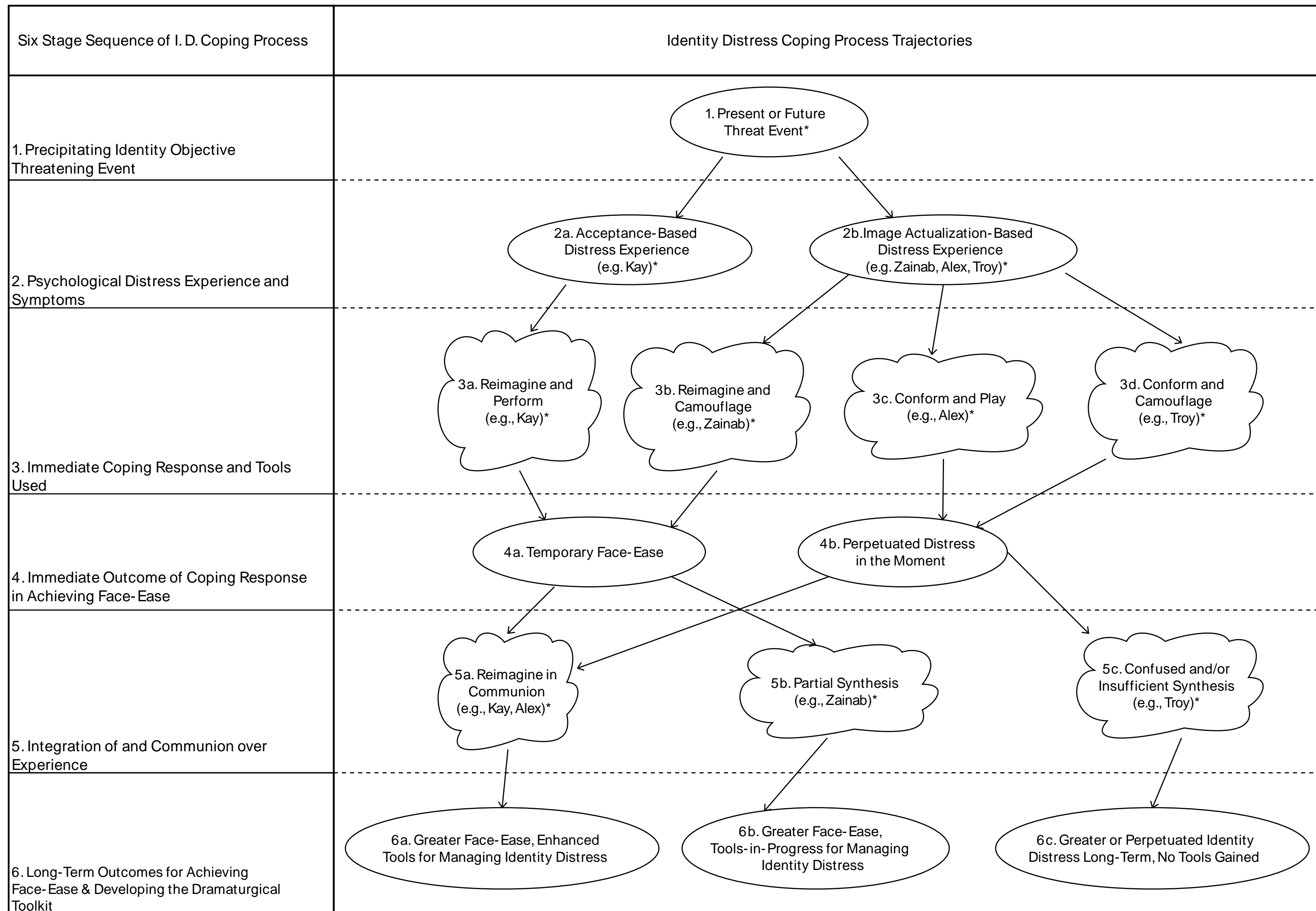
The following diagrams in Figures 8a and 8b illustrate the ways in which different kinds of identity distress coping processes can manifest, following a six stage trajectory, depending on how the individual elects to cope when identity objectives are threatened in an encounter or "identity-objective threatening event." Importantly, and as described in participant profiles in

Figure 8b, the tensions between acceptance and image-based orientations are at play and in an identity-objective threatening event an individual must elect to prioritize one over the other; this forced choice means de-prioritizing not only one of the two orientations i.e., image vs. acceptance, but potentially a whole range of other identity objectives that are at play which must be subordinated at the moment of threat in order to uphold a certain line e.g., whether that line is "competent" or "good barista who is also not a gender binary," etc. The immediate and long-term face-easing versus distress outcomes also depend on factors of authenticity vs. conformity, awareness (which is also related to one's dramaturgical attunement or one's versatility with and possession of an adaptable dramaturgical toolkit) in the immediate coping response, and extent of synthesis and social communion in later integration of the event.

Play, imagination, and performance are broader theatrical skills connected to a variety of possible dramaturgical tools (i.e., "yes, and," perezhivania, le jeu, absurdism, etc.,) which can support face-ease while camouflage (i.e., mask, disguise, or outright lie) are typical non-trained responses and represent everyday face-saving strategies that are less authenticity-based and therefore more taxing than theatre pedagogy-based-practices. One of the many advantages of theatrical training is that theatre practices utilize authentic emotion and experience-based tools for managing character versions of oneself. This underlying authentic basis means tools that can help prevent a full compromise of one's emotional needs and identity objectives. These theatre practices also provide useful tools e.g., distancing metaphors of one as performer, clown, or improviser, etc. for cultivating more playful or liberated stances towards social interaction overall which can help an individual to lower the stakes of face and identity objective threatening events. Figure 8a emphasizes the sequence of the six stage model that emerged from participant narratives, with the long-term result primarily based on the longitudinal data that was collected

one year later,[145] and Figure 8b shows in detail the way this model manifested for particular participants. Figure 8b focuses on the primary case studies as well as a kind of in-the-wild "control" participant, Troy, who only attended two SAI classes and did not take up any new coping methods, dramaturgical, or therapeutic. He is included in the model as a comparison point of someone who had his own insufficient toolkit that he did not fully take the opportunity to cultivate.

[145] With the exception of Troy who was only observed in SAI the couple times he showed up, thus 6c is based on what was observed over the course of those classes.



*See Figure 8b for details.

Figure 8a: Identity Distress Coping Process Trajectories in Six Stages

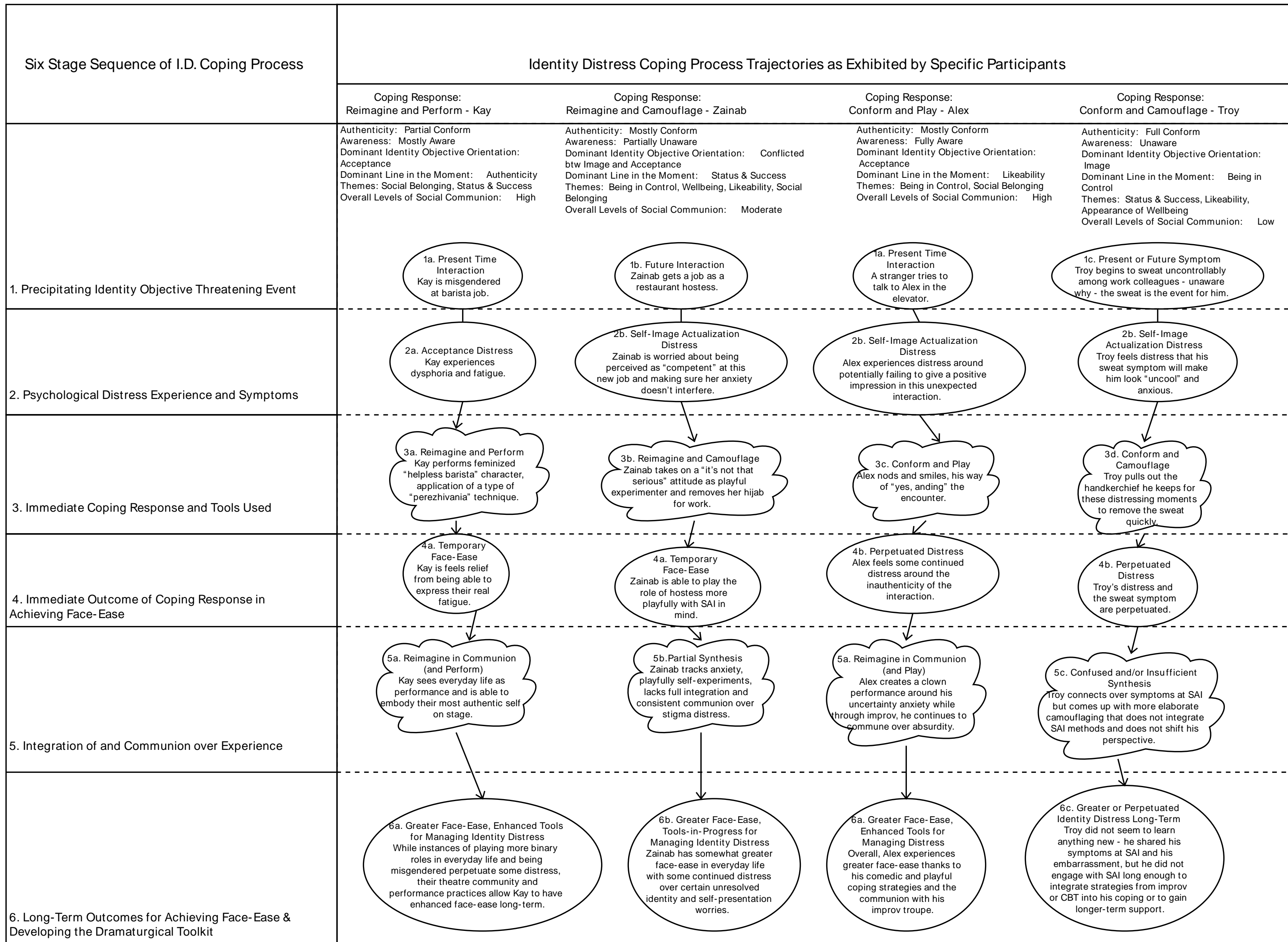


Figure 8b: I.D. Coping Process Trajectories as Exhibited by Specific Participants

The two figures above show a non-exhaustive range of identity distress coping processes and strategies as emerged in study participants. Overall, those dramaturgical coping dynamics which were in greater authentic communion with others rather than in inauthentic conformity with others' expectations, allowed individuals to adapt a more relaxed attitude towards their everyday identity distress, thereby easing it. The extent of face-ease also depended on the level of inauthentic camouflaging.

The two figures are meant to be read in tandem: Figure 8A emphasizes the barebones dynamics and components of the model while Figure 8B fleshes out this model with examples from participant data. Note that Figure 8B provides not only the coping trajectory of specific participants, but lists a brief identity distress coping profile for each along the key points of how authentic they are in their coping response or strategy, how aware of the nuances of their own distress reaction and coping, their dominant identity objective orientation, as well as their dominant line for the event and other key identity themes which organize their self-system and actions. The left hand column in both figures indicates that the proposed model of the identity distress coping process consists of a six stage sequence unfolding first in immediate real-time reactivity to the identity objective threat in Stages 1 through 4, and in later and longer-term processing of the overall event, its coping implications, and deeper identity-related meanings in Stages 5 and 6.

Stage 1: The Precipitating Identity Objective Threatening Event

The first stage, i.e.,the identity objective threatening event, can occur in present time, as in Kay being misgendered by a customer in 1a, or alternatively, it can occur in a potential future interaction threat imagined by the individual, as in Zainab failing to live to up to her identity

objective of “competent” in an interaction at her new hostess job in 1b. Such an event actually did end up happening in one of her final interactions as hostess as detailed in Chapter 5. In this real time event, while she had worked to prevent stigma around her expressed religious identity, Zainab’s low stigma consciousness around race, gender, and potentially other factors like youth became evident as her competence was still called into question in a discriminatory way during a customer interaction.

Stage 2: Psychological Distress Experience and Symptoms

The second stage, the psychologically felt and somatic experience of the distress, differs along the image vs. acceptance orientation of identity objectives that is dominant at the time. This stage is where participants’ trajectories begin to diverge. An acceptance-themed distress experience like Kay’s misgendering distress is inherently self-aware in that they are striving to be able to have their authentic gender identity accepted in everyday life. Thus, the need to seek face-easing spaces where being accepted is guaranteed is something they are fully aware of and this awareness greatly supports their coping process and adept dramaturgical attunement overall. Whereas if the distress is self-image actualization-oriented and the individual, like Zainab or Troy, is not fully aware of how their objectives play into their felt distress symptoms and experience, it may prove much more challenging and unlikely for them to enact a fully successful face-easing strategy to alleviate the distress.

Stage 3: Immediate Coping Response and Tools Used

The third stage consists of a range[146] of coping choices in the moment of the distressing encounter, resulting in four distinct possible decision points detailed below and demonstrated in Figure 8a:

[146] This range, like other ranges of possible options in this model overall, is non-exhaustive and is based on the trajectories that were emergent in this exploratory study.

3a) Do I, with awareness of why I am distressed, reimagine the identity distress with partial authenticity and an awareness of my choice (akin to *perezhivania*)? i.e.,Do I create an alternative (yet partially authentic) identity presentation or narrative?

3b) Do I, with a lack of full awareness as to why I am distressed or the reason for my particular coping response, camouflage and reimagine the identity distress with partially compromised authenticity (in relation to the alternate character presented)?

3c) Do I, with awareness of why I am distressed, camouflage the identity distress in full conformity and inauthenticity? Do I do this playfully with the distancing metaphor of "yes, and?"[147] i.e., Do I create an alternative identity presentation or narrative?

3d) Do I, with a lack of awareness as to why I am distressed, fake or imitate an accepted identity expression without any authentic identification and in full conformity with my audience expectations?

Stage 4: Immediate Outcome of Coping Response in Achieving Face-Ease

Depending on how the choice in Stage 3 played out for each individual, the fourth stage would either result in temporary face-ease or perpetuated identity distress. In choosing a real-time coping strategy for managing distress, individuals must coordinate with their face-work choice at the time. The in-the-moment adaptiveness and calculations must operate in relation to any experienced tensions between the line they decide to maintain in that interaction as well as the identity objective orientation and identity theme(s) they choose to prioritize.

[147] While Alex does this playfully, as represented in the "Conform and Play" trajectory, Robert from the preliminary interviewees described in Chapter 3 would represent a different version of this trajectory that could be called "Conform and Disguise" wherein his saving grace would be the peer group on campus with whom he is more authentic and is able to disguise his identity challenges as a low-income Latino student at an elite historically White university in his Stage 5.

These potentially high stakes tensions between these potentially conflicting motivations, particularly if face-work and distress mitigation are in conflict,[148] is why dramaturgical tools which allow for imagination, distance, and playful adaptiveness can prove particularly effective in easing distress and its repercussions in both the short and long-term. The first and second choices, 3a, *Reimagine and Perform* and 3b, *Reimagine and Camouflage*, lead to partially authentic emotional sharing with others (akin to acting based on real emotion but with the content or apparent cause of emotion significantly altered) thus they are partially relieving of distress in the moment as a result. The identity distress in that context is only temporarily relieved, however, because of the partial inauthenticity. The third choice, 3c, *Conform and Play*, leads to conforming to the identity display expectations of the audience in the distress-inducing situation, which in the cases observed in this study means no authentic emotional sharing, and results in equal or more identity distress in the moment. The *play* component of 3c acts as a distancing metaphor which can help ease one's attitude towards the distress experience overall as well as facilitate the face-work in the short-term. The fourth choice, 3d, *Conform and Camouflage,* is fully inauthentic, which prevents any authentic emotional sharing, and therefore perpetuates distress in the moment. Also, as the individual has little to no awareness of the source of distress, *Conform and Camouflage* renders long-term productive integration of the experience far more challenging and less likely overall. These findings suggest that play and re-imagining, especially if the individual has awareness and therefore greater dramaturgical distance, are helpful immediate coping responses for an overall trajectory that means greater face-ease long term, analyzed in detail in the next section.

[148] Face-work and distress mitigation may conflict when they differ in terms of objectives, though not necessarily, it depends on how aware an individual is of why they are distressed in the first place. If it's Troy for example, he only seems concerned with his distress as an image problem far more so than concern for his own wellbeing or comfort.

Stages 5 and 6: Managing the Identity Distress Event in the Long-Term

In theorizing long-term identity distress event processing and resolution which play out in stages 5 and 6, it's helpful to look at how professional actors deal with complicated or uncomfortable experiences while performing. Tust-Gunn (1995) has indicated that an awareness of synthesizing one's discoveries has been identified as key for boundary blurring in actors:

> …the primary determinant of whether confronting themselves through their characters resulted in personal growth or distress for actors seemed to be whether or not they were able to understand and synthesize their discoveries… It was disturbing if difficult issues were evoked and the actor had no outlet for understanding them, working them out, or releasing them creatively. (Tust-Gunn, 1995, p. 161)

Likewise, individuals who create alternative character positions to cope in identity objective threatening encounters in everyday life should ideally take the time to understand and synthesize discoveries made during such events. An awareness of boundary blurring, or perhaps at times in everyday life, "boundary dissolution," between oneself and an alternate character may be important to track and understand for successful overall long-term distress mitigation as well as learning and growth of the individual. This importance of conscious synthesis of everyday life identity challenges is further supported by research on stigmatized identity consciousness i.e., racial identity consciousness, (Helms, 1984; Sediqe, 2019), wherein therapy has been suggested as necessary for the person to come to terms with the discriminated position into which they were born and the bias which they cannot escape in their everyday life. Notably, in this kind of identity and stigma consciousness-focused therapy, the identity struggles and distress of the patient are to be processed with a therapist who understands and therefore can support the individual's sociocultural challenges (Helms, 1984). Therefore, supported synthesis, ostensibly whether in communion with trusted interlocuters, such as a therapist, supportive group, etc., should allow the individual to progress and to facilitate integration and clarity of the individual's

self-system (Hermans, 2006) in terms of self-positions the individual may construct in coping with stigma and stigmatized identity consciousness.

Stage 5: Integration of and Communion over Experience

The second part of the coping trajectories demonstrated in Diagram 8a, or Stage 5: Integration of and Communion over Experience, describes potential longer term, post-distress event coping decisions concerned with the processing and meaning-making around the event and these are demonstrated in choices 5a-5c:

5a) Reimagine in Communion: Do I reimagine the distress in communion with supportive interlocuters, thereby validating my meaning-making and identity expression?

5b) Partial Synthesis: Do I partially synthesize and learn from the experience yet still have a lack of awareness and insufficient communion over key components?

5c) Confused and/or Insufficient Synthesis: Do I continue with a lack of awareness, synthesis, processing, or communion over the distress?

Stage 6: Long-Term Outcomes for Achieving Face-Ease and Developing the Dramaturgical Toolkit

Depending on how an individual's choice and coping process played out in Stage 5 would then determine their long-term outcomes, or the sixth stage, which has three possible iterations: *Greater Face-Ease and Enhanced Tools*, *Greater Face-Ease and Tools-in-Progress*, or *Greater or Perpetuated Identity Distress*. Choice 5a, *Reimagine in Communion*, such as in Kay inhabiting their authentic identity on stage or Alex getting to create comedy around his own uncertainty distress, offers a productive processing or synthesis of the distress. This productive synthesis can lead to greater face-ease in everyday life and indicates an enhanced dramaturgical toolkit through integration of any lessons learned, as well as good dramaturgical attunement in being able to effectively utilize the toolkit in real-time to create helpful dramaturgical distance.

Choice 5c, *Confused and/or Insufficient Synthesis,* leads to the perpetuation of the identity distress cycle and does not result in growth. Hypothetically, 5c could lead to a worsening of distress experiences and symptoms in the long-term, especially if the distress event was particularly difficult and/or uncomfortable.

Individual Trajectories: A Comparative Analysis

This section analyzes the strengths and weakness of different coping strategies utilized by the participants compared in Figures 8a and 8b.

Zainab and Troy: The Trouble with Camouflage

Zainab and Troy's trajectories both led to less successful processing and mitigation of distress, 5b, *Partial Synthesis*, and 5c, *Confused and/or Insufficient Synthesis*, respectively, and this is in part connected with their coping strategies in Stage 3, both of which included camouflaging as a primary component. Camouflaging involves a lack of honesty with not only one's interlocuters during the encounter, but with oneself, making it difficult to understand, synthesize, or integrate the experience afterwards. Thus the camouflaging behavior helped with the impression management component in the moment, which meant an erasure of some kind of potential stigma, unattractive symptom, or potentially displeasing information from public display. What this strategy lacks, however, is an authentic emotional foundation for the new character as well as possibilities for dramaturgical distancing and attunement in relation to the threat.

Based on his expressed goals in interaction with his coworkers, Troy's self-system was dominantly image actualization-oriented and status and success-focused; this involved maintaining the appearance of control around his sweat symptom which could undermine his desired image at work. His primary strategy, 3d, *Conform and Camouflage*, was to fit into

whatever his ostensibly hypermasculinity-oriented, professional circumstances dictated as "cool." This meant either quickly grabbing his "gentleman's" handkerchief to quickly get rid of the feared (and sabotaging) sweat or the pre-emptive strategy he described at SAI that would involve going for a run before a social gathering at a bar with coworkers, thus creating a pre-emptive narrative about the sweat as a result of athletic exertion. Troy seemed compelled to continue creating signs of his strong male identity; during his brief time attending SAI he explained that the sweat was a mysterious event he couldn't control and which generated his anxiety, instead of more directly addressing whatever uncomfortable feelings his white work colleagues stimulated in him as an upwardly mobile black man which he gestured towards during the SAI sharing session but never fully confronted in that space.[149] This lack of confrontation with his true feelings, lack of imaginative dramaturgical distancing to empower himself, and lack of de-stigmatized social communion around his experiences did not offer Troy good possibilities for relieving his identity distress in either the short or long-term.

Attending SAI briefly appeared to be an attempt on Troy's part to seek an anxiety-free space where he could be more authentic, but it turned out to be an inadequate fit, leading to outcome 6c, *Greater or Perpetuated Identity Distress Long-Term*, (perhaps because there weren't others sharing around similar stigma concerns nor was SAI discourse equipped to facilitate a discussion around primarily racial and gender stigma-based distress.) However, it's possible to imagine that in the long-term, Troy could find a therapist or support group, even a friend with similar challenges with whom he could authentically discover, make and reimagine meaning around his distress, gain coping tools and skills (whether through a theatre practice or another perspective providing him with productive distancing metaphors and reimagining tools,)

[149] See Chapter 5 for further detail on Troy's narrative around his distress during SAI support group discussion.

and productively synthesize the distress of his work experience, engaging in some version of strategy 5a, *Reimagine in Communion*, where the full complexity of his experience would be validated without judgment and he could inhabit a more authentic sense of self, leading to greater overall face-ease and wellbeing.

Zainab's strategy, 3b, *Reimagine and Camouflage*, was more successful than Troy's because it consisted not only of camouflaging but also of reimagining and this also included experimentation, improvisation, and a lighter "it's not that serious" stance from SAI. Thus the removal of her hijab, a camouflaging move that was partially unaware in that she was dishonest with herself about her own stigma distress, was aided by the dramaturgical distance provided by her reimagining of herself in that environment as a kind of empowered improvising self-experimenter. Thus 3b was a strategy that corresponded with her confused and complex objective of being seen as competent[150] which was image-oriented and other-directed and her mission of anxiety mitigation, which was acceptance, wellbeing, and self-empowerment oriented. Zainab knew that she was self-doctoring through the hostess role yet when interviewed, didn't fully understand her own logic of hijab removal as inherently making her better able to do her job. The inability to fully understand this decision indicated that this aspect of her identity distress was invisible to her in her blurring of self with a character who had a less marked identity without the hijab.

The high intersectionality of an individual like Zainab makes the work of stigma management particularly complex. This is why Stage 5 is critical for long-term enhancement of face-ease. Zainab was able to partially synthesize her experience and the support provided by the

[150] At another point in her coping strategy, Zainab went with decision point 3a in that her boss showed trust in her decision-making. Feeling supported by (importantly for her) an interlocuter with authority, Zainab was able to authentically feel "competent" as her relationship with the audience up until that point had been a complex one around a kind of stereotype threat as described in detail in Chapter 5.

tools she had acquired from SAI and yet she continued to struggle to articulate and understand the complexity of her identity distress around being a Muslim, mixed raced woman. Similarly to the obstacle which prevented Troy from having a more productive sharing with others at SAI, I suggest that this is in part due to a lack of communion around such socio-culturally specific struggles with others experiencing similar kinds of identity distress as well as a lack of understanding of socio-culturally and interactionally-situated identity distress and face-easing processes in both CBT and modern American psychiatric discourse.

Kay: The Complexity of Dramaturgical Attunement

Meanwhile, Kay, a participant with one of the more comprehensive sets of dramaturgical tools at their disposal, in their election of Choice 3b, Reimagine and Perform, was consciously mitigating stigma distress around gender identity while partially conforming to their audience expectations. They performed a stereotype that was not entirely authentic to their gender non-conforming sense of self though as the archetype was somewhat androgynous, it was partially authentic nonetheless which reflected Kay's identity objective of authentic communion and belonging in public space rather than only in designated spaces like those of their theatre community. The boundary blurring for Kay thus appeared to be at least partially synthesized as they were able to discuss and identify with the authentic fatigue of the "helpless barista," a character they crafted from their felt fatigue through an adeptness akin to self-aware theatrical *perezhivania*. However, they did not explicitly discuss the stereotype conformity of this role during our interview, therefore it was unclear whether they had processed it, and this aspect of the blurring could potentially perpetuate long-term distress if Kay did not fully synthesize it. Thus the results of Kay's coping attempt, while mitigating identity distress in the moment and highly audience-pleasing, were a partial compromise with their authentic sense of self and did

not mean a long-term ending to identity distress in the workplace. This partial compromise is perhaps more due to the continuation of binary thinking and behavior around gender within contemporary American society rather than anything Kay can fully control or transform on their own in spite of their spirited everyday activism; given these challenging circumstances, perhaps Kay's in-the-moment coping is as authentic as it can be. Nevertheless, as Kay authentically inhabits their identity on stage, in film, and with theatre friends and colleagues as well as with like-minded community members including their RA, their opportunities to commune and make-meaning are well developed, resulting overall in a strong coping strategy or 6a: *Greater Face-Ease, Enhanced Tools for Managing Identity Distress*.

Alex: Creating an Anxiety-Less Reality

Finally, for Alex, he followed trajectory 3c, *Conform and Play*, with 5a, *Reimagine in Communion*. Alex's Stage 5 consisted of a full synthesis and discussion of how as a bouffant and improviser he could cope in communion with like-minded others, (particularly troupe and audience members), about the faulty logics which distressed him in everyday life. The blurring of self with these absurdist characters was fully cognizant, synthesized, and authentic to his identity distress experiences and objectives. His awareness and synthesis facilitated perhaps one of the more successful examples of face-ease as well as personal growth of the case study examples. His dramaturgical re-imaginings such as his spa clown persona, were fully authentic in their sharing of Alex's lived experience. However, Alex still felt distress in public spaces. He was often face-threatened in public and tended to engage in avoidance and simple acts of conformity, such as when he nodded and smiled in the elevator encounter instead of reacting negatively or even violently as he expressed fantasizing about (3c).

Alex's performative and comedic re-imaginings and anxiety-free spaces allowed him the possibility for fully authentic communion and understanding: Alex's communion with his improv troupe, enjoyed by live audiences when performed publicly, is an example of a fully face-easing and identity distress-alleviating practice 5a, *Reimagine in Communion*. He identified fully and authentically with the ways in which he was presenting himself around absurdity and his interlocuters supported this representation[151] and synthesis of a self-aware, supported, and thus more empowered self-position. While Alex did not openly show his authentic self-expression with all everyday interlocuters, such as in unpredictable moments of social interaction in public spaces like the elevator encounter, which caused distress (4b), these baffling incidents were all potential material for his comedy, allowing him to cultivate understanding and acceptance for himself among supportive interlocuters in comedic i.e., for Alex, "anxiety-free" spaces. Thus Alex appeared to operate from a helpful dramaturgical distance much of the time, as encounters that were distressing could be mitigated with a simple, conforming, "yes, and" which he had translated into everyday interactions from the improv space. Alex effectively reimagined and at least somewhat "blurred" the rules of the improv and comedic space with those of everyday life to make it more "anxiety-free." (Arguably Kay achieved this spatial boundary-blurring effect particularly clearly through their direct lamination of back stage-front stage boundaries onto their self-aware performative practices while working the cash register i.e., when to put on versus drop the friendly smile.) Alex's dramaturgical tools for distressing encounters coupled with regular, face-easing social communion with his improv troupe friends, allowed him to have greater face-ease in the long term.

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[151] Note that these examples are not aimed to be all-encompassing, but rather to serve as an illustration of different processes, as the participants had many different kinds of coping processes in different instances.

Overall Insights from the Model

The key sociocultural tensions between actualization and acceptance were at play in the trajectories presented in the Identity Distress Coping Processes Six Stage Model, in that individuals inherently may experience pressure to choose the trajectory that seems more pleasing to the audience yet may be incompatible with their identity objectives. This is also why a specific audience supportive of one's authentic self-expression is critical for identity distress mitigation. What mattered most for participants' dramaturgical coping with identity distress in the short term was being able to create a dramaturgical distance in order to reimagine and/or play in response to the distressing interactional stimulus from an alternative character position. This dramaturgical coping response had to be both adaptive to external circumstances and their internal self-systems, particularly tany potential tensions in their line, dominant identity objective orientations, and other important underlying themes as an interlocuter and individual inhabiting social space.

Empowered identities developed in one context may be transferred and enacted in others, particularly self-aware, character-maneuvering identities such as performer or improv-trained self-experimenter. Coping decisions in the immediate response, influenced long-term results but were only part of the process and not a sole determining factor. Likewise, an effective immediate coping response in the short term wasn't necessarily enough on its own.

The overall findings suggest that the dramaturgical coping process is cumulative and requires maintenance and processing. For long-term identity distress mitigation that resulted in overall face-ease and growth, it proved crucial to synthesize the discoveries made during the immediate coping response, such as during any boundary blurring that occurred, whether between alternative character versions of oneself, or through an alternative stance, i.e., a blurring of boundaries between the alternative dramaturgical space and its accepted rules, perspectives,

and practices and the everyday life space in order to both reimagine everyday interaction rules as well as one's position and perspective. Synthesis and face-easing practices in communion with trusted others were also important for long-term mitigation of distress, better coping, and growth. These post-event integration practices are important for continued growth and enhancement of one's dramaturgical toolkit, attunement and in relation to it, a clearly organized and adaptive self-system, allowing for greater face-ease overall.

Overall Insights from the Research Approach

The trans-disciplinary and multi-method research approach used here provided a new theoretical understanding of the dramaturgical dynamics of identity distress and a deepened understanding of the relationship between identity and everyday mental health in contemporary America. The findings demonstrate the importance of qualitative and ethnographic exploration of primarily quantitatively-studied mental health diagnoses. The approach traces the situatedness of identity distress in the other-directed, image-oriented society that is contemporary America, where individuals independently and intuitively seek out skills and tools from alternative practices, not always knowing exactly what they need and yet knowing that they need support.

Ultimately this approach offers a transdisciplinary, non-stigmatized definition, framework, and model for understanding identity distress as an everyday, interactive coping process. It teaches that developing one's dramaturgical toolkit and dramaturgical attunement overall is key for everyday identity distress coping. It's critical to note that coping trajectories differ primarily on levels of authenticity, awareness, synthesis, dramaturgical distancing, and social communion while play and reimagining are successful dramaturgical strategies for an identity distress coping process that leads to an increase in face-ease, as well as an enhanced dramaturgical toolkit and attunement for future coping.

Future Prospects

This section proposes a number of potential future benefits and applications of the findings and insights of this study. The coping model presented aims to encourage a more precise, non-pathologized vocabulary around everyday suffering and coping and to encourage the development of better interventions on both individual, group, and larger-scale levels.

Tailoring Interventions to the Individual

The case studies[152] suggest some possible applications of dramaturgical face-easing strategies for individuals who face particular stigma management challenges. For example, the case of Kay suggests that Neo-Futurism or elements of it, such as non-fictional storytelling, might be useful for transgender, non-binary, and other individuals with non-traditional identities seeking to explore, establish, and even heal through a supportive, nonfiction medium and audience where the partial camouflaging or conforming they may to have to participate in in everyday life could be dropped. Likewise, the case of Zainab suggests that improv combined with cognitive behavioral therapy techniques could be useful for others with a complex set of sociocultural identity challenges: individuals experiencing stress in social interactions arising from racial, gender, cultural and/or religious minority stigma experiences in everyday encounters who could benefit from a destigmatized language and imaginative reframing among a supportive group of peers and be fully authentic in their emotional sharing around their stigma experiences. Zainab's experience is also translatable for those with discord in their familial identity influences. Finally, the case of Alex suggests that clown play, improvisation, and comedy or elements of these pedagogies might be beneficial for other autistic, face-blind, other otherwise

[152] The case studies served a dual purpose, both representing a range of Identity Distress Experiences and Identity Distress Processes and demonstrating that mental health is an interactive phenomenon involving both the individual and group levels.

neuro-diverse individuals as well as for neurotypical individuals with similar kinds of identity distress centered around issues of precarity, likeability, belonging, empathy, and the faulty, unhelpful logics of everyday life which they can authentically deconstruct together.

Applications in Specific Contexts and Settings

This section describes a few potential sites of research and application where the insights from the present study could prove beneficial including therapeutic and psychosocial research, educational institutions and community interventions, and hybrid clinical self-help courses for adults.

Potential Contribution to Therapeutic and Psychosocial Research

This study shows the importance of studying mental health phenomena through exploratory interaction and dynamics-oriented approaches such as this one which by taking an ambiguous diagnostic category of "identity distress" was able to pinpoint a relationship between everyday image or impression management, identities and the self system, and distress processes. Mental health was explored as a dynamic process phenomenon that is both social and individual. Future studies could continue to contribute to knowledge of this process by gathering both social and individual data particularly centered around practices wherein individuals are learning to understand, enhance, or manage themselves for an audience or with interlocuters.

The identity distress processes coping model and overall framework should be tested by future studies which work with individuals as they engage with an identity distress coping process; as demonstrated, certain coping measures can be preventative of identity threat or face-easing post-hoc. The stages and decision points presented in Figures 8a and 8b were based on what was observable from the interviewees in this small-scale study, and therefore these possible trajectories are non-exhaustive and offered as a starting point. Future research could entail

tracking and further exploring variations and details of the stages, decision points, and cumulative effects which define possible trajectories of the identity distress process among a greater N, and a longer term longitudinal study could reveal longer term trajectories and nuances building on the original six stage model presented here. Additionally, the dominant takeaways and themes around dramaturgical coping could be further explored.

In this study, individuals applied dramaturgical metaphors to their lived experiences intuitively and often without the guidance of a personal psychotherapist,[153] drama therapist, or other context where the dramaturgical coping could be fully synthesized in its nuances of meaning-making. About half of the participant-interviewees had somewhat hopeful subjective improvements in their identity distress coping that were likely limited by the lack of one-on-one clinical and meaning-making dialogue[154], which corresponds with Stage 5 in the model, in addition to a lack of awareness for some around their coping practices, like inauthentic camouflaging, which corresponds with Stage 3. One important area for future research would be to understand different variations of Stage 5, Integration and Communion, how different iterations of this stage are best for different individuals, and whether traditional clinical support is more helpful than other kinds of support i.e., a peer group or theatre troupe.

For example, a fruitful avenue for more therapy-oriented research could be to pair dramaturgical group exercises with individual(ized) dialogic psychotherapy using dramaturgical distancing metaphors with special attention paid to a sense of authenticity in various identity roles as well as to the stigma adaptation, development, and awareness processes of individuals of

[153] There were notable exceptions to this, however. Zainab engaged in several one-on-one sessions with a cognitive behavioral therapist with whom she analyzed and further developed the lessons from SAI shortly following the completion of the SAI course.

[154] My impression from interviews is that individuals were overall quite interested to discuss their experiences at length because of a desire to process these experiences dialogically and in a meaningful way.

various backgrounds in the vein of Janet Helms (1984/2003)[155]. Integrated with Helms's stigma processing in therapy approach, the work of Hubert Hermans (2006*)* provides a potential model for analyzing the self as a theatre in relation to identity distress coping. This combination of approaches could be optimal to explore in both one-on-one and group interventions whether the intent is more clinical or pedagogic. A combined, inclusive, approach, in its explicit discourse with counterpoint perspectives, spaces of the self and dialogue-centered techniques, coupled with face-easing metaphors and practices could provide for a more dynamic approach for intervening at both individual and group levels. It's also important to continue to explore this work with non-clinical approaches as well and ideally to compare a variety of possible applications.

Potential Use in Educational Institutions and Community Interventions

As the pedagogies studied here represent a small sample of the range of interventions, treatments, alternative therapies, and activities available to the public and in constant development, ideally future research would explore the possibilities of other activities and interventions through this dramaturgical coping perspective e.g. examining the distancing metaphors offered by other practices whether theatrical or otherwise can provide a useful perspective on what kind of reimagining possibilities are being offered. Certain activities are suited to particular individuals and/or particular identity objectives and therefore an expanded understanding of how other activities can support identity distress coping will enhance the repertoire of possible sources and types of dramaturgical coping skills and tools for a broader as well potentially more nuanced range of identity distress concerns.

[155] Janet Helms' work is a strong foundational model because it provides attention to not only the individual's identity development and stigma challenges situated in sociocultural and historical context, but how those processes interact with those of one's interlocuter(s).

The most helpful elements discovered in the pedagogies explored here, such as establishing parameters for students which allowed for authentic identity expression and a sense of acceptance and communion, could be integrated into such events as college freshman orientations for example, to help students find and create face-easing spaces[156] and groups early on in college. A focus on "de-stigmatization," as well as increased empathy and inclusivity of socially-perpetuated everyday suffering, could be worth instituting at any level of education. Interviewees' stories of being "othered" usually started as early as childhood and pervaded their identity narratives, indicating that it could be worth exploring the potential of identity distress intervention for younger ages as well. De-stigmatization interventions would need to be tailored to the particular institution or program and its embedded expectations: training could mean that identity distress processes are understood and integrated into training at multiple levels (i.e., student, educator, administrator, etc.) and it would mean addressing and mitigating the many possible stigma sources and experiences in that particular context.

A worthwhile goal of identity distress mitigating and preventative curricula could also be to make students aware of harmful image actualizing ideas and of the many possible tools for self-reimagining, depending on the expectations of the context and the individual's social milieu,[157] e.g. a "never-enough" self-image (and limited to a narrow, non-inclusive idea of what "social success" means,) propagated by an institution can cause suffering and is a common root of identity distress. As astutely articulated by Kay: "Fuck it, you're interesting enough." Supporting students in the cultivation and seeking of face-easing spaces and practices as theatre

[156] Jay Torrence's clown play course, described in Chapter 6, can serve as an apt potential model for creating an inclusive, sensitive safe space.
[157] e.g., for Kay, this meant being perceived as "interesting enough" at EQU and as an individual and performer, for Zainab, this meant being perceived as competent and engaging enough in American professional and social settings, and for Alex, it meant being perceived as pleasant in an uncertain, illogical everyday existence.

was for Kay, as well as an effort to train educators in addressing embedded pressures of their particular institution could all be worthwhile efforts at the preparatory or higher education levels.

More broadly, these performative practices could be integrated as an applied theatre intervention targeting the identity challenges and stigmas in a particular educational, community, or other large group context. Both the resulting training and performance of an applied theatre identity distress intervention could help students, staff, and community members alleviate identity distress patterns by fostering a more inclusive, face-easing environment. In this way, the Identity Distress Coping Processes Six Stage Model and the development of one's dramaturgical toolkit and attunement could be translated into more effective guidelines for student and community intervention and wellbeing.

Recommendations and Cautions for Hybrid Clinical Self-Help Courses for Adults

In hybrid clinical-commercial self-help courses such as SAI, clinicians and teachers should handle deeper cases of psychological distress with care as they arise. The hybridity and category vagueness of these courses creates not only an opportunity for therapy without mental health stigma, but also potentially adds risk if there is not the necessary sensitivity by facilitators around dire mental suffering. Open and explicit communication about the intent of any mental health-oriented group with clear rules of engagement and ethical standards is crucial.[158] However, a sensitive application of these hybrid techniques in combination with other more clinically-driven treatments (as needed) does have the potential to equip individuals with better tools for coping with everyday life dramaturgy processes around identity presentation and communication.

[158] While the version of SAI I observed was ambiguously advertised to attract a broad range of clients which served the goal of money-generation, this commercialized component meant less oversight by clinicians in terms of clarity of intent with the clients, and a sacrifice at the level of therapeutic rigor as well as overall meaning-making possibilities of the practice.

Hybrid courses should incorporate an awareness of the embedded dangers in the self-help movement. The idiom-as-movements identified in this study tie in with the self-help industry in a complex relationship. A critical lens onto this relationship, including the camouflaging behaviors and identities that are propagated by certain self-help industry and alternative therapy practices, could help create more effective and less harmful practices and heightened awareness overall.

Identity Distress Coping Processes and Idiom-as-Movements Research

This study demonstrates that American psychology and mental health experience do not exist in a sociocultural vacuum. Individual mental health experience is in constant flux as a result of uncertain social encounters, therefore having an empowered, validated, authentic self-position is important for social wellbeing. The detailing of specific contemporary American idioms of distress, or idiom-as-movements such as "get out my head" which are activated in high stakes social encounters could be studied more extensively and integrated into research and applied settings: both the ones identified in this study and others. These insights could also be of benefit for research in other modern, contemporary societal contexts impacted by these frequently globalized American idiom-as-movements.

Limitations

This study represents an initial, limited foray into a complex and nuanced area of investigation. The sample size is small, particular, and intended as a highly qualitative springboard for further work: the sample could be expanded and the findings re-examined and further detailed in larger participant samples and a wider variety of individuals and group practices. The present work was intentionally conducted as a combination of purposive and critical case sampling as elaborated in Chapter 3, as the primary goal was theory-generation.

Participants could be included from a vaster range of SES diversity[159] and any variable that may link to identity experience in contexts that are both explicitly performative and otherwise. The results are also non-exhaustive in terms of potential pedagogies, interventions, and face-easing practices.

Concluding Thoughts

Identity distress is not in fact abnormal in the traditional psychological understanding of an abnormality or pathology of the individual. Rather, it can more accurately be understood as a contemporary version of the "American nervousness" that was identified in the late 19th century. The version of identity distress theorized by this study presents a new, de-pathologized approach to mental suffering and wellness that is psycho-socio-cultural and focused on coping. This approach is also sensitive to gradations of mental health diagnosis on a more nuanced spectrum than just "well" and "ill."

Tensions between self-image actualization and the desire to be accepted reflect broader social burdens, pressures and inequities in how individuals and their felt experiences are understood. As individuals cope with pressures to conform, standardize themselves, achieve success in prescribed ways, erase stigma and avoid discrimination, they simultaneously search for alternative understandings and spaces where they don't have to work quite as hard or suffer quite as much in their strivings to uphold positive face value. Individuals seek and create spaces where they feel they can be their "full selves" free of the need to erase potentially stigmatized characteristics. These findings suggest that our current social spaces need to be re-examined and the connection between social expectations, interactions, and mental suffering needs to be reframed so that we don't have to work quite so hard to co-exist in the first place.

[159] This sample was predominantly of far-ranging middle class origins with notable exceptions like the early interviewee Robert.

This study presents new insights for understanding the relationship between mental health and identity through identity distress as both a socio-culturally embedded and dynamic, psychosocial process, perhaps more readily understandable as impression management distress, for it is the very act and desire of managing external impressions to perfection that can (in dynamic with the pressures and stigmas of modern, contemporary society of course), turn on itself. It is this modern human paradox of ultimate self-help and self-management to the brink of self-destruction where theatre comes in. Theatre is not scared and does not need to pathologize our strangest, most misguided tendencies. Instead, theatre training holds within it a toolkit for exploring, even reveling in each tendency as an opportunity to both learn and commune with others; for good actors do not and cannot hide from emotions. This study thus expands not only on the acting and theatre metaphor in order to better understand everyday life, as other dramaturgical theorists and social scientists have done, but it draws directly from acting and theatre-making disciplines to help us imagine and cultivate healthier ways to live.

The theoretical framework, idiom-as-movements, overall insights and themes, can help guide future research and development of a more enriched, detailed, and accurate framework for understanding identity distress processes, treatments, preventative programs, tools for individual coping, and perhaps most importantly, more aware, sensitive, de-pathologized social understandings of interactive, everyday mental health processes, coping, and suffering leading to more sensitive, de-pathologized, and informed practices. It also holds implications for the cultural psychology of America, and that of any other-directed and image-oriented modern society which exhibits similar phenomena around the nexus of image management, stigma, and mental health experience. The rapid pace of contemporary cultural-technological developments will continue to push our understandings of engagements, audiences, and theatricalizations as we

are socialized into new modes and interfaces of connecting with and understanding each other. The challenge then is to accept the reality of these conditions and to assemble the right set of tools, such as the dramaturgical ones studied here, that can help individuals cope and even thrive in self-authentic ways and to strive towards a future in which they won't have to.

AFTERWORD

The Role of the Witness, Everyday Transformations, Hope

It's noteworthy that this dissertation was completed during the Covid-19 Pandemic when the public disclosure of everyday suffering in the United States and globally across social media has become more normalized than sharing joy: a kind of face-easing condition of a common societal and global experience e.g. a vivid example were the public disclosures of her mental suffering by ultra-successful Olympian Simone Biles in her struggles to perform during the 2021 Summer Games. For at least a while, it appears to have become normal to mention feeling depression, anxiety, or misery in general or to even discuss seeking therapeutic or other support for one's pain. There is even hope for the makings of a non-stigmatized vocabulary around everyday mental suffering such as "low grade depression" famously offered by Michelle Obama on her podcast and quoted to me by my mother, a Soviet immigrant for whom typically such a subject is taboo and only for the hyperbolically distant other, not for you or those you know. I argue that this open, non-stigmatized sharing is a start but that it's critical to keep developing a socio-culturally-minded understanding of the everyday suffering that most of us have or will experience.

As most interviewees in this study were to some extent engaging with the therapeutic personhood model wherein their growth and development must be witnessed in order for transformation to occur, I inevitably became a witness for many. Crucially, (for both myself and my incredibly generous interviewees) I was able to offer a place of non-stigmatized sharing: I listened to their identity narratives, importantly setting aside any pre-judgments as much as possible in order to facilitate ethnographic openness and discovery. I thus got to watch my interviewees evolve during and across the course of interviews. Identity storytelling is part of

identity-making, particularly for those seeking to change and grow; crucially, the event must happen in front of others. This listening role is a simple one and what became clear is that many are simply eager for a witness and the message is that if more individuals would play this role for each other, practicing an ethnographic openness that assumes one's own ignorance rather than pre-knowledge of the other, the prevalent inability to cope in contemporary society would likely ease. Our shared humanity and experience would become evident very quickly and social encounter would not need to be experienced as a constant source of threat and cause of overwhelming exhaustion. A face-easing practice can be as simple as telling your story to someone you trust, or even better, *listening* to someone tell theirs.

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Appendix A

Emergent Themes from the Data

This section presents emergent themes of identity stress on three levels: sociocultural, group, and individual. The sociocultural level descriptions are an overview of each theme based on native knowledge, lit review, and cultural analysis. They describe cultural values to which individuals are socialized to aspire to and by which they are evaluated societally, and which permeate the themes on the group and individual levels. The group level descriptions are based on the ethnographic research of classroom practices presented in chapters 4-6. The individual level descriptions are based on the in-depth interviews (both preliminary and post-fieldwork) conducted throughout this study. Note that these are theoretical categories based on a small n and that they are offered as the researcher's more detailed theory based off of observations and as an impetus for further research in these areas.

The aim of these descriptions is to present a new, enriched, and more dynamic understanding of identity stress in sociocultural process and context than the original DSM categories implemented as Likert scales by Stephen Berman (Berman et al., 2004) which were the jumping off point for this research. This project confirms individual coping and mental health as an embedded sociocultural process, in line with an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), rather than as an isolated set of diagnoses which has historically been the dominant approach within American psychology.

The list of themes, presented in no particular order, does not by any means profess to be exhaustive. It is also intended as a foundation for further research on the complexity of American mental health processes in dynamic context in various kinds of research including quantitative

work that is intended to be representative of particular populations, which this is not; that said these descriptions may be taken as suggestive of themes to explore further with certain populations and in contexts where these themes may figure as relevant. Primarily however, these themes are the exploratory qualitative description of a phenomenon. It's also important to note that each of the themes is descriptive of a potential focal content area of stress and related symptoms, and that it also has to do with a desire to achieve a certain sociocultural value, which is why these themes have been delineated along the three levels of research and analysis along which this study was conducted. These descriptions include certain theoretical inferences, such as that when an individual feels that they are getting closer to achieving a particular identity value, that's when they experience identity eustress and vice-versa for identity distress but it's important to note that based on the findings here of the importance of a sense of authenticity and identification with one's identities and roles, eustress is most likely to occur when an individual identifies with the part they're playing rather than feeling that it is a false presentation made primarily to satisfy external standards. It's also noteworthy that the identity values as described on a sociocultural level, are also what individuals focus on displaying about themselves in interaction, or the lines that they are concerned with maintaining in their face-work.

Themes of Identity Stress

Status and Success

Societal Level

Status and Success is a theme of stress (eustress or distress) related to hierarchical, status, stigma, and spoiled identity concerns and aspirations (Goffman, 1963). Achievements and markers of success (whether in career, academic, relationship or other areas,) is important for this theme.

Group Level

Group settings in which the status and success theme is important focus on markers of achievement like grades, career attainments, relationship status, financial and material attainments, etc.

Individual Level

Individuals with heightened levels of distress within this dimension are often concerned about their status positions at work and in their social circles. They are motivated to present markers of success, competence, intelligence, and other socially desirable characteristics in managing their overall, long-term reputations as well as day-to-day impression management. Distress symptoms may manifest when one is around someone of higher status whom they are deeply concerned about impressing, particularly in an interaction where they are expected to make some kind of presentation demonstrating their competence, progress, success, etc. or to contribute in some way to a project. In social situations this may manifest when an interlocutor is perceived as possessing a higher and more attractive status that is beyond the individual's perceived domain of access.

Social Belonging

Sociocultural Level

The social belonging theme of identity stress (distress and eustress) reflects the valuing of (and often concern around lack of) social support and social connectedness in American society. One example of this is concern around the lack of social support and belonging of individuals is around school shooters who tend to fit a certain isolated "loner" profile.

Group Level

In a group setting, this theme may be expressed through a creation of shared rituals, discussion of shared characteristics, experiences, or identifications, and various activities around bonding and support both within the auspices of the group and potentially outside of it as well.

Individual Level

When fulfilled, these areas appear to have a significant impact for individuals' overall wellbeing. When these areas are lacking, individuals may describe feeling loneliness, isolation, and distress around the lack of social connectedness in their lives. They typically expressed feeling like outsiders and outcasts, and that their identity was spoiled in some way—any potential source of stigma is worried about and oftentimes hidden. They do not have a social space, or a sufficient access to one, where they feel comfortable "being themselves" or "safe" or able to express themselves fully. This lack of a comfortable social space constrains authentic emotion expression or uncensored opinions, perspectives, and descriptions of experiences. They may report not feeling comfortable in their own skin. They yearn to make friends and have very few or none in their current milieu. In cases of a comorbid social anxiety diagnosis, their distress symptoms may manifest in either large group interactions, small group interactions, or both. They feel like they cannot or do not know how to relate to others or that doing so will lead to inevitable failure. This is a dimension more often associated with clinical levels of distress for interviewees in my sample and is likely to be co-morbid with other self-reported conditions such as mid to high levels of anxiety (particularly social but may include other types as well) and depression. It was most commonly expressed by SAI participants both in interviews and during support group sessions.

Wellbeing

Sociocultural Level

The somatic aspect of this dimension has been identified as universal for cultural idioms of distress by medical anthropologist Lawrence Kirmayer; it is the underlying biological and/or expressive distress component that is experienced in myriad ways cross-culturally and historically. In the US, it is reflected in the self-help movement and the idea of self-management around any symptoms that appear vague or out of control.

Group Level

In group settings, this is expressed through self-management practices and lessons such as through cognitive behavioral lessons, eye contact practice, "yes, and" exercises, or public speaking practice.

Individual Level

Among my interviewees, the wellbeing theme signifies a concern with one's physical, mental, emotional, and/or overall wellbeing. As distress it can be a kind of anxiety about anxiety, or alternatively, anxiety about mortality. It can manifest as a kind of cyclical fixation on a loss of control and health. As eustress it can mean a valuing and striving towards markers of good health, both mental and physical, only becoming distress or anxiety if this striving becomes obsessive. Distress can occur in the form of self-described panic syndrome and panic attacks with confusion about their origin and worry about a loss of control over one's body. Individuals feel that psychophysiological symptoms of panic and/or anxiety (e.g. sweating, digestive problems, faintness, heart palpitations, etc.) have a "mind of their own," and are completely out of the control of the individual.

What is feared is the unpredictable panic symptom itself and this fear may be indicative of one's disconnect or disregard from how the environment impacts them at the time. A couple interviewees described a sense of not knowing oneself well. In some cases, heightened levels of distress in this dimension can be connected with clinical conditions like major depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, etc. In other cases it can mean a particularly stressful time in one's life, a passing phase that does not necessarily signal a long-term disorder but nevertheless is cause for concern at the time.

In addition to the somatic symptoms and concerns, there may also be a deeper philosophical confusion that attends wellbeing anxiety. This manifests as ennui about one's physical and mortal existence, a fixation with death, aging, existential meaninglessness, etc. in which one is stuck in a seemingly endless cycle of fixation on death and nothingness in the recognition that mortality is inevitable. It can manifest also as a fear of dying or disappearing, being forgotten, etc. It's possible that this is connected to what Ernest Becker describes as a constant mechanism of the "denial of death" (Becker, 1973) in American society that is adaptive. Presumably in the case of identity distress around death anxiety, the lack of denial may lead to constant distress around this knowledge and the mark one is to leave while alive. This is also related to the constructs McAdams describes as "generativity vs. stagnation" (McAdams, 1998) in terms of individuals (and McAdams research is primarily US-based) ultimately caring to leave something positive for mankind post-mortem.

The preoccupation with one's own wellbeing can lead to an obsessive anxiety around solving whatever one interprets the problem as being. The focus on fixing oneself, may become the central theme of this distress. In terms of eustress, it can mean a premium on maintaining good physical and mental health and often leads to seeking out a variety of forms of self-care, both traditional and alternative. In the American self-help and self-actualization market, this dimension is to some extent addressed by the culture of gratitude around death awareness and life preciousness proposed and popularized by a variety of alternative teachings, including yogic practices and contemporary American religious groups (Engels 2018).

Authenticity

Sociocultural Level

A valuing of an essential, real, or authentic truth to live by, which may be interchangeable or difficult to differentiate terms in popular culture, vernacular, and media expressions. In current American popular culture, the power is increasingly given to the individual to "speak your truth," a valuing of a subjective expression particularly by those who have been historically part of repressed and stigmatized categories. The valuing of expression of one's subjectivity is key to this theme. Authenticity is also linked towards a movement of de-stigmatization of identity categories that have been historically stigmatized and discriminated against.

Group Level

In the group setting, this may be visible in exercises that implement metaphors or uncovering or peeling away layers to reveal a real, essential, or authentic self. There may be discussion of a truer self that isn't always expressed or support for the expression of identities, identifications, experiences, perspectives, etc. that individuals may not feel comfortable

expressing in other settings. There may also be a practice of verbal acceptance and validation of identities (through discussion and encouragement that individuals share their narratives) that may be stigmatized in other settings.

Individual Level

Individuals in my sample concerned with distress around the authenticity theme typically expressed feeling that they are not able to present their "authentic self" to the world most or all of the time. They struggled to find a way to "be real" and sometimes to "be comfortable in my skin." In contrast, identity eustress narratives centering around authenticity tended to be associated with a sense of getting to express and have one's "true self" acknowledged through face-work that demonstrated respect and acknowledgement, whatever that meant for the particular individual. Those who had found what one participant termed an "anxiety-free space," felt that they had a space or group of people with whom they could be authentic and those were described as extremely important to their sense of wellbeing, fulfillment, belonging (there is overlap in this aspect with the belonging dimension,) and authenticity.

A major way in which authenticity distress occurred in participants was through an expressed confusion, anomie and sense of not knowing who they are. This confusion sometimes manifested more specifically as a sense of being pulled between different identity polarities in terms of gender, culture, sexuality, nationality, religion, name, career, etc. The confusion and dissonance of being between two or more identity polarities and the lack of a coherent relationship between them was the source of distress in these cases. Heightened distress in this dimension often co-occurred with distress in the Social Belonging dimension. Distress in this dimension can also come from a sense of pressure to make significant identity choices that

involve visible external markers such as names and clothing, or to make those choices for the sake of pleasing other people rather than for oneself.

Precarity - "you can't have perfect control"

Sociocultural Level

The labeling of this identity stress (distress and eustress) theme as "precarity" is based on the sociological description of precarity by theorist Lauren Berlant. In describing contemporary America, Berlant writes of precarity: "Its performative desire has become to redirect and bring new tones to the forced improvisation of a contemporary life that is increasingly not only without guarantees but without predictables" (Berlant 2011). The underlying value is of course control and an ideal scripted attainment of one's dreams, whatever those may be.

Berlant is referring to the precarity and unpredictability of the modern American economy, the unpredictable oscillations of modern cultural and social movements, as well as the uncertainty around attaining one's goals and desires. She writes about a return to something that is continually not working as a "cruel optimism," explaining that oftentimes it's easier to keep returning to the site of something dysfunctional than to change one's circumstances.

Group Level

In a group setting, embracing precarity and unpredictability could mean exposure therapy or learning to improvise through a variety of exercises and games and practicing "yes, and." It could be expressed through exercises that encouraged the possibility of failure in front of an audience and offered strategies for embracing this failure, discomfort, or simply lack of achieving the desired effect as a temporary phenomenon itself.

Individual Level

Individuals who practiced "yes, and" tended to use the expression "it's not that serious" in interviews in reference to the typical content of what they have been worried about in the past. Distress in this theme involves a worry about the uncertainty and unpredictability of the future. For interviewees, this could mean uncertainty about the distant future and the achievement of long-term identity goals months and years from today, which does involve upward mobility pressures and struggles, compounded by the unpredictable modern economy and job market—and this aspect is of course more stressful the more precarious one's socioeconomic position. It also includes uncertainty (about interactional success in particular) in what we refer to in this project as the future-now, as in the next few hours or even minutes.

A feeling of helplessness over one's unfolding life can cause severe distress on a daily basis. For the individuals in this study, this meant a concern with how everyday interactions will unfold, particularly for those who either felt they lacked good social skills, were not outgoing or interesting enough, constantly feared social interactions, or lacked the ability to perceive social cues effectively. There is the sense of a need to plan and prepare for all contingencies, sometimes a compulsive effort to do so, and the sense of impossibility of being able to do so perfectly, which catalyzes the distress cycle further. A preoccupation with uncertainty and precarity may be linked with the uncertainty of one's somatic responses (and the wellbeing theme) or with any kind of fear of social failure connected to a sense of lack of control or agency[160]—it is an example of a dimension that can overlap or compound any of the others. The range of precarity distress within existential, long term, and everyday manifestations is reflective of identity

160 Precarity distress could overlap in many other ways that were not necessarily saturated in this sample, but that would be easy to imagine in a different age sample, such as an older sample being preoccupied with precarity and death, with the heightened sense that life is precarious.

distress overall in the way it unfolds in terms of time-perspective in the data. It can occur and co-occur on any and all of these three planes.

In terms of eustress, precarity and uncertainty was imagined by interviewees as an exciting norm rather than as a threat. One particularly positive interviewee in the preliminary sample, spoke of a philosophical example of a positive uncertainty-embracing outlook they had adapted for this specific purpose called “planned happenstance.” “Planned happenstance” is Krumboltz’ 1999 theory about turning serendipity into opportunity. While “planned happenstance” is originally intended for the context of creating and being open to unexpected career opportunities and developments particularly in advising students at American liberal arts colleges, this interviewee, who also happened to be a theatre student, used it as a more global approach for everyday coping with uncertainty and precarity. In chapters 5 and 6 we explored students’ application of improvisation and clown play metaphors to this identity stress area; there are interesting commonalities with the planned happenstance approach in that “yes, and,” exposures, as well as the embrace of potential failure in clown play treat the unknown as an opportunity to learn and play rather than as an ominous threat.

Likeability

Sociocultural Level

From the very first self-help book, “How to Make Friends and Influence People,” to the popularity preoccupations of American high school students in films and life, to the importance of “likes” on social media profiles, the likeability theme – being engaging, interesting, attractive, popular, etc. enough for an audience, is an integral American identity value. Preoccupation with the likeability-entertainment theme of stress (distress and eustress,) reflects a deep sense of needing to please others by being able to keep their attention.

Group Level

Evidence of this value on the group level may appear as a shared concern with gauging how many laughs one gets, or how interested the group and group leader(s) are and explicit group work on making one funnier, more believable, more appealing, to the audience, etc.

Individual Level

Individuals experiencing high stress (distress or eustress,) in this dimension need validation from an audience, whether it's through getting laughs and being perceived as funny or being seen as particularly interesting, unique, or captivating. Not unlike a theatrical act for which success involves holding the audience's attention throughout. In terms of identity eustress, this means a delight in positive audience response and a potentially heightened sense of self-worth as a result.

There is the sense of it being important that one stands out and is noticed which comes with the fear that one is or will be forgotten, that one is unremarkable or alternatively that one is sensational and the best version of themselves in front of others (for many in this sample it meant it in front of a large audience, for others it could mean a significant audience such as their boss, coworkers or a date). There were even some individuals in preliminary interviews who described specific instances of succeeding in front of an audience in response to the question: "Describe a time when you were most like the person you wish to be." This dimension can easily flip between distress and eustress depending on audience response.

The focus on developing oneself into more of an extrovert is an additional aspect of this dimension for some in my sample and is a major continual theme in the history of the American self-help and self-improvement movement. This self-improvement aspect was particularly true for the improv and SAI participants in Chapter 5 and clown play participants in Chapter 6. Extroversion or expressing oneself in a way that increased likeability and popularity was valued by some participants as an ideal American personality achievement to strive for.

This theme may co-occur with social belonging. These individuals may express suffering from a lack of what feel like "true friends" to them. Others with heightened likeability distress are in highly competitive environments where there is the sense that one must work to stand out because everyone else is so interesting and unique or skilled as well. There is an aspect of this dimension that is reflective of the competitive nature of attention-seeking on social media and individuals have a range of reactions to the valuation of "entertainment value" of their online presence: over half of the college students interviewed reported staying away from social media completely, opting for in-person forms of interaction.

In performance pedagogy spaces, some individuals really concerned with the likability - entertainment value dimension were also worried about becoming good professional performers and in their case the professional and social were at times indistinguishable. For others this exemplified an overall concern with being unable to successfully form connections and bonds upon meeting people in both social and professional contexts and this concern was shared by SAI participants thus there is potential comorbidity with a social anxiety diagnosis. The performance pedagogy for them represented the struggle of attracting an interested "audience" in everyday life.

Presence

Sociocultural Level

Presence, known colloquially as “get out of your head,” or “be present,” is a value and identity stress theme prominent in the mindfulness movement. It has permeated many aspects and contexts of American life and is evident in micro-contextual levels as well as macro. The emphasis is on the importance of having one’s attention and faculties in sync with others as understood in the lived experience of both or multiple parties. It is the value of an individual or group sharing simultaneous space-time reality with the external, immediate world (i.e.,other individuals or group members,) which is evidence of being caring, good, and considerate.

Group Level

On the group level, this value may be expressed and practiced through meditation, yoga, presence and perezhivania-based performance training, improv games, as well as discussion of its importance. As it is about creating an experience of time that feels subjectively shared by multiple (ideally all) group members, any exercise that forces group members into an immediate and mutually-dependent time-pressured task (e.g. a clown exercise where three students have to work together to get across the room without using their right feet,) would be evidence of this value. An example of a eustress version of this would be collective effervescence (Durkheim, 1912) as is aspired towards in a theatrical production as well as in group improv games such as “1, 2, 3 Word” where players go around in a circle taking turns to say words simultaneously with the person next to them with the objective being for two players to say the same word at the same time.

Individual Level

Interviewees expressed worry about getting “out of their head” or “breaking out of my shell.” It can be expressed individually as an elusive sense of mismatch between an individual’s subjective experience and the ongoing social interaction, or that’ one’s subjective sense of anxiety is a separate entity that is controlling one’s attention rather than the ongoing interaction or events in which one is physically present but is not fully engaged with psychologically. It can be evident in descriptions as a disengagement and one that is not willful but rather a result of paralyzing fear.

Identity Stress Themes: Conclusion

These identity stress descriptions capture the underlying themes of identity stress as it emerged from the qualitative data in this study. They demonstrate the cultural values to which individuals are socialized to aspire to and by which they are evaluated societally, in group settings, and individually, meaning by their own internalized critical and encouraging voices. Table 2B presents a non-exhaustive list of dramaturgical coping strategies for these themes and thus the prominent identity objectives that emerged in the study. It may be reasonable to hypothesize that acceptance objectives are closer to the eustress aspect of identity stress whereas actualization objectives tend to compliment distress themes but this likely depends on how individuals take up and imagine these various self-help and identity objectives (i.e.,the problematic uptake of body positivity described in Chapter 2). This could also be a fruitful area to explore further in future quantitative and qualitative work.

Appendix B

Interview Guides

Interviews with College Students

1. Can you tell me a bit about what it was like for you, growing up/your background?
2. Clarify aspects of interview guide when appropriate.
3. For purpose of college-how have you used this “space?” Is this how you would want your children to use it? Do you think college is a helpful and useful experience? How did you see the purpose of college before you started and how do you see it now?
4. Expand from survey on who want to become in future (in 10 years, etc.)
   A. Is this entirely your own wish or does it reflect someone else’s wish? (If someone else’s find out who).
   B. In what ways are you very much like the person that you want to become in 10 years?
   C. In what ways are you very different from the person that you want to become in 10 years?

5. If there is a discrepancy between “real you” and what others see (from survey:) Do you feel that others see you the way you want to be seen? (If no, probe about image for family, friends, partner, discrimination, etc. If source of identity distress, explore symptoms and coping). How would you describe the ideal American and how do you measure up?

6. Do you have a particular role model or guide for living that you follow? Do you have an ideal for your life? Role models/guides/models for living

7. Why college? [Also, possibly what have you hoped to achieve during college and have you done so? Growth?]

8. Who were you when you graduated from high school?
9. How much have you changed from the person that you were when you graduated from high school?
10. If you have not changed, how have you managed to stay the same?
11. If you have changed, in what ways have you changed?
12. If you have changed, what do you think caused you to change?
13. How much have you changed throughout college? (Repeat progression of questions for change from high school to changes throughout college).
14. Can you give an example of a time when you especially felt like you were the person you wanted to be?
15. What kind of feedback did you receive at the time?
16. Can you give an example of a time when you felt like you were really out of character? What made you feel that way?
17. Do you feel like a different person in different situations/with different people in your life? If yes, how so? If yes, distress/coping? Does one or any version of you feel more “real” or “true?”
18. Computer dating thing for friends in the world
19. If you could send a time capsule to yourself from 10 years ago? If you could send a time capsule to yourself 20 years from now?

20. Researcher from another planet-what's special about you
21. Life as a play-actors, director, audience, critics/reviewers
22. Memoirs
23. If you could re-engineer yourself genetically and be born in any situation
24. Specific incidents where manage identity-related stress, issues, concerns—incidents most tied to hopes, dreams, aspirations, expectations, etc. - Sort concerns with events chart – ask about specific episodes, vignettes, (biggest challenges, areas of growth, etc.)

Neo-Futurist Interviews

Why did you take Neo-Futurist class? What (if anything in particular,) were you hoping to get out of it?

Did it meet these expectations? Why or why not? What did you/didn't you get out of it?

How has Neo-Futurist class and/or method impacted you (if at all)? (I'm particularly interested in knowing if you feel that it has impacted you psychologically and/or socially in any way.)

What do you think of the notion of the "real you" on stage?

How does it relate to your notions of the "real you" in general and how you feel about the "real you" in life?

How did you feel about the chair test? What was it like for you?

Is it important to you to be "interesting" or "impressive" or "a good performer?" Please explain.

What's your ideal version of you? Please describe.

Do you have an idea of an ideal life for yourself? (Let's say 10 years from now.) What does that look like?

Interviews with Clown Play Students

Why did you take clown performance class? What (if anything in particular,) were you hoping to getout of it?

Did it meet these expectations? Why or why not? What did you/didn't you get out of it?

How has clown performance class and/or method impacted you (if at all)? (I'm particularly interested in knowing if you feel that it has impacted you psychologically and/or socially in any way.)

What do you think of the notion of yourself as a clown character on stage?

How does it relate to your notions of the "you" in general and how you feel about the "real you" or other versions of you in life? What the about the "neutral" you?

How did you feel about the standing-in-front of everyone in neutral test? What was it like for you?

How did you feel about demonstrating emotions at different intensities? How does emotion practice we did in class relate to how you experience emotion in your everyday life?

Is it important to you to be "interesting" or "impressive" or "a good performer?" Is it important to keep the attention of the audience in your life/in other contexts? Please explain.

How did your final performance feel to you/what was it like for you?

What's your ideal version of you? Please describe.

Do you have an idea of an ideal life for yourself? (Let's say 10 years from now.) What does that look like?

Social Anxiety Improv Bootcamp Program Interview Guide

Why this program—Social Anxiety Improv? How did you end up doing this? How did you find out about it?

[Often end up talking about other kinds of support groups/therapies that they've done.]

What was the experience of the program like for you?

Probe whatever the "problem" is…

-Find examples of identity distress experiences…

-Probe why it happens

Why didn't you come back/or will you continue in program? Will you continue to do improv? Why/why not

Find out about background, growing up experience-what it was like growing up? Possible connections with current issues?

What's the fear? (E.g. group settings) Explore the phenomenological experience…

Improv class vs. support group?

Ask about SUD's and CBT if seems relevant… if relevant-in which context think of "SUD's" and other CBT aspects from group – experience of that? –How helpful if it's helpful?

Would you like the community to go on or not? Would you like to meet up with the people again or not?

[Remind when necessary that have no stakes in this, also this is anonymous.]

If describing their identity fears: Is there a worst case scenario?

[Emphasize that there is no right or wrong in the conversation.]

-Explore somatic stress symptoms where appropriate.

-Also how feel "when SUD's are up" – sx

-Original event, how did it start (first event if can remember?)

-Were improv exercises helpful? How? Which ones?