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## Improvising Close Relationships: A Relational Perspective on Vulnerability

Nicholas Riggs  
*University of South Florida*, [mcordner@usf.edu](mailto:mcordner@usf.edu)

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Improvising Close Relationships: A Relational Perspective on Vulnerability

by

Nicholas A Riggs

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Communication  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Arthur Bochner, Ph.D  
Carolyn Ellis, Ph.D  
Keith Berry, Ph.D  
Daniel Belgrad, Ph.D

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Hannah, who the most inspiring and beautiful person I know on and off stage. To Carlos for helping my rally everyone to build an improv scene in a city where none existed. To my Grandmother for passing on a love for the arts. Finally, to my immediate family, for believing that I could overcome the odds and discover my passion.

I would like to thank the brothers of Pi Beta Sigma for being guiding stars in my life and my work. Special thanks to all of the members of Post Dinner Conversation, Inc for having my back and cover my blind spot all of these years. Finally, thank you to Art Bochner for lighting the path to my future, Carolyn Ellis for her openness and encouragement, Keith Berry for his continual support and friendship, and Dan Belgrade for seeing me through graduate school from first semester to last. You are all essential characters in the story of my life. I could not have done it without you!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	iv
LIST OF TABLES .....	v
ABSTRACT .....	vi
CHAPTER 1: COMING TO IMPROV .....	1
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS .....	24
Defining Improvisation.....	25
Improvisation as Performance .....	26
Staged Improvisation .....	28
Guiding Principles of Improv Comedy .....	30
Agreement.....	31
Initiation .....	33
Game.....	35
Improv Comedy as Interpretive Practice.....	38
Close Relationships Among Improvisers.....	41
CHAPTER 3: TOWARD A QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY OF IMPROV AS RELATIONSHIP .....	47
Developing a Method .....	47
A Communication Perspective .....	48
Interpersonal Freedom .....	50
Performing Relationships .....	53
Vulnerable Positioning and Move Making .....	56
Adapting the Research Performance Format .....	61
Forming Post-Performance Focus Groups .....	63
Procedures .....	65
Recruitment of Participants .....	65
Staging the Performance .....	68
Performance Structure .....	72
Collection of Feedback .....	72
Transcription of Film .....	77
Analysis of Data .....	78

Coding Scenes .....	78
Coding Focus Groups.....	79
Summary .....	80
CHAPTER 4: TESS & KARL.....	81
A Note on My Own Vulnerable Positioning as Researcher .....	81
Setting the Stage.....	83
Tess & Karl .....	85
Mac and Cheese Story – Scene 1.....	85
Premise .....	85
Emotional Status .....	86
Patterns .....	86
Dynamics .....	86
Mac and Cheese Story – Scene 2.....	87
Premise .....	87
Emotional Status .....	88
Patterns .....	89
Dynamics .....	90
Visiting Australia Story – Scene 1.....	90
Premise .....	91
Emotional Status .....	92
Patterns .....	92
Dynamics .....	93
Reflections .....	93
Summary .....	103
CHAPTER 5: CARLA & MATT .....	105
Transition .....	105
Learning to Fall Story – Scene 1 .....	106
Premise .....	106
Emotional Status .....	106
Patterns .....	107
Dynamics .....	107
Learning to Fall Story – Scene 2 .....	108
Premise .....	108
Emotional Status .....	109
Patterns .....	110
Dynamics .....	110
Reflections .....	111
Summary .....	119
CHAPTER 6: HANNAH & NICK.....	120
Transition .....	120
First Time Getting Drunk Story – Scene 1.....	121

Premise .....	121
Emotional Status .....	122
Patterns .....	123
Dynamics .....	123
First Time Getting Drunk Story – Scene 2.....	124
Premise .....	124
Emotional Status .....	126
Patterns .....	126
Dynamics .....	127
Reflections .....	127
Summary .....	138
CHAPTER 7: KARA & RICK.....	139
Transition .....	139
Making Tiny Sandwiches Story – Scene 1.....	140
Premise .....	140
Emotional Status .....	140
Patterns .....	141
Dynamics .....	141
Quidditch Injury Story – Scene 1 .....	143
Premise .....	143
Emotional Status .....	143
Patterns .....	144
Dynamics .....	144
Reflections .....	145
Summary .....	158
CHAPTER 8: LEAVING THE STAGE .....	159
Beyond the Study .....	159
Final Reflections .....	163
CHAPTER 9: IMPLICATIONS OF UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIPS AS IMPROVISED PERFORMANCES .....	164
Applied Improv Insights .....	171
Relationships as Improvised Performances.....	173
Relationship Skills for Intimate Couples .....	174
Focus.....	174
Teasing.....	176
Accepting .....	178
Renovating .....	181
Conclusion .....	183
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	185

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: VULNERABLE POSITIONING.....	62
FIGURE 2: PERFORMANCE POSTER USED TO RECRUIT AUDIENCE.....	72

## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: PERFORMANCE PREP WORKSHOP LESSON PLAN.....	74
TABLE 2: PERFORMANCE WARM UP .....	77
TABLE 3: TESS AND KARL – MAC AND CHEESE STORY (SCENE 1).....	91
TABLE 4: TESS AND KARL – MAC AND CHEESE STORY (SCENE 2).....	96
TABLE 5: TESS AND KARL – VISITING AUSTRALIA STORY (SCENE 1).....	99
TABLE 6: CARLA AND MATT – LEARNING TO FALL STORY (SCENE 1).....	113
TABLE 7: CARLA AND MATT – LEARNING TO FALL STORY (SCENE 2).....	117
TABLE 8: NICK AND HANNAH – FIRST TIME GETTING DRUNK STORY (SCENE 1).....	130
TABLE 9: NICK AND HANNAH – FIRST TIME GETTING DRUNK STORY (SCENE 2).....	135
TABLE 10: KARA AND RICK – MAKING TINY SANDWICHES STORY (SCENE 1).....	150
TABLE 11: KARA AND RICK – QUIDDITCH INJURY STORY (SCENE 1).....	154



## ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I study the way couples improvise relationships together. I define improvisation as a kind of performance that leads to an interpretive practice where people develop the meanings of their relationships as they perform. Participating in a performance ethnography, my romantic partner, myself, and three other couples reflect on the way we perform together on stage. Adapting the popular improv performance format “Armando” and utilizing post-performance focus groups, I observe how the couples strive to make meaning together and negotiate a joint-perspective about how they played. Ultimately, I argue that attending to the way a couple improvises their relationship off stage can provide key insights into the communication patterns that allow them to share vulnerable experiences and grow close. In the end, I discuss ways that improv techniques and philosophies have informed and guided my own romantic relationship.

CHAPTER 1:  
COMING TO IMPROV

One of my earliest childhood memories is telling a room full of people that I want to be an actor. Standing in front of the family piano, my grandmother leans low, bending her rocking chair forward to meet my eyes with an earnest stare.

“Now Nicky, want do *you* want to be when you grow up?” she asks. I’m five and my brother is ten. I’m not used to being asked questions like this because he’s usually the one who captures everyone’s attention. Not this time, though. I glance around and see the pursed lips and raised eyebrows of my family. The one thing they all have in common is the arts—in some capacity, each one of them performs, including my grandfather who “plays the radio” as they like to say. Looking back into my grandmother’s big, caring eyes I feel a rush of excitement come over me.

“I’m gonna be a movie star!” I shout and the room collapses with laughter.

“I believe it!” my grandmother says, rocking back in her chair, “I believe it.” She looks at my grandfather, who holds his amusement on his face, glancing at me with hope.

\*\*\*

Opening night of *Beauty and the Beast* is one week away and I’ve never been so nervous or lonely. I’m a lead and all of my friends are in the chorus, so they don’t talk to me. Being cast as a lead your Freshman year of High School is definitely an honor, but it

has its drawbacks. I really don't care though—I keep telling myself that it will all pay off when I audition for colleges. I spend most of my downtime at rehearsal in the warm-up room alone, fooling around on the keyboard.

The door opens. Kelly's legs slip through the door, then a leotard, fuzzy cat tail, whiskers, and a face with a sinister grin. Out of all of the dancers in the show, she's the only one who isn't afraid to talk to me. She says she needs to "keep my ego in check." My hands freeze as she walks toward me with thick-painted eyes that tractor-beam my teenage libido. To me, she's the most attractive person I've ever met. And she's nice to me.

"Show me what you're playing," she commands. I'm too embarrassed to respond. I play the same run of the chromatic scale that my Dad taught me when I was younger.

"I wasn't...I don't really know anything." I say, nervously. "Do you?"

She nods her head as she bites her bottom lip and reaches over me to crawl her fingers down the sharps and flats on the high part of the piano, rubbing her torso against me. I grab her stomach out of reflex, trying not to topple off the bench, and she laughs out loud, curling into a ball as she collapses on my lap. Surprised and scared at the same time, I look down at her as she puts her arms around my neck, and lifts her lips close to mine.

"What are you doing after rehearsal tonight?" she asks, watching me mouth an answer.

"Nothing," I say. "What about you?"

“Driving with you to the soccer field over by my house. You’re giving me a ride home,” she says, grabbing the collar of my lace-and-rhinestone shirt, pulling her lips close to my neck.

The door swings open and one of the seniors walks in, looking at us innocently. She rolls off me and blocks his view as I slip my collar over the lipstick stains, quickly playing the chromatic scale, acting like I’m showing her how to do it. We cover our flirting by talking about the next scenes coming up in rehearsal, making plans with our eyes.

\*\*\*

“It’s bullshit,” I say, “She doesn’t mean a word of what she says. Why are all mom’s liars when it comes to their kids?” My girlfriend sits quietly on the other end of the line. I know she’s thinking because she’s not chewing on the freeze-dried Banana chips she usually eats while we talk. Everything in her life seems to be freeze-dried.

“It wasn’t really *that* bad,” she says. “I mean, *yes* you were off key and *yes* Karah is a terrible scene partner—but there’s more shows. That first scene with the freshman—the one you directed—that’s everyone’s favorite scene,” she reminds me.

Looking in the mirror, I wipe off my makeup-smeared forehead.

“Yeah, I guess. I’m just tired of her being at *every* show and *every time* telling me that I was ‘the best one up there’ and ‘the most handsome person on stage.’ *Especially* on nights when I just suck, it’s a slap in the face. The way she says it is so...I dunno...flat and meaningless. Like she feels like she *has* to say it.” I’m laying on my back, looking at the ceiling, imagining my mother outside the theater, a crowd of hugs and laughs behind her.

There's no words, just mouth movements, ambivalent facial expressions, and practiced hand gestures.

“Don't you think you're being a little arrogant?” she asks. “You know, some of us would love for our parents to come to a show once, let alone to every show. You're kind of full of shit, you know that?” Frustration ignites the dismissiveness in her voice. ““Oh, such a poor baby...mommy tells me she thinks I'm great in every show and I just want her to mean it,”” she mocks. “You're in like two shows a month. She's probably tired of seeing you play the same crappy character over and over.”

It feels like all of the air gets sucked out of the room. I lay frozen on my bed, cracked down the middle.

“Hey...,” her voice changes. “Hey...I'm sorry. I...I didn't mean that last part. You know I think you're an amazing actor. I...just...I dunno, just don't lose track of what you're saying.” There's a long pause, then a dramatic sigh. “Hey look, I'm gonna go to bed. I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Ok,” I say. My voice is just breath.

“I love you,” she says.

I don't believe her.

\*\*\*

Looking out the window at my back yard, I try to imagine what it will be like to not live in this house. I try to see the backyard with eyes that didn't grow up here. My mom's voice is high-pitched, almost patronizing. I glance over and confirm the snarled

lip-to-nose expression I sense from her tone, which only amplifies the sarcasm in her voice.

“Sure,” she quips, “You can audition for schools if you want, *sure*,” she looks down as she opens another Fresca. “You’ll have to rehearse and pick out a song, memorize a piece, and get a tape ready. We’ll have to pay Mrs. Morgan to work with you on your voice *again*. And it’s getting awfully close to the deadlines, so you’ll have to do it *now*. I don’t even know the deadlines.” She exhales and stares at me.

“Okay,” I say, blankly. I can’t tell if the idea of me leaving for college is bothering her or if it’s something else. I’m the youngest child, so life is going to change dramatically for her and my stepdad once I’m gone.

“Look,” she says, making eye contact as she switches from fridge to stove, “you’ve done great and been in a lot of shows. You *know* that I support you. You definitely did more than your brother did. But I just don’t know if you have the talent to compete in a college audition.”

I lean against the sink. “But I’ve been on stage since I was a kid—”

“Yeah,” she interrupts, “but all of those other kids went to magnet schools and have parents who could afford to pay for acting lessons and coaching since they were little.” Her expression shifts to sympathetic. “We just didn’t have the money to do that for you. It was either pay for my chemo or give you guys acting lessons.” She shifts again from sympathetic to slightly annoyed. “I’m sorry I got cancer, but I thought it was pretty important that I live.”

One part of me wants to lash out and yell at her for using a guilt trip to push her point of view on to me. Instead, I shut mouth. Another part of me can see where she's coming from. How many of those other kids *did* have amazing training and opportunities I only dreamed about? I couldn't even get a part in the community theater production of *Sound of Music*. I look at her through a smoke screen of thoughts, unable to find words.

"What happens when you don't make it?" she asks. "You saw what happened to your brother. *Jesus*, he wanted to be a Musical Theater major, didn't get accepted, switched to Vocal Performance, got in, switched to Dance, then Broadcasting, now Communication. That's four majors in two years. At least with Communication he can find a job. *And* he's happy with it, I just talked to him last night."

"Common sense," I say. "Communication is all about common sense..." I start to think about making a living, paying for my loans after graduation, and not being stuck in this house after graduation.

"I think it's a *much* better idea to go into Communication," she says. "There's just more you can do with it. You can always act. There's *always* community theaters around, wherever you are."

I turn and look out the window, taking a long breath.

"Fine," I say. "It's getting dark."

\*\*\*

I sit on the trunk of Darren's car, enjoying the spring wind blowing over me. Katy's sandwiched between my legs, looking up at me as her hair blows everywhere. She

could say a million things with a glance, which is why she's the best actor at our school. I feel like I can pour all of my fear into her big, brown eyes.

She shivers a bit. "You can't think like that," she says. "You *will* get into grad school and when you do you're gonna be *great*." She pounds my thighs with her fists. "Thinking negative isn't going to help you. You'll know in two weeks and then you can start making plans with my parents." She's as hopeful that I'll move to Florida and keep her parents company as she is that I'll actually get accepted. I look up the road trying to imagine what it would be like to leave here.

"I dunno," I say, "Maybe I should just stick around here, join a community theater and keep making sandwiches for a living. It'd be nice to get back to what I always wanted to do, you know?" Her expression hardens as she slaps my arms with her hands.

"Just because you did two one-acts doesn't make you an actor." She gives me an arrogant smirk that makes my face red. "You *really* think you're that good?" she asks, raising her eyebrows. "You're better at what *you* do," she says. "You don't *need* to be an actor."

"Maybe I won't go to grad school even if I *do* get accepted," I say, "just to piss you off." She slaps me again and jumps on the car with me.

"You're a fucking idiot!" she yells, with a laugh, turning her eyebrows into a smile. "Don't even joke."

Months later, we sit in the Upright Citizens Brigade theater in New York City on Valentine's Day, losing our minds laughing to a long form improv show. It's my first time seeing improv and I love it. Afterward, we get in a fight and chase each other across



the city, yelling and trying to lose each other in traffic. We make up with a hug in the middle of Grand Central Station like characters in a screwball comedy, promising never to lose each other. Less than a year later, we break up over the phone while I'm driving home from my Critical Methods class in Florida and she's walking home from her improv class in New York.

\*\*\*

Clutching the sides of the podium, I try to contain my laughter. I'm sure that no one can hear me since I'm backstage running the lights and sound. Most people who come to these performance showcases don't realize there's a backstage area. Peeking through the slit in the velvet curtains, I can see the backs of three people who were in the audience just a minute ago. They're arranged like Russian nesting dolls, one in front of the other—one kneeling, another sitting, and the other standing—waving their arms like their at a luau. My colleague Teri stands next to them, asking questions fed to her by an audience that's hungry to keep laughing. They respond one word at a time, actors playing a three-headed monster or an "Oracle," as she calls them. Each response is more ridiculous than the one before it, striking the audience with absurdity every time they ask a question. I'm amazed and puzzled. How does each person playing the Oracle know when to stop talking without queuing each other?

Suddenly the middle person freezes. It's her turn to speak and her arms stop waiving. Her posture tightens and she sits straighter in the chair. The room goes silent and it's hard to breath. I glance at the front row of mouths hanging open like ventriloquist dummies as Teri plasters a smile on her face, sharpens her eyes, and searches the actor

for a response. It takes all of my willpower to keep from bursting through the curtains, shouting “Cats!” as a punchline to the Oracle’s “All-I-do-on-the-internet-is-watch...” set-up. There’s a feeling in my gut that’s pulling me toward the stage, something calling me to go play. I hold back because I’m afraid—afraid of what people will think of me, afraid of not being funny, afraid my cohorts will just add my stealing the spotlight to the growing list of strange things I’ve done since coming into the Ph.D. program. They don’t know that ever since I got here, all I’ve wanted to do is get back on stage.

“Spaghetti!” the middle person blurts out. A few pity laughs pop in the audience as Teri steps in front of the actors, yelling “End scene!” She thanks the crowd for watching. “This was a short form improv game,” she says, “which are a lot of fun and a great way to learn communication. Especially for students who struggle to talk in class—and teachers who wish they could think on their feet—improv helps you build self-confidence and learn trust. I’ll be offering an improv lab right here next semester for anyone interested. If you’d like to sign up, give me your email and I’ll be in touch. Have a good night!”

My finger is already on the mouse, ready to click the house music on as she ends the show. Flying past the curtain, I slow down and catch my breath as I approach, tapping her on the shoulder. She spins around with a smile as I lean in and make eye contact. In a very steady, hushed tone I say, “I *must* do this.”

\*\*\*

I show the audience the slip of paper that has the words “I want to have a baby” written on it as Hannah stands behind the door to the room so she won’t see it. They all

quietly sigh, leaning back with short grins and muffled comments to each other, waiting for the scene to start.

“Alright, Hannah, c’mon out,” Teri calls.

The door slides open and Hannah walks out, poised and ready to start. My goal is to find a way to get her to say the words on the paper without making it obvious.

Immediately, I envision a kitchen table and set up the chairs, perpendicular. I sit in one of them, cheating to the audience as she stands behind the other one with her back to the audience. She acts like she’s flipping pancakes. My hands hold a newspaper and I imagine that we’re in a 1950’s—a “typical” husband and wife about to eat breakfast.

“Do you want eggs?” she asks

“Uh huh,” I respond, not looking away from the paper.

“O.J.?” she asks.

“Yuuup,” I say, still searching the paper.

“*Bacon?*” she asks, trying not to sound annoyed. I break my concentration.

“No, no.” I say, “No bacon. I’m sorry honey, I’m just focused on finding a new job.” I pause, and then ask, “What would you think about moving away from here?” She turns and looks at me, showing her face to the audience.

“Well, yeah, *sure*. I guess if we *have* to. What’s wrong with the job you have now?” she asks.

“Well you know I’m not happy there, sweetie.” I pour on my best fifties overcompensating-male voice, letting my mind pull from the vault of Mad Men

characters I store in my head. “Plus it means spending more time at work away from you,” I say. She turns and looks at me dryly as she scoops eggs on a plate.

“I don’t want *that*,” she says, “I just wish you could be here more. I get so lonely.” Two-times she’s indicated that something is wrong, and it’s all that I need. I lower the paper, furrow my brow, and soften up.

“Hey darling, what’s wrong?” I ask. “You look like something’s bothering you—something you’re not telling me.” She sets down my plate on the table as we make eye contact, sharing a concerned expression. I sense that she wants something more.

“I *don’t know* George,” she says, as she plops down on the chair, holding the spatula in her hand and staring at it. “I guess I just feel like something’s missing. Don’t you ever want more?” I can tell that she gets the game of the scene.

“Well that’s why I want to find a better job, so I can provide better for us. But darling,” I say as I grab her hand resting on the imaginary table, getting her to look at me and put down the spatula, “We have each other and *that’s* what really matters. Now really, what is it you’re not telling me?” I plead.

“I think I want to have a baby,” she says.

“Lights!” Teri yells from the other side of the room. The crowd gasps in disbelief and bursts into applause as Hannah and I keep looking at each other, feeling like we just won the lottery.

\*\*\*

“I’m calling about the Tampa Improv Festival,” I say, as I turn left into the lot and park. “Yes, improv—that’s right, like jazz music but it’s theater. It’s like ‘Saturday Night

Live' without the scripts," I say. There's silence on the other end of the line. "Have you ever seen 'Whose Line Is It Anyway?'" I ask. "Yes! The one with Wayne Brady and Drew Carey. Yup, what we do is just like that, but live."

I glance at my reflection in the rearview mirror as I open the driver-side door, recognizing the frustration in my expression. I arrange to meet with a hotel manager next week about setting up a discount rate so traveling performers can rent affordable rooms when they come into town for the festival.

Lightly jogging across the middle of the street, I wave in apology to oncoming cars. The workshop starts in three minutes. Running up the stairs of the business building, I brainstorm another beat of my lesson plan with each step.

"Good afternoon, folks," I say, scanning over 60 students who circle the room. "Today is all about thinking on your feet and acting fast. Let's get everyone up and matched up with a partner." For the next two hours, I stand on a chair and speak at the top of my lungs, guiding them through basic improv exercises and explaining the ways that play applies to their professional lives.

Back in the car, I check my email as I come to a red light, realizing that Hannah and I have been accepted to DuoFest in Philadelphia. I shoot her a text with a smiley face and a plane emoji, happy to book another vacation. Pulling into a spot, I can see Terry standing outside the sandwich shop, holding papers.

"You been waiting long?" I ask. He's overly cordial, as usual.

"No, not at all." He holds the door as we walk in and I order a footlong. For the next hour he explains to me a special kind of show format he wants to try with his "indie

team” for Sunday night shows. I remind him not to make it too complex since it’s just a fifteen-minute show, and I riff with him about the possibilities for their performance. Afterwards, we talk about a new performance analysis system we’re developing based on the way he tracked stats of basketball players in high school.

“It’s a great idea,” I tell him.

Back on campus, I roll off the doorframe of a colleague’s office, starting down the hallway to Autoethnography class. As I plop my book down on the board room table, I look around to see faces I’ve known for years mixed with one’s I’ve only seen a few times. By the end of the semester, I’ll have seen nearly all of them with tears streaming down their faces.

“Good afternoon everyone!” Dr. E turns the corner of the table as she sits in her chair, always smiling on top of her tie-dye shirt, and carrying novels and files with drafts of student papers. “We’re gonna do some editing today, so pull out the scenes that you wrote. Before you all disappear with your writing partners we’re gonna talk about a few things.” She takes care of some basic administrative announcements before we break up and retreat to our offices, ready to read and edit each other’s narratives in another vulnerable meeting among peers. It’s something that doesn’t happen in other classes.

After class, I collect my things, evading long conversations with colleagues. I go around the back hallway of the Communication department office, slipping in the performance lab through the prop room door. As I enter through the curtain, I can hear a crowd making noise, laughing and talking about classes, making plans for the weekend, or chatting about previous scenes. This is one of my favorite parts of the day.

“Alright everybody, let’s circle up.” Participants slip off sandals and store their phones under their chairs, forming into a perfect circle. They start throwing an imaginary knife around the circle as I start warm ups, periodically stopping the game to explain its applications to tonight’s workshop. The workshop runs continuously for the next two hours.

“Great job tonight everyone,” I say as we all clap for ourselves, collecting our things. “Call for tomorrow’s show is 8 o’clock. See you then!”

The next day, Hannah and I stand outside theater running through our warm up. Inside, the show’s already started and the first team is on stage. We look into each other’s eyes, searching for the flare of connection that ignites our relationship on-stage when we perform. We mirror ridiculous faces and build verbal patterns in a machine-like fashion until laughter overtakes our ability to keep a straight face.

“You ready?” I ask as we walk toward the door. I already know the answer. She leans toward me as she opens the door, stopping me with her eyes before I meet her with a kiss.

“Of course,” she says.

\*\*\*

“And for you, sir,” the waiter asks, flipping a page in his notepad.

I look around the table and realize how much our improv company has grown since we started. Seven people who loved to do improv once a week has turned into a community of people more diverse in age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class than the

average population of the city. The waiter takes everyone's order, joking with each person as others chime in. Improvisers never do anything alone.

“What can I get you tonight?” The waiter moves around the end of the table.

Hannah sits across from me making silly faces at Leo, who sits next to me. Across from Leo, Carla and Matt sit close to each other. It's clear that her legs are draped over his lap, but they both act like they're not dating when anyone asks. Next to Matt, Rick leans across the table clasping hands with Kara as she hides a smile so bright it could replace all of the lights in the restaurant. He talks low, like Don Juan, wooing her with boyish glances and smooth gestures that make it look like he isn't trying. She eats it up. Tess and Karl sit next to Kara, watching her like they're not even in the room. Karl lightly holds her shoulders as they watch and Tess turns back to Karl every few seconds, responding to something that he keeps whispering into her ear. Every few minutes, Leo places another napkin on Karl's shoulder without him noticing, adding to a pile that's already ten napkins high.

“Can I get you anything?” the waiter asks. Leo lifts the menu off the table and starts to order.

Looking around the room, I can't help but wonder how many more romantic couples will form from improvising together. There's something about being vulnerable with each other on stage—about really letting your guard down and letting another person in as others watch. It's as though improv makes people close without them having to decide what to self-disclose, what to be sensitive about, and what to hide. It helps people see in an instant some of what lies behind each other's public mask. There's no hiding



your feelings in an improv scene done well. When the scene is over, the characters may be gone but the players remain the people who reacted instantaneously to each other—who didn't give in to social anxiety, weren't inhibited by their fear of judgement, and made it easy for others to play alongside them. They learn to make strong eye contact and read each other's body language, to touch each other when they need to, make space between them when it's called for, and to share in developing a reality that blossoms from their personalities but is grounded in the dynamics of their relationship. It's no wonder so many of them fall in love.

"Sir," the waiter asks. "Anything else for you?"

"No," I reply, handing him Hannah's menu. "She and I are gonna share."

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"Hey, congrats on getting that job!" I say. "Gonna be sad to see you go." Chris sets down a stack of papers on the table behind the copier as he glances over at me, eyebrows raised. His expression softens once he realizes it's me.

"Hey, thanks man. It's really awesome. I was worried for a little while that I wasn't gonna get anything, but this job is awesome. Have you been to App State?" he asks.

"I haven't but I went to Ohio University nearby, so I know what the area looks like. All mountains, right?" He shakes his head in affirmation.

"Yeah. The actual school and village sit right smack in the middle of mountain ranges, so it's beautiful. A really cool, progressive University, too, with lots of stuff to

get into.” He shuffles a few papers, getting them ready to copy. I take a stack off the machine, tapping them on the tray to square them up.

“Man, I hope I can find something like that when I’m ready to graduate” I say. I insert another document that disappears into the feeder.

“You’re about to start your dissertation phase, right?” he asks. I nod without looking, afraid to let him see my worry. “Do you know what you’re gonna look at?” he asks. He waits for my reply as I stall, arranging papers for the cutting board. I snap my head back to look at him, tossing him a bit of frustration.

“I don’t know,” I sigh. “Maybe education technology. Maybe Facebook pages left up after someone dies. I’m not sure anymore. I know that I have to pick something that I really *want* to do or I probably won’t finish.” He looks down and nods, bouncing his whole body.

“I figured you’d do something with improv,” he says, matter-of-factly. “That’s seems to be all you talk about anymore.” I’m a little taken off guard as he shoots his palm out, “–And I don’t mean that as a bad thing at all. I just figured that all the success you’ve had,” he fumbles a bit. “You and Hannah being engaged, performing together, running the business together, I mean, there’s gotta be some kind of relational study in there.” He holds his hand like a cup as he talks, gesturing in a way that only academics do. “I think you could talk about love and relationships and performance. At least it seems like improv involves all of those things, especially the way you guys do it.” I’m frozen in place holding collated papers up by my head.

“I never thought about it,” I say.

“You should,” he says. “Are you done?” he asks. He steps up to the machine as I grab my papers and step out of the way. I head for the door, congratulating him again as I leave.

As I turn the corner and walk down the long, white corridor of the department office, my mind fills the walls with scenes from my past. I see myself as a child, wishing I could be an actor. I remember moments from high school when I first got a crush on a dancer in the musical and getting into fights with my girlfriend about my mom. I remember my mom telling me I wasn’t good enough to make it as an actor and that I should go to school for Communication. I remember how Katy made the same argument when I applied for graduate school but thought about getting back into acting. I think about how much I wanted to study performance when I first arrived at USF five years ago and the moment I knew I needed to be an improviser. I think about how I fell in love with Hannah doing improv and that amazing scene we did about the baby, all of the other couples that formed since we started our improv company, and all of the other relationships that haven’t formed yet. Reflecting on all of it, I can’t help but wonder what it is about improv that brings us all together?

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My story is a story of adaptation and growth through relationships, where I searched for and found the freedom to “go for it” as an actor by becoming an improviser, led there partially by my need to feel vulnerable on stage and partially by making myself vulnerable to romantic partners who felt the same way. Even though my graduate department didn’t offer courses in improvisation, I discovered a way to remain open to

the possibility of performance by learning about narrative and autoethnography. These courses helped me understand the exhilaration I felt from both performing and being in close relationships. Either blind fate or dumb luck guided me into Teri's improv lab where the first scene I performed was with the person who would eventually become my off stage partner. Perhaps it was passion. Perhaps it was just where my story was headed. Perhaps it was just a part of my personal growth.

I understand growth as something that happens in relationships—not something that happens *to* a person but something that happens *between* people. Growth comes from figuring out how to get comfortable being in one's own skin in front of others, coming out of a protective shell to realize the full potential of love and possibility in one's as it's being lived. Being vulnerable, letting myself be myself, and letting others get close to me has always been my struggle. It's probably what drew me to the theater at a young age and, eventually, improv. It seems that learning how to be vulnerable is built-in to learning how to perform for others. My experiences with romantic relationships and with theater have always gone hand in hand, probably because I've always found it easier to talk to love interests in private after they watch me express myself in public. Improvisation has given me an outlet and a philosophy for understanding how to both *do* and *cope with* my vulnerability. As a result, I've learned to maintain better relationships.

According to Brown (2012), being vulnerable is problematic for most people. The solutions that I've found for dealing with vulnerability stem from the habits I've developed as an improviser, academic, and romantic partner. Doing improv has taught me how to operate with resilience and diligence, has allowed me to return to the

commitments I abandoned, and remake myself as a person invested in the well-being of others, able to open up to them and grow alongside them. The habits of communication that I've learned as an improviser has helped me remain emotionally and intellectually available to others, giving me a way to publically cope with very basic fears that are familiar to all of us but only talked about in the most intimate, private settings when we feel safe and we're surrounded by those closest to us.

Some people go to church to learn new habits, others join a bowling league or book club, and still others find the "bar crowd" more appealing. For me, improv, academia, and my romantic relationships provided the refuge I needed to refurbish the ways I learned to communicate. Unlike any other hobby, the intimacy people experience when they do improv together is rooted in the *way* they relate—in the *how*, not just the *what* or the *why*. The "meta-lifestyle" of improv drew me in right away, giving me a place to experiment with communication and have meaningful conversations without having to rely on intentional self-disclosure to feel close to others (Bochner, 1981). I've found that I feel closest to the people I trust on stage the most—the people I can rely on to interpret the world in similar ways, or at least understand how I'm inspired by them and make sense of our experiences together. Being an improviser means confronting vulnerability in a public, open way where everyone can "see" you do it and therefore means showing others how you "do" trust in relationships.

Though improvising has given me a chance to practice letting go as I make meaning with others and cope with my insecurities, it doesn't eliminate the fear, anxiety, or uncertainty that comes with committed relationships. In fact, it *induces* anxiety, which

gives me lots of practice taming my fears, countless chances to stay true to myself as I express myself, and requires me to honor the relationships and ways of relating that make me the person I want to be. I like to tell people that improvising helps me learn how to be comfortable with vulnerability. When I say that, I'm pulling again on Brown (2012), who claims that being vulnerable means experiencing “uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure” in our relationships (p. 33).

Brown (2012) thinks of vulnerability as the *stuff of courage*, those parts of our personalities that push us to take chances in our relationships and “put ourselves out there” as we communicate. According to Brown (2012), many people struggle with vulnerability, ultimately dismissing it as a “bad word” because they associate “*feeling with failing and emotions with liabilities*” (p. 34). Improvisers develop communication practices both on and off stage that habituate them to face and embrace feelings of failure and the liability of emotion, helping them use their vulnerability to keep themselves wide-open as performers. On and off stage, when they relate to each other they give each other the best chance they can to turn their fear into meaningful connection. In short, improvisers use skillful communication to turn being vulnerable into a social art.

Learning how to do this has lit a path in my life toward what Brown (2012) calls “wholeheartedness,” helping me do a better job staying in touch with my emotion—my vulnerability—and able to have more meaningful relationships that can last. Thinking of vulnerability as a weakness, showing no emotion, showing an overabundance of emotion, or avoiding intimate contact with others actually makes it *more* difficult to relate to others. That’s because people need the risk of communication to feel the sensitive urge to

protect each other. Being a wholehearted person means daring to be exposed for the emotion one feels in and through their relationships. In my story, I've tried to express how I have dared to become vulnerable through the relationships that eventually led me to improv, where I now practice vulnerability as a social art.

Discussing the nuances of embracing each other in our vulnerability, Brown's (2012) work shows how much more likely we are to shield ourselves from the perceived risk of letting others get close to us. She calls us to make vulnerability a permanent aspect of our relationships, akin to what is found on the pages of any improv manual (Spolin, 1963; Halpern, Close & Johnson, 1993; Halpern, 2006; Napier, 2004; Gwinn, 2007; Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008; Johnstone, 1981, 1999; Lynn, 2004; Koppett, 2013; Besser, Roberts & Walsh, 2013; Chin, 2009; Bernard, 2011; Jagodoski, Pasquesi & Victor, 2015). Her criteria for being "wholehearted" reflects the virtues that improvisers strive for as they learn and practice their craft, including authenticity, self-compassion, resilience, gratitude, intuition, creativity, playfulness, laughter, and the ability to remain calm. The connection between Brown's (2012) research on vulnerability and the practices of doing improv reveals that learning how to improvise means learning how to *do* vulnerability by exercising the willingness to *be* vulnerable.

In this dissertation, I observe the performance of four romantic couples who improvise together and whose experiences on stage inspired a romantic commitment off stage. With my own romantic partner and myself included, I explore the way improvisers in close relationships improvise on stage and off, falling into communication patterns that make them more or less vulnerable as they make meaning together. In the end, I embrace

Bochner's (1981) observation that what brings people together is not what keeps them together, adding that a couple's ability to reach a joint-perspective when making sense of the products of their relations may help them be vulnerable with each other in ways that can enhance their closeness, especially through metacommunication. The next chapter delves into the theoretical and conceptual foundations of this study.



CHAPTER 2:  
THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

*“Ars est celare artem, as the ancient Romans would say: the art is in concealing the art.”*  
–Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth In Comedy*

In this chapter, I describe the conceptual and theoretical foundations I draw on for studying the way couples improvise close relationships, connecting on stage to off stage relationships. First, I define improvisation as a kind of performance that leads to an interpretive practice where people develop the meanings of their relations, particularly what it means to be close. Following that, I offer a detailed account of the theoretical perspectives that guide my inquiry, providing an overview of how improvisation lends itself to staged comedy performances. Next, I describe how learning and doing improv can be understood as an interpretive practice, often times leading to the emergence of close relationships among performers who play together and learn about each other as their performances blur the boundaries of on stage and off stage relationships. Finally, I discuss how doing improv can lead to “close” relationships off stage. When performers talk about their performance off stage they are given a unique opportunity to metacommunicate about their relationship when they are vulnerable.

**Defining Improvisation**

Improvisation has deep roots in the history of performance, stemming from the folk drama of Commedia dell’Arte, which helped shaped the trajectory of comedy from

16th century Europe to the popular “happenings” of the 1960’s US (see Schechner, 2001). In these performances, performers engaged in sociocultural critique as they performed spontaneously with no script, relying upon familiar, socially recognizable tropes and roles to engage the audience. Although this kind of improvisational performance draws attention to the theatricality of everyday life, learning how to improvise takes practice. In their training performers learn to delineate between paramount reality and “the finite provinces of meaning” (Berger and Luckman, 1966) that emerge through their performance. “Special rules exist, are formulated, and persist,” Schechner (2003) says, “because these activities are something apart from everyday life” (p. 13). In short, improvisational performance makes a spectacle of the performance of everyday life.

Improv *comedy*, a theatrical style of improvisational performance deeply influential of mainstream film and television, has its own locus of global practitioners who draw crowds in metropolitan areas for shows, festivals, and classes that display and teach the virtues of improvisation. For the most part, improv comedy education has been the domain of its practitioners. While there recently has been a surge of research on improvisational performance (Caines & Heble, 2015) and there are books highlighting the applications of improv comedy pedagogy in organizational settings (Koppett, 2013), the virtues of improv comedy as it applies to close relationships has only recently evolved as a new academic territory.

### *Improvisation as Performance*

Schechner (2003) might classify all improv, both on stage and off stage, as an “illusionary mimetic theater” wherein the “seams joining drama to script to theater to performance” are intentionally hidden (Schechner, 2003, p. 72). Defined in the most general way, the term *im-provisation* refers to action despite direction, where *in-* means “not” and *-provisation* stems from the root word “provision” or “prior seeing.” When combined, they describe a state of affairs where there is no certain future but an effort made to act upon a future, nonetheless. The term describes *a means of communication that occurs in the presence of ambiguity—a modicum or orientation of action that involves social actors making meaning in process*. Thus, to improvise is to take uncertain action with confidence. According to Caines and Heble (2015), improvisation is a “form of artistic practice that accents and embodies real-time creative decision-making, risk-taking, trust, surprise, and collaboration,” which makes it a “key feature of interpersonal communication and social practice” (p. 2).

Taking a philosophical perspective, Peters (2009) suggests that improvisation is not necessarily *innovative*—though, in his formulation, it does lead to the emergence of novel ideas and gestures. Rather, he says it’s *renovative*—to improvise in not to recreate, but to recondition, origins. Understood in the broader context of social interaction, improvisation refers to a “doing by doing” (Rosenthal, 2009) that frees a person from social constraints while forcing them to confront their limitations (Schechner, 2003) as they perform in a particular context of conversation.

“I wasn’t sure what to do—I had to improvise,” we hear the mechanic, cook, actor, teacher, parent, *etc.*, say. Putting the idea of improvisation in social context to illustrate its communicative significance, Caines and Heble (2015) observe that Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech emerged from an improvised decision, made in response to an audience member shouting “Tell’em about the dream, Martin” (p. 2). They assert, “one of the most important lessons we can learn from improvisation [is] about enacting the very possibilities we envision” (p. 2).

When I talk about improvisation in the broader context of social interaction, I highlight its role in conversation. I’m curious about the way improvisation occurs in sequenced interaction, both verbal and nonverbal, which may include patterns and fluctuations of speech and coordinated meaning making through communication. Through alternation and turn-taking, systematization and organization of utterances, nuance in intonation, gaze and style, and the habituation and strategic use of linguistic devices (Gumperz, 1986; Schlegoff, 1986; Sacks, 1986; Goodwin, 1981; Tannen, 2005), people perform multiple selves (Goffman, 1959), enact different degrees of listening (Lapari, 2010), direct their attention (Madison, 2006), and open up possibilities for dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986; Bohm, 1996) as they relate to each other (Griffin & Patton, 1974; Baxter, 2011). The conversations that occur at different levels of social organization in different contexts or frames of reality lead to different kinds of performances that make improvising possible. Bauman (1986), in his study on oral narrative, draws the connection between performance and conversation concisely:

I understand performance as a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of

responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content...the enactment of the poetic function, the essence of spoken artistry. (p. 3)

### *Staged Improvisation*

Improv comedy, taken as a kind of improvisational performance, is “staged” conversation where the delineation between on and off stage personality is blurred. According to Schechner (2003), “Any behavior, event, action, or thing can be studied ‘as’ performance, can be analyzed in terms of doing, behaving, and showing” (p. 32). What makes improv comedy especially challenging to study is that improvisations of conversation occur on and off stage. Thus, to take improv comedy as improvisational performance is to recognize its duplicitousness, as something self-constituting, self-referential, and perhaps even self-defeating as *it produces relationships among performers that are not limited to on stage interactions*. When we think of improv comedy as improvisational performance, we are by necessity referring to moments on and off stage when conversation is fashioned between people so that it doesn’t *appear* to be a performance.

When performers’ confrontation with ambiguity is put on stage it becomes the object of a concentrated performance. As a result, it is easy to confuse or mistake the paramount reality of the “real life” relationship between performers with the performed reality they develop in their scenes. The dynamics of comedic improvisers’ relationships are enveloped by the dynamics of the relationships they perform both on and off stage. Thus, improv comedy as staged improvisational performance is a theatrical art form that features the crafting of conversation and the coordination of meaning making between

people whose performances are informed by the relationships they have off stage. Improv comedy performances are twice contextualized: meta-metacommunication takes place on the stage, which resembles (and often augments) the way the same performers communicate with each other off stage.

Performing in this sense is a relational feat of *performing performance*—the coordination of meanings about meaning making, which involves performers working together spontaneously. This is one way to talk about improvisation as *play*, which can be understood as a metacommunicative endeavor (Bateson, 1972) or a “mode” of communicating (Schwartzman, 1978) that erects a contextual frame for understanding behavior that does not necessarily denote what it would denote outside of the frame (Bateson, 1972; Nachmanovich, 1999). Apter (1991), building on the work of Huzinga (1949) and Callios (1961), thinks of play as a metaphysical space, describing it phenomenologically as a condition of motives or “play-state” wherein the player experiences “a protective frame which stands between [players] and the ‘real’ world and its problems, creating an enchanted zone in which, in the end, [players] are confident that no harm can come [to them]” (p. 15). The explanation echoes Neumann’s (1971) understanding of play as episodes where participants engage in the “make-believe suspension of some of the constraints of reality” (p. 124). Del Close, the late guru of improv comedy, called this kind of performance “art by committee” (Halpern, 2006). Typically, improv comedy involves two or more people who create scenes together while they are in dialogue (Buber, 1947), partake in *communitas* (Turner, 1986; Esposito, 2010), share in peak experience (Goodall & Kellet, 2006), tap into flow

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and find themselves “jamming” as they negotiate interdependence and autonomy, “temporarily los[ing] self-consciousness that can intrude on everyday life” as they show audiences *how* they form “strong, ecstatic bond[s]” (Eisenberg, 1990).

In short, by thinking about improv comedy as improvisational performance I am lead to consider it as an art form that stages the *play of relationships* because it foregrounds instances of conversation when performers coordinate meaning together improvisationally. I also acknowledge the likelihood that performers form and maintain relationships improvisationally both on stage and off stage as they talk about their performances. I’ve taken this premise as an invitation to look at the emergence of what Goffman (1974) calls “fabrications” or, as Collins (1988) eloquently puts it,

cases where people try to induce false beliefs about what is actually going on...[which]...add layers of reality on to ordinary activities, both because ordinary appearances are made to represent something that they are not; and because the participants can now have several layers of reality [of] which to pay attention. (p. 59)

Goffman (1974) showed that observing social situations in order to understand the contingencies of the ritualized aspects of performance can enrich the way we understand how people in relationships coordinate meaning publically, coping with the emergence of intimacy as they become vulnerable with each other. Staged improv comedy performances and conversation about them are “fabricated” social situations where performers develop and maintain relationships that appear to be close.

## *Guiding Principles of Improv Comedy*

Improv comedy is a unique realm of performance that touts its own practices and techniques. Hundreds of theaters and community centers around the world offer improv classes that teach people how to play with meanings spontaneously on stage, performing unscripted plays. Though there are as many ways to teach improvisation as there are training programs for doing so, the coherence of staged improv scenes rely upon fundamental guiding principles that are relatively universal (Hauck, 2012). I have narrowed these principals to three fundamentals: 1. *Agreement*—particularly regarding the symbolic nature of the “reality” of the scene; 2. *Initiation*—constructing a scene in a way that invites the other to participate in a relationship that is grounded in the scene’s “reality” as it emerges; and 3. *Game*—recognizing and playing out interaction patterns of a scene that heightens the performer and audience involvement in the action, often raising the stakes of the characterized relationship. In this section, I briefly discuss each principal.

### Agreement

In the beginning of any improvised scene, performers are trained to find agreement right away by accepting all additions made to the scene (i.e., “offers”). Offers further define the “reality” that is under construction. I use the term “agreement” broadly to refer to offers that become “endowments” about the characters, relationships, locations/time, emotional point of view, etc, of the scene. By accepting offers as endowments, performers find their way into an autotelic state (Apter, 1991) of play where they can suspend their judgements about these attributions and accept them as



constituting a “reality” they can respond within honestly. Agreement is the invisible contract in the scene, signed by performers with every accepted offer that they honor. Acknowledging and participating in endowing a scenic “reality” enables both performers and audience to suspend disbelief. Performers are able to quickly construct a “reality” that will be further developed, augmented, and adjusted as the scene unfolds.

Besser, Roberts and Walsh (2013) highlight a few ways that agreement can be disrupted in a scene, which in their experience leads to performer and audience confusion. They explain that commitment to performance choices made at the beginning of a scene helps maintain the illusion of the “reality” under construction. To them, “unintentional detachment” and “ironic detachment” are both performer behaviors that “make it difficult for [the] audience to stay engaged in the base reality of the scene” (p. 49). They also suggest that variations of denial—such as “being inattentive” or fighting over “dueling initiations”—challenge the trust between performers and make it difficult to remain in agreement (p. 56-57). They conclude that agreement is largely an outcome of emotional intelligence, which leads performers spontaneously to honor endowments. We might think of agreement as the active pursuit of empathy in the minutia of the other performer’s choices.

Lynn (2004) explains that agreement can break down because of negating and denying offers. “*Negating* is the undoing of your partner’s information...[and]...*Denying* is the refusing of your partner’s *offer*” (p. 24). He urges compliance-in-principal and directs performers to avoid arguing, giving each other instructions, asking each other questions, playing ridiculous characters, endowing each other as strangers, planning

ahead, using offensive language, and making jokes. To him, all of these behaviors lead to decision making that eschews agreement. Being able to sustain agreement in the performance means participating in intense listening and acknowledging the other's offers as concrete, "real" statements.

### Initiation

All improv scenes start with some nonverbal and verbal initiation—an offer that in some way marks the beginning of an interaction pattern that develops a "reality" by inviting a response. Napier (2004) urges performers to do *anything* at the top of a scene to jump start this process. For Napier (2004), "*that* you do something is far more important than *what* you do" (p. 15). Declaring a position immediately through verbal or nonverbal offers helps performers act instinctively, ensuring that their characters have a firm and reliable point of view as the scene progresses. Making the first move lessens the other's ambiguity about how to respond, which hastens the emergence of a dynamic relationship between characters. According to Napier (2004), "improvisation's success does not lie in premise, but in the audience's perception of relationship created through point of view or character or some other deal" (p. 21). Initiations are best tailored to invite agreement about a "reality" as quickly as possible.

There are two general approaches to initiating an improv scene—*organic* and *premise* (Besser, Roberts & Walsh, 2013). Taking an *organic* approach, anything can be used to inspire scenes—a word, a gesture, a tone of voice, etc. Though the tradition in long form improv is to start a scene with an audience-offered suggestion, some performers refuse to rely solely on the audience for their inspiration, instead drawing inspirational

material from each other, other performers, or previous scenes. These scenes tend to be more difficult to perform and demand a great deal of trust between the performers.

Jagadowski, Pasquesi and Victor (2014) use the ideas of “heat” and “weight” to articulate the ways that information is gleaned from other performers to inspire scenes organically. They define “heat” as “the intimacy and intensity of the relationship” (p. 108) and “weight” as “the import and tone of the situation” (p. 110) that emerges through each player’s performance. Assessing each other’s micro expressions, involuntary nonverbal cues, and tonal adjustments help performers make assumptions that presume a particular type and kind of relationship that can be performed. Like Besser, Roberts and Walsh (2013), Jagadowski, Pasquesi and Victor’s (2014) insights highlight the minutia and simplicity of organic initiations and urge performers to listen deeply, suspend judgement of their own ideas, and use their initial interpretations of the other performer to initiate scenes.

Taking a *premise* approach to start scenes, performers gloss over initial interpretations of micro expressions and quickly move to verbally defining *who* they are to each other, *where* the scene is taking place, and *what* the characters are doing. This establishes a “platform” (Johnstone, 1994) or “base reality” (Besser, Roberts & Walsh, 2013) that reduces uncertainty immediately. Performers playing with premise initiations also strive to include some absurd, unexpected, or nonrational component in their first offer—often called the “first unusual thing” (Besser, Roberts & Walsh) or “tilt” (Johnstone, 1994) of the scene—that helps them move the action of the scene forward. Performer and audience attention is drawn away from discovery-based endowments of

organic initiations and is instead directed toward the exploration and heightening of comical aspects of the character's relationship. This "game-based" approach is more efficient for producing comic scenarios and less risky for performers who seek to make an audience laugh. Instead of negotiating organic interpretations of each other, premise initiations challenge performers to develop the pattern of interaction from the very first offer, finding substance in the heightening (as opposed to the discovery) of emergent meanings.

While *organic* initiations tend to lead to scenes where the primary performance activity is discovery, *premise* initiations downplay the need for discovery by providing necessary information quickly for exploring and heightening interaction patterns seeded by the incongruity of the first unusual aspect of the scene. In both approaches, endowing each other with a character that has a strong point of view and honoring each other's endowments is essential. Both approaches give performers different initiation strategies for improvising relationships, but both are based on making sure the initiation invites agreement.

### Game

Once a scene has been initiated and a "base reality" has been established performers strive to remain in agreement as they get deeper into the "make believe" of the performance. They may consciously or unconsciously, subtly or overtly, challenge each other to expand on endowments and meanings that have already developed. While at the outset of a scene it makes sense to honor everything that is endowed (typically by saying, "Yes, and..." in some fashion), once the first unusual thing appears in the scene

and the “base reality” is tilted toward a comic idea, agreement becomes more complex. Performers strive to make the incongruity of the unusual aspects of the scene more pronounced as it progresses. They work together to both heighten the comic idea that perpetuates this incongruity in the direction of absurdity and sustain their agreement by continuing to honor the “base reality” of the scene.

Improvisers call this “playing the game” (Besser, Roberts & Walsh, 2013) of the scene, which involves having a grasp of the emergent interaction pattern (i.e., the “moves” being made to heighten the absurdity) so that they can be fully engaged in its perpetuation without compromising their ability to remain in agreement. As the scene unfolds, more is revealed about the “base reality” through variations put on the interaction pattern as the game is played. As the game continues, the content of character dialogue and action may change, but the core interaction pattern remains. When the game is no longer playable, it’s because the pattern has been blocked, changed, or heightened to its peak. To summarize, performers look for and enact interaction patterns that help them maintain a “base reality” and explore and heighten the incongruous elements of a scene, constituting a game that allows them to perform a unique character and relationship along the way.

According to Besser, Roberts and Walsh (2013),

Repeatedly answering the question ‘If this thing is true, then what else is true?’ creates a comic pattern. Each answer to this question (or similar, related versions of this question) is called a ‘Game move.’ A combination of game moves forms a pattern that we call a ‘Game’. (p. 65)

Playing the game of the scene also involves heightening the stakes of the character's relationship in ways that deepen the characters' point of view and more explicitly reveals underlying relational tensions that are linked to the incongruity. "With a Game," Besser, Roberts and Walsh (2013) continue, "you put boundaries on what choices you could be making and, in doing so, lighten your cognitive load" (p. 47). Thus, as soon as the comic pattern is identified the scene progresses naturally as performers explore, discover and heighten the "reality" of the scene.

Klein (2011) suggests that there is an unspoken "rule of three's" that drives scenes forward, making it easier on the performers to sustain agreement as they play games. At the top of a scene, each offer narrows the possible patterns that performers can enact. According to Klein (2011), "three [offers] is all you need for a pattern—the rest of the [offers] basically need to fall in line" (para 5). Though her explanation refers to a scene with more than three performers, the same procedure of pattern building applies to improv scenes with any number of performers on stage. She explains that the first three offers of a scene can be characterized by the ideas of *freedom*, *power*, and *responsibility*:

Start with Person One. He has the freedom to choose from anything in the world of things and ideas. He could say "octopus" as easily as he could say "loneliness", and no one can argue that he is wrong on either account. He is free to say whatever comes to mind.

Person Two then has her chance. Hers is a position of power. No, she did not get to create the pattern, but she now holds a single point in her hand, and gets to control the direction in which it will travel. From the word "red", for example (and my favorite example for the pattern game, because colors are both very concrete and potentially very abstract nouns, so they present so many possible patterns), she can say "blue" to establish a pattern of colors, but she could just as well say "printed" and turn "red" into "read" and set up a pattern of past tense verbs involving things done to or with

words. She could say “platelet” and you have a pattern of words involved with blood (“blood”, incidentally, does not fit this pattern, because it is the pattern). The world of ideas has been reduced by Person One, but Person Two chooses where to go from there. She sends us in a direction.

To Person Three [or the person playing that part], then, falls responsibility. The pattern has been set in motion, and clearly enough so that the third choice should be clear. It is the responsibility of Person Three to listen to and acknowledge the direction in which the pattern has gone. It would do no good for “red” and “blue” to be followed by “printed”, even if “printed” could have been a word that would have followed “read.” But it is equally irresponsible for person three to follow “red” and “blue” with “color”, since the first two words were not category names but actual color names. It is always hardest to be Person Three, but it is also the position that produces the most satisfaction in both the players and the audience when executed correctly.

Performers’ abilities to follow the basic principles of *agreement*, *initiation*, and *game* impacts how vulnerable they can be with each other on stage. These three principals take practice to master, which typically involves great potential for failure. Performing without adhering to them often leads to anxiety and fear, feeling exposed as an unreliable, uninspired, or generally incapable performer who is unable to develop and maintain the suspension of disbelief during a performance. A performer’s capacity for experiencing vulnerability in this way is at the core of his or her ability to improvise relationships and is often the subject of post-performance reflections with fellow performers.

### *Improv Comedy as Interpretive Practice*

I was first trained to improvise in 2012 in a ten-week program offered by a student in my graduate cohort who trained at The Second City in Los Angeles in the early 2000’s. After my initial training, I found myself not only drawn to the stage, but also

enamored with what I perceived as a crossover between the wisdom of improv classes and the philosophical tenets of dialogue and interpersonal communication theory. Listening to others, suspending assumptions, remaining open, acting boldly, and welcoming surprise were valuable lessons embedded in both my graduate classes and improv training. In my mind, what I was learning about the applications of communication theory by reading the works of Buber (1947), Laing (1961), Goffman (1976), and Bateson (1972) corresponded with the teachings of renowned improvisers like Spolin (1963), Johnstone (1981), Halpern (2006), and Napier (2004). In the years to follow, I traveled the country taking workshops, teaching workshops, and performing at festivals so I could absorb as much as possible about how to improvise on stage. I quickly learned that the communication skills I was cultivating in myself and others not only worked for making spontaneous comedy in collaboration with others, but also brought us into close relationships very quickly. As I began teaching applied improvisation to business students and working professionals, I was exposed to the work of Koppett (2001) and Madson (2005), along with the sub-universe of applied improv practitioners who circle the globe teaching communication skills associated with improv to non-actors.

My experience as an improv comedy director and producer involves teaching others the skills that I have learned through my experience, as well as adopting and adapting different improv formats for the stage. Improv formats help performers express their “groupmind” (Halpern, Close & Johnson, 1993) in a nuanced way, giving them guidelines for performing variations on overarching themes discovered and developed as the show progresses. Formats are comparable to different kinds of dance—where a style of



dance like *salsa* is enacted by putting variations on a predetermined three-step-move, improv formats help performers put comic variations on a three-beat-show as they adhere to a predetermined scenic structure.

Within the constraint of a format, improvisers are free to explore, discover, and heighten whatever characterizations, relationships, locations, worlds, or realities they can symbolically construct through their initiations, sustained agreement, and game play. Although a format serves as a general guideline for the performance, the performer's decisions are ultimately emergent, contingent upon their ability to honor endowments and sustain agreement while finding and playing games.

There are myriad formats that have been popularized and canonized by different institutions where improv comedy is staged, including but not limited to single-scene deconstructions (“monos”), cinematic progressions (“montages”), linear narratives, generic stories, and free-form scenic modulations. Formats take shape as performers use stage editing techniques that allow them to begin and end scenes in different ways and at different times, including reprising scenes, role-playing different characters, reintroducing games, and developing different themes to “riff on” or build ideas on as they interact. The structures that emerge from the nuanced editing that takes place helps guide and continuously orient performer behavior as they communicate on stage. Thus, the practice of improv comedy is less inclined toward ongoing invention than it is toward ongoing interpretation and renovation of emergent games and themes that develop over the course of a performance.

The product of a staged improv performance ultimately depends on the way the format is processed. Thus, each performance is highly nuanced and each performer contributes idiosyncratically. As a result, no two shows are ever alike. Regardless of the format performed, audience attention is drawn to the ongoing development of relationships as the show progresses. This may include the dramatic potential of scenes, surprises and “mistakes” performers make along the way, their transformations of character, the permutations of the theme as the show progresses, performers ability to remember and “call back” characters and games from earlier in the performance, as well as the performers’ capacity for vulnerability as they discover and heighten comic games. Formats give performers a framework for rendering different kinds of performances that foreground particular kinds of spontaneous meaning making.

#### *Close Relationships Among Improvisers*

I come to this study as both a practitioner and ethnographer of improvisation. Just as well, I am an autoethnographer of my own romantic relationships, connecting my personal experiences to social, cultural, and global issues that encompass relationality (Riggs, 2013). Combining these interests and aspects of my identity, I find myself particularly curious about how and why improvisation leads people into close relationships. Unlike other kinds of public performance, improvisation draws people who willingly make themselves vulnerable with strangers in public as they perform and play with the way they do relationships. For improvisers like me, being vulnerable with a person on stage often leads to deep bonds off stage because the bonds I form through improv are predicated by trust in performance. Nearly all improv groups that I have

encountered consist of some couples in close relationships and typically, at least a few performers in each group are romantically involved. Practicing improv comedy can quickly lead to the development of relationships off stage as the experience performing together lays a foundation for discussing vulnerability and relationships. In other words, experienced performers learn how to relate to each other by experimenting (or playing) with their relationships on stage and talking about how they do that off stage. The dynamics discovered in their performances become the substance of conversation that can sometimes invite fiery debates and other times instigate intimate disclosures about why certain decisions were made.

Over the years, I've come to realize that the close relationships that come about by doing improv comedy teach couples how to metacommunicate (Bateson, 1972) about their relationships. Performers become vulnerable when they do improv on stage and when they talk about their performances off stage. Their vulnerability is often carried across the threshold of the stage and the cycle is continued as they talk about their performance afterward in preparation for their next performance. Performers often reveal what may otherwise be guarded perceptions and feelings about social, political, spiritual, and relational aspects of their life as they talk about the way they play with others.

Like my partner and myself, couples who get close through improv tend to acutely recognize and poignantly address their own and others communication patterns. Not a day goes by when my partner and I don't have in-depth conversations about why other performers may have made the decisions they made on stage. These conversations often lead to discussions about how we perceive their off stage relationship, why they do

improv, and what makes them vulnerable. “She does that because she’s uncomfortable with her sexuality,” I may say, or “They play characters like that because they’re looking for *any* excuse to touch each other,” my partner may say. In these conversations, we knowingly blur our interpretations of performer’s off stage personalities with their on stage tendencies, trying to integrate our interpretations about why they do what they do and how we might help them grow as performers and people.

Our ability to understand the way a person plays with others has to do with our sense of their emotional sensibility and development. Since improvising involves acting out interpretations of situations on stage as they emerge, a large part of any improviser’s identity involves processing their emotions publically. Conversations about improv in general and performers specifically are therefore more or less intimate by necessity. Put another way, personal beliefs—about self, society, and others—are often exposed in improv scenes and become the province of public conversation. Off stage relationships can inspire scenic development that leads to trust on stage, and vice versa. Thus, improv scenes may affect the development of relationships off stage as performers get close by interpreting their performances together. Furthermore, the communication skills performers acquire and develop in public often informs the way they communicate in private.

A quick example from my own experience will help illustrate this. During a performance in rehearsal, my romantic partner and I discovered in the first moments of a scene that our characters were “just friends” playing in the snow. We quickly realized that our characters were attracted to each other but bashful about it. After flirting while

making snow angels, we found ourselves looking down at the marks we made in the snow, discussing our reservations about the shape of our bodies. The scene ended with me tenderly reassuring her that I find her attractive despite her fears about being overweight. I tell her not to fear her feelings and that she can trust me. By the end of the scene, it was difficult to tell the difference between our characters and ourselves.

In our relationship off stage, my partner and I know each other's struggles with body image well. At the time, it was something we talked about nightly. On stage, our characters became surrogates for exploring the themes of those conversation performatively, giving us the opportunity to address an emotionally polarizing aspect of our relationship through the guise of improvised characters. We talked about the scene for weeks to follow, replacing conversations that were timid and careful with discussions that were intense and cathartic. It seemed as though the scene helped us be more vulnerable with each other, giving us a chance to negotiate a joint-perspective about how and why were attracted to each other.

The other performers in rehearsal said that watching our scene was like being a fly on the wall of our past. To them, it was like watching a moment from a documentary about us falling in love. Though we admitted we'd never actually played together in the snow, we did acknowledge that the scene tapped into something deep between us, making us feel vulnerable while we performed it. Mainly, it revealed something that helped us get close to each other in the first place—admitting our shame about the way we looked without feeling judged. Moving forward from that rehearsal, our conversations about the scene helped us reflect on how we felt similarly or differently than the

characters we had created on stage. Talking about the performance decisions we made became a way of talking about the decisions we made in our relationship. It made us more sensitive to each other's fears and assumptions, more vulnerable to each other and, ultimately, closer. Our on stage characters reflected and refracted our off stage selves (art mimicking life) and so our dialogue in the scene was a precursor for conversations we would have later (life mimicking art).

After this experience, I realized that doing improv with my partner could create opportunities for recognizing, discussing, and adjusting communication between us. We could use our performances to enact relationships that we could interpret later, making the negotiation of individual interpretations an endeavor in joint sense-making about why we make decisions in relationships. The fact that we do improv *comedy* encourages us to remain in agreement and heighten patterns that we discover in our performances, which often reveals aspects of our relationships that aren't obvious to us otherwise.

Comedic improvisers are taught to remain in agreement with their performance partners in order to discover a "comic corrective frame" (Burke, 1984) as they engender everyday conversations. Burke (1984) argues that the "comic corrective" frame is a lens for understanding the moral conditioning of reality, helping people transcend "tragic," dichotomous frames for interpreting phenomena (i.e., good/evil) and widen the scope of their sense making abilities. When used to examine close relationships, deep realizations about subliminal meanings come into view. Using a comic corrective frame to understand relational tensions can help couples become "observers of themselves, while acting" and "transcend[ing]' [themselves] by noting [their] own foibles," resulting in "maximum

consciousness” (p. 171) as they realize that their relations are always implicated by the way they moralize and rationalize their decision making. It can lead couples to enact what is commonly referred to as *humility*.

Since staged improv comedy scenes are grounded in agreement, taking risks with characters and revealing emotions and thoughts on stage can instigate reflection and change in a relationship off stage. Vice versa, if performers have experience in a close relationship off stage, their relationship may also guide the moves they make on stage, which means that improvisers in close relationships extend each other opportunities to use improv as an interpretive practice, where their performance training helps them more effectively metacommunicate. In my own personal experience and in this study, reflexive dialogue between romantically involved couples fosters conversations about the ways both people perform partner on and off stage. Improvising together puts the couple in a position to acknowledge their relationship as *an intimate sphere* where they become more or less vulnerable, “correcting” to each other as they adapt their interactions to negotiate a joint-perspective about how they play. In other words, improvising can help couples widen the scope of their interpretive capacities, giving them unique opportunities to metacommunicate their relationship in novel ways to become close.

In the next chapter, I develop an ethnographic method that combines interpersonal theory with improv comedy performance, explaining the procedures involved in conducting a performance ethnography for studying the ways couples improvise their relationships on and off stage, how they make themselves vulnerable doing so, and how that influences their ability to remain close. Following that, I describe a performance

where four couples (my partner and me included) perform together and reflect on the performance in post-performance focus groups.



## CHAPTER 3: TOWARD A QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY OF IMPROV AS RELATIONSHIP

In this chapter, I develop a qualitative methodology for studying relationships as improvisational performances. First, I discuss the connections between interpersonal communication theory and the practices of improv comedy, integrating the work of key relational scholars whose insights help me develop a method for analyzing the way people interact and become vulnerable as they perform their relationships. Next, I discuss the way I adapted the popular improv format “Armando” for a performance ethnography that gives improvisers in romantic relationships an opportunity to reflect on their performances in post-performance focus groups. Finally, I explain the procedures involved in observing and analyzing the performance and focus groups. Following this chapter, I discuss the performance and focus groups and my interpretations of how the couples involved in the study improvise their relationships on and off stage.

### **Developing the Method**

Interpersonal communication and improv comedy gives people different ways to arrive at insights about their relationships. Both give people a means of understanding how, why, and to what ends interpersonal bonds form between people. Both encourage performative modes of presenting and articulating evocative and novel insights about relationships. Both potentially promote better understanding of self and other through the

exploration of meanings made in a diversity of contexts, and both elicit interpretive practices that are motivated by a spirit of inquiry, advancing a pragmatic humanist agenda regarding the cultural conditioning of social life. In practice, interpersonal communication researchers observe phenomenon, interpret data, and write papers while comedic improvisers observe behavior, interpret scenes, and act them out. There is good reason to believe that insights from both fields can be incorporated and applied to the study of close relationships.

Following Gergen & Gergen's (2013) promise that performative social science enriches research by "promising new vistas" (p. 47) of alternative/alterative ways of knowing, I seek to bring the insights of interpersonal communication researchers and comedic improvisers together in a qualitative methodology that acknowledges improv comedy performance as an interpretive practice where people work on their relationships in playful ways. Adapting a classic improv format into a ethnographic research method and conducting focus groups where performers are asked to make sense of their performances together, I explore the ways couples coordinate meanings on and off stage, renovating what it means to be close. In this section, I discuss how the interpersonal perspectives of Pearce (2007), Rawlins (1983), and Goffman (1967) guide my development of a method for studying how couples improvise close relationships. I conclude by describing the format I adapted for the performance portion of the study, how I formed focus groups, and the procedures involved in conducting the research.

### *A Communication Perspective*

As a theoretical paradigm, taking a communication perspective means attending to the patterns of interaction that emerge in relationships as individuals make meaning together. Put simply, the researcher looks for the emergent “rules” of conversation that correspond with the emergent “roles” people play in their relationships. To understand the ways that people in relationships make meaning is to look at how they coordinate their speech acts and how they become more or less vulnerable doing so.

Speech acts can range from a classroom lecture to a passing smile and are often sequenced in turns as people interact, creating speech episodes. Identifying the boundaries of these episodes means analyzing the turns people take as they interact and derive meanings from conversation. Looking at the turns of conversation in improvised scenes and in the conversations about those scenes invites a novel form of analysis where the object of study is the performer’s relationships, in this case romantic relationships.

Pearce (2007) points out that looking at episodes of speech for turns of conversation also means looking for the completion of meanings, which may be found at varying points in the episode. In Pearce’s (2007) words, “we should be open to the possibility that what we do ‘now’ will have greatest effect on actions that happened some turns ago, not necessarily the most recent turn” (p. 118). Examining performers’ scenes and focus group conversations as separate episodes in this study, I determine how sequences become meaningful for couples as they interpret their performances.

Pearce (2007) also suggests that looking at episodes analytically means *framing* the episode by selecting what constitutes a speech act and how it forms a sequence.

Researchers derive the punctuation of the episode by determining its beginning and end, ascertaining the emplotment of a story that is told by the episode as they decipher the contextual hierarchies of different speech acts. Study participants derive meaning from episodes by ordering speech acts and interpreting them in specific contexts. Determining how speech act ( $x$ ) is being interpreted *in the context* of ( $y$ ) by the participant ( $z$ ) reveals the way individuals frame their interpretations and prioritize some contexts over others. In this study, I focus on how each individual interprets interactions with their partner in either the *context of their relationship* or *the context of the performance*, paying close attention to each couple's ability to agree on one of these frames for making sense of their performance from a joint-perspective.

Finally, Pearce (2007) points out that some speech acts move people to respond in particular ways. They carry with them a "logical force," or a felt injunction, that provokes a "sense of 'oughtness'; [a] sense that if he, she, or it has done 'this' then we may, must, or must not do 'that'" (p. 120). He concludes that generally, "whatever the logical force of a situation impels us to do will perpetuate whatever pattern is occurring" (p. 120). Based on this explanation of logical force, I look at the way couples are "moved" toward positions that make them more or less vulnerable, inducing their partner to "correct" to their position as they relate.

### *Interpersonal Freedom*

In his study of close friendship, Rawlins (1983) seeks to "identify informal relational logic(s) that governed [friends'] communication" (p. 258). According to Rawlins (1983), the dependence/independence dialectic of close relationships constituted

a blend of autonomy and interdependence through ongoing relations that “must be continually, though not always explicitly, negotiated” (p. 265). The freedom to be independent of the other and the freedom to be dependent on the other formed the basis of what Oppenheim (1960) calls “interpersonal freedom,” or the state of “being free to do something with respect to someone else” (p. 373). Rawlins (1983) claims that close relationships, especially friendships, are maintained by an individual’s ability to *choose* to remain close to the other person by enacting contradictory freedoms of dependence or independence. If one of the freedoms ceases to be exercised in the relationship, the ability to exercise it atrophies and the closeness of the relationship is threatened. “There are thus relational restrictions upon freedom; neither party can be totally independent or dependent. But limiting both parties’ individual liberties makes possible their jointly experienced freedoms” (p. 265). Put another way, how close two people are in a relationship is contingent upon how much they are able to act independent of, and dependent on, each other. Thus, what makes people close is their ability to maintain a sense of *confidence* in the relationship that it will continue to produce equitable conditions for acting both dependently and independently.

For Rawlins (1983) interpersonal freedom is an ironic freedom, always existing within the limitations of the moves people make toward positions that make them vulnerable. This is concurrent with Peck’s (1978) view of loving relationships, wherein he claims that too much dependency is indicative of a person’s emotionally parasitic intentions, as well as Frankfurt’s (2004) conclusion that care-based relationships necessitate a posture of independence as partners “incur substantial vulnerabilities” (p.

63) communicating their care to each other. Ultimately, Rawlins (1983) concludes, “The irony of such potentially limited interpersonal freedoms should be particularly evident in the communicative practices by which friends manage their patterns of independence and dependence” (p. 257).

The dialectic between independent and dependent moves an individual makes as they relate to their partner is indicative of the degree to which they can be vulnerable and maintain the closeness of their relationship. The more independent their actions, the less vulnerable they become but the more vulnerable the other becomes to injunctions on their ability to act dependently; inversely, the more dependent their actions, the less vulnerable they become but the more vulnerable the other becomes to injunctions on their ability to act independently. Ideally, interpersonal freedom entails maintaining a comfortable balance between independence and dependence.

Presumably, if both partners act predominately independent or dependent, interaction patterns emerge within a realm of *codependence* as they become reliant on the other to mandate the terms of their relationship. However, if both partners continue to make both dependent and independent moves, interaction patterns emerge within the realm of *interdependence*. They become more vulnerable with each other as they both become involved in delineating the terms of their relationship. In this study, I use this ideation of interpersonal freedom to assess the experience of vulnerability in relationships, observing the way partners move and are moved by each other, constituting equitable or inequitable conditions for confident relations (i.e., belief and trust in each other).

Equitable conditions for communicating extends partners an opportunity to be more vulnerable with each other on and off stage. Thus, it's easier for partners to trust each other, taking risks heightening comic games on stage and addressing the decisions they made off stage. Inequitable conditions for communicating places injunctions on one or both partners, prohibiting them from acting independently or dependently when they choose, therefore limiting the interpersonal freedom of the relationship, making it harder for them to trust each other on and off stage. While equitable conditions can increase confidence in the relationship, inequitable conditions can call that confidence into question.

To offer a simple example of the difference between these two conditions, imagine a moment when a person complains to their partner about a mutual friend and afterward says, "I'm sorry for complaining" as opposed to "Thank you for listening." The former remark *assumes* that the other is burdened by their complaint, necessarily limiting the other's freedom to have their own, independent thoughts about the matter. The latter makes room for the other to respond however they like, opening a moment for uncertainty so their partner can choose how to think independently. As Oppenheim (1960) remarks, "the contradictory of interpersonal unfreedom is not interpersonal freedom, but the *absence of unfreedom*—which is not the same" (p. 376). I use the terms "equity" and "inequity" to point at this difference because where interpersonal freedom exists, so does the capacity to be more vulnerable, reach a joint-perspective that integrates both partner's interpretations, and remain close.

*Performing Relationships*

Pearce's (2007) and Rawlin's (1983) insights suggest that relationships, like selves, are performances where people negotiate meanings and make sense of their interactions together. Goffman (1959; 1967) offers helpful language for observing and describing these performances, framing all social interaction as a matter of "stage-craft and stage management" (Goffman, 1959, p. 15) where relating means playing a "part" or doing a "routine" (p. 16) in the ongoing drama of everyday life.

When two people communicate, they start from scratch to constitute a reality by acting out a "line" or what Goffman (1967) calls "a pattern of verbal or nonverbal acts by which he [or she] expresses [his or her] view of the situation and through [his or her] evaluation of the participants, especially [his or her] self" (p. 5). The line that two people take as they position themselves to relate to each other "provide[s] a plan for the cooperative activity that follows" (Goffman, 1959, p. 12), helping them "define the situation and start to build up lines of responsive action" (p. 10). Like in an improv scene, their ability to remain in agreement is contingent upon the initial offer that's made and the corrective "additions and modifications" they make to stay in line with each other. Also like in an improv scene, a pattern (or game) emerges that shapes the interaction. As Goffman (1959) puts it, "it is essential that these later developments be related without contradiction to, and even built up from, the initial positions taken" (p. 10). In his observation, it is easier for people to remain in agreement with each other by staying in line with their initial offer than it is for them to alter the line later.

Still, alterations happen as two people communicate. These "corrections" help ensure their communication remains coherent and helps them stay in line with each other.



Corrective moves may catch one or both people off guard, causing them to challenge the sincerity of the performance of their relationship, often leading to a new pattern (or game). Goffman (1959) uses the term “sincere” (p. 18) when he refers to a performance that maintains the integrity of a relationship, where a person sustains their “poise” as they “suppress and conceal” their shame about being out of line (Goffman, 1967, p. 9). The less sincere a performance is, the more “securities and defenses” (Goffman, 1959, p. 19) each person has to negotiate as they put on a “face” for each other. According to Goffman (1959),

A person may be said to *be in wrong face* when information is brought forth in some way...which cannot be integrated...into the line that is being sustained for [him or her]. A person may be said to *be out of face* when he participates in a contact with others without having ready a line of the kind [the other] participants...are expected to take...[and] “to give face” is to arrange for another to take a better line than he might otherwise have been able to take. (p. 8-9)

Experiencing a change in face as a result of corrections made during communication can evoke powerful emotional responses. Goffman (1967) points out, “If the encounter sustains an image for [a person] that is better than [he or she] might have expected, [her or she] is likely to ‘feel good’; if [his or her] ordinary expectations are not fulfilled...[he or she] will ‘feel bad’ or ‘feel hurt’” (p. 6). Put another way, the less a person is affected by corrections, the less vulnerable they will be. The more affected, the more vulnerable they will be.

Whatever the appearance and manner of the two people, as they communicate there usually is an expectation that both will do all they can to maintain the line between them, or offer a new line that is easier to maintain. Although “appearance and manner

may tend to contradict each other” (Goffman, 1959, p. 25) at times, the two work together to sustain coherence in the communication so a sense of emotional equanimity can be attained. Goffman (1959) claims that “We [all] expect some coherence among setting, appearance, and manner. Such coherence represents an ideal type that provides us with a means of stimulating our attention to and interest in exceptions” (p. 25). This interest in exceptions means we can’t help but notice when we’re out of line and most vulnerable to each other.

Goffman (1959) suggests that “we may not find a perfect fit between the specific character of a performance and the general socialized guise in which it appears on us” (p. 29). In other words, the roles people end up playing as they correct to each other may be driven by a need to reach a “working consensus” (p. 10) about how to perform the relationship, or “single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored” (p. 9-10). In short, two people who perform a relationship are moved to communicate with each other in ways that make them vulnerable as they negotiate a joint-perspective about how to derive meaning from their situation, their interactions, and their feelings. These moves happen moment-to-moment as the two people relate or as Goffman (1959) puts it “in a split second during the interaction” (p. 30), forcing each person to improvise their relations.

#### *Vulnerable Positioning and Move Making*

I’ve elected to use Rawlins’ (1983) insights about interpersonal freedom, elements of Pearce’s (2007) communication perspective, and Goffman’s (1959; 1967)

framework for observing relating as a performance because they allow me to narrow the scope of my analysis to the way improvisers in close relationships correct to each other as they strive to reach a working consensus both during their performance and about their performance afterward. Put simply, I am curious about the *trust* improvisers feel for each other when they claim to be close and work to maintain that closeness both on and off stage. The way they position themselves to be vulnerable to each other reflects the equitable or inequitable conditions of their communication, which is indicative of the degrees to which they mitigate interpersonal freedom and maintain closeness. The patterns of interaction that emerge as they improvise, making corrective moves to stay in-line with each other, are contingent upon how *independently* or *dependently* they act as they negotiate a joint-perspective through their performance. I presume that the “closeness” of a relationship can be interpreted by how interdependently the couple acts and how confident they are in that their relationship will continue to allow them to be vulnerable.

The synthesis of these three research perspectives indicates that communication is a provisional endeavor of meaning making where couples experience vulnerability dynamically, improvising their relations as they correct to each other, implicitly negotiating their interdependence and autonomy. Doing so, they run the risk of impeding on each other’s personal freedoms to be independent of or dependent on each other. In a close relationship where two people identify as being romantically involved, being able to coordinate meanings together collaboratively and achieve a high degree of interpersonal freedom is essential if the relationship is to continue being or feeling close.

Since vulnerability is a requisite of performing staged improv comedy, performing with one's partner and making sense of that performance afterward can be understood as a high-stakes activity. For couples who improvise together, the consequences of being unable to negotiate a joint-perspective or achieve interpersonal freedom could impact their trust, causing them to question their closeness and/or the sincerity of their performance of the relationship. Thus, the moves that partners make as they improvise their relationship on and off stage may "constitute subtle and covert dilemmas that must be managed effectively if [the] relationship is to flourish" (Rawlins, 1983, p. 256).

Drawing on Goffman's (1967) work regarding the positions people take as they communicate with each other, I have identified three primary vulnerable positions that performers make moves toward as they correct to each other both on and off stage: (1) *Protective*, (2) *Defensive*, and (3) *Offensive*. Goffman (1967) goes to great lengths to frame relationships as interpersonally motivated performances where the positions people take as they interact publically determine how they move and are moved by others. "The person will have two points of view," he claims, "a defensive orientation toward saving his own face and a protective orientation toward saving the other's face" (p. 14). Conceivably, the inverse of a defensive position is an offensive position—a truncated moment where a person must communicate, saving his or her own face at the possible expense of the other's. Using this language, Goffman (1967) explains that "face" is "a kind of construct, built up not from inner psychic propensities but from moral rules that are impressed on [a person] from without" (Goffman, 1967, p. 45). Thus, *self-face* and

*other-face* are constructs of the same relationship that results from the way partners are positioned to be vulnerable with each other.

Partners make *defensive* moves by acting on their own behalf, independently of the other, becoming invulnerable as they deflect accusations, disconfirm assumptions, or maintain the previous line of communication—“putting their guard up,” so to speak, in an attempt to save their own face. Inversely, they make *offensive* moves by acting on their own behalf, independently of the other, in a way that reveals their emotional state through accusations, assumptions, or statements about personal perceptions despite the possible threat to the other’s face as they take a new line of communication.

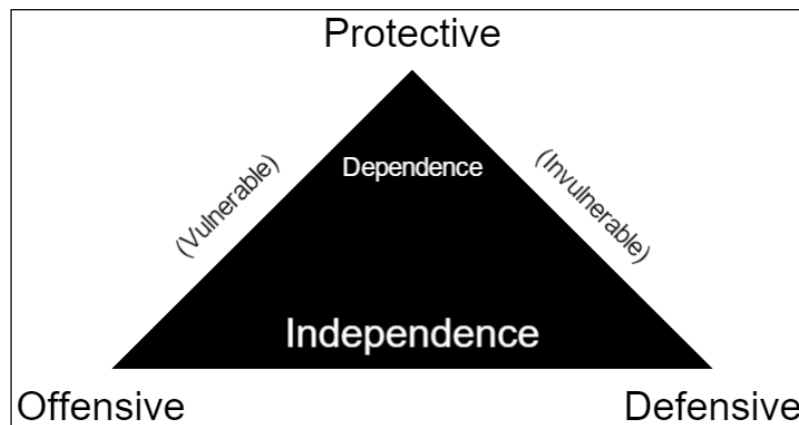
Partners take *protective* positions by acting on behalf of the other, deferring to the solidarity of the relationship, opening themselves up to possible confirmation or disconfirmation of their perceptions as they attempt to save face for both partners and reach a working consensus about their line of communication. While moves toward defensive and offensive positions involve partners exercising their freedom to act independently of each other, moves toward protective positions involve partners exercising their freedom to be dependent on each other.

Moves made toward these positions can be used correctively to adjust to the other in order to maintain the line of communication and reinforce a sense of confidence in the relationship. For Goffman (1967), this involves addressing or redressing the other’s vulnerability, acknowledging the implications of the way that the “face” of the relationship is being constituted. Typically, corrective moves involve some sort of emotional showing that indicates the change from one position to another. The impetus

for making corrective moves is based on *how* the communication ought to be done, rather than on *what* ought to be communicated about. Thus, corrective moves either balance or heighten the stakes of a couple's relations, making them more or less vulnerable as they act more independently or dependently. I focus on the corrective aspect of vulnerable positioning as couples relate because improvising close relationships both on and off stage is about the decisions people make as they attempt to find a balance in their relations that leads to interdependence, confidence, and ultimately, closeness. Looking at relations for the corrective action partners make grants that people in relationships are always subject to each other's vulnerability as they negotiate meaning and mitigate interpersonal freedom.

Figure 1 shows these three positions linked in a triangle, where each corner represents a position that a partner may move toward as they relate. Using this model, I treat relationality as a game of vulnerable positioning where partner's emotional status fluctuates as they move. Relating to the other is akin to a "dance" where both partners are always involved in choosing different positions (whether deliberately or correctively) as they communicate. At the base of the triangle are *offensive* and *defensive* positions, which correlate with independent actions. At its apex is the *protective* position, which correlates with dependent actions. This frames relating as a joint endeavor of coordinating and managing meaning through the improvisation of speech acts, which lead to interaction patterns that reveal the equitable or inequitable conditions of interactions that impact closeness.

Theoretically, when partners both take the same position, a symmetrical interaction pattern emerges, and the vulnerable experience of relationship remains static. The emotional status of both partners remains unchanged and therefore the “status quo” of the relationship is maintained—presumably, no move is being made toward more or less vulnerability. On the other hand, when one partner takes a different position than the other, a move has been made that initiates a complimentary interaction pattern and the relationship’s vulnerability becomes dynamic. The emotional status of partners changes in accordance to corrective moves—the more independent moves one partner makes, the more dependent the other becomes unless that move is challenged. Ultimately, both partners find themselves moved to correct to the other as they try to maintain confidence in their relationship, experiencing vulnerability to different degrees.



■ **Figure 1** Vulnerable Positioning

*Offensive-Defensive* relations result in inequitable conditions (i.e., mutually exclusive behavior) that may escalate to extreme provocation where partners lose their ability to coordinate meanings and may even intentionally compromise the confidence of

the relationship as both partners act independently, locked in a pattern of saving their own face and defacing the other. The couple's ability to return to equitable conditions metacommunicates closeness as they both resume saving face for each other. Thus, *Defensive-Protective* or *Offensive-Protective* relations result in equitable conditions that may deescalate provocation, where one partner corrects to the other in order to maintain confidence in the relationship and save face for both partners. Looking at the dynamics of interaction patterns that emerge on and off stage as couples communicate and position themselves to be vulnerable provides key insights into the ways they mitigate interpersonal freedom, sustain trust, and remain close.

### **Adapting the Research Performance Format**

“Armando” is a specific improv format suited for a team of 6-11 performers, where one person in the ensemble—referred to as the “monologist”—begins the performance with a story from his or her life, which is inspired by an audience suggestion. The monologist's goal is to be as honest and forthcoming as possible about what the suggestion makes him or her think about and to connect it to a personal story. While the monologist tells the story, the rest of the ensemble listens for information that inspires them to initiate scenes. After a few inspired scenes are performed, the monologist may return and ask for another suggestion, delivering another monologue to inspire more scenes. According to Halpern (2006), who created the format to encourage truthful and vulnerable storytelling in improv performances,

It's not enough to simply replay the monologue in the form of a scene. Why show us what we've just heard? The job of the improviser is to listen to the whole idea of the monologue and say something back to the monologist through the scene. Prove or



disprove their theory, if you will. To do this, the player must transplant that idea into a different context altogether. (p. 33)

Halpern's (2006) explanation punctuates the importance of "transcontextual" action outlined by Bateson (1972) as a key to learning new patterns and developing relationships. Performing an Armando requires performers to interpret the stories told and show those interpretations as they play out a scene in another context. Performers may use scenes to co-construct the exact scenario of the story (i.e., a "nail on the head" scene), or endow a scenario that is analogous to the story (i.e., a "mapped" scene). In either approach, they are responsible for improvising a scene that depicts what the story inspires them to think and feel. Typically, performers initiate scenes intending to comically magnify their interpretation with a premise, but they are also free to play organically if their inspiration is limited. Ultimately, *Armando is a reflexive performance practice*, where improvised scenes hearken back to an inspirational narrative that evokes interpretations. Applied as a performance research method, Armando can illuminate pathways to investigate interpretive practice, giving researchers a rare opportunity to observe meaning making in action and witness vulnerability as performance partners show, tell, and reflect on their own and others' life experiences.

Instead of performing an Armando with a large group, in this study I've adapted the format for couples to perform as two-person teams (i.e., duos). In the adapted arrangement, duo partners who identify as being in a close relationship with their improv partner off stage perform for 20 minutes, initiating as many scenes as they like based on stories inspired by audience suggestions. This adaptation ensures a few things crucial to the goal of the study: (1) Partners in close relationships perform together; (2) Inspirations

for scenes are anchored in the telling of lived stories; (3) Both partners encounter vulnerability in front of an audience; (4) Audience attention is drawn to the couple's interaction; and (5) Performer's interpretive faculties are engaged for the duration of the performance. Along these lines, the adapted Armando format allows me to observe couples communicating on stage and examine audience reactions.

#### *Forming Post-Performance Focus Groups*

In this study, I build off the work of dialogians and social constructionists Markova, Linell, Grossen & Orvig (2007) who claim that focus groups are “social, rather than individual, types of activity” (p. 70), which are both organized sequences of action and joint human endeavors. The frames of conversation brought forth by prompts, questions, or other latent activity of focus groups enable participants to “attend to the same conversational floor” (p. 70) and share in the sensemaking of discussion. These frames guide study participants as they render and negotiate their interpretations, giving definition to the discussion, and helping orient them to the discursive order emerging through their interaction.

Three focus groups were held in this study—two between the performers and one between audience members who had witnessed the Armando performance. Immediately after the performance, performers wrote down their initial reflections, which were stored for later analysis. The first performer focus group was held one week after the performance. The audience focus group was held one week after the first performer focus group. The final performer focus group was held one month after the performance. For all three focus groups, I prepared a list of tentative questions to encourage conversation and

dialogue among participants. These are detailed below. I also invited participants to bring their own questions.

The first performer focus group involved watching the recording of the performance before discussion. The second performer focus group was reflection based, where performers reflected on the performance and the previous discussion. In the audience focus group, the participating audience members reflected on their experience during the performance.

Although I had hoped that the audience focus group would produce interesting data to be coded along with performer focus groups, that was not the case. Whether it was my relationship with the audience members as a fellow member of their graduate cohort or the fact that many of them were instructors of the performers at one point, the audience focus group did not increase my understanding of the performances or the performer's relationships. Thus, I decided to focus my analysis on the performer's points of view exclusively and to use the responses from the audience focus group only to develop questions for the second performer focus group. I did not code the responses of the audience focus group as data for analysis.

Three activities—written feedback, watching the performance, and preparing questions for focus groups—created a context with a specific conversational frame for the couples in this study to explore what it meant to improvise with their partner. Setting the frame in this way invited participants to articulate and explore their perceptions of their performance with their partner, as well as what it felt like to improvise with their partner,

what it meant to improvise as a couple on and off stage, and what they learned through the whole process about being in a close relationship with another improviser.

### *Procedures*

This dissertation focuses on a single staged improv comedy performance, followed by a series of dialogue-centered focus groups in which performers and audience members would reflect on the performance. In this section, I describe six relevant areas of research design: (1) Recruitment of participants; (2) Staging the performance; (3) Performance Structure; (4) Collection of feedback; (5) Transcription of film; and (6) Analysis of data.

#### Recruitment of Participants

Four pairs of improvisers in close relationships, including my partner and me, were selected to participate in the performance. These performers submitted written feedback directly after the performance regarding their perceptions of the show and participated in two follow-up focus groups. Four audience members were selected to participate in a follow-up audience focus group after having attended the whole performance. These audience members were selected because they replied to a request for written feedback after the performance. All focus group participants submitted written reflections about their initial perceptions of the performance. The performance and each of the focus groups were filmed to produce data for future analysis. Also, all participant's names have been changed to offer them a degree of anonymity.

Performers were approached by me directly or through email and invited to participate in the study. My goal was to locate and involve members of my own

professional improv organization who had developed romantic relationships because of their involvement doing improv comedy. Of the 40 members in the organization, four couples were known to be in close relationship, including myself and my partner. Criteria for participating were: (1) The performers self-identified as “romantically involved” with each other at the time of recruitment; (2) The performers were not legally bound through marriage or domestic partnership at the time of the study; (3) The performers identified as being in a romantic relationship for at least 3 months; (4) The performers initiated their relationship as a result of improvising together; (5) The performers were active in the same professional improv organization; (6) The performers performed together on a regular basis; (7) The performers were familiar with the “Armando” format; and (8) The performers identified as having experience performing long form improv.

All four couples agreed to participate in the study. Ages of the performers ranged from 19-29 years old. At the time, each performer shared a residence with his or her romantic partner, was currently or had previously studied at the same local University, were actively involved in the student improv organization at that University, and were members of the same professional improv company. In total, four heterosexual couples who identified as being in a monogamous, heterosexual relationship were chosen as research participants. Each participant had known his or her couple for at least three years and at the time of the performance had been romantically involved with their partner for at least six months.

Audience members were recruited post-performance via email for the audience focus group. Audience members who participated in the focus group met three criteria:

(1) They were present for the entirety of the performance; (2) They submitted written feedback no later than two weeks after the performance; and (3) They were available to meet within two weeks for a focus group reflecting on the performance. In total, I identified four audience members who met the criteria and were gathered for the audience focus group. Three were female and one was male, all were enrolled as doctoral students in my department and were in their late twenties. The male and one female identified as being in a romantic relationship at the time.

Since my partner and I participated as one of the research couples, I was able to compare our communication patterns to the other couples' patterns. This gave me an autoethnographic perspective and helped me reflect on the performance alongside the other performers during focus groups, mediating some of the power dynamics that arise in more traditional participant-observation studies because our performance, like the other three, was to become data for interpretation and reflection by all participants. Acting as a participant allowed me to reflect on how I performed "principal investigator" off stage, giving me a chance to turn inward and focus on my own perceptions of me and my partner's performance, the couples' performances, and improv comedy in general. That means that I take a recursive stance in this study as *both researcher and participant*, fully acknowledging that my role as a researcher prepares and informs my perceptions of other's opinions and attitudes regarding me and my partner. To the best of my ability, I tried to remain mindful about my role in the study—that my actions as a researcher had implications for my role as a co-performer, and my life as a romantic partner. Necessarily, this was a challenging and humbling experience.

## Staging the Performance

Two weeks prior to the performance, I gathered participants together and informed them about details of their participation in the study. I explained the structure of the study and the adapted Armando format. I told them that they would be participating with their partners in a twenty-minute segment of the performance and that they would be performing scenes inspired by their own monologized personal narratives, inspired by audience suggestions of a random word. I explained that they would be required to watch the performances of all four couples and to submit a one page reaction to the performance immediately afterward, and to participate in no less than two follow-up focus groups within the month where they would watch a video of the four performances together and engage in conversations about it.


In the time between this meeting and the performance, IRB approval was sought for the study. IRB determined that the study did not fall in the category of human subject research and the study was exempted from IRB approval.

Two weeks before the scheduled show, I printed and posted flyers advertising the performance on campus near the performance space. Figure 2 depicts the flyer that was used. I also sent email notices and Facebook posts to members of my graduate department community in attempts to recruit a live audience. Since improv shows traditionally rely on audience suggestions and performers feed off audience response, including both audible suggestions and laughter, I encouraged attendees to come prepared to participate when asked.

One week before the scheduled performance, the performers gathered to meet in the space where the performance would be held—a black box theater in the University building where my graduate department is housed—to prepare for the show via a one-hour group workshop. As one of the directors of our professional improv group, I assumed the role of artistic director for the show, preparing a workshop that readied participants for performing the adapted Armando format. Like all workshops that I develop, this workshop followed a basic three-phase structure to help performers build heuristics around techniques that would lead to the execution of the adapted Armando format. Table 1 provides a detailed lesson plan of the workshop.

Knowing that the Armando format requires performers to tell impromptu stories from their lives and to develop them into simple premises for playing out inspired scenes (Halpern, 2006), I used methods developed by the Upright Citizens Brigade (Besser, Roberts, & Walsh, 2013). Relying on my own training with numerous improvisational practitioners, I developed each phase of the workshop to build on the former focusing on inspiration, narration, and initial scenic development. I used simple improv theater games (see Spolin, 1963) to give each performer ample experience with impromptu storytelling and premise-based initiations. Since each performer was seasoned enough to understand and successfully execute the principals of improv comedy, my goal was to help make them comfortable and confident with the adaptation of the Armando format.





**IMPROVISING  
CLOSE  
RELATIONSHIPS**

A dissertation performance featuring four different couples doing narrative-based improv. Performers take audience suggestions to inspire stories from their lives, using them to develop improvised scenes, together.

**4:30PM—6:00PM  
CIS 3020  
TUES AUGUST 19TH**

■ **Figure 2** Performance Recruitment

After each couple took a turn with a five minute run through of their set, the group closed the workshop by sharing a few thoughts on what they felt worked best for them and what others ought to avoid. Their thoughts ranged from making sure that the monologues were not too freely associated from the audience to offering suggestions for avoiding disagreement between each other as performers in scenes. In theory, this would ensure that initiations clearly articulated the *who*, *what* and *where* of the scene and that the “base reality” of the scene remained intact. Before the workshop adjourned, I instructed the performers to assemble one hour before the performance in the performance space.

The day of the performance, my partner and I arrived early to assemble the space. We placed 40 chairs in a crescent-arch with an aisle in the middle for easy performer access to the stage from the back of the room, where they would be standing. By tailoring the stage lights to illuminate a 20 foot wide by 10 foot deep area, I created an intimate setting for the stage. I placed a light board at the back of the room so one of the performers could “find the button” for each group, blacking out the lights once the couples’ time was up or they had reached a point that served as an obvious scenic end point for their set.

While audience members gathered in the space, the rest of the performers (myself included) warmed up with very basic improv exercises that help us engage each other physically, verbally, and cognitively. Table 2 provides a detailed list of the exercises we used. In addition, I restated the stipulations of the adapted Armando format and listed the performance order so that each couple would know when they could expect to be on stage. I also informed them that I would be hosting the show, introducing each couple (including my own), in order. I told them they would be free to introduce themselves briefly as they arrived on stage. Finally, I asked one of the participants to blackout lights for me and my partner.

■ **Table 1** Performance Prep Workshop Lesson Plan

Phase	Game	Explanation
Warm Up	Narrative Hotspot	In a circle, performers take turns “tapping out” a player telling a story from their lives, stepping into the center and telling a story from their own life inspired by some element of the story that preceded them.
Exercise	Premising & Circle Scenes	Performers stand in a circle. One performer makes the suggestion of a random word. Any other performer may take that word as inspiration for telling a story from their lives. As they do, the other performers listen to the story and search it for information that they can use to make premises for two-minute scenes. After the storyteller finishes, each other performer takes turns sharing the premise that they developed. After everyone has shared at least one premise, performers take turns entering the circle and delivering one line that makes the <i>who</i> , <i>what</i> and <i>where</i> of the scene apparent. Then another performer enters the circle and plays the scene out with them for two minutes. Performers take turns until all of the premises have been played out.
Run Through	5 Minute Run Through per Couple	Each couple is given 5 minutes to take a random word suggestion from the audience to inspire a story from their lives. The other performer listens to the story and creates a premise, which he or she uses to initiate a scene with his or her partner after they finish telling their story. If the scene ends before 5 minutes is up, they can either initiate another scene with a new premise, or take a new suggestion to tell a story and find a premise to play out in a new scene.

### Performance Structure

The performance lasted one hour and 30 minutes. Thirty-two people were in the audience. Audience member age ranged from 22 to 69 years of age and was generally representative of my graduate colleagues, department staff, and University faculty, including members of my dissertation committee. As emcee and host of the event, I entered the stage, thanked the audience for coming, explained that the performance was the main component of my dissertation project, and briefly explained the basic format of the show. I explained that all performers were romantically involved couples and that their performances would be completely improvised. Following this brief introduction, I introduced the first couple, retreated to the back of the room with the other performers and started the timer. As each of the four couples took the stage, one of them asked for suggestions of random words that were shouted out by audience members, which they self-selected to inspire a personal story.

### Collection of Feedback

Directly after the performance, each performer was given a blank sheet of paper and a pen and asked to find a spot in the performance space to sit and write their initial responses to the show. They were instructed that feedback should be roughly one page in length and could focus on anything they like, so long as it pertained directly to their perceptions of the show as a whole, how they performed, and how the other couples performed. They were instructed to write their reactions as individual performers and to abstain from collaborating with other performers in their writing. As a performer in the

show, I also participated in writing my own initial reflections. After each performer finished I collected their reflections and stored them for future analysis.

These immediate reactions were stored for post-focus group analysis. I refrained from reading them and using them to inform my participation in the focus groups. During the performance phase of the project, I functioned as a co-performer, purposefully trying not to take on the role of principal investigator. Thus, abstaining from reading the feedback allowed me to enter the focus groups free of predispositions or assumptions derived from privately written reflections.

Audience reactions were obtained by sending a formal request to audience members through the graduate student email listsrv two days after the performance. My email was sent to all graduate students subscribed to the listsrv and read as follows:

First of all, thanks to all of you who came to my dissertation performance. I really appreciate the support! We certainly can't do improv without an audience, and I couldn't do this study without your being that for us. I know a lot of folks had initial reactions to the performances and wanted a talk-back portion of the show. Unfortunately, we didn't allot enough time for that. However, I would *love* to hear your thoughts. It's completely voluntary, but anyone who could email me some written feedback about your expectations for the performance, what you observed, how you related to the couples, what your impressions of the relationships between performers were, as well as anything you learned or caught notice of during or after the show, it would be greatly appreciated! If I get enough feedback, there may be a chance I'll put together a very short focus group session to hear your thoughts in conversation and how what you saw relates to your own relationships (past or present) and what you know as communication theorists and teachers.

■ **Table 2.** Performance Warm Up

<b>Game</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
I Got Your Back	Each performer approaches each other performer, looks them in the eye and states, “I got your back” as they give each other a hug.
Butt Touching	For 1 minute, performers run around the space with the intention of gently tapping each person on the posterior. At the same time, they try to avoid being tapped.
Pass The Clap	In a circle, each performer takes turns turning and making eye contact with the person next to them. Once they feel they have made a connection with that person, they clap their hands in a way that makes it easy for the other person to clap simultaneously. This repeats around the circle, speeding up upon each round, until performers can easily clap in unison with the person next to them.
Norwegian Clap	Two performers face each other and engage in a clapping game. Clapping their hands in unison, they then choose to “throw” their hands in one of four directions (up, down, left, right) without hesitation. If both performers choose the same direction, they both clap each other’s hands as their next move. This pattern is repeated and played faster until one performer fails to do the correct move. Then they begin the pattern again.
1.2.3	Two performers face each other. One performer counts “1”, the other counts “2”, and then the first performer counts “3”. This pattern is repeats faster until one performer fails to do the correct move. Then they begin the pattern again.

In total, I received four responses. Each person wrote roughly a one page response to the show along the lines of the suggested criteria in the email. I stored these reactions for later analysis after the focus groups. Again, as a co-performer in the show I wished to suspend my reading of these responses so that I could assume the role of co-performer and co-investigator during the first performer focus group. In addition, I wished to gain perspective about how the initial reactions of the audience members changed in the time elapsed between the performance and the focus group without tailoring questions targeted toward that change.

Both the first performer focus group and the audience focus group met at my residence. My house provided ease of access for watching the performance and was in close proximity for the participants. The second and final performer focus group occurred in the performance space because I believed this space would help performers reimagine the performance after a longer passage of time.

The first performer focus group took place one week after the performance. The audience focus group occurred two weeks after the performance (one week after receiving written feedback), and the final performer focus group occurred one month after the performance (three weeks after the initial performer focus group). The time elapsed between the first and second performer focus group was strategically planned to track how the perceptions and impressions of the performers changed over time, particularly after the initial focus group conversation and any ensuing discussions between partners.

In each focus group, I initiated conversations by thanking all participants for being involved in the project and encouraging them, at any time, to ask the group their own questions as we talked. Furthermore, I informed them that as a co-performer and co-investigator, I would be asking questions that I had prepared based on my initial perceptions of the show and that I would also be offering my own thoughts about the show as we progressed, including answers to their questions as a co-performer. In each group, I started the discussion by asking more general questions. At moments where conversation lulled and others had no other comments or questions to offer, I asked a follow up question or moved on to a new line of questioning. These questions got more specific about the participants' experience of performing with romantic partners as we continued, but always remained directed toward the different aspects of improvising close relationships. In the second performer focus group, my questions reflected perceptions presented by the members of the audience focus group. Examples of questions that I prepared and developed throughout the course of conversations are as follows:

*Performer Focus Group 1–*

- What are the different dynamics of relationships that you believe were shown in the performance?
- What were your feelings directly after your part of the show?
- How often do you perform with your partner?
- What were your thoughts during your performance?
- Do you feel as though you and your partner were on the same page during the performance?
- What did you do to get on the same page with your partner? What could you have done?
- What do you see as the themes that came out of each performance?
- What were your first impressions after watching your show? What did you expect to see?
- What did you discuss immediately after leaving the performance?
- What does the word “relationship” mean to you?



What does it mean to play a romantic relationship in a scene?  
Do you “carry” anything with you off stage?  
What do you think improvising with your partner does to or for your relationship?

*Audience Focus Group–*

What are the different dynamics of relationships that you believe were shown in the performance?  
What patterns did you see in the ways the couples related to each other?  
What do you think the “stakes” were in the relationships depicted in the performance?  
How do you think these performed relationships relate to the performers actual relationships?  
What did the frame “couples” do to the performance?  
Did you identify with any of the scenes in the performance?  
How would you rate the relationships depicted on a scale from healthy to unhealthy relationships?  
How would you rate the relationships of the performers on a scale from healthy to unhealthy relationships?  
Which couples do you think performed more organically?

*Performer Focus Group 2*

Will you be more or less likely to play with your partner from now on?  
What do you think was the source of the audience’s reaction during the show?  
What do you think was at stake for your character’s relationship in each of the scenes you played out?  
Have you talked about the performance with your partner since the last focus group? How so?  
Have you talked about the last focus group? How so?  
What in the performance or the focus groups do you think applies most to romantic relationships in general?  
Have you realized anything that applies to your own romantic relationship?  
What have you learned from this process?

All focus groups exceeded the preplanned one hour limit. Noting the time and paying attention to the moments in conversation where participants appeared to have no

other comments or questions to ask, I asked if there was anything else the group wished to say about the performance, their role in the study, or anything else that arose in conversation. Once no other contributions were forthcoming, I thanked everyone again for being involved and the groups disbanded.

#### Transcription of Film

Film of the focus groups was transcribed using a third-party transcription service. After receiving the files, I reviewed them for accuracy, updating them and marking moves in the conversation between speakers for precise acknowledgement of which speaker made what claim in the performance and focus groups.

#### **Analysis of Data**

I reviewed transcripts and video of the performance and focus groups numerous times to arrive at thematic codes, enabling me to attend to the provisional nature of each couple's communication as they negotiated frames for interpreting their performance. Each scene was coded as a single episode and the performer focus groups were coded as a single episode, the second focus group being a continuation of the first.

#### *Coding Scenes*

To better understand the way couples interpret their performance in the focus groups, I developed a coding scheme along five different dimensions. Since each scene was inspired by a particular suggestion and story, each scene coding was labeled by the story that inspired it. The dimensions used to code each scene included: (1) Premise, (2) Games, (3) Emotional Status, (4) Patterns, and (5) Dynamics.

Defining the premise of each scene involved identifying the offers that lead to the emergence of the *who*, *what* and *where* in the scene. Determining the games of the scene involved identifying when an unusual aspect of the scene was heightened. Changes in emotional status were recognizable by the shift in performer's emotional intensity as the scene progressed in accordance with Salinsky and Frances-White's (2008) summation of Johnstone's (1979) discussion regarding the enactment of dominance and submission in staged improv relationships. Patterns were interpreted by attending to the emergent content-based themes in the scene that were used to heighten games. Finally, dynamics were assessed by identifying each offer as a move made toward an *offensive*, *defensive*, or *protective* position and plotting the moves made in sequence in the corresponding zone on the triangle of vulnerable positioning. This provided an illustration of how the couples' *corrected* to each other's moves during the performance. The amount of moves in each zone was interpreted to be indicative of *equitable* or *inequitable* conditions of the character's communication as well as the characterized couple's *potential to be confident* about the relationship and continue to act vulnerably. This also allowed me to assess performers' actions in the scene as *independent* or *dependent*. The intimacy of the content of the scene was determined by interpreting the kind of relationship that was developed (e.g., romantic, parental, acquaintance, etc) and attending to the personal quality of the characters' disclosure. The assessment of the overall vulnerability of the characters was based on the performers propensity to make corrective moves that either inhibited or enabled the other's ability to act independently or dependently.

### *Coding Focus Groups*

I read and described the initial written reflections with exemplars in the analysis. I coded focus group transcripts along different dimensions to assist in determining the content of the discussions. The first performer focus group was coded for moments when participants discussed: (1) Each couples' respective scenes; (2) improv comedy in general; and (3) the performance as a whole. The second performer focus group was coded for: (1) the previously mentioned dimensions; and (2) conversations since the last focus group. Each couples' contributions were extracted together and placed in a new document for analysis, retaining their coding demarcations. These documents were analyzed for: (1) The frames individual partner's used to articulate their interpretations (i.e., the *context of the relationship* or the *context of the performance*); (2) the metacommunicative elements of individual partners contributions as they discussed their relationship; (3) the vulnerable positions individual partners took as they contributed to the discussion, including their tendency to act independent of or dependent on each other; (4) emergent interaction patterns within the couple's coordination of meanings as they interpreted the performance; (5) the equitable or inequitable conditions of the couple's communication; (6) the intimate nature of individual partner's disclosure about themselves or the relationship; (7) the couple's potential to be confident in their relationship; and (8) the overall vulnerability of the couple. Special attention was paid to the changes in each partner's behavior from initial reflection to final focus group—including their ability to demonstrate *equanimity* or calmness of mind or temper—as well as shifts in the couple's interaction patterns.

## Summary

In this chapter, I've described a methodology for studying the way couples improvise close relationships. First, I discussed the correlations between interpersonal communication theory and the practices of improv comedy. Following that, I provided a detailed account of the theoretical perspectives that guided my inquiry and the development of an ethnographic method that combines interpersonal theory with improv comedy performance. Finally, I explained the procedures involved in conducting the research. In the following chapters, I discuss my observations of the performance and the focus groups, analyzing the moves couples made both on and off stage as they became vulnerable, drawing conclusions about how they enacted interpersonal freedom as they negotiated a joint-perspective about their performance. This is followed by a brief chapter that includes my final reflections about what it means to be close in relationships as improvisers and a final chapter where I discuss the implications of improvising close relationships or my own relationship.

CHAPTER 4:  
TESS AND KARL

In the following chapters, I discuss my observations of the performance and focus groups by reflecting on couple's scenes and focus group contributions as separate episodes. I begin by describing my own experience setting the stage and introducing the show. This is followed by chapters that begin with a brief description of each couple's introduction, an analysis of each scene the couples performed, and my reflections on their metacommunication during the post-show focus groups. I conclude with a chapter that describes how I end the show, explaining what happened to each couple after the study. The final chapter includes implications for romantic couples who improvise their relationships.

**A Note on My Own Vulnerable Positioning as Researcher**

In this study, I interpret the ways performers make sense together as they communicate with each other about their performances. My interpretations are not based on sterile, objective observations—they are deeply rooted in my relationships to the performers as their co-performer in the research performance and our improv company, as a person who taught each of them how to do long form improv, as their friend, and as their mentor. My intimate positioning to the other participants helps me put my knowledge of each performer's personality, improv abilities, and the character of their

relationships to use, which allows me to draw conclusions about and show how their vulnerable positioning to each other reveals insights about the way they communicate on and off stage.

In this study, I am what Behar (1996) calls a “vulnerable observer” whose work is “tremendously colored by my emotions and experiences” (p. 11). By embracing and articulating the anxiety inherent in treating my friends ethically as research participants, I seek solidarity with the reader, coming clean as an observer who has been completely involved in the lives and performances of the research participants I’m observing and about whom I’m making interpretations.

As I see it, pulling off the mask of academic objectivity allow readers to accept, agree, disagree, dismiss, challenge, question, and ultimately, hold me responsible for my interpretations. I admit that my ego as a performer and researcher is tied to this work in a profound way and because of that, criticisms about how I draw conclusions may push on intellectual pressure points, hurt my pride, and stunt my passion. However, rather than conceal and turn away from that reality, I choose to embrace it by making my relationships and myself vulnerable to that criticism. Brown (2010) might say that doing so is *an act of courage* that allows the reader to determine for himself or herself the value of research that comes as much from the heart as it does the head. My hope is that readers will find confidence in their relationship with me as they review my work and take a protective position toward me as we enact the game of “research” together. Of course, all that I can do is initiate the game as sincerely as possible, inviting you, the readers, to get closer to me and the other participants as you read.

## Setting the Stage

As the show starts, I take the stage. All but a few seats are full in the black box theater housed in the Communication building. Standing center stage, I block the light from my eyes so I can see the audience. They're brighter than I anticipated. Though I've learned how to do improv in this room—and later went on to teach my own improv classes here—I've never seen it set up for a long form show, let alone filled with an audience of mostly non-improvisers. I feel a surge of confidence as I notice that the room design ensures everyone can see and hear just fine.

“Thank you for coming to the dissertation performance ‘Improvising Close Relationships,’” I begin. I can see members of my committee scattered around the room, mixed with faces new and old—folks that I began grad school with and folks who stepped foot in this room for the first time today. I wear a tan fedora, blue polo, khaki shorts and sneakers—my standard improv apparel, which is comfortable enough to let me move freely around the stage, yet formal enough to draw the audience's attention. Black, velvet curtains line the walls as the lights bear down. It's an intimate setting with the audience on the same level as the performers, only inches away. Two red chairs behind me face the audience. In the back corners of the stage, black wooden boxes of different sizes are stacked unevenly, providing a neutral stage dressing that's also useful as props. “You have a rare opportunity tonight,” I announce, “to see a number of couples improvise together, people who actually identify as romantically involved.”



As I say, “romantically involved” mouths widen into smiles and someone in the back chuckles. After two years of hosting weekly improv shows for the public, I can tell when the audience is poised to laugh. Sideways whispers and hopeful expressions fill the room as I tell them “This is actually a world premiere of this kind of show.” The audience breaks into cheers and applause as I take a step to the side of the stage, nodding at the performers in the back of the room to get ready.

“How many people here have ever seen an improv show?” I ask. Lots of hands go up. “Good,” I say. “So you know it’s highly interactive. We need to hear you saying things to us when we ask for suggestions.” As I explain how the Armando format works, I notice people checking in with each other—raising eyebrows and exchanging smiles as I tell them that the stories we will be telling are from our actual lives. “We’re going to find a way to be inspired by whatever it is that comes out of our stories.”

I tell them that they “need to be warmed up.” I lead them in a simple exercise of call-and-response, getting them involved in making noises and contributing to the show. Signaling groups on different sides of the room to “Ooooo” and “Ahhhh” as I raise my hands, I direct them in a spoken chorus, alternating sides of the room as I help them coordinate their sounds to resemble a group of people watching fireworks. They burst into applause and laughter as I give them a final signal to go silent.

Noticing a few latecomers, I waive them into the room. “So the first group that we have coming up is a good one,” I say, “But I wouldn’t say that they weren’t.” This gets a rich round of laughs as I smile. “Let’s start clapping at a low level,” I direct them, increasing with intensity as I shout over their applause to introduce the first group.

Leaving the stage, I pass the performers on their way to the stage. They're as focused and ready to go as the audience.

### **Tess & Karl**

Of the four couples in the performance, Tess and Karl are the only ones who perform three separate scenes. The first couple to perform, they both take the stage with a small bounce in their step. Karl introduces them, making a small joke about the assumed gender identity of their names. With a smile, Tess turns toward Karl in acknowledgment, hands on her hips, then looks down and refocuses in preparation. Asking for a "word" to inspire a story from their lives, Karl selects "toaster" from a slew of suggestions, turning toward Tess in confirmation. He launches into a story about a mishap on a road trip where his younger brother started a small fire in the family RV as he tried to make Easy Mac without water.

#### *Mac and Cheese Story: Scene 1*

##### Premise

The first scene resembles what most improvisers would call a "basic agreement scene," which evolves into a brainstorming session between the characters. Tess initiates by situating them in a kitchen and confessing that she wanted to cook but the water isn't working. Karl encourages her to "do it anyway," which starts a game of brainstorming different ways to make "Ramen" without water. A few lines later, Karl further insinuates that their kitchen is in a college dorm room. At this point, the premise of the scene is "Revolutionizing College Cooking" (Karl's exact words). They continue to play the brainstorming game throughout the scene, eventually arriving at the idea of using spit in

place of water and heightening the promotional possibilities and opportunities for fame that this new way of cooking could afford them. By the end of the scene, both of them spit into the cooking bowl, sharing a moment of firm eye-contact and grinning as they both claim that the dish is “ours.”

### Emotional Status

Both performers’ emotional status is maintained throughout the scene by their sustained agreement and simple game play. They raise the stakes together as they think up new ways to cook and promote the novelty of their creation. Karl becomes more emphatic as he attempts to vindicate Tess’s “mistake,” taking a lower emotional status in order to provoke her to keep cooking. In response, Tess begins to show slightly more emotion as the scene proceeds, matching his emotional status.

### Patterns

While the scene is about cooking, their characters’ culinary endeavors result in something they can both share pride in, validating their bond as a couple. The pattern that develops is *mutual innovation*, wherein they highlight their imagined dreams of fame and allow each other to inflate expectations of greatness as they share in the creative labor of generating new ideas.

### Dynamics

The dynamics of the relationship leads to *equitable conditions* for communicating, which ultimately results in an illustration of *interdependence*. The episode moves the couple toward slightly more vulnerability because it’s an intimate moment where they identify something that came into being because of their mutual and

cooperative encouragement to take risks. The characters demonstrate *confidence* in the relationship because neither of them are significantly inclined to act overtly independent of the other, which helps them remain in agreement, encourage aggrandizement, and support each other. Table 3 shows the detailed codification of the scene.

■ **Table 3** Tess and Karl – Mac and Cheese Story (Scene 1)

Dimension	Description
Premise	<b>Revolutionizing College Cooking</b>
Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brainstorming Disgusting Ingredients</li> <li>• Promotional Possibilities of Spit Mac N Cheese</li> </ul>
Emotional status	<p><b>Emotional Status Maintained</b></p> <p>Start: Both High</p> <p>End: Both Moderate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Karl takes an immediate lower emotional status, provoking Tess to match and maintain her emotional status throughout</li> </ul>
Patterns	<p><b>Mutual Innovation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heightening the possibilities of fame</li> <li>• Inflating personal expectations of greatness</li> <li>• Sharing in creative development of new ideas</li> </ul>
Dynamics	<p><b>Confidence – Equitable Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both act more <i>Independent</i></li> <li>• Majority of Moves made P <math>\leftrightarrow</math> P <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Insignificant Amount of Moves Made <math>\rightarrow</math> D and <math>\rightarrow</math> O</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Relatively Intimate</li> <li>• Characters become slightly more vulnerable with each other</li> </ul>

*Mac and Cheese Story: Scene 2*

Premise

The second scene is more complex and longer than the first, revolving around a couple’s dispute about their burnt down house and the consequences of their actions in

the aftermath. Experienced improvisers might think of the scene as a “second beat” of the first scene, depicting the same characters at some point in the future. Though there’s no indication that this is what the performers intended, the similarities in the premise make the interpretation plausible.

Karl initiates with an accusation, raising his voice to say, “Really? The whole house? Gone!” The premise “Spouse Burnt Down the House” is clear, at this point. Immediately, Tess tenses her shoulders, as if to shrug off the charge that she had something to do with it, saying in her defense, “Well...it looked fun.” From this point forward, Karl launches into the first game—an augmented version of the brainstorm game from their first scene where he points out what they no longer own, revealing that Tess had burned down their dream house. As the scene progresses they both find and heighten games about what they can no longer do as a couple and what their love is worth. They copy each other’s responses to get an emotional rise out of each other. The remainder of the scene involves a barrage of accusations and excuses, exploring deeper issues that the characters have with each other. They antagonize each other, engaging in a short-tempered volley. They don’t rage or shout but instead gradually escalate their tensions, saying subtle things aimed at intentionally hurting each other. Eventually they find themselves coming apart, questioning where they should live, whether they actually love each other, and whether or not they should stay together.

#### Emotional Status

Though both performers’ emotional status is challenged throughout the scene, they end in a mutual, high emotional status position, resigned to more argument as Tess

makes her final offer, “Are you done?” with a glare. An exasperated Karl replies, “Yeah, I guess.” Tess assumes a lower emotional status as the scene progresses, matching Karl’s frustration, becoming more emotional as the scene meets its midpoint and Karl makes moves that are more offensive. Both of them sit on the ground in a symbolic depiction of their low emotional status. Tess starts to take a higher emotional status as she makes moves that are more protective and Karl follows. This shift in emotional status is marked when Tess claims that she won’t leave because she loves him enough to stay. Karl responds with a metacommunicative offer, “We’re just going in circles at this point because clearly you don’t...” After saying this, he stands up and continues making offensive moves that heighten the stakes of the game as their emotional status escalates.

### Patterns

The scene is about a “kitchen fire” that Tess admittedly let consume the home that Karl built. By the end, it becomes clear this event altered the course of their (character’s) relationship. The audience can see that this couple’s perceptions have been misaligned for some time. The two characters don’t seem to understand what it means to love each other; they refuse to grant the other’s point of view any agency.

Despite the tension of the scene, Tess and Karl remain in agreement by continuing to honor the scene’s base reality. The most pivotal moment gets an audible reaction of disbelief from the audience as Tess finds their last remaining possession and hands it over enthusiastically, endowing it as “a picture of our first date.” In a cold, monotone way, Karl exclaims, “Wow...The only thing we have left is memories,” and violently tears the picture in half. In response, Tess takes a step back and metacommunicatively offers, “I

don't know what to do right now." She tenses, gives a stern glare, and expresses a weepy-sounding next offer.

The pattern that develops can be understood as *obstructed retribution*, characterized by patronizing each other's misjudgments, strategically minimizing the severity of the situation, blaming, and avoiding responsibility for the demise of the house (which becomes a symbolic representation of their relationship by the end of the scene). Whereas the first scene depicts a couple who maintains equanimity, reveling in a heightening of naïve-yet-affirming playful collaboration, this scene shows a couple unable to maintain emotional status and falling into disenchantment with each other as they go through the "literal" destruction of their dreams.

#### Dynamics

The scene dynamically reveals a couple engaged in *inequitable communication*. Karl makes moves *independently* of Tess, who acts *dependently* in order to both keep the base reality intact (as performers) and hold on to whatever is left of the relationship (as characters). The episode shows a relationship venturing into significantly more vulnerable territory regarding finance, trust, and love that descends into emotional retribution. The characters demonstrate a *lack of confidence* about the relationship because of their tendency to act correctively in both defensive and offensive ways. They choose conflict over compromise and lose their emotional composure. The audience witnesses drastic emotional status changes as both performers give in to exhaustion by the end of the scene. The stakes are high as the heightened vulnerability is responded to by cruelty; both characters engaging in acts intended to harm the other and disavowing

the closeness of their intimate relationship in ways emblematic of what Henry (1965) calls “the truth of rage” (p. 108). Table 4 shows the detailed codification of the scene.

*Visiting Australia Story: Scene 1*

Ending the second scene, Tess approaches the front of the stage and asks for another suggestion. She takes the word “Australia” as she points out that she’s been to Australia. Delivered with poise and confidence, Tess continually refers to Karl as she tells the story, looking for assistance. Karl chuckles in disbelief, pointing out that it’s her story as he says, “how should I know.” Talking about her grandfather’s decision to move the family to Australia when her mother was a baby, she describes her experiences visiting him and her encounter with a Koala bear.

Premise

The final scene resembles the couple’s first scene, featuring brainstorming. Experienced improvisers might describe it as a “frustration” scene because both performers agree that their characters are likely to remain in disagreement. In this scene, we see characters that have their own understanding of what it takes to change careers as well as what constitutes a fact that supports an argument. Karl initiates by establishing the relationship and relative time of the scene through his point of view, exclaiming “Oh my gosh. That was the best vacation ever; we are moving there.”

Sitting next to each other on the chairs, they give the impression that they’re in a committed relationship, having the conversation somewhere in their home. Tess accepts his offer, pointing out that Karl’s character has said this before about other vacations and Karl responds with “Enough of Italy, I’m moving to Egypt.” The premise is “Planning to



Become an Egyptian Tour Guide” as the base reality of the scene leads them to play contentious games about Karl’s desire and inability to rationalize his overzealousness.

■ **Table 4** Tess and Karl – Mac and Cheese Story (Scene 2)

Dimension	Description
Premise	<b>Spouse Burnt Down the House</b>
Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do we (not) have?</li> <li>• What can we do (now)?</li> <li>• Material Value of Love</li> <li>• Copycat</li> </ul>
Emotional Status	<p><b>Emotional Status Challenged</b></p> <p>Start: Karl – Low; Tess – High</p> <p>End: Both High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tess lowers her emotional status halfway through the scene as Karl become more offensive</li> <li>• Karl raises his emotional status as Tess becomes more protective of the relationship</li> </ul>
Patterns	<p><b>Obstructed Retribution</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Patronizing each other for misjudgment</li> <li>• Minimizing the severity of the Situation</li> <li>• Blaming the other person</li> <li>• Avoiding responsibility</li> </ul>
Dynamics	<p><b>Lack of Confidence – Inequitable Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Karl acts more <i>Independently</i>; Tess acts more <i>Dependently</i></li> <li>• Majority of Moves made P <math>\leftrightarrow</math> O <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Significant Amount of Moves Made <math>\rightarrow</math> D</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Highly Intimate</li> <li>• Characters become significantly more vulnerable and cruel to each other</li> </ul>

Patterns

As the scene progresses they heighten games about their mutually exclusive travel preferences, the factual basis of Egyptian stereotypes, and the credibility of the sources

they use to back up their facts. By the end, both characters remain steadfast in their opposing points of view, “agreeing to disagree” about the legitimacy of Karl’s desire to move. In the final offer, Karl confirms that the relationship is close—perhaps spousal, familial, or domestic—as he applies a gendered stereotype, telling Tess that she has to move with him because “Someone has to clean the house.”

### Emotional Status

In this third scene, the performers maintain their emotional status through sustained agreement. Unlike their first scene with small emotional status adjustments, there is hardly any shift in outward expression of emotions. Most likely they accept their mutually exclusive points of view regarding moving to Egypt.

### Dynamics

The pattern that develops is *frivolous dissent*, wherein Karl continues to rationalize his own point of view despite Tess’s showing no indication of changing her mind. Along these lines, the pattern leads Karl to mistake passion for intelligence and overlook Tess’s resistance to temptation. Both of them stand their ground. Despite their dissent, the *equitable conditions* of the characters’ communication give them a sense of equanimity. They seem to enjoy contending over who’s right about the facts. Though Karl acts *dependently* and Tess acts *independently*, their tendency to make correctively protective moves—most obviously illustrated by Karl’s final, gendered offer—demonstrates the confidence these character have in their relationship. They become slightly more vulnerable with each other by the end of the scene because even

though it is not an intimate scene, Karl indicates that he needs a needs her. Table 5 shows the detailed codification of the scene.

### **Reflections**

In her initial reflection following the show, Tess focused on the dynamics of all the couple's performances, as well as how genuine the performer's reactions were as they performed with their partner. She suggested that "you can easily see the dynamic between them" and that "each couple played off of the ins and outs of their relationship." Pointing out a few examples in the other couple's scenes, she suggested that the decisions made in each scene came from a comfortable place—as though they made their choices to align with their partner's expectations. "I think it was apparent," she argues, "when scenes were really that person's reaction to something their significant other did. It was a true and very real reaction."

In a similar vein, Karl discussed each couple's performance style, expressing curiosity about whether they were a reflection of their offstage relationship. "For our part," he continued,

Tess and I had a mixture of agreement scenes and disagreement scenes. The scene about the house was interesting because it was a long and intense disagreement with no discussion possible, which is a kind of disagreement we've never had.

■ **Table 5** Tess and Karl – Visiting Australia Story (Scene 1)

Dimension	Description
Premise	<b>Planning to Become an Egyptian Tour Guide</b>
Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bad Things to Tess are Good to Karl</li> <li>• Egypt Stereotypes are Facts</li> <li>• Anything Counts as a Credible Source</li> </ul>
Emotional Status	<p><b>Emotional Status Maintained</b></p> <p>Start: Both High</p> <p>End: Both High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very little change in emotional state throughout</li> </ul>
Patterns	<p><b>Frivolous Dissent</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mistaking Passion for Intelligence</li> <li>• Advising Against Temptation</li> <li>• Standing Mutual Ground</li> </ul>
Dynamics	<p><b>Probable Confidence – Equitable Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Karl acts more <i>Dependently</i>; Tess acts more <i>Independently</i></li> <li>• Majority of Moves Made D <math>\leftrightarrow</math> O <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Significant Amount of Moves Made <math>\rightarrow</math> P</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Low Intimacy</li> <li>• Characters become slightly less vulnerable</li> </ul>

He goes on to comment on the pattern that developed in the scene, claiming that the second scene “left the territory of funny and then became funny again.” Furthermore, he pointed out that their scenes involved conversations that they had off stage, particularly the fact that in the past they had “joked about having a cooking show and moving away.” He ended his reflection acknowledging that he and Tess were “fundamentally very different but always manage to get to common ground and find agreement.”

Throughout the first focus group, Tess urged that each couples' performance was grounded in their "romantic selves." For her, improvisation and close relationships are all about *trust*—a term she never overtly defined but brought up repeatedly, seeming to suggest that there was an antecedent of intimacy among the couples that was observable through their characterizations. "There's trust in a relationship," she claimed, "and there's trust in an improv scene, so when you don't trust another person in a scene, it breaks down, just like in a relationship. I feel like they're totally balanced just like that." Later, as the group discussed the intricacies of performing with romantic partners, she reiterated the necessity of trust, pointing out the importance of having a trusting relationship off stage. "It looks like you don't trust them enough," she said, talking about performing with strangers. "It's like, 'I don't even know you. Are you going to have my back because... I don't know.'"

Karl corroborated the notion that trust is an important aspect of performing together. Doing so, he took a complex, protective position about their second "Mac and Cheese" scene—almost contradicting his previous statements—as he claimed that the scene was "not a reflection of anything, because after this we were just like, 'Oh, yeah, that was a good scene.'" He continued,

We're happy because it was...I don't know. I guess it's just kind of...I'm trying to think of a way to phrase it. I guess improv is about trust and relationships are about trust, right? So we know that it's like, I know that you're going to be true to yourself in the scene, I can be true to my point in the scene and we'll go where it needs to go. And it was a really weird scene, but I think it was a good scene.

In this turn of the conversation, Karl responded to an earlier claim he made that each scene “reflects different dynamics of relationships,” justifying his on stage decisions in a metacommunicative way.

Despite the connection that both Tess and Karl drew between trusting each other off stage and their ability to remain in agreement on stage, both claimed to keep their improvising “separate” from their relationship, calling attention to the fact that they were less inclined than the other couples to improvise when not performing in a show. “We don't need to talk about it in our place,” Tess said, “because we're just like, ‘No, we're just going to be us and improv is separate.’” In Karl’s words, “...we never do anything,” meaning they never do scenes together when they aren’t on stage. Karl went on to claim that because they don’t perform together that often, he saw their scenes as “a novelty” because it gave him a chance to do “scenes that are different” than he typically gets to perform. Neither of them spoke directly to each other very often. They sat next to each other on the couch during the first focus group, addressing the group as they spoke, making little eye contact and few gestures toward each other. Karl continued,

back to what I said before, how I feel like you guys all kind of do improv on your own time and we never do. We also haven't been on that many teams together, really just *No Salad*, and we always have pretty good scenes together, but we don't do them that often. I don't know. I kind of like it...because I don't feel like I'm doing the same thing.

Both Karl and Tess used the word “weird” to describe the way they felt about their scenes. Karl expanded on this as he articulated his thought process during scenes, once again metacommunicating his on stage reasoning. In doing so, he revealed that

some of his decisions were deliberately contrary to Tess's decisions. "It's kind of hard to play," he explained,

especially because, yeah, it's like what you're saying, it's not at all what we're like. So it was pretty uncomfortable to play, actually. And there was a point where, it's like, you [Tess] didn't want to go there and I had to drag you with me a little bit. I had to be like, "It's okay, you need to be angry too," because when I said that like, "Our love wasn't worth the house," you know, which is just the worst thing, a really, really terrible thing to say.

Though his tone didn't indicate it on film, these statements revealed a defensive position that he took for the majority of the discussion, which resulted in frequent justifications of his performance decisions. He went on to further describe his on stage thought process, referring back to a previous statement that I had made in the group discussion about performing vulnerable characters. He explained,

I felt like it was a little freeing going into it without the label of comedy show on it, because what led me to have the freedom to do that ten-minute scene of me screaming at Tess was the fact that I didn't need to be funny. Even though it was funny, and then it stopped being funny, then it kind of got funny again, but that wasn't on purpose. We had the freedom to do a more dramatic scene. On what you are saying about perception is funny, I wasn't thinking about it at all. And then afterwards all of you tell me that, "Oh, it's like everyone loved the scene but hated your guts." It was, like, oh, okay.

Later in the discussion, he takes a similar defensive position, justifying his most provocative move in the second "Mac and Cheese" scene when he destroyed the photo of their first date, which Tess endowed as the last possession that their characters shared as a couple. "I tore up the photo to make her angry," he argued,

because she wasn't on the same plane of emotion that I was on. And for her to be at a similar intensity, even if your emotion was, "I'm done," it needed to be as intense of an "I'm done" as I was "You burned down house." So that's why I did that and so it was worth the house.

He took a final defensive position as he highlighted the novelty he experienced performing with Tess. In his explanation, he claimed that his inability to anticipate Tess's decision-making is what brought him the most enjoyment and helped him take risks. "So like the scene with the burning down house," he observed,

like I probably never played a character even close to that before and I found it interesting, because sure I guess, like there were points where I could kind of figure out how she was going to react, but I feel like if I know you're going to do this when I do this, and then I'm just playing both characters and that's boring to me. I like when I don't know what's going on or when something surprises me.

Only once during the first focus group did Tess engage Karl directly. This is the only moment where we saw them physically turn toward each other. Like Karl, she used her response as an opportunity to justify her on stage decisions. She took a defensive position as she deconstructed their scenes, critical of her own performance and definitive about her preference to perform in a way that was anything but novel. She grappled with her own identity as an improviser, making it clear that there were certain things she wouldn't do in any improv scene—mainly, "arguing." As she discussed it, she made sense of their performance in the context of their relationship, which provoked Karl to reframe it for her:

Tess: After we performed I was like, "Oh, that was really good. It was a really long scene, but it was really good," I thought. And then watching it, I was like, "No. No, I'm going to do that. Why



did I say that? Why did I do that?" And I'm just like, "It was really long. To me it was kind of boring," because I was like well, I don't know. I'd rather not watch it, but that's just me.

Karl: How do you feel in the scene, though? Like that scene?

Tess: In the scene, it felt long too. We were talking afterwards, I felt like we could have ended it a little bit sooner, but there really wasn't a good point to end it on.

Matt: You didn't even get to the argument.

Tess: Well, I'm not going to argue in a scene, because that's not how I am. I'm pretty true to myself in a scene. Like, I'm not going to be, I don't know, a 10-legged blue, purple octopus or whatever in a scene, because that's just not me. I like to stick to, "Oh." You know, all my characters are like, I can see myself either being that character or playing that character, or I don't know. It's just kind of weird. So I refuse to yell at him in a scene because I can't yell at him in real life. I literally cannot yell at him in real life. It just feels so unnatural, and I like being natural and schlumey in a scene, just being me.

Karl: And then in that scene about burning down the house, it was for that reason that I wanted to make the scene uncomfortable.

Tess: Yeah.

Karl: Because again, I was like, "This doesn't have to be funny, this just has to be interesting,"

Tess: So the principal really was happening.

Karl: And it took effort to drag you there, you know, because it's like getting more and more, and then whatever, seriously.

Matt: You wanted her to be vulnerable.

Karl: Be uncomfortable, let's go.

Despite their generally indirect demeanor and mutually exclusive performance preferences, both Karl and Tess seemed to take similar positions. They made moves in the first focus group toward protective and defensive positions, acting relatively confident in their relationship. They were mostly ambivalent, metcommunicating their reasoning for on stage decisions without directly implicating each other as making poor decisions. By virtue, they didn't confirm a mutual context for making sense of the performance together. Karl acted independently of Tess as he contributed to the discussion, justifying his on stage decisions within the *context of the performance*—apparently a *higher order* of meaning for him than their relationship. Tess did the opposite, predominately framing her decision making within the *context of their relationship*, therefore putting their relationship over their performance. This sort of disjunction in sense making is most apparent when Karl summarized his thoughts, speaking positively about the novelty of performing with Tess, metacommunicating that he was unable to anticipate Tess's reactions. "I was pretty happy with it," he began,

It was three scenes that I didn't feel like I had really played before. And I guess maybe the first one felt a little familiar, because it was just kind of a basic agreement scene. It was fun, because it was silly but it kind of pushed me to make the second scene very different. Especially, again, it was very freeing to not have to label it a comedy show because I was just, like, okay, I don't care about if you laugh. All I care about is was it interesting and was it something you hadn't seen before, that hadn't been, as far as it was different from everyone else's.

In the second focus group, Tess and Karl enacted an entirely different interaction pattern—one that oscillated between offensive and protective positions. The episode was loaded with reflective contributions from each of them where they spoke in concert with each other, finishing each other's sentences and bringing up conversations they'd had since the first focus group. Interestingly, this shift from defensive to offensive positions made their communication more equitable. In contrast to the first focus group, they directly confronted each other about their performance preferences and their individual perceptions of improv in general. As they did this, they metacommunicated a *request for correction*, moving each other to become more intimate as they talked and reached agreement about their perspective as a couple, becoming more vulnerable as the discussion continued. The following is just one of many examples that illustrated this:

Tess: I know afterwards, we talked in the car, and I told him, I was like, "Well, the first time when I actually played [the scene], I felt okay about it, but I don't know." It was just kind of weird. Then when I watched it again, I realized that he does kind of like...

Karl: Steamroll.

Tess: Yeah, a lot, but he made me realize when he does that, it's just because he does that based off of my reaction. I thought that I didn't really contribute anything to any of the scenes, but I contributed my reactions, which led him to say what he did and stuff. I didn't really know that until after.

In these instances, one of them took an offensive position that usually invited the other to make a move toward a protective position. In another turn, Karl actually corrected Tess's presumption outright in an attempt to reframe her perception of what the

audience responded to during their scenes. Similar to the first focus group, Karl frequently acted *independently* of Tess. In this episode, his offensive position raised the stakes of the conversation, causing Tess to agree with his perspective:

Tess: I don't know. Sometimes I really don't feel like I get recognized for [my nonverbal], because the audience really laughs at what is being said.

Karl: Right. They laugh at your reactions a lot too. It's just harder to recognize because...For example, when someone gets up there and says a one-liner or pun, and there's a laugh, it's very clear. But when we're having an argument, and Tess is in the middle, being really uncomfortable, the audience is laughing at her, but it's not as obvious, I guess. If you're just looking at it purely based on, "Oh, they're laughing at the argument," but it's like, "No, actually they're laughing at your [character's] discomfort because they identify with you." In that whole scene with the house that burned down, you were aware that the audience was identifying with it. I was so...It was like I was yelling at the audience through you.

Tess: Yeah.

Eventually, Tess started to talk more poignantly about her point of view, mentioning that her history of being in abusive relationships kept her from wanting to argue with Karl—or any romantic partner—on stage. The shift in their dynamic is an attempt to bring about emotional status changes that would help them feel closer as a couple. Despite this, they continued to frame their performance in mutually exclusive ways and maintained equanimity as they related to each other. Clearly exemplified by their discussing the second “Mac and Cheese” scene in the second focus group, the disjunction in the way they made sense of their performance was still apparent. As in the first focus group, Tess continued to frame the performance in the *context of their*

*relationship* whereas Karl's ardent insistence about his actions revealed his preference to frame their performance in the *context of the performance*:

Tess: When it's in a relationship like I've been in the past, I literally cannot do that because it just always escalates. That's what I have in my head. So I never want to be like that towards him or anything.

Karl: I have no such thing. When I'm doing anything improv-related, it's a disconnect.

Tess: That's why I think that you can be like that and stuff, but I just literally cannot.

Their ambivalence from the first focus group gave way to continuous subtle confrontations and they no longer relied on metacommunication. Subsequently, they were more open about their perceptions of each other. While their ability to finish each other's sentences and reflect on prior conversations invited them to share more intimate details about themselves, they made correctively offensive and protective moves toward each other when they did so. They became more vulnerable to each other as Tess made it abundantly clear she did not desire—and was not able—to interpret their scenes in the context of the performance as Karl did. The possibility for becoming less confident about the relationship in the second focus group, illustrated by Tess's outright statements about the link between the way she understands improv and relationships, ultimately conflicted with the way Karl understood improv and relationships:

Tess: I also wanna say, like, be true to yourself in a relationship and in improv, because if you're that character, then you're that character. Be true to what that character would do. Then in a

relationship, don't change for anyone. You know? If it's right, it's right. I don't know. Always be honest and true to yourself.

### **Summary**

For Tess and Karl, the ability to remain ambivalent to each other while acknowledging the mutually exclusive way they made sense of their performance allowed them to maintain different interpretations off stage. That they could also maintain a sense of equanimity while they revealed discrepant interpretations is intriguing. While they were willing to play characters on stage who were confrontational in their relationships, it seems that off stage they did anything they could to avoid confrontation. As a result, they never really got to a joint-perspective; instead, they seemed to agree to disagree and hang on to their own mutual perspectives together. The disjointed way in which they understood their performance coupled with their inability or unwillingness to take up each other's point of view may have meant that their confidence in their relationship was being challenged.

CHAPTER 5:  
CARLA AND MATT

**Transition**

The second couple to perform is Matt and Carla, who take the stage and immediately introduce themselves by their opposing names—a small quip to warm up to the audience that gets little reaction. They interact a bit, both messing with a flower in Carla’s hair, which Matt commandeers and unsuccessfully puts behind his own ear. Correcting their names, Carla introduces herself and asks the audience for a suggestion. Although the most audible suggestion they hear is “Ecstasy,” Carla takes another suggestion—“Safety.” She launches into a story about working at an amusement park as a costume character, explaining that part of her training involved learning how to fall over in the costume without getting hurt. The playfulness of their introduction is worth noting because it differs greatly from Tess and Karl’s. They focus on each other, giving themselves reasons to interact with each other and make each other laugh, which is more isolated and audience-focused than the poise of Tess and Karl. This focus sets a precedent for their performance, foreshadowing their demeanor of silliness and their tendency to make strong physical and visual contact.

## *Learning to Fall Story: Scene 1*

### Premise

Most improvisers would call this scene an “organic” girl-meets-boy start that eventually turns into a “peas in a pod” scene. Matt’s initiation situates a location and relationship right away, putting them at a bookstore as strangers. He picks up a book, begins reading it, notices Carla across the room, and puts down the book, swiftly approaching her to introduce himself and tell her that he’s “awestruck” and that she’s “just gorgeous.” Carla introduces herself, flattered, and they both quickly dive into the premise “Love at First Sight.” Moving the location, they make their way to a café table in the book store and play out the characters’ first impromptu date, finding games as they get to know each other and order drinks.

### Emotional Status

As the scene starts, Matt takes a low emotional status position, which gives his character a neurotic, flabbergasted quality. His emotions are compromised by the way his character feels about Carla. In contrast, Carla maintains a high emotional status at the beginning of the scene, generally welcoming Matt’s intimate advances while still slightly hesitant to let her guard down. As they carry the scene forward, editing into a new location and “dating” phase of the scene, Carla’s emotional status begins to drop and match Matt’s. They start to reveal things about themselves—as can be expected on a first date. Both of them begin to take risks disclosing more nuanced parts of their character, which in some moments puts the other on guard and in others invites them to act more vulnerably, showing off for each other by being rude to the waiter and sharing their



knowledge of theater, video games, television shows, and celebrities. Both of them end the scene with the same emotional status, relative to each other and poised for further conversation.

### Patterns

The pattern that develops is *safe investigation*, where they probe each other for information to explore the possibility for romantic chemistry, asking questions about their occupations and tastes, but also finding opportunities to explore fantasy themes about popular media, feeding off each other as they engage in comfort joking about musicals, video games, and service jobs. Their collaboration leads them into other games, such as Carla ordering food by shouting at the waiter and Matt's continuous justification that being a little rude means getting what you want. In his words, "this is funny, c'mon, we own this place." Matt's willingness to raise his emotional status and challenge Carla to lower hers reinforces his gall—he's the one who approaches her, asks most of the personal questions, and insists that they take advantage of the situation and have fun. The features of the character's personality exemplify the inspirations Matt has drawn from the story and keeps with the playful demeanor of their introduction. He makes decisions that help him perform "falling in love" by communicating risky self-disclosures. Carla's continual engagement with the fantasy themes that Matt initiates helps them reach a state of play that is "character close"—not so different from their relationship off stage.

### Dynamics

The equitable conditions of the couple's communication demonstrates the sort of *interdependent* move making that occurs during successful first dates. The conversation

becomes more intimate as it progresses because they both make correctively protective moves as they adjust to each other during the interaction, keeping the scene focused on their relational development as two people attracted to each other. They gravitate toward a more vulnerable experience through a significant number of offensive moves, which are easily corrected as they become more and more confident in the relationship. Table 6 shows the detailed codification of the scene.

■ **Table 6** Carla and Matt – Learning to Fall Story (Scene 1)

Dimension	Description
Premise	<b>Love at First Sight</b>
Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She Does the Ordering</li> <li>• Elaborating Media Mashups/Building on Imagined Scenarios</li> <li>• Being Rude Means Getting What You Want</li> </ul>
Emotional Status	<p><b>Emotional Status Challenged</b></p> <p>Start: Matt – Low; Carla – High</p> <p>End: Both Moderate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carla takes a slightly lower emotional status when she begins to order drinks</li> </ul>
Patterns	<p><b>Safe Investigation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probing for personal information</li> <li>• Exploring creative humility</li> <li>• Trying new things</li> </ul>
Dynamics	<p><b>Probable Confidence – Equitable Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both act more <i>Independent</i></li> <li>• Vast Majority of Moves Made P <math>\leftrightarrow</math> P <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Significant Amount of Moves Made <math>\rightarrow</math> O</li> <li>○ Insignificant Amount of Moves Made <math>\rightarrow</math> D</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Increasingly Intimate</li> <li>• Characters become more vulnerable</li> </ul>

*Learning to Fall Story: Scene 2*

Premise

Matt and Carla's second scene is another "peas in a pod" scene that involves mirroring each other in gesture and tone. This time, Matt's initiation establishes impending trouble as he approaches Carla's character and states, "there's a breach in security." This invites Carla to further endow the *who*, *what*, and *where* of the scene and play a larger role in establishing the base reality. She turns away, checks her earpiece, then reestablishes eye contact with Matt as she says, "affirmative" in a matched, hushed tone. The move functions as a non-sequitur, denoted by her frozen stare and silence as the audience laughs. Although Matt's offer indicates that he has a premise in mind, he performs the next exchange organically, questioning Carla's unusual response. "They said affirmative and you said affirmative back?" he questions, to which Carla responds, "Affirmative." At this point, though the base reality hasn't been clearly defined, the first unusual thing emerges and leads to a game of non-sequitur agreement, which is sustained throughout the scene. In the next few offers, Matt endows them as secret service guards protecting the President by saying "someone has knocked out one of the guys and is dressed up like us." This solidifies the base reality, designating a shared occupational relationship for both of them. They never actually designate their specific location, though it's presumably somewhere in close proximity to the President or the Oval Office. By the end of the scene, they discover that Carla is not the "Rookie" that Matt assumes her to be. Her character ties Matt to a chair and reveals that he is actually the perpetrator that's trying to infiltrate and attack the President.

### Emotional Status

This scene is one of only two in the entire show that depicts an emotional status reversal. While Matt is initially composed, taking a high emotional status, he continually lowers his emotional status as his character assumes a mentor-based role toward the “rookie” that Carla plays. This helps him find a game in “proving industry knowledge” as the scene progresses. By doing this, he gives his character permission to overlook glaring inconsistencies in Carla’s character, attributing them to a lack of knowledge and experience. Both Matt (as performer) and the audience know that their relationship is a sham, so he slowly lowers his emotional status, putting his character in a more vulnerable position as he performs trust in their relationship.

Conversely, Carla starts the scene with lower emotional status, unable to hide that she is making “mistakes” on the job, which she uses to her advantage as she continues to play the “non-sequitur agreement” game in contrast to Matt’s “proving industry knowledge” game. By slowly raising her emotional status as the scene continues, following Matt’s advice about how to do the job, a third game emerges—“adding insult to injury”—as she waits for Matt to make his character vulnerable enough to be tied up.

### Patterns

The pattern that develops is *oblivious certitude*, which points to the implicit irony in the premise and their character mirroring. As the scene continues, Matt incriminates himself and Carla mirrors his demeanor, agreeing with him despite his apparent ignorance of her “real” identity. The pattern is possible because Matt’s character thinks he is particularly suited for their occupation and thus blindly falls into Carla’s trap.

Probably because they have both studied acting, Matt and Carla perform a scene that requires them to continue to act as though they don't know what's going on, even though they do.

### Dynamics

The *equitable* conditions of the character's communication ultimately results in Matt's demise and heightened vulnerability. Matt acts more *independent* and Carla more *dependent* as he increases the intimacy of their conversation. Carla decides to make correctively protective moves to conceal her character's identity, which leads Matt to make more correctively offensive and defensive moves as he grows more confident in the relationship. Figure 9 shows the detailed codification of the scene.

### **Reflections**

In his initial reflection after the show, Matt pointed out that both scenes “felt like a day out of [their] lives in a Universe where [they] could get away with anything.” For him, “it was so damn real at times” because their characters closely resembled identities that they experiment with in their daily conversations and improvisations off stage. He was also impressed by Carla's choice in the second scene where she “was not only pulling a fast one” on his character, but on him, because he didn't expect her to actually take the scene to the point where she would fully get the better of him.

It's also interesting to point out that Matt included a sketch with his feedback—a crude depiction of him and Carla “driving” a plane down a runway under a smiley-faced sun. The picture is emblematic of Matt's personality, which is playful and animated. He

specifically pointed out his mistaken description of the picture, finishing it with the words, “Yes, driving...”

■ **Table 7** Carla and Matt – Learning to Fall Story (Scene 2)

Dimension	Description
Premise	<b>Breach in Security</b>
Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non Sequitur Agreement</li> <li>• Proving Industry Knowledge</li> <li>• Adding insult to injury</li> </ul>
Emotional Status	<p><b>Emotional Status Reversed</b></p> <p>Start: Matt – High; Carla – Moderate</p> <p>End: Matt – Low; Carla – High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both slowly shift their emotional status until the final 2 moves of the scene when the reversal is revealed and heightened</li> </ul>
Patterns	<p><b>Oblivious Certitude</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agreeing despite ignorance</li> <li>• Mirroring official demeanor</li> <li>• Permitting Self Incrimination</li> </ul>
Dynamics	<p><b>Lack of Confidence – Equitable Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Matt acts more <i>Independently</i>; Carla acts more <i>Dependently</i></li> <li>• Majority of Moves Made P <math>\leftrightarrow</math> P <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Significant Amount of Moves Made <math>\rightarrow</math> D and <math>\rightarrow</math> O</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Increasing Intimacy</li> <li>• Characters become more vulnerable</li> </ul>

In her initial reflection, Carla addressed the show overall more than she discussed particular scenes. She pointed out that the “chemistry between the players was strong” and that she enjoyed “taking bits of reality and allowing it to influence” the relationships she was portraying on stage because it meant she could “feel the scene more” and the scenes had a “more genuine appearance.” She thought she was more likely to perform

like this because she was with Matt. The scenes “felt more personal” and she knew she could “bring [her]self into the scene more” because they could “connect on that level.”

In both focus groups, Matt and Carla took predominantly protective positions as they talked about their own scenes and the show in general. The equity of their communication style kept them from rarely having to correct to each other at all. Much like Tess and Karl in the second focus group, they’d finish each other’s sentences and speak in concert with each other. For example, as the group was talking about improvising off stage, Matt remarked, “Yeah...Carla’s like, ‘Hey, Matt, what’s this character sound like?’” Carla continued,

Because we're very character-heavy improvisers we do that a lot. We make up characters, we do impressions of other characters, and we come up with games a lot.

Matt: You were just tickling me last night. "Hey, what does this character sound like laughing? What does this character sound like laughing?" Just torturing me.

Carla: I was trying to tickle all of Matt's characters and my favorite was Donald Duck.

Matt: [Makes Donald Duck noise]

A few aspects of their communication set them apart from the others in the first focus group. Most apparently, their playful demeanor was unceasing. In tandem, they made jokes out of most of the comments they and others made. At one point, I said the words “general frame” and they both sat up in their seats and saluted me in perfect synchronicity. Surprised, I stopped myself and responded, “...I can't believe you just did

that at the same time,” and they repeated the gesture. Beyond their shared willingness to heighten absurdity, they were the most physically open of the couples in the focus group. Sitting on the couch during the first focus group, they both remained intertwined the entire time, holding hands, often distracted with each other as others spoke. On a number of occasions, they’d check-in with each other, making brief eye contact and giving each other small kisses, as if to make sure the other was comfortable, aware, and able to participate.

In one of these moments, Matt made it clear that the relationship was a source of pride. Talking about how he was inspired to start the first scene, he explained, “It’s like falling. It was kind of like how we fell for each other.” The group continued,

Kara: I saw it. Like I saw it flash. Like, “Oh, there it is.”

Rick: Yeah, she explained it to me as you were doing it. She was like “Oh, he’s falling for her.” That was really, really well done.

Matt: So it was the metaphorical interpretation of our start, and how it remains. [Kisses Carla]

Unlike the other couples, Matt and Carla both spoke on behalf of their relationship, regardless of whether they were talking about how they act on or off stage. They took ownership over their scenes equally and treated all moves made as sanctioned and anticipated. This pattern of *preemptive agreement* was also the connecting thread in their performance—what I have highlighted above as “peas in a pod.” Matt made a clear reference to this pattern, which he coined “that same page wink” as he and Carla discussed their second scene. I quote them here in depth because the passage exemplifies



both their philosophy of improvisation and the equity of their relationship. The way they are able to build on each other's ideas echoes the relationship they enacted in their first scene and contributed to their playfulness:

Matt: Yeah, when I go to the scene and it's more of what my character's going to want and motivations I have. So for the scene when I started getting more ridiculous and personify the thing, he was trying to impress her because she's much more commanding. He said, "Okay, I'm going to try and get on your level." That's what he thought in his head would work. Now we're turning into more like brats, we're ridiculous because that's what you are like. But in the second scene where I realized that she was actually the guy. I had realized it like, you know, two minutes in and she was so convincing that I didn't really know. I was, like, "Fuck, that's what it's about."

Carla: Yeah, I recognized the moment that you figured out that I was the person in disguise, because at the beginning of the scene, I knew I couldn't play a very convincing security guard.

Matt: So you went with it.

Carla: So I knew I was just going to be a kind of off person. And then when you mentioned that somebody stole the uniform, I'm like, "Okay, I'm going to be the person that stole the uniform." And I noticed the exact moment that you figured out that I was playing that character, and it was when you said, "Your uniform's a little big." And so it's just, like you recognize the exact moment that I got it.

Matt: And that's the hard balance of, "Okay, now you know." It's like it's an act and you know your character. But you've got to know that your character should know that. You've got to balance that, finally just giving away, like "He doesn't know what I know." So it's a fine balance and that's what I thought as you talked.

Matt and Carla's capacity to address the group from a joint-perspective stemmed from their ability to frequently take protective positions, guard the way they do things in their relationship, and act interdependently. There were hardly any moments in either focus group where one of them spoke without the other contributing immediately after. Repeatedly, they both made sense of their scenes within the context of their relationship, continuously metacommunicating that improv is a joint endeavor that doesn't have to be performed exclusively on stage. Although they didn't reveal too many intimate details about their relationship, or why they made the decisions they made on stage, their reoccurring habit of checking-in with each other demonstrated that they became emotionally closer as they talked about improvising. Each check-in was a move made toward an offensive position where one of them acted independently of the other, making subtle eye contact—sometimes mouthing silent words, other times making funny faces—and inviting a subtle protective move that confirmed their closeness. The subtle dynamic of their relationship helped them maintain confidence in the relationship that made them more vulnerable with each other.

There were few differences in their demeanor in the second focus group. Both of them continued to complete each other's thoughts and speak as a couple, this time giving each other even more latitude to articulate how "they" performed. In their first contribution, they took turns speaking for the relationship:

Carla: We started saying "affirmative" more. When I hear people saying it, it makes me laugh. It's not really that consequential, but I thought I'd say it because it was funny. I don't know. What do you think?

Matt: I think we play the way we always play and kind of lose it, and we go, "That was fun."

Carla: Yeah, exactly.

Matt: That's weird.

Carla: Yeah. So the way that we both kind of play is we don't have a very strong opinion on it after we do it, because we just lose ourselves in the characters. It's just the characters being themselves, rather than us being the character. You know? So it was really weird to watch it last week because I don't very often watch myself play. I feel like the way I felt about it after I watched it was pretty much the same way after I did it. It was just...It was almost like watching other people because it was just them being themselves. I don't know.

Since the second focus group took place in the performance space with the performers sitting in chairs, there were fewer moments where Matt and Carla checked-in with each other and made physical contact. In addition, they both spoke from their individual point of view. They still acted interdependently, expanding on each other's thoughts. When I asked the group about the relationship between the way they do improv on and off stage, Carla began,

I think there's an extent to which the two are related. For example, if you're in a scene, and you're not willing to compromise at all, you're just one hundred percent only doing what you want, and you refuse to listen to the other player. That probably reflects a little bit on the fact that you're not good at cooperating outside of the scene, but what the characters are doing is something entirely different. Like, if the characters are having an argument, and if the characters are fighting, that doesn't necessarily mean that the players are fighting, because they're agreeing to fight. You know? So it's just

where the character leaves the player, I guess, is where that line is drawn.

Matt: I think performance, ya know, it's all about being vulnerable. You've got to be able to go to the lowest steps or the highest highs. You can't have any emotional armor. New players always let that linger, where they know they're not going to go that far. But when they break through it, it's the greatest thing. It's like, "Yes, you're vulnerable now. You'll do anything in a scene." It's the same with performance. You've got to know that you've got to go to those arguments, even though it may get dark. You may realize this could happen at one point. You got to do that.

The two responses revealed Matt and Carla's assumptions about improv in general, which are both anchored in the authenticity of the characters they perform. Their contributions to the discussion articulated their joint-perspective that the authenticity of improvised characters are the fulcrum upon which their off stage conversations about improv pivot. They said that the way they performed their scenes reinforced their resolve to continue performing together. This is illustrated in their final exchange, one of the only moments in the second focus group when they made direct eye contact as they spoke, checking-in with each other:

Matt: I think that's all Carla and I do. We just constantly make fun of each other and laugh and make games.

Carla: Yeah.

Matt: That's all we do.

Carla: Yeah. We already do play with each other a lot. We improvise. We make up games. We play characters. I feel like after we did the two-form up there, I feel like we're a little bit more

confident, and we want to do actual two-form more, with an audience and stuff. We've talked about it a few times since then. It's something that we wanted to do, but we didn't really put much effort into, but I think we're going to try and start doing that more.

Their tendency to check-in functioned as a “reset button” for the pattern of their interaction, encouraging them to frame their performance in the *context of the performance*. Even when they spoke individually, both of them articulated the importance of embracing the possibility that something said or done on and off stage in any relationship may make them more vulnerable as performers. For Matt, it can lead to questions about how “personally” he should interpret what others say. “It's that attachment to the character because you were them,” he claimed,

So it's kind of like, ‘No, no, no. That's me. No, no, no. You're talking about my character.’ It's that kind of... You can't separate yourself from an improv scene. It's kind of hard. There's still that tiny fraction that's there. You wonder how many of those callouts are to you or your character.

For Carla, the way that emotions can possess a person to perform counter to how they act off stage may result in ambiguity that compromises their authenticity. “Sometimes your emotions get the best of you,” she said about communicating with a partner off stage,

and there's not a whole lot you can do about it. If you're in an argument with somebody, and it's escalating, you want to stop yelling, and you want to just stop fighting. You're trying, and you can't. It happens.

Their mutual recognition of the role that character played in the mediation of their scenes harkens back to Tess's statements about trust. Matt echoes Tess's point of view as he talks about what it takes to forge relationships through improv performances. “Even if

you don't think you're giving anything in an improv scene,” he claimed, “if you're giving your trust, that's a lot. That *is* giving in an improv scene.”

### **Summary**

For Matt and Carla, the ability to take a protective position about their relationship—even when speaking only about their own performance preferences—metacommunicated a sentiment of trust that solidified their joint-perspective and often times reinitiated their playful demeanor. Both on and off stage they interacted as if they knew what the other was going to do and say before they did it, treating the unknown as though it were known, confident in their mutual desire to get back to a moment when they could play with each other. Through their ability to build on each other's ideas and heighten absurdity, they continuously confirmed the way each other made sense of the performance, which helped them maintain closeness in their “real-life” relationship.

CHAPTER 6:  
HANNAH AND NICK

**Transition**

Hannah and I are the third group to take the stage. Bringing Hannah up to the stage, I take a step back and she introduces us. She jokes that she feels like only she is going to be performing after such a large welcome, of which I say “Oh, cool” and pretend to leave. The audience laughs as we connect with strong eye contact and light conversation. As we move slowly around the stage during the introduction, we balance each other by making a “stage picture” that depicts an equal power relationship. This is something we’ve learned over the years playing together—a habit that has managed to work itself into our preshow ritual. Hannah turns toward the audience and asks them for a suggestion of “something [they’ve] recently thrown away but had a lot of value.”

A voice near the front shouts “Alcohol,” which gets a big laugh from the audience. Thinking that the suggestion is absurd, I joke, “I know that voice and he doesn’t mean it.” Hannah turns to the back of the stage, laughs, and then thanks the audience for the suggestion, to my surprise.

Launching into a story about her first time getting drunk when she was 15, Hannah explains that her parents had a mini-bar. One night after they left the house for the evening, she and her friend “thought it would be a good idea to get [her] drunk for the

first time.” The night begins with extra-large glasses of vodka and ends with both of them getting sick. “My parents came home,” she continues, “and they were knocking on my door to make sure we were okay.” She explains she covered for her friend (and herself) by saying they were “just tired” and her parents never questioned her.

As she tells this story, I sit on one of the chairs up stage, listening intently. I am waiting for details of the story because it’s a story I already know. I’m a bit nervous that she’s going to include the parts about her story that include her first sexual encounter. The story usually includes intimate details about her struggles with sexual identity as a teen. Realizing that she’s not going to include those details, I quickly search my mental index for inspirations that will steer us clear of sex. The last thing I want to do is commit us to a scene that taps into the *untold* details of the story, which could force Hannah to reveal something about herself that she purposely omitted. The social stakes are high for both of us—the audience is mostly our colleagues and professors, many of whom Hannah has just met at her first graduate school orientation earlier in the day.

### *First Time Getting Drunk Story: Scene 1*

#### Premise

Improvisers might look at our first scene and call it a “point of view” scene in the “Annoyance” style of play. The Annoyance Theater in Chicago promotes an approach to scene work where each performer “takes care of themselves first” (Napier, 2004, p. 16) so their two points of view converge and generate games. Much like Matt and Carla’s scenes, ours begin organically with a loose premise of “Underwhelming Birthday Surprise.” I initiate by situating Hannah as a person about to be surprised by a gift, telling



her to “keep your eyes closed” as I stand behind her and grasp her shoulders. She responds apathetically, eyes closed, giving reasons why she’d rather not. At this point, we have a sense of our relationship so we start playing a frustration game, where Hannah keeps trying to justify opening her eyes and I demand that she keeps them closed. We both know that our characters are in a close relationship and that it’s a special occasion.

As I quell her fears, I walk over to a shelf, grab two objects, and explain over her protests, “It’s your birthday. I wanted to do something special.” After a few more attempts, she eventually accepts that the gift will be worth the build-up and starts to play along. Telling her to open her eyes on the count of three, I yell, “They’re shots!” as she watches me raise the objects in the air. She freezes, responding slowly with polite exasperation, making it clear that she’s not impressed. I ask if she likes the gift and she responds, “I just thought with the buildup it would be...” We continue to explore and discover details about our relationship. As the scene progresses we heighten several games, negotiating what constitutes a good gift, reminiscing about how we met, confessing our initial low expectations of each other, and making assumptions about each other’s personal preferences.

### Emotional Status

Anchored by exploration of the relationship and character discovery, the games of the scene function as tools for challenging each other’s emotional status. As we establish the base reality, I shift my emotional status from moderate to low, matching Hannah as we establish the premise. After revealing the gift, Hannah’s emotional status spikes as she attempts to cover her extinguished excitement and I follow, quieting my tone and

tensing my posture. This mutual rise in emotional status continues until we finally take the shots and immediately drop emotional status together, showing disgust at the taste of the alcohol. We end the scene matched in emotional status.

### Patterns

The pattern that develops is *mutual castigation*. As we navigate the scene through games, we use “sympathetic disagreement” and “admission of faults”—as well as outward admiration of each other’s strengths—to uncover hidden feelings and arrive at equitable conversation that reminds us (and entreats the audience) of the reasons we’re in a relationship. Despite the argumentative beginning of the scene, by the end we express care in our tone and body language, albeit through confrontational statements, “Oh my God, you’re awful” (me) and “I can control you” (Hannah). Through these final offers we reveal a desire to challenge and be challenged by each other.

### Dynamics

Our scene demonstrates a couple who engages each other about their *comfort* in the relationship, unafraid to lose emotional status as they relate. We both act *interdependently* as we position ourselves to correct each other’s offensive and defensive moves, actively protecting the integrity of the relationship and mutual interests of the characters who become more vulnerable through their honesty. The range of emotional status and the intimate nature of the conversation illustrates a moment in the character’s relationship where they confront each other to reaffirm their closeness. Figure 10 shows the detailed codification of the scene.

■ **Table 8** Hannah and Nick – First Time Getting Drunk Story (Scene 1)

Dimension	Description
Premise	<b>Underwhelming Birthday Surprise</b>
Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eye Closing Frustration</li> <li>• Every Gift isn't Good Enough</li> <li>• Remember Our First Time Meeting</li> <li>• Confessing Poor Expectations</li> <li>• Assuming the Other's Preferences</li> </ul>
Emotional Status	<p><b>Emotional Status Challenged</b></p> <p>Start: Nick – Moderate; Hannah – Low</p> <p>End: Both Moderate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nick takes a lower emotional status immediately as Hannah raises her emotional status</li> <li>• Both lower their emotional status together when they take the shots</li> </ul>
Patterns	<p><b>Mutual Castigation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sympathetic Disagreement</li> <li>• Seeking to uncover hidden feelings</li> <li>• Admitting faults and admiring strengths</li> </ul>
Dynamics	<p><b>Probable Confidence – Equitable Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both act more <i>Independent</i></li> <li>• Vast Majority of Moves Made P <math>\leftrightarrow</math> P <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Significant Amount of Moves Made <math>\rightarrow</math> D and <math>\rightarrow</math> O</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Highly Intimate</li> <li>• Both characters become more vulnerable</li> </ul>

*First Time Getting Drunk Story: Scene 2*

Premise

The next scene is also an organic “point of view” scene with a much slower start than the first. Hannah initiates by taking a unique body position on stage, pushing the chairs together, sprawling out over them. I approach her noticing that she looks upset about something. “It’s a…” I begin. She completes my offer by saying “Gone,” which I

hear as “Go on.” “Okay, I’ll leave...” I tell her and she corrects me, acting feverishly sad about something that she lost. She says that she doesn’t want me to leave because she’ll “just ruminate and that’ll be even worse.” In an attempt to lower my emotional status, match her emotional point of view, and balance the stage picture we’ve created, I kneel down on the other side of the chairs. She continues, asking vague rhetorical questions, “What if it’s gone forever?” and “What if I want to do it over and over again? I feel like everyone else can.” I sense a dramatic tone developing in the scene because the pacing is slow and her emotions are heightened, so I act solemn, trying to assuage whatever fear she is expressing. Neither of us know what the base reality is yet because all that we’ve endowed is the character’s point of view. I’m making a concerted effort *not* to endow a premise closely aligned with the story that she *didn’t* tell, because all that I can think about is that she lost her virginity. Instead, I retain the sober, solemn emotional posture that I imagine would have been provoked by her losing her virginity and instead endow whatever she’s lost as something unusual, setting us up to “map” our points of view on to an absurd premise.

“Look,” I say, “I’ve never won the lottery. I know it was only 20 dollars...” At this point, the audience responds with laughter, realizing the absurdity of the offer and the ridiculousness of our character’s points of view. As Hannah looks down at her chair, I continue, “...but you paid that street performer to, you know, eat fire. And apparently that was worth 20 bucks to you. And now you know...that it wasn’t.” In response, she lethargically lifts herself up and throws her chair to the ground, flipping it over in anger, then turning and grabbing a box from the corner to throw. With the next offer, I attempt

to calm her down, endowing our location as a public place and our relationship as acquaintances who had been spending some time together earlier that day. “I was glad to share the moment with you,” I say, “I was just eating my brunch and I saw you on the bench...” At this point, the loosely developed premise of “A Bad Financial Decision” emerges, giving us both a point of contention for mapping our emotions on to our characters as the scene continues.

By the end of the scene, it’s revealed that my character was hoping to get to know her so I could ask her on a date. In the last two offers of the scene, she asks, “*That’s* why you wanted to talk to me after the meeting? *That’s* why you were so nice to me?” Honing in on her endowment that we were recently at a “meeting”—and honoring my previous endowment that we’re in a “public place,” I respond, “Well, it’s Alcoholics Anonymous, we have to hug.” In this final moment of the scene, the base reality solidifies, contextualizing our strange behavior even further.

#### Emotional Status

Once again, we challenge each other’s emotional status in the scene, only this time we anchor our play in the emotional stakes of the emergent relationship. As a result, the scene evolves organically and involves new discoveries until the very end. Hannah immediately takes a low emotional status as she sprawls on the chair and reacts with loud, wailing responses to my cool, calm demeanor. Playing within the wide emotional boundaries of her character, she shifts between explosive anger and depressive disdain. In contrast, my behavior stays emotionally static throughout the scene as I continue to listen to her. By the end, she realizes that my character appreciates her range of emotions and

becomes less expressive, shifting her emotional status to moderate and finally sitting next to me on the chairs.

### Patterns

The pattern that develops is *volatile acceptance*. We both seek to get a response from each other without transforming our character's points of view, which are at odds with each other. Within the pattern, I keep my emotions contained as Hannah explains her deeper motivations for making a bad financial decision. As we play games, we reveal our hidden judgements of each other and my misunderstanding of Hannah's overzealous reactions. We begin to understand that we don't really understand each other and that our interpretations of why each of us act the way we do were initially mistaken.

### Dynamics

Again, we establish equitable conditions for communicating about the relationship. However, we both make *independent* moves in this scene, provoking and heightening our mutually exclusive points of view. Offensive and defensive moves dominate the interaction, moderately increasing the intimacy of the conversation as the premise unfolds. Since we start the scene depicting characters in the midst of a heated moment of emotional conflict—and because we both make significant moves to correctively protect the relationship—the scene decreases in emotional intensity as it continues, and we set the stage for our characters to become more vulnerable with each other. By the end of the scene, we demonstrate a *renewed confidence* in the relationship that has developed. Figure 11 shows the detailed codification of the scene.

## Reflections

In her initial reflection, Hannah highlighted the nervousness that she felt and perceived the other performers felt. “I couldn’t stop myself from wondering what the audience was thinking,” she said. Commenting on the show overall, she admitted that some of the scenes “were drawn out and long” and she recognized that most of the performers were playing characters “close to themselves” as well as relationships that were “close and intimate.” Though the focus groups and reflections revealed that very few performers acknowledged feeling nervous, Hannah used her perception of the abundant nervousness to justify the way she performed. She thought that our performance was problematic and pointed out that she was “trying to provoke [me] to play more and harder” but “felt like [I] was holding back.” She particularly mentioned the moment that I endowed her as having wasted money on a “street performer” in our second scene, claiming, “It didn’t make sense to me and I felt like [Nick] just blurted out whatever.” In addition, she confirmed that she also felt reluctant to endow the scene with more detail because she “thought about sex but was too afraid to say that in front of all [her] peers and colleagues.” Her final thought was that we performed “as if we were contemptuous towards each other, mixed with fondness.”

■ **Table 9** Hannah and Nick – First Time Getting Drunk Story (Scene 2)

Dimension	Description
Premise	<b>A Bad Financial Decision</b>
Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overzealous Reactions</li> <li>• Revealing Hidden Judgements</li> </ul>
Emotional Status	<p><b>Emotional Status Challenged</b></p> <p>Start: Nick – High; Hannah – Low</p> <p>End: Nick – Moderate; Hannah – Moderate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hannah shifts in a bipolar fashion, becoming less dramatic</li> <li>• Nick remains static as an “anchor” throughout the scene</li> </ul>
Patterns	<p><b>Volatile Acceptance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keeping Emotions Contained</li> <li>• Learning From Mistakes</li> <li>• Explaining Deep Motivations</li> </ul>
Dynamics	<p><b>Renewed Confidence – Equitable Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both act more <i>Independently</i></li> <li>• Vast Majority of Moves Made <math>D \leftrightarrow O</math> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Significant Amount of Moves Made <math>\rightarrow P</math></li> </ul> </li> <li>• Highly Intimate</li> <li>• Characters become open the possibility of becoming more vulnerable</li> </ul>

My initial reflection was self-interested, focusing first on the overall quality of the show as a whole. I felt the performers were “actually playing with each other, pushing their boundaries as performers and (seemingly) tapping into some thread of meaning from the past of their relationships.” In contrast to Hannah’s reflection, I was more enthusiastic about our performance and concentrated on the efficacy of our scenes, particularly how we “took our time and for the good majority of the show stayed deeply in-tune with each other’s offers.” I pointed out that there were moments when it felt like we “locked in” with each other and were “able to get tender with each other—which we



typically don't do when we perform." I continued to rationalize that the "tenderness lent itself to finding awesome moments of truth in comedy," attributing our ability to get the audience to connect with us to the way we'd been treating each other off stage, claiming that the way we performed "may have been because lately we have been very patient and more supportive than usual."

The stark differences in our initial reflections were assuaged by our communication during the focus groups. The pattern of our interaction about our performance resembled our scenes as we enacted *confrontation towards confirmation*—a stark contrast to the other three couples. Though we had opposing perceptions about the quality of our performance—particularly in terms of the comfort we both experienced on stage—we used the focus groups to work through those perceptions and reach a joint-perspective. More than a few times, we revealed a highly detailed interpretation of our scenes, clarifying the basis for our own decisions making in the performance:

Nick: I felt more comfortable. If you notice, I was playing characters in a way more vulnerable than I ever play. I was playing guys that are really nice and willing to deal with shit and be okay with everything. When have I ever played a character like that?

Hannah: But I probably wasn't listening to you at all, like everything that you were offering me, I was just, like "Well, I'm still going to say the last thing I just said," you know?

Nick: That wasn't the impression I got in that show. That was the impression I got at the show later that night at the workshop, but not in that show.

Hannah: Yeah, that too.

Most of our contributions in the first focus group connected the decisions we made on stage to our feelings about the show, our relationship, and how we performed together in general. Unlike the other couples, we negotiated the meaning of our scenes as we talked *directly about our individual feelings and perceptions*, presenting a provisional interpretation that opened opportunities for one of us to change our mind. Our perspectives shifted by the end of the discussion, where we began to adopt a fully developed joint-perspective. In one particular instance, Hannah articulates her perception of the way she performed as problematic:

Hannah: Afterwards I felt like I could tell, like yeah, it felt short, but I didn't feel like I played very well. So I didn't feel bad, but I did feel kind of like I was playing to something. I was trying to play to *something*, not playing...

Nick: ...With someone?

Hannah: Yeah, right.

After a good deal of discussion, she began to reframe this perception. After Carlos asked if we “ever feel like we settle into certain kinds of scenes” because we perform together frequently, Hannah for the first time responds in a positive way about her performance:

Nick: We wanted to really actually push, like start pushing new stuff, start not doing new material, but like really pushing the boundaries of each other as performers. How much can we handle?

Hannah: Yeah.

Nick: And we've been doing that the last three performances. That I think, there was some of that in there. We've never played that loose context.

Hannah: You were making decisions, like you said, that you hadn't made before. And I felt like I, too, was doing something different, so that's cool.

While I was confident that we were “locked in” during our performance—as I said in my initial reflection—I continued to seek confirmation from Hannah that the performance was *not* as problematic as she seemed to think. How else would we have been able to keep the audience engaged and laughing up to the moment of our last scene if the performance was so problematic? In an attempt to do this, early in the first focus group I revealed my own uncertainty about the second scene, which resulted in a co-exploration of our individual perceptions. I wanted her to know that even though I wasn’t absolutely comfortable with the performance, I still thought it was interesting and successful. Mainly, I wanted her to know that I *was* listening and that under the surface of our characters, we were in agreement that the scene was unfolding organically and it was about our character’s relationship:

Nick: It's funny. There were so many moments in the second scene that we played where I knew that you had no idea where we were and what we were doing. It was a very organic start, so that's to be expected. But then, I thought I endowed us in a park, but it was too vague, and then I thought I endowed us as having just met. But then watching it I'm like, well, actually there's nothing that indicates that it actually was happening. We were finding something in the past.

Kara: I saw you guys on a patio, like on a boardwalk.

Nick: Well, that's the thing. When she went to get coffee, I was kind of like-- I'm looking at her, like okay, maybe you work at the stand next to the bench in the park. I didn't even think about it. But then in that last moment, with literally it was all the way until it was, "Well, it's an A.A. meeting. We have to hug," that I didn't even realize until now that that went back to the alcohol, what we took, right? But that was the moment when I was like oh, we're inside somewhere after the . . . oh shit. We went through that entire scene, I don't think either of us had any idea where we were or what we were doing. All we knew was who we were to each other.

After this comment, I went on to talk about how the trust we foster as a couple off stage as a couple factors into the way we play on stage. A few turns later, after brief interjections by Kara and Matt, Hannah responded:

Hannah: Yeah, in the second scene, I imagined that we were inside, and so when you said, "That's public property," I was, like yeah, of course, because we're working somewhere, and it's public, like a corporation. I don't know.

Nick: It was the church where the A.A. meetings were, apparently.

Hannah: Yeah, right. But then what really threw me in the very beginning was, I guess, the moment I kind of threw out like "Well, I have no idea of where we are and what's going on," when you mentioned the fire-thrower. Because I was teasing out what I was upset about I was letting you do it, but I was like "Okay, maybe he has something," because immediately what came to my mind was sex. I don't know why. I was like "Maybe we shouldn't say that in front of people. I don't know if I want to say that in front of all of these people," and then you endowed that I won the lottery, I won \$20 in the lottery.

Nick: Yeah, right, because we needed something in context, right?

Hannah: Right, for some reason, I didn't hear it right, but I didn't feel like I could ask you, "What did I do?" So the rest of the time, I was vaguely playing towards that, because it didn't make sense to me.

Nick: But you pulled off an erratic alcoholic pretty fucking well.

Kara: Yeah, you did. You were so like, torn apart and emotional.

Hannah: Thank you.

As we neared the end of our discussion about the second scene, we arrive at a moment where we both realize why we made the decisions we did in a critical moment of the performance that both of us recognized as problematic. Speaking for myself, it was

important to me that we reached a joint-perspective about our performance because we perform frequently and each performance is another opportunity to become better, more fluid improvisers. The confirmation of joint-perception came when we discovered that Hannah's initiation in the second scene and my endowment of the situation was, in fact, a mutual avoidance. At the same time, both of us were trying not to draw on the *untold* story of her losing her virginity, which was clouding our ability to respond quickly and situate details about the *who*, *what* and *where* of the scene that were less absurd and easier to play with. When Kara mentioned that she assumed Hannah's character was referring to losing her virginity (because she, too, knew the other version of the story), both Hannah and I started unpacking our similar thoughts and we discover not only the source of our confusion in the scene, but a source of agreement in the conversation:

Nick: Yes, virginity is what came to my mind when you said that, but immediately I was like, "Dismiss."

Nick: "We are not doing a scene about you losing your virginity."

Hannah: No, that's exactly why I was, like, "No, no, no. No, no."

Nick: So we actually were on the same page in the beginning of that scene, but then we're both like, "Nope. That's not what comes next. Nope."

Rick: Save that for somewhere else.

Hannah: Yeah. And then I feel like in that moment we had to *create* something instead of going with what I originally was going to bring into the scene. The rest of it, it was actually a really good scene and I enjoyed watching it and playing it, but there was a part of me during the scene that was kind of like, "That's *not* what I was thinking about."

Nick: Yeah, right. Me too.

Unlike the other couples, Hannah and I had been performing weekly for the past year. Admittedly, we were both more familiar with each other's tendencies and preferences in two-person scenes. We also had a great deal more experience talking about performing together, which is why we made such an effort to reconstruct the scene by reporting our thoughts and feelings in the focus group. Our experience had taught us to share how we interpreted each other's decisions and how our interpretations led to our individual decision making on stage. We had also learned to resist making a final interpretation of the performance until we'd shared our individual points of view. This helped us speak intimately about our relationship as we worked together to make sense of what we'd done on stage in the focus group. Perhaps because of our experience performing together, and because we had been together romantically longer than the other three couples, we were more willing to engage in conflict in front of the rest of the couples in the focus group.

After unveiling the source of our confusion about our second scene, the pattern of our interaction shifted. In one instance, Jess said, "I've noticed that you guys always seem to have sexual tension on stage. It wasn't just this time." After making a few jokes about her comment, we both took turns responding in a way that reflected Matt and Carla's tendency to make sense of their performances in the *context of their relationship*:

Nick: I think it's because we learned to play so physically from our original training, from everything we've taken in. It's all about the body. I hardly ever divine anything from my past. I do not use any method at all. It's all like if my body's in this shape when we start, then that's what's coming out. I find the voice and character to say anything about that, into that. When you're playing with your partner, I mean, it's an interesting point to bring up. I think that's

like, yeah, if it's a person that you have sex with, then that sexual tension is probably the foregrounded tension that then you pull on to find whatever. It's intuitive, it's highly intuitive.

Hannah: Yeah, even this week, when we played with each other, it's just easy to, when we lock eyes or we just look at each other, it's like I don't know, sometimes, I almost fall into something and I'm like, "Oh. This is a certain thing that I know I do with you." I guess that comes back to the question I asked earlier. It's like I know what to expect from you. If I act in a certain way, I know that you will respond in a certain way. If I walk up to you with sexual tension, I know you won't deny me that. You'll actually feed it - and maybe not the same way, so we'll feed it.

We haven't always made sense of our performances this way. I can remember when we first began performing together our off stage conversations would lead to arguments, discomfort, and suspicion. Feelings would get hurt, followed by threats about disbanding our duo, and a few times, we began to question whether we should be in a relationship at all. Eventually we'd make-up, realizing that our performances weren't necessarily indicative of what we thought or how we felt about each other off stage, but instead revealed where we were in our journey as two different people who evoke certain attitudes and feelings out of each other on stage. Reflecting on those episodes now, I recognize that the source of our conflict was often our inability to confirm jointly how we, as a couple, made sense of our performances together (not just individually). On a given occasion, one of us would make sense of the performance in the *context of our relationship*, while the other was framing it in the *context of the performance*.

In this instance, we shift from *confrontation toward confirmation to collaborative non-competition*, both of us deciding to frame the performance within the *context of the performance*. This helps us dialogue about the performance and confirm each other's

individual (and perhaps differing) points of view without confusing our on stage relationships with our off stage relationship, which is what seemed to be the case in the early part of the focus group. While at first Hannah was tentative about her interpretations, talking more about herself and her own perceptions as they were linked to our relationship to each other and the audience when *not* on stage, we both became more vulnerable with each other and the group as we began to metacommunicate about the specific moments of our performance and how we attempt to approach performances as an improv duo. Despite the confrontational nature of some of these interactions, the dynamic let us effectively process our individual perceptions with each other, giving us a chance to correct to each other as we negotiated a joint-perspective that includes both of our points of view. Our interactions in the first focus group revealed a familiarity with, and equanimity within, conversations about improv performance. When we both shifted the frame of our sensemaking to the *context of the performance*, we both became more confident in the relationship. Thus, the way we perform our relationship in the first focus group serves as an example of how confrontation may be used to create more equitable conditions for fostering a joint-perspective that leads to closeness.

In the second focus group, we once again articulated our individual (independent) points of view, only this time referenced conversations we'd had since the first focus group, including how these conversations affected our subsequent performances since then. Once again, we were able to negotiate a joint-perspective that included both of our points of view, only this time it was done by speaking exclusively in the *context of our relationship*.



For example, in one exchange I mentioned a scene from another show where we (once again) played with a loose premise (i.e., a limited *who*, *what* and *where*) and characters who had opposing points of view. Instead of making a concerted effort to situate a concrete premise, we were more patient than usual, trusting that we'd reach a point in the scene where the source of our agreement would become apparent. Matt, listening to me talk about this scene, coined the moment we were waiting for the "point where you connect." Hannah responded, by explaining how this realization about our performance style contributed to the way she thinks of herself as my partner off stage:

Nick: For the first three minutes, we were not on the same page. She was doing a certain thing, and I was doing a certain thing, and those two things did not... We talk a lot about that afterwards... did not necessarily connect, because I felt the same way. I took this character that was kind of hard and garrulous and leaving and all that, and she was happy with people staying and all that.

I was like, "Yeah, I could flip my role right now and play that, but it would be completely unrealistic. But we hung on . . .

Matt: You find where you connect.

Nick: Yeah. When we finally got to that connecting point, it became something real...

Matt: Deep.

Nick: ...and really deep and almost metaphoric of our off stage relationship.

Hannah: Yeah. After realizing that's how I played . . . I've played like this before, where I haven't necessarily listened. I wouldn't call it steamrolling, but I would call it listening to the story that's going on in my head, what I want to happen, over what's happening on stage. I notice that I do that in real life too, maybe not to the same degree, but we've also been talking about whenever we're going about our normal days, and there are moments when he'll tell me something, and I'll just completely not listen to what he says and

continue on with whatever I was thinking, usually me saying terrible things about myself like, "Oh, my gosh. I dropped the ball on one thing, and now I'm a terrible person." Nick would be like, "No, it's really not that big of a deal." I'm like, "I'm so terrible."

Nick: I always imagine your inner monologue as the character from [the film] Fargo. I don't know. Yeah, just like, "Oh, man. I suck at all these things. Oh, you're so bad at this."

Hannah: Yeah. Well, I tend to be a little dramatic, too. So that's been a weird eye-opener in other aspects of my life, too. It's not that I'm trying to be different, but I'm noticing when that happens.

Finding “the point where we connect” is both a crucial aspect of any improv scene and an apt way of describing the pattern of our negotiation in the focus groups. At first, we were not sure if we *do* connect, but we trust that there will be a moment when we *can*. In the second focus group like the first, we again acted more independently of each other as we contributed to the discussion, making offensive moves that reported the state of our individual perceptions as a bid toward negotiating a joint-perspective. The key difference was that we did so by speaking from the *context of our relationship*. Thus, the source of our agreement in the focus group wasn't implicit in the *content* of what we said, but in finding ways to synchronize the *context* that we used to understand what we said. This not only made the conditions of our communication more equitable, but also increased the *probability of confidence* in our relationship because we gave each other the freedom to reveal intimate details about ourselves, making us more vulnerable as we interacted with the group.

### **Summary**

The focus groups let Hannah and I talk about our performances in a way that encouraged us to metacommunicate our uncertainty about our interpretations and work

through conflicting perspectives. Seeking confirmation, albeit confrontationally at times, Hannah and I expressed an ambivalence about our performances that helped us derive complex meanings and eventually arrive at a joint-perspective that included both of our points of view. Making moves toward offensive positions, we reported our inner-thoughts and emotions to each other while trusting that the other would correctively protect the relationship as they responded. Even when one of us did *not* do this, we continued to persist until the other did and a confirmation was achieved. In this way, we worked to confirm our closeness by getting to agreement through conflict, working together to understand how we played as a couple.

CHAPTER 7:  
KARA AND RICK

**Transition**

The final couple to perform is Rick and Kara, who take the stage quickly and ask the audience for suggestions right away. Both of them stand facing the audience, poised to start their scenes. Rick asks the audience to think of a word and shout it out on the count of three. Turning to Kara, he asks what she heard and she says, “mustache, Jesus and avocado.” Rick checks to see if she can use one of them and she repeats “avocado” in confirmation.

Kara launches into a story about working at Panera Bread, commiserating about putting lots of ingredients on “very small bread.” Her story is significantly longer than the other performers’ stories as she emphatically describes the process of making the sandwiches, providing rich detail about what goes into them and what they’re named. “They have a thing about putting the word ‘power’ at the end of food, making it seem a lot more special than it actually is,” she claims. As she speaks, Rick stands upstage out of the light, letting her take center stage as she paces back and forth during the story. “Every time the sandwich pops up on the screen,” she says, “I literally die a little inside because it challenges me to pile a ridiculous amount of food onto a very tiny, miniscule piece of

bread.” She finishes the story explaining that she’s wearing a dress because after the show, she’s going to interview for a new job.

*Making Tiny Sandwiches Story: Scene 1*

Premise

Most improvisers would recognize this scene as a game-based premise scene, where the *who*, *what* and *where* and first unusual thing is introduced in the initial offer. It’s also a “presentational” scene because the audience is an interactive part of the scene. Rick initiates by addressing the audience as an audience, using an augmented voice as he says, “Here at L’Oréal, we do it big...Here at L’Oréal we’ve got our new shampoo line. It’s a lot of ingredients in a tiny bottle but it fits, don’t worry.” As he does this, Kara stands next to him, flipping her hair like she’s rinsing out shampoo in a shower.

After describing the product with the word “power” Rick looks to his left and asks, “Is that good? Can we cut?” Kara takes a step back and looks at him, telling him that she “can’t keep doing this” because her scalp is starting to burn. At this point, a clear premise has emerged (“New Product Commercial”) and they know that they are two commercial actors who have been on set for a while. As the scene unfolds, they find games easily, describing other products with the word “power,” endowing objects with absurd proportions, and raising the stakes of the commercial, bemoaning the tasks given to them from an “offstage director” as they get more and more difficult. Throughout the scene, they banter as they commiserate over the conditions of the shoot.

### Emotional Status

This is the only other scene where the performers reverse their emotional status by the end of the scene. Rick immediately takes a high emotional status as he tries to accommodate Kara, who begins the scene with a low emotional status and becomes more flustered as she attempts to perform her part in the commercial. By the end of the scene, Rick takes a low emotional status as his character becomes more frustrated with Kara's inability to perform and Kara takes a high emotional status as she starts to give up.

### Patterns

The larger pattern of the scene is *futile assistance*, where the shared empathy with their character's rational complaints within absurd circumstances results in their having to play by impossible rules. Through this single pattern, they are able to reenact scenes within the scene, finding games that lead them back to the given frustrating conditions of not getting it right.

### Dynamics

Despite the frustrating circumstances, the characters maintain *equitable conditions* for communicating with each other, negotiating their needs as actors, which involves confronting their capabilities. They grow more vulnerable with each other as the scene unfolds and they have to complete more challenging tasks, sharing more intimate details about themselves as they struggle to get the shoot right. Rick acts more *independently* as he confronts both the off-stage director and Kara about her shortcomings, doing most of comedic heightening. Kara acts more *dependently* as she follows Rick's subtle directions and makes space for Rick to explore new patterns to

heighten. Although they make a number of moves toward offensive positions, their ability to correctively protect the character’s working relationship depicts co-workers who reserve a *confidence* in their relationship so they can accomplish their tasks. Figure 12 shows the detailed codification of the scene.

■ **Table 10** Kara and Rick – Making Tiny Sandwiches Story (Scene 1)

Dimension	Description
Premise	<b>New Product Commercial</b>
Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describing Things with the Word “Power”</li> <li>• Endowing Absurd Proportions</li> <li>• High Stakes Acting</li> </ul>
Emotional status	<p><b>Emotional Status Reversed</b></p> <p>Start: Rick – High; Kara – Low</p> <p>End: Rick – Low; Kara – High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rick takes a lower emotional status as they continue to explore the conditions of the premise and the tasks of the commercial shoot become more challenging</li> </ul>
Patterns	<p><b>Futile Assistance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathizing with rational complaints</li> <li>• Attempting perfection</li> <li>• Playing by impossible rules</li> </ul>
Dynamics	<p><b>Possible Confidence – Equitable Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rick acts more <i>Independently</i>; Kara acts more <i>Dependently</i></li> <li>• Vast Majority of Moves Made P <math>\leftrightarrow</math> O <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Insignificant Amount of Moves Made <math>\rightarrow</math> D</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Increasing Intimacy</li> <li>• Characters become more vulnerable</li> </ul>

As the first scene ends, Rick comes forward and asks the audience for another word as Kara encourages the audience in a hurried shout, “More words!” Lots of suggestions are shouted from the audience. “I can do Ambulance,” Rick says as he moves

center stage to tell his story. Kara takes a seat on the chairs upstage and listens as Rick describes his involvement with the University Quidditch team—a full contact sport inspired by the *Harry Potter* stories, involving teams of players who carry a “quaffle” down field while holding plastic piping between their legs. “As I’m rounding the bend,” he says, “this giant, beast of a man leans in to get me and clocks me.” He explains that the tackle cuts his eyebrow open and he has to rush to the hospital to get stitches. “I cried,” he says, because he’s afraid of needles, “so they medically glued part of my eyebrow back together.” He ends the story sarcastically, claiming it was “really fun...having to tell the doctors that I got head-butted by a large, burley man while I was playing Quidditch, a made-up sport.”

#### *Quidditch Injury Story: Scene 1*

##### Premise

Their second scene is also a game-based premise scene, only this time they perform “representationally”—they don’t address the audience. Kara initiates by approaching Rick and taking his hand, leading him to a chair. “Alright Hun,” she says, “If you want to just sit down. School starts in a few weeks and your Mommy brought you in here, you know, to get your shots.” She pushes back his sleeve while pulling his arm out straight as he looks up to her and says, “I know.” She continues, “Alright, well I’m gonna get the turn-a-kin, okay?” Rick looks down and pauses, thinking about her last offer as the audience laughs. He responds, “Okay. I don’t know what that word is” and starts nervously tapping the side of his chair. At this point, the premise is “Scared Child Getting a Shot,” where the first unusual aspect of the scene is Kara’s mispronunciation of



“tourniquet.” They quickly create a series of games based on Rick’s character acting younger than he is, presuming that all big words are scary, using the automated chair to make Kara’s job harder, and to represent her nursing procedures as akin to illegal drug use.

### Emotional Status

Unlike the first scene, they both take a high emotional status at the outset and end with mutual high emotional status. However, while Kara’s emotional status is static throughout, Rick drops to the lowest possible emotional status after his character gets the shot. He uses the automated chair he’s sitting in to raise himself up in the air as he cries and howls. Immediately after, he returns the chair to its original position and takes the highest emotional status possible, taking a sucker out of a jar and putting it in his mouth, like a binky to calm down.

### Patterns

The larger pattern of the scene is *respectful confrontation*, where Rick continues to challenge authority and make excuses and exceptions for why he can’t take the shot, all of which are thwarted by Kara. Like their first scene, they use this single pattern to find games that lead them back to their initial conditions of patience, despite Rick’s fear.

### Dynamics

Again, the *equitable conditions* of their communication helps them become more vulnerable with each other. As in their first scene, they negotiate their needs, which involves confronting the reality that Rick has to get the shot and Kara has to do her job. They grow slightly more vulnerable with each other as the scene unfolds and Rick makes

Kara's job more challenging, using the banter between them to share intimate details about themselves as a strategy for assuaging his fears. Again, Rick acts more *independently* as he tries to outmaneuver Kara's character, while Kara acts *dependently*, waiting for the right moment to stick him with the needle and allowing him to express his reluctance. Although they make a number of moves toward offensive positions, their ability to correctively protect their nurse-patient relationship depicts characters that also reserve a *confidence* in their relationship so they can accomplish the task. Figure 13 shows the detailed codification of the scene.

### **Reflections**

In his initial reflection, Rick attested to the quality of he and Kara's scenes, claiming "it was the most fun I've had with Kara on stage because we were supposed to be there representing our relationship and how it plays out through improv." In his eyes, the performance was an opportunity to show something about their off stage relationship, which led him to "find the funny and the progression [of scenes] specifically through the relationship they had on stage." This encouraged him to "call back to real moments [they] had and sort of superimpose them onto the scene and characters" they performed. For him, they were "always on the same page" and he "trusted her as [his] partner and girlfriend" as they performed for an audience that knew him and Kara were in a relationship, which "for some reason made the performance easier." He ended the reflection by observing that their scenes were the only ones that weren't "couple-y" among the four couples, which he attributed to his own preference to not perform characters in a romantic relationship.

■ **Table 11** Kara and Rick – Quidditch Injury Story (Scene 1)

Dimension	Description
Premise	<b>Scared Child Getting a Shot</b>
Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Big Words Are Scary</li> <li>• Rick Acts Younger Than He Is</li> <li>• Strategic Chair Maneuvers</li> <li>• Nursing Procedure Resembles Illegal Drug Use</li> </ul>
Emotional Status	<p><b>Emotional Status Maintained</b></p> <p>Start: Both High</p> <p>End: Both High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rick drops to lowest possible emotional status after getting the shot, then takes highest possible emotional status after taking a sucker</li> <li>• Kara remains static throughout</li> </ul>
Patterns	<p><b>Respectful Confrontation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making excuses and exceptions</li> <li>• Being patient in spite of fear</li> <li>• Challenging authority</li> </ul>
Dynamics	<p><b>Possible Confidence – Equitable Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rick acts more <i>Independently</i>; Kara acts more <i>Dependently</i></li> <li>• Vast Majority of Moves Made P <math>\leftrightarrow</math> O <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Insignificant Amount of Moves Made <math>\rightarrow</math> D</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Increasing Intimacy</li> <li>• Characters become more vulnerable</li> </ul>

Similarly, Kara began her reflection claiming that their performance was “on point” and they were “on the same page for the majority of the performance.” She also brought up that they were “familiar with each other’s stories and experiences,” which made it easier to follow each other during their scenes. She claimed that their ability to play games in the scenes “felt natural” and that they were “easy to create” because their ideas “meshed so fluidly.” She finished her reflection also pointing out that they were the

“only couple to not perform a scene with a romantic undertone,” which she said isn’t a bad thing “by any means” because it’s “just how [their] dynamic ended up being.” She used this point to set their performance apart from the others, observing how “each couple brought to the stage such a unique and individual dynamic.”

Both Rick and Kara used the phrase “same page” to describe the quality and efficacy of their performance—a speech code that they used approvingly. They also both mentioned that their previous experiences with each other as a couple made the performance easier and more enjoyable. Finally, each of them separately mentioned that they were the only couple that didn’t perform scenes depicting romantic relationships.

Despite this view of their performance and the role their relationship played in it, both Rick and Kara emphasize that they are reluctant to identify as a couple when they do improv. Throughout the first focus group, Rick was mostly silent as Kara ardently expressed a need to set their relationship apart from the others, using their reluctance to perform “romantic couple” on stage as evidence. Often becoming defensive about their relationship and the role it played in their performance, she acted *independently* the majority of the time, speaking on behalf of the relationship. By the end of the first focus group, I had observed several instances when Kara not only spoke *for* Rick, but also wanted “to show that [their] relationship was strong through [their] improv.” Many of her contributions reiterated that she wasn’t under the impression that the couples were going to do scenes about romantic couples. In her mind, she and Rick

would just be doing [improv] with our partner. And seeing how our relationship just strengthened our ability to improvise, I wasn’t thinking that we would be in a relationship with people that we

were improvising about, [that is] the characters that we were improvising.

This came up repeatedly. She adamantly defended that she and Rick's scenes did not depict close relationships *on purpose* and that there was generally no "correlation between [her] relationship [with Rick] and the content of [her] improv scenes." This statement contrasts with her and Rick's initial reflection that what made the scenes "easy" was that they were so familiar with each other's lives and that they could "call back to real moments" and "superimpose" them onto their scenes. Later in the focus group, talking about their second scene, Kara showed this as she made a point to say

I went to that scene, I was like, 'I'm so ready to do this,' because I knew exactly what story he was telling, I knew where he was going. I had needles in my head, the second he brought up Quiddich and his eyebrow. I'm like, 'Okay, I know exactly what I'm going to do with this and it's going to happen.'

As the focus group turned more acutely toward discussion about performing with a romantic partner, Kara suggested that she and Rick purposely *don't* play close relationships when they improvise because early in their relationship they didn't want other improvisers to think they "were a thing." Rick explains that "behind closed doors" they improvise a lot. "What Kara and I do all the time is just find game[s]," he said, "just because it's something we love to do." He continued:

Rick: I think the problem with [the performance], a lot of it was on me, because I didn't go in there thinking that I was going to try to improvise a close relationship. I just went in there seeing it as another performance.

Kara: Yeah, exactly. I know I'm the same way and Rick's the same way. We're not typically the kind of people who want to have an intimate relationship in an improv scene. We're more focused on...

Rick: We're gamey.

Kara:...the situation, like the laughter, the humor in it, the kind of irony of a situation. Like, we think about situations. [Playing intimate] relationships just doesn't work ...

Rick: But that's our relationship, it's like, we find the relationship we have by being together and finding the game, and when we have that it's the same as when you two are [points at Matt and Carla] reading that book or you're yelling at...What was the name of the character?...

Carla: ...Joel?

Rick: Joel—yeah—yelling at Joel, together. So everyone has their own little things they do, but it's no less of a relationship. Like, you can't compare them. We all have our own ways of showing how we act around each other.

Despite producing the most humorous performance of all four couples, Rick and Kara presumed that there was a problem with their scenes because they weren't scenes that depicted romantic relationships. They seemed to suggest that *their* style of improvising involved revealing patterns through the relationships on stage that were detached from their off stage relationship and that the *others'* styles on improvising involved *bringing* patterns to the stage from their off stage relationship, forcing them into the performance of romantic relationships on stage.

Although claiming to share this joint-perspective, they both made opposing offensive and defensive moves as they continued to participate in the focus groups, which

revealed a difference in point of view. As the conversation progressed, Kara began interpreting their performance in a way that was at odds with Rick's point of view. A *codependent* dynamic emerged, where they spent most of their time rationalizing their individual opinions and feelings for others in the focus group and hardly any time negotiating a perspective together. The lack of metacommunicative moments between them culminated in what I interpreted as a pattern of *resilient justification*, where they continued to offer reasons why they acted differently than the other couples. Ironically, *this* pattern is what set them apart from the other couples in the focus groups, who spent the majority of their time speaking to each other and working toward some sort of interpretive consensus.

Kara dominated the first focus group discussion, making more than double the contributions that Rick did. She continuously took defensive positions, inviting other participants to correct her, claiming that she and Rick didn't do something "wrong" or out of line with the concept of the show, so much as play out their unique style of improv. For her, their performance was necessarily different than the others because as a couple, *they* were necessarily different. Making moves between defensive and protective positions when he spoke, Rick struggled to find a way into the conversation and refrained from making any corrective moves. As a result, *her* view became *their* view.

Rick and Kara were the only couple who brought up the fact that they did not play romantic relationships on stage. Even though doing so was never acknowledged, articulated, or encouraged at any stage of the research project as an expectation, both of them seemed to think it was an informal expectation. Ultimately, the content of the

scenes was left up to the performers and how they used audience suggestions to be inspire each other through storytelling. Thus, Kara's resistance to performing a romantic relationship on stage and Rick's complicity in the way she articulated their joint-perspective may reveal insecurities about how their relationship off stage might come across on stage. Still, though they might have felt exposed and vulnerable in a show where they knew the close relationships of the performance partners was promoted, they produced a highly entertaining performance by playing roles distinct from their romantic relationship.

Since Kara and Rick only confronted each other a few times during the focus groups, they made fewer corrective moves than the other couples. Like on stage, this seemed to allow them to remain in agreement most of the time. As Kara continued to contribute to the first focus group by speaking for both of them, she became more expressive about defending her perspective, eventually sliding into hyperbolic. For instance, talking about how she and Rick play with each other off stage, she claimed

We don't talk about it, it just kind of happens. We'll just like, be doing whatever and then it turns into improvising a song or improvising a scene or we're characters. And it's not like we do it for the sake of improv, we just do it because we enjoy doing it.

As the focus group discussed the possible correlations between the scenes in the performance and the couples' relationships off stage, she claimed

We're just two people who know each other really well—who know our nuances and our tendencies—and it really benefits us and we can just go [on stage] and be okay. We don't try to aim for [playing] relationships, we don't try to aim for like “We're boyfriend and girlfriend, we're into each other.” No. We are two people who are intimate with each other in a lot of different ways,



not just as a relationship...But the fact that we're intimate in so many different ways, to put the relationship in that mixture [on stage], it almost feels as if it limits us.

Later, as the whole focus group discussed the same topic, Kara argued against my interpretation that improvisers *can't help* but bring intimate elements from their off stage relationship on stage, once again pointing out that she and Rick perform differently:

Nick: We're always striking something that's inspired by our intimacy, not by reality, but by fantasy, by our thought process.

Kara: Yeah, but the reality is that all three scenes, that all three sets before ours played some sort of romantic relationship.

Kara's vigilance led to a short argument between her, Hannah, and me as she continued to defend her point of view. Hannah and I interpreted her defensiveness as indicating that she had a problem with *any* couple claiming that intimacy informed their performance:

Kara: I'm just being honest, you guys. I don't look at Rick and think relationship, I think...

Nick: ...But do you have a problem with it? Because it sounds, like you have a problem.

Karah: No.

Hannah: It's also the third time you brought this up, so I'm just wondering.

Nick: Yeah, I'm wondering too, like, do you have an issue with...

Kara: ...No, I'm just trying to say...

While Kara was on guard in these situations, Rick remained silent. In both tone and content, her argumentative stance made the others uneasy and compelled them to ask her for clarification, but in all cases Rick remained in silent support. Ironically, what she *said* about relationships was often at odds with how she *acted* in the focus groups. Though she claimed that Rick and her were frequently “on the same page” and trusted each other enough to anticipate each other’s thoughts with ease in the first focus group, she left little room for Rick to talk about his individual interpretations. When he did contribute, he revealed that his point of view was, in fact, different.

In the second focus group, the roles were reversed—Rick did nearly all of the talking. When Kara did speak, her contributions directly disputed Rick’s point of view. In response, Rick abruptly changed his opinion, accepting Kara’s interpretation *as* their joint-perspective, simply contradicting his own interpretation of their performance style:

Rick: Kara and I have that a lot, where we call back to scenes that we did in the past. Then we look at it, at our relationship, from that standpoint, using our relationship's eyes to judge the scene and how we acted. We wonder if we were just *those* [characters we were depicting]...or if we were being ourselves in the scene. And, I...Right? I feel like we have a lot of conversations about that. We discuss what goes on in the scene and how we act towards each other...

Kara: ...We'll discuss it, but I don't think we ever...

Rick: [He turns toward Kara]...Is that synonymous to how we act towards each other in general?

Kara: I never feel that way.

Rick: No?

Kara: I honestly think when we perform, we just...

Rick: [Nodding]...It's very different.

Kara: ...Yeah, it is. You and I don't put the two together.

Rick: [To the group] It's actually kind of opposite, to be honest. In scenes, I definitely take the lead, oftentimes, especially in scenes where it's the two of us because I know that she's going to follow really, really well, unlike in our relationship where I don't pay attention to shit. I don't go on Facebook, and I don't know when we have to be to improv shows. She's always like, "Get your shit together. You're taking us somewhere in two hours." I guess it's relatively different, almost polar opposites, the way we act in real life, in our relationship, and the way we perform together.

This comment reminded me of a moment in the first focus group where Kara turned toward Rick, looking to him for support. He managed to avoid answering her as I interrupted, sensing conflict, cutting him off in an attempt to help him save face:

Kara: Honestly, I don't look at Rick and think [about our] relationship. I think what the characters are like. I don't know. Do you feel that way? Like I don't look at you and think, "This is my partner. Let's go with that." No, I am definitely . . .

Rick: ... Well are we talking about in a scene or just in general?

Karah: No, no, not in general.

Nick: Yeah, but that's not what's being said. That's actually not what's being argued...At least not what I'm hearing the group say about you.

I was unclear about what Rick's response would have been in that moment.

Ironically, these two instances reinforce Kara's insights about being on the "same page" when they improvise. "I feel like when Rick and I do improv," she claims,

we're just always on the same page. Like there's usually never any question about what we're doing and we catch on with each other because we know each other so well, and that hasn't always been the case in our relationship. We're not always on the same page in our relationship and we've had a lot of trouble with that, and it's been a very bumpy road for us. But at the same time, we usually try to avoid, I guess, going into improv anything, feeling like we're in a relationship, because I guess, it doesn't limit us; it frees us, when we just go in there and we're just two people that we are. We're two people that know each other, we're close and we're intimate, but it doesn't have that title, it doesn't have that label, it doesn't have any bearing on us.

To Kara, being on the "same page" seemed to mean liberation from any label or stigma that may stem from public perception of being in a romantic relationship with her improv partner. Rick appeared to contradict this interpretation when he indicated that being on the "same page" meant that they were able to carry the patterns of interaction they created off stage into their scenes on stage. "I think the relationships that we have," he said,

behind closed doors when it's just the two of us, is really a direct kind of representation of what we did up on stage. Because what Kara and I do all the time is just, we find games just because it's something we love to do, and [that's] all we did [in the performance] was play games. It was just straight up games.

The disjunction between their points of view is an issue of confusing the *process of improvising* with the *content of the improv performance*. Whereas Rick appeared to

refer to the way they improvised together, connecting how they play with each other off stage with how they played on stage, Kara appeared to be concerned with differentiating the content of their performance on stage from the content of their relationship off stage. Although Rick drew a different interpretation than Kara, he did little to point it out, to help her understand why, or to draw her confront her about it.

Although it did appear that together they endorsed a style of improvising that *was* different from the other couples—one that helped them have a great deal of comedic success in the performance, it had little to do with not playing romantic couples in their scenes. What ultimately set them apart from the other couples was the way they interacted in the focus groups, particularly that the joint-perspective they reached was largely dictated by one partner’s point of view. While they were “on the same page” most of the time, it seemed to always be a page determined by one partner. While Kara appears to control the page they were on off stage, Rick primarily controlled the trajectory of their scenes on stage by giving Kara ways to respond that reinforced his understanding of the scene.

Through her responses in the focus groups, Kara spoke passionately, showing that she had put a lot of thought into how they improvised together. Conversely, Rick spoke relatively dispassionately, claiming that he didn’t want to overthink their process. “I think at the end of the day,” he said,

if you focus too much on what you're trying to do and what your actions are doing, that you're paying too much attention to time, almost. It passes slower, and you feel like you make mistakes. You feel like you catch things that you shouldn't. I feel like when you're not totally involved in yourself, if you're not in that weird kind of mood where you're just really out of it and paying attention to

everything you do, just like in an improv scene where you're just going and you're just doing it. If you're hanging out with your partner, a lot of the time you're just shooting the shit. You're doing something fun. You're always having a great time. But if you slow yourself down a little too much, and you're too focused on what you're doing or saying, then you can [make it harder on yourself]. To me, at least, it happens. I feel worse about what's going on than I should. I'm a little more negative than I should be, paying too much attention.

Carla: Over-thinking?

Rick: Yeah, over-thinking.

Carla: Yeah.

Rick: I find that in both the relationship and onstage.

Thus, a pattern of *contradiction for exception* surfaced in Rick and Kara's focus group interaction, which may have been a result of the way Kara made sense of their performance—and improv in general—almost exclusively within the *context of their relationship*. Rick's complicity in accepting Kara's interpretation of their performance as their joint-perspective resulted in a lack of metacommunication, letting them “off the hook” (so to speak), able to avoid conflict, confrontation, and discrepancies in their individual interpretations. Seeking to “be on the same page,” they used the focus group discussions not to negotiate an interpretive consensus but to construct a perspective of their relationship that made them the *exception* to the other groups. For them, it seemed that improvising together in ways that *didn't* show dynamics from their relationship “behind closed doors,” as Rick put it, reinforced the “strength” of their relationship. In

short, they seem to both defend a position with the others that their invulnerability on stage made them unique and strong as a couple.

Despite this point of agreement, while Kara preferred to frame their performance on stage in the *context of their relationship*, Rick framed it almost exclusively in the *context of the performance*, which suggests that when he talked about their performance, how they played together on stage was more important than how they acted as a couple off stage. Rick continually made “I” statements that turned his comments about their scenes back on the way he *performed* and not on the aspects of their off stage relationship. For example, when he brought up the fact that they didn’t develop scenes depicting romantic couples—addressing the content of their performance directly—he spoke exclusively about the *decisions they made on stage*:

Rick: I already kind of pointed it out that with her and I, I just thought it was funny that everyone else had the scene where they were obviously romantically involved or like, into each other or someone was trying to get the other person to be with them. And both of our scenes were like, "We're just two random people, you know. I'm getting paid or she's getting paid and I don't want to be here in this scene and I'm going to get a needle." It was one level, and it wasn't deep with the relationship, which I thought was kind of funny, but I ended up just kind of chalking it up to the way I perform. Because I didn't go in nervous at all, I left feeling good about the scenes, and I always come into an improv show just kind of ready to do improv. I don't ever have an idea of where I want it to go or how I want it to end up.

Kara: I think that's why I felt nervous because, I don't know, I just can't think about improv and then think about my relationship and think about them as one thing, as a solid, single thing. I think about them individually. Like I'm not saying I don't bring my relationship into improv. It definitely contributes to it and it definitely affects the way I perform, but there is no correlation between my relationship and the *content* of my improv scenes. There's no

theme. Of course I'm going to improvise better with someone I spend a lot of time with.

Kara's response in this instance revealed the disjunction in their interpretations because she framed the performance in the *context of their relationship*. She said it mattered *who* she performed with and seemed to confuse the content of their performance with way they acted as a couple off stage. Ironically, the confused connection that she draws between the way she and Rick play on stage and the way they act off stage helps her defend her position that they do not bring their off stage relationship with them on stage.

Although their participation in the focus groups seemed to display *confidence* in their relationship, Kara's determination to show the exceptional quality of their relationship may have prevented Rick from acting independently, resulting in moments of contradictory statements that encouraged him to abandon his point of view for hers. A desire to *protect the relationship in a non-corrective way* may have resulted in Rick's limited participation in the first focus group and careful participation in the second. Kara's exerting individual control over their joint-perspective, along with her resistance to make sense of their performance in the *context of the performance*, gave Rick little freedom to share his point of view. Rick may have realized that holding on to his own interpretations risked compromising the confidence in their relationship and, thus, deferred to Kara's perspective as a safe bet. This kind of interaction pattern could produce a state of *codependency masked as interdependence*, in which the couple's joint-



perspective exists largely within boundaries that one of them dictates, the other permits, and both depend on to feel close, sense confidence, and enact trust.

### Summary

Rick and Kara seemed to be comfortable avoiding confrontation so they could more easily accept the presumption that they were “always on the same page,” even when it became obvious that they weren’t. As a result, they were unable to produce a joint-perspective about their performance that included Rick’s point of view. On stage, their ability to reach agreement quickly and find games got a big reaction from the audience. Off stage, their ability to relate to each other seemed far less collaborative, provoked other focus group participants to seek clarity, and put Kara on the defensive. In contrast to other couples (e.g., Carla and Matt, Hannah and Nick) who metacommunicated often and effectively during the focus groups, Kara and Rick’s *lack of metacommunication* made it easier for one partner to abandon their point of view and endorse the other’s as their joint-perspective, giving them the option to avoid calling each other’s interpretations into question.

CHAPTER 8:  
LEAVING THE STAGE

Passing Rick and Kara as they exit the stage, I turn to the audience and tell them that the show is over, inviting all of the performers back to the stage. As the audience applauds one last time, I thank them and explain, “we’re going to go on and do other things with the study now, but we’re glad that we got to bring improv to you.” Glancing back and seeing all of the performers lined up behind me, I’m relieved. I end the show as I always end shows, telling the audience that “If this looks like fun that’s because it is,” inviting them to come see us perform as a company and take an improv class with us. The house lights come on, the crowd rises, and I make my way to the backstage area, retrieving pens, and blank paper to give to the performers for their initial reflections.

**Beyond the Study**

If there’s one thing I’ve learned about relationships, it’s that “what brings people together is not what keeps them together” (Bochner, 1981). As time goes by, so much changes. When the study started, I considered most of these performers my good friends. Together we had built a small improv company and brought the art form to our city through weekly training and shows. Our group became well known among improvisers across the country and attracted scores of performers to our open public workshop and annual festival. I watched each couple forge a close relationship from scene to scene and

show to show, getting closer as time went on and eventually becoming willing to embrace the intimate nature of their relationship in public. We were a tight knit group of friends who spent time with each other on and off stage at parties, campfires, on road trips, at restaurants, and sometimes for no reason at all.

Admittedly, my interpretations of the couples' scenes and contributions to the focus groups come from my own point of view. Maybe it's because Hannah and I learned so much about each other by learning to improvise together—or maybe it's just that my love life and my performance life have always been intertwined—but I operated under the impression that improv could help people foster healthy romantic relationships where their bonds strengthened as they learned what their partners were capable of intellectually and emotionally through their performances. What could be more provocative than doing a scene with someone you have secrets with, telling the truth about those secrets in front of a room full of people who all think you're acting? What could be more exciting than acting like someone you're not with someone who knows you the best? Now, after completing this study, I'm not sure how to answer these questions and I'm not sure if I think this way. Thinking *about* and *with* these couples as they performed and talked about their performances, I wonder if my experiences with improv were less universal than I imagined. I have learned that the couples in this study—and presumably couples who improvise together all over the world—don't necessarily find improv as a life practice that brings them closer. Or some of them, it may simply be something they do for fun and don't give much thought to at all.

A few months after the study, Tess and Karl broke up. Karl, single for the first time in a few years, started to spend more time with me and other company members, clearly heartbroken but also intrigued by the idea of having time to do more improv. He confronted me about his issues with Tess, particularly always giving in to what she wanted in the relationship and even abandoning his friends to make her happy. We hung out at bars, commiserating at times but mostly making jokes and having fun building on each other's comic ideas. He became one of my closest friends. Even though we're separated by age and ethnicity, we realized that we trusted each other both on stage and off. We started to teach improv classes together and before too long, he became an executive in the company, graduated college and found a good paying job at a local hospital. He also found his way into another close relationship with one of our improvisers. They eventually formed a duo together and performed at shows with Hannah and me weekly. Though he seems happier in this relationship, I can see many of the same patterns developing that he experienced with Tess, both on stage and off.

In the meantime, Tess disappeared from the improv scene. Hannah saw her a few times at social outings—a couple of “girls’ nights” that she was invited to for movies and wine. As the months went by, she got fewer and fewer invites until she and Tess stopped speaking all together. It seems like she moved on from both her relationship with Karl and improv in general.

Matt and Carla remained together. After Matt found a new house nearer to the University, Carla moved in with Karl's new girlfriend just around the corner. Although they would come to shows on occasion, both of them stopped performing with the

company. Soon after the second focus group, Matt started getting consistent work doing voice-overs for cartoons, which was always his passion. Carla continued her work with a local amusement park and continued to work on her degree. According to Karl and his new girlfriend, they still take every chance they get to act ridiculous together but they have had their ups and downs as a couple.

Rick and Kara remained together for a few months after the study, breaking up periodically and instigating a lot of social drama within the company. Eventually, they broke up for good and Kara left the company, defriending a number of people on Facebook and sharing deeply negative opinions about myself and other company members before completely cutting ties. Very quickly, she found a new apartment and got into a new relationship. The break up was hard on Rick, who like Karl started spending more time with company members and performing more. Emerging as a social leader in the company, he began performing a duo with his best friend alongside Hannah and me at weekly shows, which only lasted a short while. Now he performs a duo weekly with a rotating cast. He just recently got into a new committed relationship.

Hannah and I got married the following March after the study ended and Karl was the best man at our wedding. Since then, we've toured the country performing together at different theaters and festivals in major cities. Looking back on our performance in the study, we both realized that the focus groups helped us find a voice as a couple who improvises together, giving us a chance to figure out how to more effectively process our scenes and take greater risks on and off stage as we subtly push each other to grow. The trust that we felt on stage since we met deepened after appearing nationally as a husband-

wife duo, which is how we've promoted ourselves. Both of us are still involved with the company as executives and instructors, and we teach applied improv workshops together to University students and local professionals. We've evolved as performers and partners both on and off stage, experiencing less conflict and more confirmation as we communicate daily.

I recognize that I come to this study as a person already living within a network of relationships where my past experiences with the participants—including my thoughts and feelings about them—color my interpretations. I've done my best and worked as vigorously as possible to abridge personal opinions and put myself in the other performer's shoes while working through my observations. Still, I can't outrun my own subjectivity and I refuse to eschew my interpretations even if the couples in the study disagree with how I've understood their communication. Even though I approach this study as an ethnographer of improv and an autoethnographer of my romantic relationships, the best I can do is put forth my *tentative* impressions regarding the ways these couples communicated, negotiated meaning, and made themselves vulnerable. Just as well, I realize that there is more to these relationships than just improv. Looking back on all of the changes that followed the study, I can't help but wonder if the metacommunicative conversations we all shared—though exciting and enriching at the time—resulted in shifts in some of the performers' perceptions about each other, about me, and about their relationships. I wonder if their experiences in this study led them toward their break up. I wonder if it led them to leave the company. As with all qualitative research projects, there are some questions that can never be fully answered.

## Final Reflections

In this study, I sought to understand improvising together can give a couple a way to maintain their relationship in nuanced, complex ways and experience vulnerability with less fear, encouraging them to negotiate the terms of their interpersonal freedom as they make sense of their performances together. By metacommunicating, they reveal patterns in their communication that may make it possible to confront relational realities about how they play on stage that may be emotionally difficult, yet important to accept off stage. Though no one can predict whether a couple will remain together or not, I have found that a couple's ability to be *confident* in the relationship as they communicate opens them up to negotiate a joint-perspective, giving them an opportunity to grow closer as they become more vulnerable with each other.

Conceptualizing relationality as a game of vulnerable positioning both on and off stage, I've observed that couples who create *equitable* conditions for communicating their interpretations demonstrate a confidence in their relationship that helps them reach a joint-perspective. Communication patterns emerge that influence the way partners express and make sense of their performance decisions. A couple's ability to frame their interpretations within the same context—be it the *context of the relationship* or the *context of the performance*—impacts their ability to continue to trust each other and be vulnerable. In some cases, their inability to “be on the same page” about *how* to make sense of their performance can impact their ability to maintain equanimity (or emotional composure) as they communicate. In this study, the couple who created the most *inequitable* conditions for communicating their interpretations (Rick and Kara) demonstrated a lack of

metacommunication, revealing a disjunction in their sense making abilities that limited the interpersonal freedom. Ultimately, each couple fell into a unique pattern of communicating their interpretations to each other, which was related to the frames they used to make sense of their performance *and* their ability to coordinate their framing at any given time in order to negotiate a joint-perspective.

Being confident in the relationship appears to mean trusting that your partner will correctively protect the relationship during negotiations of what may be very different points of view. A couple's capacity for vulnerability is reflected in their ability to create equitable conditions for ongoing communication about the terms of their relationships through metacommunicative conversations that make relationally held meanings provisional.

The more that partners make protective moves toward each other, the more *interdependent* they become and the more they extend each other the freedom to act independently as they express their individual points of view during negotiations. They extend each other more opportunities to be vulnerable by trusting that the integrity of relationship will be protected, growing more confident in the relationship the more they communicate. Thus, as they negotiate a joint-perspective they can become closer and engage in a more vulnerable experience. The more offensive or defensive moves they make, the more they run the risk of falling into patterns of *codependence*, establishing barriers to each other's freedom to act independently and express individual points of view. Continuing to assert individual points of view despite at the expense of one partner's point of view being honored may compromise the integrity of the relationship,



making both partners less able to be vulnerable with each other, less confident and, as a result, less close.

Being close in a relationship means being able to be vulnerable with each other without compromising the integrity of the relationship, able to enjoy the benefits of interpersonal freedom and negotiate a joint-perspective where both partners influence the final interpretation of what they've done together. This builds trust and confidence that supports the ongoing growth and development of both partners through the relationship. This study shows that making offensive and defensive moves while communicating is just as important as making protective moves because it extends individuals in a relationship the freedom to act independently, making vulnerability an ongoing possibility in the relationship. The mantra goes: *the more vulnerable my partner and I can be with each other, the closer and more intimate we can be together*. The closeness experienced in a relationship depends on how one partner is moved by the other, constituting a phenomenological space for expressing differing opinions and strong feelings about their relational experiences. In this view, relationships become a sphere of intimate, collaborative relations where partners are interpersonally free to negotiate complex meanings in compassionate ways.

As I have observed in this study, improvising close relationships means creating conditions for continuing to negotiate the relational and existential realities constituted by being a couple, extending and sustaining opportunities for experiencing vulnerability with each other. To adapt a key insight made by Becker (1973), it appears that the most we can hope to achieve in close relationships is "a certain relaxedness, an openness to

experience that makes [us] less of a driven burden on others” (p. 259) and more of an active supporter of their thoughts and feelings.

Research on organizational and interpersonal communication suggests that improvising helps us “make space” for vulnerability in relationships by embracing risks, encountering failure, and striking a balance between our autonomy and interdependence as we strive for transcendence by coordinated action (Eisenberg, 1990). Improvisation can be understood relationally as the *act of making ourselves vulnerable*. According to Peters (2009), improvising is a special kind of act that has already happened—the meeting place of thought and action, where we use our interpretive ability to contextualize information as we act upon it, orienting ourselves to interaction patterns, and confirming our relationships at the same time. What Peters (2009) leaves out, which I have tried to include in this study, is the role emotion plays as we do this. As we improvise, we stretch the boundaries of our comfort zone, altering the fundamental meanings that define our relationships, a process Peters (2009) calls “renovation” (*re-novation* as opposed to *innovation*). Thus, to improvise a close relationship is to renovate the phenomenological space of intimacy we share vulnerably with another; to relate in a way that remakes the meaningful connections that brought us together in the first place without losing sight of it; to honor our individuality and our relationships simultaneously; to be mindful of where we came from and where we’re going, together; to participate in communication patterns where we find ourselves “giving again and again what is already there” (Peters, p. 152) as we heighten the stakes of our relationship, our vulnerability, and our ability to care for each other. Although improvising means “ensuring that the channels of

communication are kept open and alive” (Peters, p. 169), in close relationships it also means ensuring that the ability to be vulnerable with each other is kept open and alive as well.

Improvisation is not recreation (*re-creation*)—it’s the remaking of something in the image of its origin, retaining the original pattern of a relationship as we furbish it with new language, new experiences, and new meanings. It constitutes a contingency between *preservation* and *destruction*—between *origination* and *free expression*—that lets us explore and discover novel meanings as we relate to others. Improvising close relationships gives us the practical feeling of being vulnerable as we continue to confront and overcome the uncertainty of what our relationship *could* mean despite (or along with) what it *does* mean. According to Peters (2009), “what is *given* is by no means what is *there*” (p. 4), so improvising is the “generous” part of communication where we “check in” with the other, “request a correction,” get on the “same page,” or confront our fears as we confirm that what is meaningful to us about how we relate is also meaningful to the other. Through improvisation, our closest relationships become site for producing experiences that invite us to be vulnerable and remind us of who we are in relation to each other. Without improvisation, it’s conceivable that there would be no growth in our relationships—no way to make ourselves vulnerable—and no way to know others as anything *but* others.

In the following final chapter, I discuss some of broader implications of this study, including how learning improvisation means learning communication skills that

help people become close, how those skills may be useful in different contexts, and some examples of how Hannah have applied our improv training to our own relationship. I finish the study with a brief discussion about how developing relationship skills can serve couples by helping them coordinate and manage the meaning they make together.

CHAPTER 9:  
IMPLICATIONS OF UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIPS AS IMPROVISED  
PERFORMANCES

In this final chapter, I discuss some of the implications this study has for understanding relationships and utilizing the insights of improv to help couples maintain better relationships. I begin with a brief discussion of the growing field of applied improvisation, followed by an explanation of how my observations and experiences in this study have helped me arrive at an understanding of relationships as improvised performances where partners cultivate relationship skills that help them perform more confidently. I conclude by describing a few of these skills, derived from my relationship with Hannah where we utilize our knowledge and abilities as improvisers to maintain a stronger intimate relationship.

**Applied Improv Insights**

The insights derived from doing improv have gained the most academic notoriety in organizational communication research. Eisenberg (1990) points out that improvisation is a key aspect of “jamming” or “personally involved, minimally disclosive exchanges” (p. 139) that take place in groups, and Weick (2001) suggests that improvisation is a core facet of organizational theory. The lessons of improv comedy can give organizational stakeholders “an orientation and technique to advance the strategic renewal of an

organization” (Crossan, 1998, p. 593), prepare people to seize opportunities for organizing (Mirvis, 1998), and lead to moments of epiphany (Leon, 2010). Improvising can also offer people in the workplace useful metaphors for understanding how they collaborate (Vera & Crossan, 2004), can strengthen organizational memory (Mooreman & Miner, 1998), and may guide the ways people plan, design, and implement their ideas in workgroups (Miner et al, 2001).

Beyond organizational communication research, methodological frameworks for adopting and extending insights derived from doing improv have been explored across disciplines. Kindler and Gray (2010) and Gale (2008) discuss the ways improvisational insights can be used in therapeutic contexts; Douglas and Coessens (2011), Young (2005), and Madson (2005) discuss the ways improv insights help people cultivate wisdom about life; Gallagher (2010) explains how short form improv games can be used in the classroom to enrich learning; Lockford and Pelias (2004) argue that improv skills are useful for teaching performance and training actors; Tracy (2010) mentions improvisation as a useful strategy for evaluating qualitative research; Puolos (2008) alludes to improvisation as an element of discovery involved in autoethnography; and Zaunbrecher (2012) considers the basic “yes...and” principal of improv an essential practice for researchers who wish to think reflexively about their work.

Beyond peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, improv practitioners have been writing about the pedagogy, practice, philosophy, and the history of improv for decades. Caines & Hable’s (2015) collection of works chronicles the interdisciplinary nature of

this journey, useful for researchers, artists, and thinkers to enrich their processes. Professional organizations like the Applied Improvisation Network ([www.appliedimprov.com](http://www.appliedimprov.com)) and countless Facebook groups devoted to applied improvisation all over the world bring improvisers together off stage to discuss the uses and applications of improv in their everyday lives. Finally, corporate trainers write manuals for teaching and facilitating improv workshops aimed at helping people develop communication skills through team building (Koppett, 2013).

Underneath all of this is a foundation of rich insights about the off stage applications of improv, which are woven through the pages of manuals used to train performers (Halper, Close & Johnson, 1993; Halpern, 2006; Napier, 2004 & 2015; Jagadowski, Pasquesi, Victor, 2015; Seham, 2001; Neile, 2014; Hazenfield, 2002; Bernard, 2011; Chin, 2009; Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008; Johnstone, 1981 & 1999; Carrane & Allen, 2006; Carrane, 2014 & 2015; Trew & Nelson, 2013) and the biographical books that chronicle the journey performers take as they learn their craft (Scruggs & Gellman, 2008; Sweet, 1978; Griggs, 2005; Johnson, 2008).

Despite all of this writing about the applications of improv in professional contexts, there has been little focus on the applications of improv as a relational practice. Put simply, the off-stage relational value of improvisation has yet to be explored in academic or professional texts. Similar to ways improv has been helpful for people in organizations, insights derived from the improv world may enrich the way people understand and enact their relationships.

### *Relationships as Improvised Performances*

In this dissertation, I have looked at improv as an endeavor of performing relationships, using the work of Goffman (1959 & 1967), Rawlins (1983), and Pearce (2007) to suggest that confidence is always a provisional experience where partners are vulnerable with each other. Working specifically with improvisers in close relationships, I have found that in their vulnerability they most easily confirm their closeness by metacommunicating about what they do on stage as a couple—talking about their performances so they can negotiate a joint-perspective or “working consensus” (Goffman, 1959) about how to interpret their performance. In these post-show conversations, they make meaning together and educate each other about each other before the next performance. I’ve conceived of this metacommunication as an off-stage improvised performance, observing how partners form patterns, change emotional status, and correct to the moves each other make much like they do on stage.

My experiences as a performer and observer in this study leads me to believe that improvisers attain a rich, practical knowledge of their partners by talking about how they talk on stage. Since talking about interaction is *also* an improvised performance that involves reflecting, interpreting, confirming, and sometimes confronting and masking relational realities, couples who improvise together give themselves a way to examine and mediate discrepancies in how they relate to each other and make sense together. By talking about how they talk on stage, performance partners can’t help but make their relationship the subject of another improvised performance—their off-stage relationship.



Understanding a relationship as an improvised performance makes the techniques and language of improv useful off stage. If trained improvisers could learn to harness their knowledge and skill as communicators, they may find the same confidence off stage in their ability to perform sincere, coherent relationship as they've learned to cultivate on stage. Furthermore, teaching couples the basic guidelines of improvisation (i.e., Agreement, Initiation, and Game) may help partners perform better relationships together, giving them a way to think about and talk about how they act with each other when they're "on stage" in any public setting.

#### *Relationship Skills for Intimate Couples*

Thinking about relationships as improvised performances also means thinking about the *relationship skills* that partners can develop as they relate. Though having a grasp of improv can give a couple a basic way of understanding relationality, the techniques for constituting a *confident* relational performance comes from actually doing it with a partner. Since all relationships are performative—siblings, parents, spouses, friends, neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers—whenever people are vulnerable to each other, relationship skills come into play.

Put another way, knowing how to position myself to experience another person's vulnerability can help me relate to them in adaptive ways that welcome or prevent wanted or unwanted relations. The insights and language of improv, when applied to understanding relationships as performances, can provide a grammar for making sense of the vulnerability or invulnerability experienced during communication.

In the following sections, I discuss a few relationship skills that Hannah and I have developed over the course of our intimate relationship as partners on and off stage. When I talk about my relationship with Hannah as *intimate*, I'm referring to the fact that we extend each other the opportunity to be vulnerable in different ways at different times as we communicate. Essentially, we find it easy to *play* with our thoughts and feelings as we relate—we've learned to make our interactions ambiguous enough to be interpreted in numerous ways (Sutton-Smith, 1997); to find confidence in the enchantment of surprise and possibility that comes from interacting (Apter, 1991); that the things we do and say to each other don't always mean what they typically mean (Bateson (1972); and that playing the part we need each other to play at any given moment is more beneficial than getting our own way (Laing, 1961). I've identified four different relationship skills that help us improvise our relationship with confidence as we position ourselves to experience ongoing vulnerability and provisional meaning making.

### Focus

Being able to focus *with* a person when you interact is perhaps the most important part of performing a relationship. Physically turning towards another person signals a willingness to listen that can mark the beginning of dialogue where partners can be affected, surprised, and changed (Buber, 1947; Cissna & Anderson, 2002). We can better read each other by looking at each other, aiming our sensemaking instruments in each other's physical direction. A vast majority of improv scenes that go poorly are a result of starting the scene with little or no eye contact. Just like reading something someone has

written, it's important that we understand interaction as a process of *reading with* our partner (Frank, 1995).

Sitting on our couch in the evening, Hannah and I find our attention torn between lots of focal points—the giant television in our living room displaying a show or movie of our choice on Netflix; the laptop and tablet sitting on our coffee table; the cell phones always in arms reach that let us scroll and troll Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and chat with others who become ambiently present (Ling, 2008); the four or five books lying under the table that are always dog-eared and bookmarked; and our large, fuzzy, Main Coon cat who needs constant attention and affirmation. It's easy to have casual conversation as we navigate the media megaplex of our living room. It's incredibly hard to know if the other person is listening and even harder to communicate something important.

When one of us has something to say, we make strong eye contact as we say it. If it's more than a quick comment, we lay our phones on their screens, take our fingers off computer keys, and pause whatever we're watching. Putting the media on hold is not much, but it does communicate our intention to listen to each other over everything else for however long the other needs or wants our attention. Most nights that we stay up later than we should, it's because we're wrapped up in conversation, not because we were glued to our screens.

We first noticed the importance of eye contact and being in physical sync with each other off stage a few years into our relationship. After living in a house where we had small dining rooms to eat our meals, we found ourselves sitting at the breakfast bar in

the kitchen of our new house, arguing. We'd been eating at the bar for months with no dining room. After some light shouting, silence took over and we both stared across the room. I made a comment that I was tired of always fighting while we ate, something I noticed we never did before. In fact, meal time had always been a welcome escape from talking about work—a time during our day we found ourselves sharing stories from our past. By the end of our conversation, we realized that our fighting might stem from how we had been sitting, making it almost impossible to make eye contact. It was getting easier to just stop talking and recede into our own thoughts and feelings without working through things. It was also easier to miss opportunities to pick up on each other's body language and nonverbal cues.

The next day we rearranged another room in the house and gave ourselves a dining room table for meals. After a week, the fighting stopped and the food tasted better. In an intimate relationship, a partner's ability to focus *with* each other by maintaining strong eye contact and being in physical sync helps them honor each other's intention to connect and hold their attention. Although no one can be certain what another person is thinking, turning sensemaking instruments toward each other is how improvisers help ensure that they hear what the other person has to offer *over* their own thoughts as they perform.

### Teasing

Leary (1957) theorized that our personality—the behavioral make-up of our presentation of self—is something that develops relationally. He showed that behaviors are “pulled” from a person when they correspond with others. For Leary (1957), who we are

has more to do with what we *do* to each other than what we *think* of each other. The way we treat and are treated by others constitutes a reflexive process where identity emerges through the reciprocity of relations we experience in our daily lives. Leary's (1957) theory is widely supported by empirical testing (Bochner, 1984) and indicates that patterned behavioral response is not something that can be avoided when we communicate. How we participate in the patterns that come from our communication determines the kind of relationships we form and identities we construct.

Improvisers are taught to have a hand in shaping these patterns instead of simply letting them emerge. Being able to shape patterns also means being able to perform believable characters on stage that are different from off stage. Experienced performers often call upon characters they've developed in past shows to help them quickly find and shape patterns with scene partners, turning the scene into a game of patterns that highlight particular behaviors for audience enjoyment. As a result, they learn to count on their scene partner to react or respond in predictable ways. Put simply, playing certain characters helps improvisers pull specific behaviors from each other, making it easier on them to find the game of the scene. As Spolin (1963) points out, games are much easier to play than scenes are to act.

The same can be true in off stage relationships. Many people temporarily act in a particular way toward their partner so a pattern emerges that makes it easier to predict how their partner will respond. *Teasing* is one way to do this—one person *teases* a particular behavior out of the other by saying something provocative, leading to a pattern of reaction and response that makes it easier to relate. Of course teasing can send mixed

messages and put another person in a difficult position, even creating a “double bind” where there is confusion about how to interpret what the other person is communicating (Bateson, 1972). As Laing (1961) says, “some people have a remarkable aptitude for keeping the other tied in knots” (p. 158) and teasing is one way to do this. At some point, teasing can become bullying if taken to an extreme, but otherwise it can be a way for people to make themselves vulnerable to each other.

Improvisers refer to teasing as “playing game”—performing and heightening the same pattern repeatedly until the scene ends. When performing an intimate relationship off stage, teasing can lead to “playing game” in a way that increases performer’s confidence in the relationship. Hannah and I have learned that teasing each other helps us communicate the vulnerable boundaries of our relationship, signaling that we trust each other not to bully, which ultimately gives us more interpersonal freedom and confidence as a couple.

One example is tickling. I hate to be tickled and I show it by *strictly* preventing Hannah from being able to tickle me more than once. On the other hand, Hannah *says* she hates being tickled but doesn’t do much to stop me, beyond running away and playfully telling me to “Stop!” It’s this big reaction that I can count on when I tickle her, so I keep doing it and she keeps reacting. Tickling her leads to a predictable pattern that also gets us to give each other our complete attention, laugh, and listen. It usually leads to a moment where we embrace each other and take a short break from our lives to connect and enjoy each other’s presence. This embrace is the punctuation of the pattern that makes the vulnerability worth it.

Teasing her like this gives her a way to let me make her vulnerable, and by doing so communicates that I am a person she trusts not to hurt her or take it too far, even when I push past her comfort zone. It also gives me a chance to be vulnerable by exercising restraint when constraints have been lifted. “Playing game” by tickling is one way that we communicate trust. Beyond the maliciousness of people who tease and don’t know when to stop, teasing in an intimate relationship can bring partner’s vulnerabilities into focus and help them confirm their closeness by pulling behaviors from each other that create opportunities for showing that they trust each other.

### Accepting

The bedrock of stage improv is acceptance. If performers can accept suggestions offered by the audience and each other, then they stand a good chance of performing an entertaining and enlightening scene. Salinsky and Frances-White (2008) claim that audiences “prefer improvisers to accept offers, because what the audience hopes to see is two people (or sometimes more) cooperating with each other to construct a world in which a story can take place” (p. 57). The same is true for couples in intimate relationships. Fighting and dismissiveness often prevents couples from working together to accomplish goals—even if the goal is merely deciding where to go for dinner.

Improvisers often talk about the “endowments” of a scene, referring to the offers of the scene that were accepted and “honored” by the other performer in order to establish a pattern and “play game.” These endowments often include character traits like names, occupations, and information about the past, which makes it easier for performers to know how to act. Similarly, partners in intimate relationships endow each other by

making assumptions about what the other person likes or dislikes, what they're capable of, and what they're motivated to do as they talk. When these endowments occur off stage, Laing (1961) called these "attributions" or "the attributes one person ascribes to a person [to] define him [or her] and put him [or her] in a particular position" (p. 151). Just like endowments on stage, the attributions partners make toward each other direct their actions by placing "injunctions" on how they ought to respond. As Laing (1961) points out, a great deal of trouble can arise when the offers made by one partner don't align with the way the other sees himself or herself. Much of the trouble of relationships stems from one partner's inability to cope with the force of unwanted injunctions that arise from attributions that are made about them by the other.

On stage, improvisers learn to accept *all* offers the other makes in the very beginning of the scene because it makes it easier to know how to perform the scene. The freedom to make *any* attribution to the other, regardless of possible injunctions, is a luxury that improvisers get to experience as they perform because they know that *endowments are always provisional*—the attributions that their partner is making can be corrected (i.e., revised and adjusted) at any time as the scene evolves.

Carrying this mentality off stage has helped Hannah and I cope with perhaps the largest disjunction in our relationship—the incongruity of our life experience. Since I'm six years older than she is, well removed from college, and at the beginning of my career, I often see things differently than she does. Very practical, domestic things like paying bills, car maintenance, quitting and applying for jobs, filing taxes, cooking meals, doing lawn work—these have been sources of anxiety for her since we've been together. Years



removed from these anxieties, there are moments when I find myself giving her “advice,” trying to help her make life easier. I usually just end up patronizing her, giving her the impression that I’m telling her how she should act, and drawing attention to our age difference, framing myself as more knowledgeable. At other times, I find her relying on me like she might rely on a parent, asking me for help and advice in ways that I’ll happily assist but would rather not. This agitates me and when I point it out it, I again end up drawing attention to the fact that she’s younger, which comes across as me talking down to her and framing her as less knowledgeable than me.

Typically, these conversations end with us confronting the fact that if we treat each other as older or younger—if we endow each other as parent or child, even inadvertently—we won’t ultimately be able to live up to our expectations because we end up framing each other as more or less knowledgeable, instead of on equal footing as partners. Try as we might to be mindful and *not* do this, we can’t completely escape it. Instead, just like we would act if we endowed each other with characters on stage, we’ve both made an effort to embrace these moments as best we can, accepting that in *this* part of our relationship—and by no means all of it—we may have to temporarily play the roles. By accepting the endowments of the other and realizing that they are provisional, we acknowledge (and hope) that our relationship will extend beyond the present moment where we may be frustrated. Ultimately, by accepting attributions that we would otherwise *not* make to ourselves, we more easily play the part in our relationship that the other endows, and perhaps needs, for a brief period of time.

## Renovating

Peters (2009) explains that the act of improvising in any context is motivated by a desire to experience original conditions again. In his view, to improvise means to will a “future past” (p. 5) into the present by reproducing what has already been done in a way “that contains a difference” (p. 5). He calls this a “renovative model of improvisation” (p. 5), using the term “renovation” in place of “recreation” because for him, improvising is less *making something new* than it is *remaking what has already been made*.

Partners renovate their relationships when they celebrate anniversaries, both honoring their past as a couple and recognizing how they’ve grown at the same time. Anniversaries are occasions that give partners a chance to reflect on and metacommunicate about how they perform their relationship over time. Young couples do this when they retell the story of their first date, remembering the feelings and circumstances that brought them together in the first place. Parents do this when they reminisce about embarrassing things their children did when they were younger—often to the dismay of their adult children and delight of their adult children’s partner. All of these instances give people a chance to renovate their relationships, reminding them of past performance episodes that can help them find new ways to keep performing the same relationship.

Hannah and I have experienced all of these scenarios at one point or another. We also find more nuanced ways to renovate our relationship daily. We both live busy lives as graduate students, teachers, performers, and company executives of our nonprofit, which means we spend a good portion of our time apart. It’s easy to lose touch with each

other during the day, and then spend a lot of time at night catching up on what happened without really spending time talking about what makes us a couple. That pattern can get old quick.

One way we refresh our relationship is by playing a text-messaging ad-lib game during the day. Hannah sends me a text that always starts with “You are the…” and ends with “in my…” It might read something like, “You’re the *wind* in my *sails*,” followed by two emoji’s (in this case, a tiny picture of a boat and a wave). I answer back by putting a variation on the pattern, building off her idea. Something like, “You’re the *crest* of my *waves*,” including my own emojis (in this case, a tiny picture of a wave and toothpaste). We keep this game going throughout the day, remaking the message over and over until we see each other again.

*Admittedly, it’s a silly game.* It can get corny or can get profound depending on what ideas we’re heightening, but it’s not the use of metaphor or the images we evoke that matters to us. What matters to us is that we continue to connect with each other in creative ways by renovating a text message about *who we are to each other*. We communicate a number of messages that are relationally affirming by texting each other like this. It helps us remind ourselves that we’re in a relationship; that we are willing to make time for each other during our day; that we’re thinking about each other when we’re not around; that we can create patterns together that make sense to us; that we are both involved in defining our relationship; that we’re inspired by each other; and that we can find new, creative ways to express and interpret what we mean to each other as we interact. Renovating the message helps us make up a little bit of the time we lose at night

and on the weekends, giving us a refreshing way to perform our relationship when we can't be together.

### **Conclusion**

These four acts—what I think of as *relationship skills*—are not an exhaustive list of insights from my relationship with Hannah, but hopefully provide practical enough examples of how knowing about and knowing how to improvise can enrich an intimate relationship. Of course, there is no manual for performing relationships off stage that ensures the kind of success stage improv training manuals seem to offer performers, but the insights have been useful for us and have led to new ways of thinking about how we can sustain a better relationship and live a better life together.

Acknowledging relationships as improvised performances means recognizing that how we feel, what we think, and the way we act toward the people we relate to is the way we organize meaning and come to know ourselves. It means embracing the notion that our identity is a relational construct—a result of a performance where we dialogue with partners and society as we mitigate vulnerability in private and in public, negotiating joint-perspectives about how to best handle intimacy as we act reflexively and keep trying to get close to each other. Ultimately, the performance of our relationships puts a story in motion that is provisional, collaborative, and always open to interpretation.

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