

“Yes And”: Exploring and Heightening the Positive Psychology in Improvisation

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Abstract

This capstone contains a brief introduction to positive psychology and the art of improvisation, including a review of the literature that supports improvisation's potential well-being effects. Also included in this capstone is a description of an exploratory study on improvisation and well-being. In this study, positive and negative affect, resilience, loneliness, and perceived life satisfaction was measured among a group of actors and improvisers from all over the United States. The study also features qualitative data, collected from the same participants, coded for positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment (PERMA) in order to consider whether working without a script offered flourishing outcomes distinct from general participation in theatre. Quantitative analysis revealed that life satisfaction scores among actors was significantly higher than those of improvisers, however the elements of PERMA showed up more frequently in the qualitative data collected from improvisers, with positive relationships mentioned significantly more often. Findings suggest that while improvisers may have a lower sense of life satisfaction, they experience more positive emotion, engagement, sense of accomplishment than actors and the study of improvisation has considerable positive effects on their relationships onstage and off. Implications for the creation of a new branch of the Positive Humanities, "Positive Improvisation," are discussed, as well as suggestions for how to make traditional improvisation more intentionally positive.

Keywords: Positive Improvisation, improvisation, improvisational training, improv, positive psychology, PERMA, well-being, "yes and," resilience, PANAS, Positive Humanities

Preface: “Yes Anding” the Capstone Process

I had a plan. I planned to gather individuals from all over Chicago for an 8-week improv intervention, have them fill out self-report questionnaires measuring how happy they were, how connected they felt to the people in their lives, how optimistic and resilient and grateful they were, and then have them report on these measures again after two months of practicing improvisational exercises. I planned to create a space where strangers looked each other in the eyes and supported each other, literally and figuratively, while attempting spontaneous (and sometimes terrifying) things. I was going to create a psychologically safe space where adults could play and empathize and take big emotional risks to build resilience and self-efficacy and gratitude and mindfulness. I was going to encourage people to laugh and sweat and breathe all over each other, then I was going to ask them about positive emotions and feelings of belonging and connection.

Then a global pandemic struck.

Gathering together in an improv classroom is no longer just an emotional risk; it has become a physical risk. My plan went out the window. Instead I chose to say *yes* to the current reality *and* to build on what is actually happening in the world right now rather than what I wish were happening. When it comes to this capstone, I chose to improvise...

Acknowledgements

I highly recommend choosing a capstone advisor whose signature strength is zest! This capstone couldn't have happened without Marianna Graziosi's encouragement and enthusiasm. From walking me through the IRB process to always seeing the big picture (and knowing how to communicate it in small, manageable chunks so I never got overwhelmed), you kept me motivated and excited through one of the hardest and strangest experiences of my life: writing a capstone, while pregnant, during a global pandemic. You are a true collaborator, building on ideas and making them infinitely better, who challenged me every week to be a more rigorous researcher and writer. While the world was on fire around us (sometimes literally), your belief in the project and ability to "yes and" unexpected results and bumps along the way has convinced me that you are one of the most gifted positive improvisers with whom I've ever had the privilege of working. I cannot fully express my gratitude for your insight, generosity, support, expertise, and humor.

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“Yes And”: Exploring and Heightening the Positive Psychology in Improvisation

Having studied, taught, and performed improvisation and scripted theatre for more than 20 years, I can attest that the anecdotal evidence certainly suggests that improvisational training adds to students' well-being. Since I became an improviser, I have seen transformations in my students, my teammates, and myself. I credit improvisational training with making me a more courageous, easy-going, generous, grateful, emotionally and socially intelligent version of myself. However, very little empirical research exists that isolates how and why improvisation teaches some people to flourish. Or even if it does.

What follows is a brief explanation of some of the positive elements of improvisation, a review of the literature that supports improvisation's potential well-being effects, and a description of our exploratory study on improvisation and well-being which measured positive and negative affect, resilience, loneliness, and perceived life satisfaction among a group of actors and improvisers from all over the United States. Our study also features qualitative data, collected from the same participants, coded for positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment (PERMA). We chose to measure loneliness as a way of examining feelings of connectedness and belonging, which we expected to be an important ingredient in improvisation's efficacy, and PERMA as a way to consider whether working without a script offered flourishing outcomes distinct from general participation in theatre which has been shown to have well-being benefits (Noice et al., 2014). Excerpts from the qualitative data collected are featured throughout where the participants' own words help to clarify and reinforce existing research.

Section I - Positive Psychology

Introduction to Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is the scientific study of human flourishing, which founder Martin Seligman (2011) defines as leading a life worth living. In 1998, as president of the American Psychological Association, Seligman proposed the creation of this new field, *positive psychology*, in response to his career in psychology spent studying misery and the alleviation of human suffering (Seligman, 2011). Using his knowledge and experience as a research scientist concerned with validation and measurement, he sought to elevate positive psychology beyond the realm of “happiology” (Peterson, 2006, p. 7). In 2011, Seligman proposed a theory of well-being laying out what he believes to be the building blocks of subjective well-being: *positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and achievement* (PERMA for short).

Positive psychology is much more than a smiley face icon and a perpetually cheerful mood; it is concerned with the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that capitalize on strengths (as opposed to correcting weaknesses) and with building “the good life” rather than repairing what we perceive as broken (Peterson, 2006; Sheldon & King, 2001). The goal of positive psychology is not to pursue positivity as an alternative to identifying and treating mental illness, but instead to complement the focus on mitigating suffering of traditional psychology. It posits that a psychology which does not consider how to define and achieve a life of meaning, fulfillment, and well-being is incomplete.

Positive psychology distinguishes itself from self-help and popular psychology because of its emphasis on the scientific method (Peterson, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). In positive psychology the same rigorous scientific method used throughout science is aimed at topics such as life satisfaction, positive emotion, and well-being. PERMA, for example, is made

up of five measurable elements (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, engagement, and achievement) that may be evaluated based on self-report or more objective measures including the reports of others (Seligman, 2018). According to Chris Peterson (2006), the study of what goes right in life may be divided into three parts: 1) positive states, 2) positive traits, and 3) positive institutions. He suggests that *positive states* are the subjective experiences we associate with feeling good, including emotions like joy, happiness, inspiration, fulfillment, awe, and pleasure. Furthermore, *positive traits* include individual character strengths, virtues, talents, and values that impact our lives positively. It's helpful to consider positive states as fleeting while positive traits are more enduring and stable characteristics. Finally, Peterson (2006) defines *positive institutions* as institutions that facilitate positive states and traits, such as families, communities, schools, and workplaces (Peterson & Park, 2003). Understanding how to cultivate organizations and communities that thrive entails the study of institutional strengths such as justice, teamwork, leadership, civic responsibility, and parenting (Seligman, 2020). This means that the breadth of the field is quite large, ranging from momentary states of positive emotion to the dynamic forces that enable well-being in enormous institutions.

In addition to understanding well-being, the field of positive psychology is also interested in the practical application of this knowledge. Using findings from research and experimentation, positive psychology practitioners aim to build well-being outcomes in individuals and communities (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Peterson, 2006). Research shows that the greatest strides in preventing mental illness and suffering have come not from treating and repairing weakness, but from building competency and developing strengths which act as buffers against negative outcomes—strengths such as hope, optimism, courage, interpersonal skill, and perseverance (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). While research may help us to discover what makes

people happy and why some people lead lives of purpose, it is imperative that we take intentional action to improve our lives and institutions based on this newfound knowledge if these research findings are to have their full impact. The growth of the field has demonstrated that positive interventions can be implemented to actively increase positive states, traits, and institutions in daily life (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). For example, practicing mindfulness and acceptance skills had positive well-being effects for clients suffering from traumatic brain injury, fibromyalgia, and rheumatoid arthritis (Bedard et al., 2003; Grossman et al., 2007; Zautra et al., 2008). And *using signature strengths in new ways* increased happiness and decreased depression for six months following the intervention (Seligman et al., 2005).

What is a Positive Intervention?

A positive intervention is an activity intended to increase an individual's well-being by cultivating positive emotions, behaviors, and cognitions, as well as her strengths, relationships, and sense of meaning and purpose (Pawelski, 2020; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). In considering what characterizes a positive intervention, one must examine the thoughts, feelings, and actions that influence both *hedonic* (concerned with living a pleasurable life) and *eudaimonic* (concerned with living a life of excellence and virtue) well-being in individuals, acknowledging that the effects of positive interventions may differ greatly depending on a person's circumstances, personality, motivation, social support, as well as exactly how and when the intervention is delivered (Pawelski, 2020). Positive interventions may be *directly positive*, by promoting or preserving what is preferred, or *indirectly positive*, by mitigating or preventing what is dispreferred (Pawelski, 2016). For example, for a couple hoping to have a child, a positive pregnancy test would be directly positive, whereas the absence of a pregnancy would be

indirectly positive for a couple who did not wish to have children. There is no one path to flourishing that applies to everyone.

In order to reverse engineer new and varied interventions that can be applied appropriately to individuals based on their unique strengths, interests, and desires, philosopher James O. Pawelski (2020) suggests breaking positive interventions into their constituent elements. He suggests these individual units that make up a positive intervention include: the *desired outcome* (the effect you want the intervention to have), the *target system* (the psychological, physiological or social system in which the change occurs), the *target change* (the shift you intend to make within the target system), the *active ingredient* (that which causes the desired change) and the *activity* itself (the intentional action recommended).

I posit that in its simplest form, a positive intervention can be understood as *awareness* plus *action* directed toward well-being aims. As human beings, we cannot always control how we feel or what life throws our way, but we can learn to control where we put our attention and how we respond. By learning to control our actions and our awareness, we can direct these skills toward developing a greater sense of well-being. For instance, self-awareness allows the direction of attention necessary to determine whether a particular action will have the desired outcome. Author of the popular concept of “flow,” Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argues that we can control how we feel about a situation simply by adjusting what we allow into our consciousness. Additionally, scholars have determined that while approximately two-thirds of an individual’s happiness level is determined by genetics and life circumstances, up to 40% may be increased—or decreased—by an individual’s own actions (Lyubomirsky, 2010; Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Therefore, where we place our attention and how we choose to take action in our lives has great weight in determining our overall experience of existence.

A Note on The Positive Humanities

In recent years, Positive Psychology has begun to consider the role that the arts and humanities play in well-being. This emerging branch of Positive Psychology, referred to as the *Positive Humanities*, is concerned with data and research that explores how disciplines within the humanities (such as philosophy, religion, history, literature, art, music, film, and theatre) contribute to human flourishing. Many people are intrinsically motivated to engage with the arts and humanities throughout their lives because of the hedonic pleasure they derive. Research shows that dancing to a song you love just feels good (Hanna, 1995). Watching a movie in a packed theatre that makes you laugh until you cry can be a delightful, and transcendent, way to spend a Saturday night (Arnie et al., 1995; Paéz, et al., 2015; Szabo et al., 2005). In addition to these effects, the arts and humanities may cultivate well-being beyond the positive emotions they elicit by building social bonds, encouraging self-reflection, creating opportunities to experience “flow” (i.e., the feeling of complete absorption in the present moment), and offering experiences of mastery and self-efficacy, among other positive mechanisms (Tay et al., 2018).

Empirical investigation which seeks to determine why some art forms benefit some individuals more than others and how to engage with the humanities in ways that yield the most positive well-being outcomes will expand our understanding of how to best incorporate the arts and humanities into the ultimate goal of amplifying human flourishing. Tay, Pawelski, and Keith’s (2018) *conceptual model* lists the four mechanisms by which the humanities may increase well-being as *immersion*, *embeddedness*, *socialization*, and *reflectiveness*. Immersion refers to the positive experience of getting lost in a piece of art or work of humanities. Embeddedness includes socio-cognitive processes such as self-efficacy, mastery, and emotional regulation that are reinforced and deepened through engagement with the arts and humanities.

Socialization is the expansion of one's identity, community, and cultural awareness through the arts and humanities. Reflectiveness describes increased self-awareness and the consideration of one's strengths, weaknesses, and relationship to the world around her. As an example, theatrical performance, in particular improvisation, offers the opportunity to engage in each of these four mechanisms in the kind of deep and varied way that Tay and colleagues (2018) suggest may lead to the best overall results for individual flourishing. Certainly, improvisational training should be considered a viable candidate for generating well-being outcomes in this new and emerging field of the Positive Humanities. This capstone begins to explore this possibility and offers directions for researchers and practitioners looking to build impactful "Positive Improvisation" experiences.

Section II - Improvisation

"Improv helped me embrace my weirdness and view it as an asset." (Participant 14)

I have been working professionally as an actor and improviser for almost twenty years. I took my first improv class in 2002. I spent the next two decades getting very comfortable with a life of discomfort, insecurity, risk, and rejection. I taught and performed improv for executives at Google and Facebook, soldiers at Fort Knox, current SNL cast members, members of the Saudi royal family at a private resort in the Seychelles, and grandmothers looking for a fun way to spend a few hours every Tuesday. I traveled the world improvising shows in Hawaii, Alaska, the Caribbean, England, Ireland, Scotland, and Australia. I was the first woman invited to join the critically-acclaimed (all-male) *Improvised Shakespeare Company*. I pay my rent every month teaching doctors, lawyers, bankers, and college students how to use improvisational techniques to become more agile leaders, more effective communicators, and all-around better humans. I've become a better human in the process. Improvisation completely changed my life.

Introduction to Improvisation

Life is unscripted. We are all improvising all of the time. Theatrical improvisation, as opposed to the kind jazz musicians do, is a method for creating spontaneous, scriptless theatre. It is generally taught using games to direct a student's attention away from his or her own self-consciousness and toward a shared achievable goal (Spolin, 1999). It requires performers to be exquisitely present as both active listeners and bold move-makers. It requires excellent support, collaboration, imagination, and playfulness. It also requires players to practice resilience when things inevitably go "wrong." The goal in improvisational games is not to win, but to work together with others joyfully, honestly, productively, and playfully. As psychologist Barbara Fredrickson (2001) proposed in her *broaden-and-build theory*, positive emotions can generate what she calls "upward spirals" towards increased well-being by broadening thinking and increasing future coping capabilities when faced with adversity (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Experiencing laughter, joy, excitement, inspiration, love, contentment, and pride don't just feel good in the moment, they also help us to undo the effects of negative emotional experiences, to learn new skills and information, to form alliances and cultivate positive relationships, and make it more likely that we will experience more positive emotions in the future, thus creating an upward spiral (Fredrickson, 2013; Tugade et al., 2004). The arts—and I suggest improvisation in particular, with its focus on fun and play—are uniquely adept at fostering high-quality human connection and generating positive emotions in both passive observers and participants. This, in turn, can elevate personal well-being and a sense of belonging, generating upward spirals of positive emotion with far-reaching broadening-and-building benefits. (Schneider & Fredrickson, n.d.)

The ability to function well without a plan and to embrace what we can control (and let go of what we cannot) has a significant impact on the success of an improv scene, but also on general well-being (Healey-Ogden & Austin, 2011; Kinnunen et al., 2019). The philosophies of improvisation teach us how to perform optimally on a stage for laughs, but also in life and in our relationships. Learning to really listen and be present in the moment, to accept what *is* rather than what we wish were happening, to respond creatively and positively when confronted with a challenge, and to build on the ideas of others is the foundation of good improv. Good improv, then, has the potential to build the skills of resilience and connectedness in real life. Practicing letting go of the plan and enjoying the chaos of uncertainty teaches us to savor reality, express gratitude, and explore strengths. However, currently the well-being effects of improvisation, while powerful, are often unintentional. That is to say that improv experiences are rarely designed with well-being outcomes in mind. If improvisation is a medication whose primary indication is to deliver entertaining theatre, the thriving of its participants is a side effect that deserves more investigation. With a few tweaks and a large dose of intentionality (in the form of empirical research and measurement), human flourishing could become improvisation's primary goal.

Core Philosophies of An Improviser

“Living your life with ‘Yes, and’ is a very powerful thing.” (Participant 120)

There are many “rules” of improvisation from “always agree” to “don’t ask questions” to “show, don’t tell,” but learning the rules of what to do and what not to do won’t necessarily have any effect on whether your scene is successful, funny, or “good” (Fey, 2013; Napier, 2004). Often the rules that beginning improv students are taught direct them to become acutely aware of behaviors they should avoid and are rooted in negativity (“don’t do transaction scenes,” “don’t

deny,” “don’t talk about the past,” etc.). However, where we put our attention greatly affects our experience of the world (James, 1890|1950). Focusing on the positive is likely to create upward spirals of positive emotion, whereas focusing on oneself and what one might be doing wrong contributes to increased negative affect, depression, and anxiety (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Mor & Winquist, 2002). Furthermore, if you’ve watched an evening of improvisation you’ve surely witnessed a performer who faithfully followed “the rules,” yet found herself in an excruciatingly unwatchable scene. Or, just as likely, you’ve seen a brilliant performer exuberantly and irreverently break every rule, leaving the audience crying with laughter. The rules are guideposts, but the best improvisers know that a joyful sense of play paired with a hefty measure of emotional intelligence will carry a scene significantly further than strict adherence to any set of rules.

“Yes and” is perhaps the only unassailable rule of improvisation. If you’ve ever heard someone mention improvisation, even in passing, you’ve likely also heard the phrase “yes and.” “Yes and” is the mantra that encapsulates almost every element of being an excellent individual improv performer, an excellent improv teammate, and an excellent human. “Yes” is awareness, acceptance, and appreciation. “Yes” is “*I am listening.*” “Yes” is “*Great idea, I can’t wait to play with you.*” “And” is agency, autonomy, and action. “And” is building a story together. “And” is adding your own brick to the cathedral. As improvisers, our responsibility within a scene is to accept the reality our scene partner has established (“yes”) and to contribute by adding to that reality (“and”). Saying “yes” to your partner is how you acknowledge their contribution and accept it as true. Two people need not agree with each other to successfully improvise a scene together. Take the following example:

If I begin the scene by saying, “*Mom, no one is ever gonna ask me to the prom,*” and you respond with, “*I’m not your mom, I’m a blender*” (and then begin spinning in a circle

while making whirring sounds), you have just said “no” to my initiation. However, if you respond, “*Sweetie, of course they will!*” you are accepting the circumstances I have initiated—namely, that I am your child, you are my mom, and the prom is coming up. Notice you didn’t agree with me, but you *did* accept my initiation, thereby saying “yes” to me.

The “and” in “yes and” is your opportunity to contribute. If “*Sweetie, of course they will!*” is the “yes” then you can add value by building upon what has been established and heightening it in a multitude of ways. “*Sweetie, of course they will! You’re the prettiest girl in school*” or “*Sweetie, of course they will! Your father is the President of the United States*” or “*Sweetie, of course they will! Mama’s been slogging over this hot cauldron all afternoon and I’ve put a spell on the entire senior class.*” Anything you add that builds upon what has already been established gives your scene partner something to explore and heighten.

The phrase “explore and heighten,” often used synonymously with “yes and,” reflects the desire in improvisation for performers to fully investigate the reality of their imaginary circumstances or the activity in which they’re engaged and to “heighten” by committing more fully and/or making the activity more important (Libera, 2004). When successful, exploring and heightening what already exists will ultimately lead to transformation within the scene (Libera, 2004). This primary rule of improvisation contains the essential elements of a positive intervention (awareness and action described above). The goal in both improvisational scene work and positive psychology interventions is the same: positive transformation.

The other core philosophies of improvisation (follow the fun, surrender your agenda, every mistake is a gift, play to the top of your intelligence) can all be broken down into further explorations of “yes and.” *Follow the fun* is simply a reminder that at any point an improviser may choose to act in the way that will bring them the most joy. Make choices and take actions

that make the scene more fun for yourself, your teammates, and your audience. Profess your love. Pack your bags. Poke the beehive. Because you can do anything you want at any time, if you are stuck in a scene you hate, you are choosing to stay stuck there. As a celebrated Chicago improviser and teacher once told her class, “If you’re not having fun, you’re the asshole” (S. Messing, personal communication, January 28, 2009).

Surrender your agenda is an admonition to let go of your plan for the scene. Starting a scene with an idea or a plan isn’t necessarily a problem, but if you think you are a blender and your scene partner calls you a ballerina, you better keep spinning and start adjusting your tutu. *Play to the top of your intelligence* means if you see something, the audience sees it. If you’re confused by something, the audience is confused by it, too. You can play a dumb character, but don’t play dumb as a performer. See what you see and know what you know. That includes acknowledging and “yes anding” the mistakes that inevitably happen. In improvisation we often say “every mistake is a gift.” The moments we fail or fumble or go off the rails are the moments of true improvisation and discovery. Acknowledging and celebrating the failures transforms them into successes—and, side note, usually makes them the funniest moments of the scene.

What’s Missing From Improvisation?

Improvisation has historically been utilized as a means of creating theatre and, more specifically, comedy. *Commedia dell’arte*, which literally translates as “comedy of the artists,” began as an oral tradition, blossoming in the 16th and 17th centuries in Italy to include improvised masked performances, music, and dance (Rudlin, 2002). It was also commonly referred to as *commedia improvviso* (improvised comedy) and *commedia dell’arte all’improvviso* (Kahan, 1976). In 1955 in Chicago, a group of young performers formed a theatre known as The Compass Players. The Compass Players were inspired by *commedia dell’arte*’s ability to satirize

local politics and current events, using improvisation to respond instantaneously to what was happening around them (Sweet, 1978).

One of the founding members, Paul Sills, was the son of Viola Spolin, a drama supervisor on the Recreational Project with the Works Progress Administration, whose approach to theatre focused on introducing play as a means of helping immigrant children in the 1920s adjust to their new homes (Sweet, 1978). Spolin's concentration on using games to teach creative group play, self-realization, and self-expression was heavily influenced by the work of Neva Boyd, founder of the Recreational Training School at Chicago's Hull House (Spolin, 1999). Sills shared the improvisational theatre games he learned from his mother with The Compass Players who used them to create improvised scenes loosely based around a pre-planned scenario, just as *commedia* shows were often structured (Sweet, 1978; Rudlin, 2002). The Compass Players eventually disbanded and several members, including Sills, reformed as The Second City in December of 1959. The Second City, one of the foremost comedy institutions in the world, still creates shows using improvisation to generate scripted political and social satire.

Relegating improvisation to the world of comedy and performance, however, is limiting its potential for good in the world. As an art form dedicated to awareness and action, it promotes many of the most important elements of positive psychology interventions: self-awareness, self-regulation, self-efficacy, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence. It is also highly physical, highly social, and, by its very nature, endorses intrinsically-motivated behavior. In addition, when situated toward intentional well-being aims, improvisation is uniquely designed to counteract the negative effects of hedonic adaptation by offering an activity that is inherently new, varied, dynamic, and unexpected. Each time you revisit an improv exercise or scene, if you're practicing "yes and," it will be completely different because you're accepting a new

reality and building on it in new ways. The art of improvisation, when practiced with positive intention, has the power to generate upward spirals of positive emotion, connection, and human flourishing.

In spite of its potential, we know very little about why, how, and even if improvisation is a truly positive force for human thriving because very little research has been done on its effects. Anecdotal evidence seems to support the hypothesis that participating in improvisation may have beneficial well-being outcomes. Students and performers often describe learning to trust themselves, facing fears, feeling brave, making friends, and learning to be more present. In the pursuit of understanding improvisation, however, we are generally missing a major tool: the scientific approach. A few studies with very small sample sizes have shown improv classes to be well-attended and enjoyable for students with Parkinson's disease, as well as beneficial for older adults who reported feeling more positive emotions, more comfortable with the unexpected, a sense of self-development, and positive feelings of social acceptance (Bega et al., 2017; Morse et al., 2018). In order to determine whether and how improvisational exercises offer well-being benefits, we must measure the effects as rigorously as positive psychology has sought to measure the effects of more well-established positive interventions like *three good things* and *using signature strengths in new ways* (Seligman et al., 2005).

Secondly, improvisation is currently missing the *intent* to increase an individual's well-being. Taking an improv class often has extraordinary accidental well-being consequences, but the same exercises taught by a different teacher may be just as likely to trigger embarrassment, self-judgement, shame, and insecurity. If we make student experience and positive growth the goal of improvisation (as opposed to producing audience laughter while increasing beer sales)

we may be able to create interventions that consistently and reliably promote cognitive, emotional, physical, and social flourishing.

Approaching teaching improvisational exercises with the mindset of a positive psychology practitioner—measuring the success of the exercise as one might a positive intervention by collecting data and looking for significant increases in outcome measures like reduced anxiety and depression, increased positive emotion and subjective well-being, as well as psychosocial benefits such as improved relationships and feelings of connectedness and belonging—may be the first step in developing “Positive” Improvisation.

The Current State of Improvisation

“Improv culture and communities can be flawed and problematic. Abuses of power and emotional manipulation were rampant. However, some of the most incredible and important people in my life are improvisers. It's a complicated community.” (Participant 33)

Like many institutions, improv communities have not always been welcoming places for everyone. In spite of the art form which espouses support of fellow players, active listening, empathetic consideration of others, and acceptance and expansion of ideas outside one’s own, improvisational training centers, ensembles, and theatres have historically been made up primarily of straight, White, cisgender males. Therefore, voices outside of that dynamic have often felt excluded and unsupported (Wright, 2020; Metz, 2016). In Chicago, for example, a group of Black alumni and current performers recently wrote an open letter to The Second City detailing instances of systemic racism, sexual misconduct and trauma, and demanding change within the organization (Wright, 2020). “[W]e feel it is our responsibility to try to keep our brothers and sisters safe,” the letter states. “You use our names to market your business, however we cannot in good conscience recommend The Second City as an effective place for Black comedy to thrive.”

Often in comedy, sexist and racist boundaries are pushed (or stepped right over) under the guise of creating “edgy” comedy. Improvisation has the potential to be an incredibly positive and transformational intervention, but not if students are expected to endure trauma as part of the journey toward becoming a great comedian. Making comedy the ultimate goal in improvisation wastes the limitless potential of the artform to build more positive states, traits, relationships, and institutions. Until improvisation is intentionally focused on inclusion and thriving for *all*, student flourishing will fall to the wayside while “getting a laugh” reigns supreme.

Section III - Exploratory Study on Improvisation and Well-Being

As demonstrated throughout this capstone, improvisational training often leads to “accidental” well-being outcomes. To date, the empirical literature on outcomes related to improvisational training is scant compared to the theoretical or applied pieces for improvisational trainers. Additionally, the connection between improvisational training and positive psychology outcomes is virtually nonexistent. This study investigates the degree to which improvisational training is connected with some of the same positive outcomes seen in positive interventions, such as improved mood, connectedness, resilience and life satisfaction using a mixed-methods approach. By analyzing quantitative data, as well as thematically coding qualitative data collected from actors and improvisers, this study begins to empirically establish the spaces where improvisational training stands to gain the most by taking a “positive” approach.

Method - Quantitative Section

Participants

Given that this study is looking for a specific type of participant with experience in acting and/or improvisational training, this survey was distributed using a snowball sampling technique, where an investigator contacts a few people to distribute the survey and asks them to pass it on to

others. No identifying information was asked of participants to keep their responses anonymous. In this study, the author shared the survey with acting teachers and then asked them to share it with their listservs and pass it on to other actors and improvisors. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Pennsylvania.

Participant Characteristics. The sample consisted of 173 individuals whose mean age was 43.58 ($SD=12.38$). 52.3% identified as male, 47.1% identified as female, and 0.6% identified as “other” (in this case, the written response was “female agender”). Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) describe race and ethnicity as a variable which is “created intertextually as part of an ongoing, ideological struggle over societal boundaries, inclusion, and equity” (p.34). In this sample, this *permeability* (p.35) of race and ethnicity is evident. Only 34% of the sample identified as solely white. 1.1% of the sample identified as white and one or more other racial or ethnic categories (Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or “Other”). 6.4% of the sample identified as Hispanic, with 2 identifying specifically as Spanish, 2 as Hispanic, and 7 as LatinX. Finally, 1.4% of the sample identified as Black, 0.9% as Asian, 0.2% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 1.8% identified as “Other,” which included: Arab, Middle Eastern, Mexican, Mestizo, Latina, Jewish. One participant identified as “elfin or mythical,” which on the surface seems like a joke, but does underscore the commentary on race and ethnicity above.

Materials

Brief Resilience Scale (BRS). The Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008) is a 6-item questionnaire which asks participants to respond to questions, such as “*It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event*” on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). This scale was found to be reliable, $\alpha=.85$.

Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS). The Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Thompson, 2007) is a 20-item questionnaire which asks participants to rate their current mood, given as prompts such as “*Afraid*” or “*Excited*”, on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (“Very slightly or not at all”) to 5 (“Extremely”). This scale was also reliable, $\alpha=.81$.

UCLA Loneliness Scale. The UCLA loneliness scale (Russell, 1996) is a 20-item survey which asks participants to respond to questions about their feelings of loneliness, with prompts such as “*How often do you feel isolated from others?*” Participants respond on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 (“Never”) to 4 (“Always”). This scale was found to be reliable in this study, $\alpha=.89$.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a 5-item questionnaire about participants’ life satisfaction, with prompts such as “I am satisfied with my life” presented on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 7 (“Strongly agree”). This scale was reliable, $\alpha=.89$.

Procedure

The survey consisted of the following sections: Informed consent, two writing prompts which asked participants to reflect on their experience in acting and improvisation classes, and quantitative measures of mood, connectedness, resilience and life satisfaction. Finally, demographic questions were asked at the end of the survey. The quantitative section of the survey was randomized for each participant to control for ordering effects.

A Qualtrics survey was distributed to acting and improv teachers to email to their listservs. Once a person clicked on the link, they were directed to the Informed Consent page. Once participants read the Informed Consent, they had the option to click: "I consent to participate in this research study," which indicates their consent to participate, and were

redirected to the next section of the survey. If they chose not to consent, they clicked "I do not consent to participate in this research study" and they were redirected to the "thank you" page at the end of the survey.

Quantitative Results

One-way analyses of variance were conducted to test for differences in well-being outcomes between Improvisors, Actors and those who identified as both equally. There were no differences between these groups for positive emotion, negative emotion, resilience, and loneliness. Overall, scores on positive emotion and resilience were higher than scores on negative emotion and loneliness for all groups (see Figure 1). The only significant difference that emerged was in terms of life satisfaction, where actors who self-identified as primarily working with scripted material (Actors) had significantly higher life satisfaction scores ($M=5.01$, $SD=1.17$) than those who self-identified as primarily improvisational actors (Improvisers) ($M=4.73$, $SD=1.36$) and persons who identified as "both-equally" having the lowest scores of life satisfaction ($M=4.34$, $SD=1.50$), $F(2,172) = 3.463$, $p = .034$.

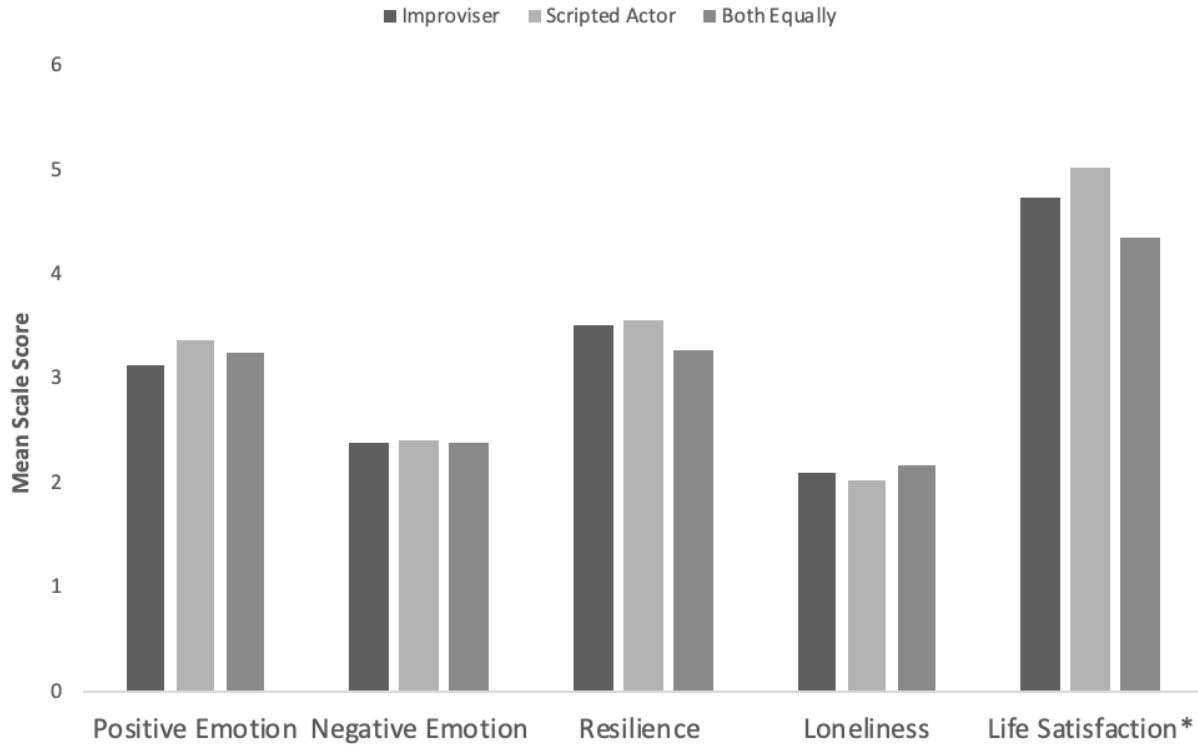


Figure 1. Mean Scores on well-being outcome measures for self-identified actors, improvisers, and those who identified as “both equally.” An asterisk denotes statistically significant differences at the $p < .05$ level.

Discussion - Quantitative Results

These findings suggest that both acting and improvisational training may help to buffer against negative emotions and loneliness. Measures of positive affect, negative affect, resilience, and loneliness revealed no significant differences between actors, improvisers, and those who identified as “both equally.” All participants’ scores were generally higher on positive affect and resilience and lower on negative affect and loneliness. However, measures of perceived life satisfaction showed higher scores among actors, with improvisers and those who identified as “both equally” reporting significantly lower levels of life satisfaction respectively.

These results were somewhat surprising considering the high levels of positive emotion, relationships, engagement, and accomplishment reported by improvisers in the qualitative data collected (reported below). Possible factors that may contribute to actors' higher levels of perceived life satisfaction include the fact that professional actors working with scripted material are typically protected by unions (The Actors Equity Association, The Screen Actors Guild, and The American Federation of Television and Radio Artists) that guarantee standard salaries, pensions, and health insurance. Improvisers have no such union and, at many improvisational theatres, improvisers are expected to perform for free and are often required to pay for rehearsal space and coaches (Metz, 2013; Zinoman, 2013). In the midst of Covid-19, a sense of security when it comes to finances and health care may be especially important in rating one's sense of life satisfaction and therefore must be discussed and considered. Actors' unions also provide an entity to which one may report unsafe working conditions, sexual harassment, racism, etc. whereas in improvisational theatres, there is no such entity to protect performers (Simons, 2018).

For our purposes we will consider life satisfaction as distinct from, but related to well-being. Perceived life satisfaction is a self-determined measure of how content one is with their current life circumstances. Individual mood may influence as much as 70% of self-reported life satisfaction (Seligman, 2011). Well-being, however, is a construct made up of multiple elements, some of which may be rated by more objective measures. Seligman himself changed his mind about his original *authentic happiness theory*, which considered increasing life satisfaction as the ultimate goal of positive psychology; instead, his 2011 *well-being theory* establishes PERMA as the essential elements of flourishing and declares well-being and human flourishing, not simply life satisfaction, as the paramount objective of positive psychology (Seligman, 2004, 2011).

Below we examine the elements of PERMA in the qualitative data collected from Actors and Improvisers.

Method - Qualitative Section

Participants

The same survey data from participants reported in the quantitative section were used in qualitative analyses. Participants' responses to the following two open ended questions were divided into excerpts and coded by independent raters. The question prompt on improvisational training was worded in the following way:

If you have experience performing improvisation, please elaborate on your experiences as an improviser. What, if anything, did you learn about yourself? Imagine that you are speaking to somebody who has never improvised before. Summarize your experience for them using the text entry box below. Feel free to write as much as you'd like, but please write at least three sentences.

The question prompt on scripted acting was worded using the following language:

If you have experience performing scripted material (plays, sketch, film/TV, etc.), please elaborate on your experiences as an actor working with a script. What, if anything, did you learn about yourself? Imagine that you are speaking to somebody who has never performed scripted theatre before. Summarize your experience for them using the text entry box below. Feel free to write as much as you'd like, but please write at least three sentences.

Materials

The excerpts were thematically coded by independent raters for the following five aspects of well-being from Martin Seligman's (2011) PERMA theory of flourishing: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. In order to keep coders centered around the same understanding of key themes, a coding frame was used to guide coders (see Appendix A).

Procedure

Two independent coders (the author and her advisor, both familiar with positive psychology) applied the 5 themes mentioned above to 346 excerpts. 173 excerpts were responses to prompt about the impact of improvisational training and 173 excerpts were responses to prompt about working with scripted text. Once all excerpts were coded, inter-rater reliability was calculated by finding the percent agreement between the two independent coders. This was calculated by dividing the number of excerpts where coders agreed over the total number of excerpts (in other words, 312 excerpts where the two coders applied the same codes, divided by the 346 possible excerpts) and then multiplying by 100 to get a percentage. For this study, the independent coders had a 90.17% rate of agreement, which is reliable.

Qualitative Results

Qualitative analysis revealed that among the 173 excerpts about scripted acting, a total of 121 codes reflecting the five elements of PERMA were applied. In the scripted acting responses 50 excerpts were coded for Positive Emotion, 26 were coded for Relationships, 23 were coded for Accomplishment, 11 were coded for Engagement, and 11 were coded for Meaning. Of the 173 excerpts about improvisational training, a total of 227 were coded for PERMA elements. A total of 76 excerpts were coded for Relationships, 69 were coded for Positive Emotion, 27 were coded for Engagement, 27 were coded for Accomplishment, and 18 were coded for Meaning. In every category of PERMA, improvisation scores were higher than scripted acting. These totals can be seen in Figure 2.

The results of chi-square analyses revealed marginally significant differences for the following elements of PERMA, where improvisational excerpts contained more excerpts coded for these elements than scripted acting: Positive Emotion $\chi^2(1, N=344) = 2.76, p = .097$;

Engagement $\chi^2(1, N=344) = 2.97, p = .085$; and, Accomplishment $\chi^2(1, N=344) = 2.78, p = .095$.

The only statistically significant difference between improvisational excerpts and scripted acting excerpts was for the Relationships element of PERMA, where significantly more excerpts were coded for the Relationships element in the improvisational writing prompt, $\chi^2(1, N=344) = 3.87, p = .049$ (see Figure 2). No significant difference existed between these groups for Meaning, $\chi^2(1, N=344) = 0.13, p = .721$.

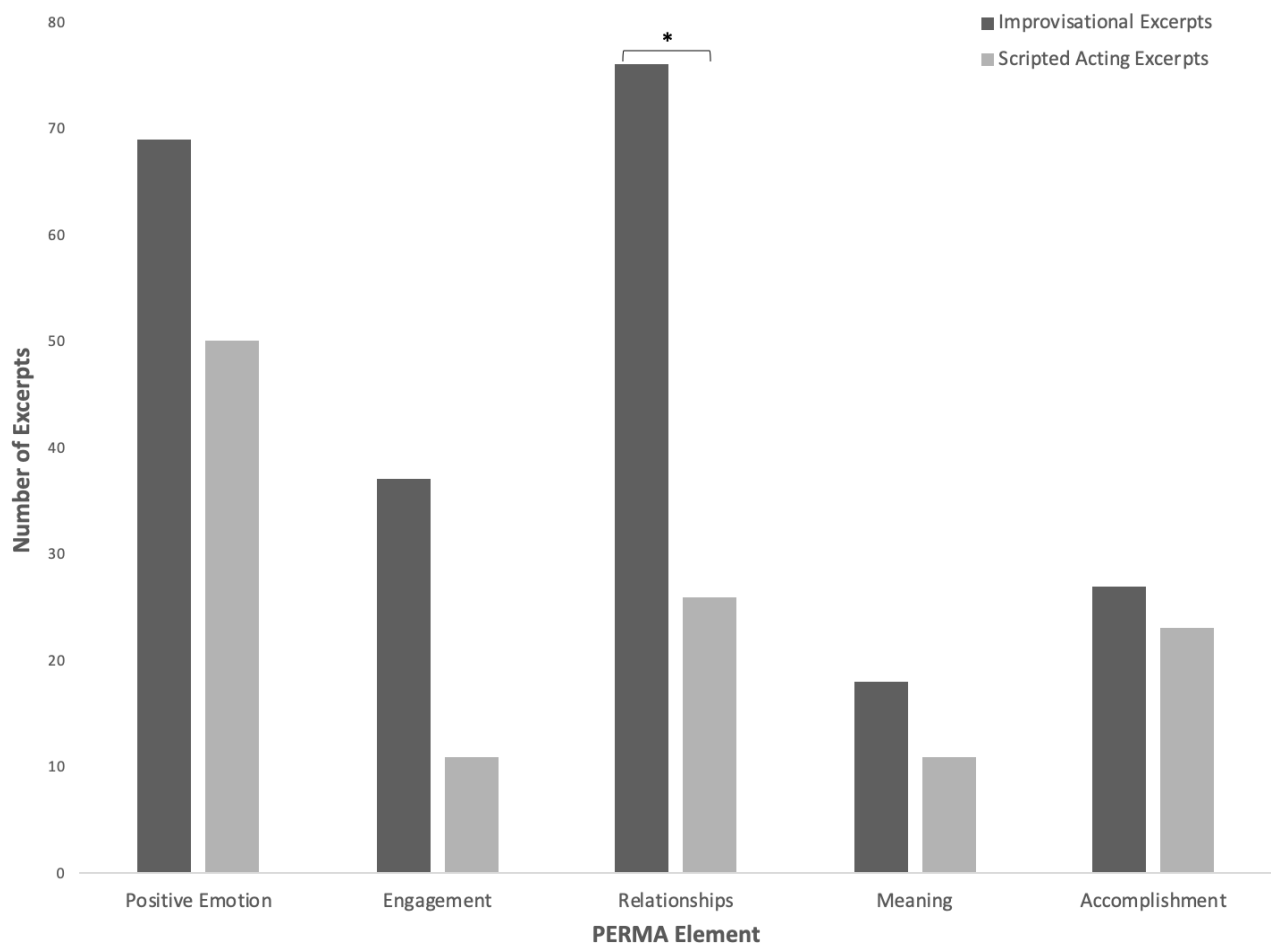


Figure 2. This graph illustrates the number of excerpts in each condition which contained mentions of the five elements of PERMA. The results of chi-square analyses are reflected by the asterisks, where a single asterisk denotes differences found to be statistically significant at the .05 level.

Thematic Exemplars

In an effort to capture the nuanced differences in well-being experienced between Actors and Improvisers, exemplars were chosen from the qualitative data collected that best capture each element of PERMA assessed by the coding frame. We have attempted to capture general themes and common language expressed by the participants as a whole, as well as to establish where there was disparity between acting and improvisational training. First, themes will be reported for marginally significant findings (i.e., Positive Emotion, Engagement, and Accomplishment). Next, themes will be explored for the Relationships element, for which significant differences were found between improvisation and scripted acting excerpts. Lastly, themes for the Meaning element of PERMA will be described, for which no significant differences were found between improvisation and scripted acting excerpts.

P - Positive Emotion. Of the 119 excerpts coded for Positive Emotion, 69 came from the improvisational training prompt and 50 came from the scripted acting prompt. Recall that there were marginally significant differences in positive emotion between groups, where excerpts from improvisational training recollections tended to have more mentions of positive emotion than those from excerpts on scripted acting.

In the case of improvisational training, positive emotion took the form of exhilaration, excitement, freedom, fun, and play. This manifestation is clear in the following two excerpts from Participants:

“Where before I had fear in letting go of control, now that same fear can be exciting.”
(Participant 134)

“I find that when I improvise or take an improv class, I am nervous, but so proud of the risks I am taking. There is a sort of rush of joy, tempered with a bit of apprehension. I

push through and am always so delighted that I have put myself out there, connected with others and engaged! I find it a rewarding way to make connections with others and definitely feel positive after improvising.” (Participant 162)

In the case of scripted acting, positive emotions tended to involve references to catharsis and pleasant feelings of self-awareness that come from exploring the full range of emotions as another character. The theme of “getting it right” came up repeatedly as an element of acting that caused anxiety and self-doubt in some and a sense of accomplishment in others. The following two excerpts capture these trends:

“Learning to act from a script allows me to be different characters and show feelings and emotions that I have but don’t often get to express.” (Participant 82).

“As an actor working with a script, I focused on memorization and getting it right. I felt that there was a standard of perfection that I needed to achieve. I enjoy performing scripted material, but I get stressed out over ‘getting it right.’” (Participant 89).

For both groups, positive emotions tended to include a sense of pride in facing challenges and the thrill of live performance. For example, Participant 11 captures the positive emotionality associated with performing in general:

“Screw drugs, I say... there's no better high than crushing a performance . . .”

E - Engagement. Of the 38 excerpts coded for Engagement, 27 came from the improvisational training prompt and 11 came from the scripted acting prompt. As with positive emotions, there were marginally significant differences in engagement between groups, where excerpts from improvisational training recollections tended to have more mentions of engagement than those from excerpts on scripted acting.

In the case of improvisational training, engagement in the act of performing often involved a quieting of self-criticism, which enhanced creativity. Participant 32 describes the experience of being completely engaged:

“I have found that improv . . . quiets my over-active mind. It can be a form of meditation. When I'm away from my 'thinking' brain for even a short period of time, it releases endorphins within me, and becomes a euphoric experience.”

Furthermore, Participant 20 captures the trend that improvisation involves a sense of getting lost or completely absorbed in the present moment:

“It terrified me. But . . . I found I would lose track of time and if I felt safe with the people around me, lose track of ‘my self’ and start saying and doing things that were unexpected and in the moment . . . If I got lost in the moment afterwards I would feel exhilarated and free and be surprised by my bravery.”

On the other hand, in the case of scripted acting, engagement tended to be enabled by preparation. The following two excerpts capture this trend:

“When I am prepared, it's much easier to get out of my own head and live in the moment. I am no longer worried about how I will say a line, I am in sync with my inner life and lines can flow out naturally.” (Participant 55)

“I like to know it so well . . . that when I'm performing I'm free to be in the moment.” (Participant 81)

For both groups, engagement tended to take on the quality of being truly present in the moment and experiencing a state of flow. For example, Participant 128 described the sensation of really being “in flow” onstage that was common among many excerpts, regardless of form (i.e., improvisation or scripted acting):

“When I find myself in a moment of pure creation, when I have completely let go...that is an out of body experience.”

A - Accomplishment. Of the 50 excerpts coded for Accomplishment, 27 came from the improvisational training prompt and 23 came from the scripted acting prompt. As with positive emotions and engagement, there were marginally significant differences between groups, where excerpts from improvisational training recollections tended to have more mentions of accomplishment than those from reflections on scripted acting.

In the case of improvisational training, accomplishment often reflected increased confidence as a result of facing fears. The following two excerpts capture this idea:

“I can be very hard on myself but when you accomplish a good improv scene the feedback you get is amazing not only because you entertained the audience but also because you survived it!” (Participant 35)

“It's terrifying and full of dread in the anticipation. Then you are finally on stage and the senses are heightened - I've never listened so hard in my life, then it's done and I survived . . . I learned I can survive the embarrassment or failure better than the thought of fear or failure.” (Participant 125)

In the case of scripted acting, accomplishment tended to involve references to analyzing text successfully and self-improvement. For example, the nature of these experiences are expressed by the following two participants:

“Learning a script is immensely challenging, but becomes easier the more you do it. To make those memorized lines and character traits come to life in each performance is a whole different skill and process. Making the page come to life and keeping the storytelling fresh each night for yourself, other performers, and audiences is the joy, the challenge and the drain of the performer.” (Participant 46).

“Learning more about my process showed me how hard I am on myself, how I'm not just a perfectionist but one who feels they have to get it right on the first try. But that's not realistic (or healthy)! The more I work with scripts and eventually ‘nail it,’ the more I see that the process of finding a character's voice is the work.” (Participant 9)

For both groups, accomplishment involved enduring failure alongside success.

Participant 69 describes the resilience necessarily to achieve one's goals in the face of bad shows and auditions, which is a pervasive experience in the world of performing:

“I have learned what it feels like to fail . . . It is truly awful... but you just have to keep going. And I have learned what it feels like to succeed! Because when you have a great show, there is nothing better!”

R - Relationships. Of the 102 excerpts coded for Relationships, 76 came from the improvisational training prompt and 26 came from the scripted acting prompt. This was the only element of PERMA where significant differences were found between improvisational training

and scripted acting. Excerpts from improvisational training recollections had significantly more mentions of positive relationship(s) than those from reflections on scripted acting.

In the case of improvisational training, responses often mentioned learning to connect authentically, both onstage and off, and instances of improvisational training making them a better friend or partner. The following three excerpts illustrate this trend:

“I learned to make it NOT about myself, but about nurturing and encouraging others.”
(Participant 13)

“This freed me up to take more risks in social settings (something as silly as singing karaoke for example). I also suspect it allowed me to make friendship bonds easier; empowering me to be more vulnerable with people much more quickly than before.”
(Participant 24)

“It has also taught me so much about how I can be a better person and teammate in all of my relationships. Improv makes you stay present in the moment and really connect with the people you are with.” (Participant 85)

In the case of scripted acting, several actors spoke of learning to empathize with other cultures or life experiences. This experience of empathizing with others' perspectives is captured in the following two excerpts:

“Acting, for me, has made me a fuller, more empathetic human. Each role expands me and makes me feel deeply connected to other humans.” (Participant 109)

“I believe that doing theater has given me the opportunity to understand others better and see different points of view.” (Participant 120)

For both groups, discussion of relationships tended to explore a sense of connection and belonging with fellow performers and learning to trust others. The two quotes below capture this dynamic seen across excerpts:

“Learning to listen better and trying to understand others better are skills that performing constantly encourages you to hone. Also, looking into another human beings [sic] eyes and trusting them onstage helps you get a more personal understanding and connection to people that society naturally shields you from.” (Participant 47)

“I developed most of my lifelong friendships through these experiences.” (Participant 98)

M - Meaning. Of the 29 excerpts coded for Meaning, 18 came from the improvisational training prompt and 11 came from the scripted acting prompt. This was the only element of PERMA where neither significant nor marginally significant differences existed between improvisational training and scripted acting. Both Actors and Improvisers seemed to gain some sort of meaning from their experiences. Both groups described storytelling and human connection as a way of life, exemplified by the following two excerpts:

“The art form is heroic, it's a celebration of humanity, it's truly marvelous when it's done well. It's usually not but seeing and doing it well occasionally is enough to keep one trying for a lifetime.” (Participant 40)

“Improv is more than a performance on a stage. Improv is life.” (Participant 159)

Additionally, participants writing about both improvisation and scripted acting described feeling more connected to humanity in general. Participant 131 illustrates this common experience:

“I feel as if I have a sense of the community of humankind in a way that says...we are a part of this world together.” (Participant 131)

Additional Feedback. It is striking to note that in both sets of responses some negative themes arose, primarily around self-judgement, anxiety, financial instability, and harmful pedagogy that promotes suffering for one's art.

“I learned the rules of giving and taking in a collaborative, generative context. I learned too that this is often held to a godly regard in white supremacy culture and used by folks in power positions to gaslight effectively.” (Participant 156)

“That transcendental ‘high’ can be very elusive and hard to keep chasing. It comes at a cost (audition after audition, rejection after rejection, not able to keep a steady job because of the requirements of acting gigs, not have steady income, having a hard time sustaining relationships because of the intensity and schedule of an actor's life, unprofessionalism in the industry, etc. etc. etc.)” (Participant 10)

This kind of feedback may be useful in considering how to cultivate a more intentionally positive field of improvisation.

Discussion - Qualitative Results

“I met amazing, intuitive, open people that I could really connect with and have become lifelong friends . . . I felt more able to express myself and connect interpersonally because that's also what were [sic] doing onstage.” (Participant 61)

The results of this study suggest that positive relationships may be the active ingredient in the recipe for “Positive Improvisation.” As opposed to scripted acting where actors are connecting to and through “characters” (and certainly describe an ability to analytically understand others’ motivations and empathize more readily), improvisational training seems to encourage connections between performers in moments when they report engaging as their most authentic selves. Improvisers often mention that these relational skills (listening, vulnerability, emotional intelligence, bravery, presence, active constructive responding, etc.) transfer to relationships outside the world of improv making them better partners, co-workers, and friends.

Fredrickson’s *positivity resonance theory* (2013, 2016) describes *positivity resonance* as the shared positive affect (i.e., emotion) experienced between and among individuals characterized by reciprocal care and synchronous behavior and biology. Experiences of positivity resonance accrue to build not only beneficial social bonds, but flourishing mental health, and lower levels of depression and loneliness (Major et al., 2018; Schneider & Fredrickson, n.d.). Dutton & Heaphy (2003) describe *high-quality connections* as those wherein the connection between two people is resilient and remains strong in a variety of conditions, is open and generative, thus allowing space for creativity, and where the parties involved feel safe displaying emotions, both positive and negative. The results of this study suggests that improvisation seems to create a safe, creative space wherein resilient high-quality connections and positivity resonance may flourish.

Overall Discussion of the Exploratory Study

We found that while Actors report higher levels of life satisfaction, Improvisers reported significantly more mentions of positive relationships and marginally significantly more positive emotion, engagement, and accomplishment. The fact that Improvisers' perceived satisfaction with their lives as compared to Actors is significantly lower, despite seemingly more positive experiences of PERMA, begs the question: why are Improvisers less satisfied with their lives than Actors and how might improvisational training address this deficit?

The fact that positive relationships were mentioned significantly more often in the qualitative data suggests that capitalizing on relationship-building exercises may be one of the most effective ways to improve well-being outcomes for Improvisers. Alternatively, there is an opportunity to intentionally introduce more meaning, accomplishment, engagement, and positive emotion into existing curriculums. Qualitative data also featured repeated mentions of heightened self-awareness, self-efficacy, empathy, listening skills, trust, and emotional intelligence. These factors may contribute to increased efficacy of positive interventions in general, and positive improvisational interventions in particular. Future studies should seek to measure these elements along with PERMA, PANAS, resilience, and loneliness in participants. Additionally, future research must advance the rigor of the investigation into Positive Improvisation by comparing the effects of a Positive Improvisation intervention against a control group. While this study paved the way in a key first step of describing Positive Improvisation, there is still much for future research to unpack and investigate.

That being said, this study did have limitations, including the lack of a control group. Quantitative analysis of PANAS scores, resilience, and loneliness suggest that Actors and Improvisers experience similar benefits from their work, however a non-theatre control group

would help to determine to what extent, if any, improvisation and acting training develop positive affect and resilience beyond the average person who has no theatrical training. We used a snowball sampling technique which is inherently non-random and, thus, subject to community bias, though we attempted to begin with a set of initial informants that was as diverse as possible, recruiting from cities all over the U.S. and disseminating the survey to acting and improvisation instructors and institutions with broad reach and large student bodies.

It is also relevant to note that we were asking Actors and Improvisers to reflect on their art and their livelihoods at a time when theatres and improv institutions had been closed for months (and are expected to remain dark for the foreseeable future), and more than 19 million Americans are unemployed, many sheltering in place with little to no in-person social interaction (Paulson, 2020; Rosenberg & Long, 2020). Strong resilience scores and compelling references to resilience skills and protective factors in the qualitative data suggest future directions for research should consider whether improvisational skills affect one's ability to cope in the face of disaster and whether improv training could help those adversely affected by Covid-19. Has the "social distancing" experienced by Americans during the spring and summer of 2020 affected Improvisers, for whom positive relationships are an integral part of their artistic work, more negatively than others leading to lower levels of perceived life satisfaction? Research into the efficacy of virtual improvisational training is also relevant considering the current risks incurred by gathering together in large groups. All that is to say that the contextual influence of this moment in history should not be ignored as having influence over outcomes in research—especially improvisational training and performing.

Section IV - Research-Informed “Positive” Improvisation

The Case for a “Positive Improvisation”

In order to build a Positive Improvisation branch of Positive Psychology (under the umbrella of the newly emerging field of the Positive Humanities described in Section I), we must move from teaching improvisation in a way that is often *accidentally* good for a student’s well-being to *intentionally* incorporating the science and research of positive psychology into training, clarifying the desired outcomes of the exercises, and measuring results with the same rigor we would a traditional positive psychology intervention. Approaching life with a “yes and” mentality can result in the positive acceptance and enjoyment of each day as it is lived, the resilience to thrive when life doesn’t go according to plan, the hope necessary to imagine a life of extraordinary possibility, and the self-awareness, self-efficacy, and self-determination to realize one’s goals (even as they change, transform, and grow around us), but only if Positive Improvisation succeeds in creating inclusive, psychologically safe spaces wherein students feel heard, valued, and supported enough to flourish.

Improvisation has historically been relegated to the realm of theatre, used to create original sketch comedy or to add spontaneity to scripted performances. However, the field of the Positive Humanities asks us to consider how and why the arts contribute to human flourishing and how we as positive psychology practitioners can expand their influence to have a more positive impact. Participating in the humanities, whether through consumption or creation, is a path to human flourishing that approaches well-being viscerally and emotionally, rather than just intellectually. The humanities are often pursued for the hedonistic pleasure they provide with the unintentional side effect of increased eudaemonia through psychological richness, as well as cognitive and social benefits (Westgate & Oishi, n.d.). I propose an intentional refocus in the

field of improvisation to maintain the hedonistic pleasures of the art form, while consciously attending to the eudaimonic cognitive and social benefits improvisation can yield.

How to put the “Positive” in Positive Improvisation?

Intentional Well-Being Aims. We know from research in goal-setting theory that the more specific, explicit, and difficult a goal, the better the performance; goals also affect individual performance by encouraging planning and affecting how much effort we put forth, in what direction, and for how long (Locke, 1996). Choosing to intentionally approach the dissemination of improvisation with the goal of increasing flourishing among its participants is likely to have a very different outcome than setting the goal of making an audience laugh, leaving improvisers to fend for themselves in the flourishing department. Intentional well-being aims may influence not only the instructor by determining specifically and explicitly where she puts her attention and what kind of planning goes into her workshops, it may also influence the student experience by guiding how they approach the exercises, their role in the workshop, and how they relate to their fellow players.

In Table 1 some of the constructs from positive psychology that improvisation seems to already “accidentally” influence in positive ways are explored in more detail. Capitalizing on the unintentionally positive results of traditional improv exercises by intentionally cultivating an approach bolstered by empirical research and goal-setting theory may lead to more efficacious interventions and additional flourishing outcomes. We won’t know, however, unless we start measuring.

The Importance of Measurement. Locke (1996) also tells us that feedback demonstrating progress in relation to our goal increases the likelihood that goals will be persistently pursued and helps us to determine superior strategies that make it more likely we’ll

succeed in achieving our goal. Measurement is a way for the Positive Improvisation practitioner to determine tangible progress toward the goal of well-being, recommit to her method if it is having the desired outcome, or rethink her approach if outcome measures reveal that her interventions are not leading to increased well-being in the chosen domain. Only by measuring do we know if a Positive Improvisation intervention is having the intended positive impact.

What we choose to measure is also important in determining the effectiveness of our intervention. If we are primarily interested in increasing eudaimonic well-being, but only collect data on whether students report having “fun” in class, we’ve chosen the wrong metric. While our qualitative study measured PERMA, there are many additional constructs from positive psychology that may be targeted in Positive Improvisation. Examples of key factors which influence the efficacy of positive interventions through the lens of improvisational training can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Positive Psychology Constructs through the lens of Improvisational Training

Positive Psychology Construct	Supporting Research	Positive “Improv” Example
Resilience	<p>The ability to navigate adversity and survive, or even thrive, in the face of challenges (Keyes, Reivich, Seligman, personal communication, January 12, 2020).</p> <p>Certain individual characteristics such as <i>optimism, self-awareness, self-regulation, self-efficacy, mental agility, and connection</i> may add to a person’s resilience and predict positive outcomes in the face of adversity (Masten et al., 2009).</p>	<p>Participant 99: “I often "failed" or had a bad show, especially in the beginning but the fact that I still wanted to get up and try again made me aware of my own determination and strength . . . Pursuing improv taught me that I enjoyed taking a risk and that things you want are worth a little pain (or in my case diarrhea . . .)”</p> <p>Participant 10: “. . . actually being on stage in front of an audience, where neither you or your fellow performers have any idea what's about to happen -- and your body actually experiences those high-stakes, fear-inducing situations -- and, again and again, you create something fun and playful and sometimes magical in those moments, despite the fear -- I think it habituates you to handling those types of situations in life... everything from public speaking to collaborating on a big project at work to handling a heavy discussion in a relationship.”</p>
Self-Awareness	<p>Self-awareness is necessary for autonomous regulation of behavior which can lead to beneficial self-determined behavior, as opposed to automatic or habitual unhealthy thoughts and behaviors (Brown & Ryan, 2015).</p>	<p>Participant 9: “And because improv trains you to reply to things instinctually, without over thinking, it helped me better understand who I am as a person, the real person inside who isn’t assimilating to whatever crowd I’m in. It seems like the opposite would be true, but that’s what’s so fantastic about improv. It reveals a persons [sic] spirit.”</p>
Autonomy	<p>Autonomous self-determined behavior is necessary to function in a psychologically healthy way; acting autonomously leads to greater well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2015).</p> <p>A sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, and personal agency grows from the self-awareness that one’s actions affect outcomes (Maddux, 2009).</p>	<p>Participant 61: “[As] a creative person it allowed me a significant amount of autonomy . . . Improv allowed me to generate my own content, to more freely and cleanly express whatever artistic/creative energy I had.”</p>

<p>Self-Efficacy</p>	<p>Self-efficacy, the belief that one <i>can</i> do something, that one has the ability to control one’s behavior or achieve a goal, increases the likelihood that one <i>will</i> do something. The ability to regulate one’s emotions when faced with a difficult task increases self-efficacy beliefs. An individual with high self-efficacy is more likely to persevere when faced with obstacles and those with high self-efficacy experience lower levels of depression and anxiety and higher well-being (Maddux, 2009; Soysa & Wilcomb, 2015; Tong & Song, 2004; Yu et al., 2005).</p>	<p>Participant 99: “Right away it gave me confidence in myself. I can be very insecure and pushing myself to get on stage every week really forced me to start believing in myself and my abilities.”</p> <p>Participant 11: I have learned to find my true self . . . I’ve discovered how to overcome obstacles and to look into myself, allowing me to admit where I can improve.</p>
<p>Positive States</p>	<p>Positive emotions may lead to upward spirals of positivity, building psychological, social, and physical resources. Even fleeting positive emotions may lead to enhanced well-being and social connectedness (Garland et al., 2010).</p>	<p>Participant 40: “[It’s] the fear of jumping off a cliff followed by the reward of flying.”</p> <p>Participant 66: “I laugh every day and am surrounded by people with strong senses of humor, that’s honestly the best part of having studied comedy.”</p>
<p>Play</p>	<p>To be considered play, an activity must be absorbing and intrinsically motivated, as well as fun, frivolous, imaginative, voluntary, and structured in some way by rules (Brown, 2009; West, Hoff, & Carlsson, 2013).</p> <p>Exercise that feels like play is especially effective at promoting social and emotional skills in addition to the stress-busting benefits of cardiovascular exercise (Ratey, 2008).</p>	<p>Participant 45: “Improvising has provided me with a place to let my internal editor rest a bit . . . and let my imagination run as it did when I was a little kid. It’s a safe place to play as an adult . . .”</p> <p>Participant 102: “I didn’t have time to be self-conscious or fret over a plan; all I could do was listen, trust, react, and relax. And PLAY!”</p>
<p>Engagement/ Flow</p>	<p>The vanishing of the self that occurs when one enters a state of flow and the ego disappears can be an incredibly positive and fulfilling state of being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).</p>	<p>Participant 80: “Improv allowed me opportunities to stop judging myself and editing myself and fully be in the moment.”</p>
<p>Mindfulness</p>	<p>Learning to be mindful has numerous wellness benefits, not least of which is the fact that humans are happier when they are focused on the present moment (Killingsworth, 2010).</p> <p>Mindfulness may contribute to an individual’s ability to disengage from unhealthy automatic thoughts and behaviors, thus enhancing well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).</p>	<p>Participant 85: It has also taught me so much about how I can be a better person and teammate in all of my relationships. Improv makes you stay present in the moment and really connect with the people you are with.</p>

<p>Connectedness</p>	<p>This highly pleasurable loss of the self we feel when merging with a group, the kind experienced during activities such as team sports, choral singing, group line-dancing, even marching with a group in protest, is associated with increased well-being (Haidt et al., 2008).</p> <p>A feeling of belonging is essential for human well-being, while loneliness is a more powerful morbidity determinant than smoking (Prilleltensky, 2019).</p>	<p>Participant 89: “Improv made me more social and I love it. I was able to feel my points of view were validated by the community. Listening, teamwork, and empathy are a few of the many skills I have been developing thanks to Improv. Improv has given me friends and increased my self-esteem and social skills.”</p>
<p>Emotional Intelligence</p>	<p>Emotions contain a great deal of information that can aid our ability to make good decisions, think critically, empathize, and form connections with others. The ability to successfully perceive emotions, understand emotions, and manage emotions in oneself and others improves our ability to contribute to society (Caruso et al., 2015).</p>	<p>Participant 143: “Understanding and putting words to HOW I'm feeling gives not just me insight, it extends out to my scene partner for them to use to inform themselves. This has been helpful in many parts of my life, not just while onstage with other performers. Taking a moment to check-in with yourself is important and helps to not feel out of control with emotions.”</p>
<p>Mattering</p>	<p>Mattering, the feeling of being valued by and adding value to our friends, family, and community is absolutely essential to well-being (Prilleltensky, 2019).</p>	<p>Participant 144: “Improv taught me what real friends were like, but more importantly it planted in me the seeds of what it meant to be a real friend.”</p> <p>Participant 126: Now I use improv in my theater classroom to break down the same fears in my students about being "good enough to be there" . . . It also allows students to feel worthy of being in the room, even (or especially) when they're not immediately clever or funny.</p>
<p>Active Constructive Responding</p>	<p>Responding positively and with specifics when good news is shared communicates to the speaker that they were heard and appreciated and has been shown to improve relationships (Gable et al., 2004; Reivich et al., 2011).</p>	<p>Participant 16: “You cannot be a good improviser and not be a good listener. In many other parts of my life, I try to come back to this, to remind myself of the power of active and engaged listening . . . improv is about connection, honesty, and listening.”</p>

A Note about Variety

“I’ve learned that the wealth of my imagination surprises me.” (Participant 109)

Perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of Positive Improvisation in terms of its potential to increase flourishing is its inherent novelty and lack of repetition. Humans generally grow accustomed to both positive and negative stimuli in a phenomenon known as *hedonic adaptation*, meaning that the emotional effects of an event or circumstance, both good and bad, lessen over time (Lyubomirsky, 2010). Certain behaviors, present in improvisational exercises, may help to forestall the diminishing effects of hedonic adaptation on positive experiences: 1) keeping your attention on the positive aspects of an experience and 2) participating in activities that are dynamic, varied, novel, and surprising (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Lyubomirsky, 2010; Schueller, 2014). The positive effect of repeating the same positive intervention over and over again (performing a *random act of kindness*, for example, or *counting one’s blessings*) is likely to be attenuated by hedonic adaptation unless one finds new and different ways to perform them. Activities that yield surprising and diverse experiences and opportunities are most resistant to adaptation (Lyubomirsky, 2010). In this way improvisational interventions are uniquely structured to provide endless variety and surprise to the individual(s) engaging.

The ability to vary, change, personalize, and adjust a positive intervention or to add/subtract interventions at will to suit one’s needs greatly improves the chance that interventions will be effective and long-lasting (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014). A good person-activity fit, the pairing of an individual and an activity that that person wants to do, is also likely to result in more positive outcomes (Schueller, 2014). Improvisation is inherently adjustable and customizable; the individuals involved have autonomy over their choices in every moment. Positive Improvisation practitioners might even consider allowing participants to customize their

own curriculums by choosing which exercises and interventions they prefer to engage in during a particular workshop.

So how do we intentionally put the “positive” in Positive Improvisation? Below I outline some suggestions to positively enhance an existing improvisational warm-up exercise, the “Yes Dance.”

Section V - Putting the Positive in the “Yes Dance” Group Warm-up

The “Yes Dance” group warm up is an improvisational exercise that was first introduced by Alexandra Billings at The School at Steppenwolf in 2007 (A. Billings, personal communication, June 27, 2020). As a group warm-up it can be particularly effective in physicalizing the concept of “yes and” while encouraging group bonding and team building. The “Yes Dance” involves a group of players forming a circle around a single person in the center who will engage in some sort of physical activity or dance. He or she then chooses someone in the circle to mirror their activity. That person responds with a verbal “yes” and immediately begins mirroring the physical action of the person in the center. The two players then switch places and the new person in the center begins a new physical activity. For more detailed instructions on the “Yes Dance,” please see Appendix B.

How is this Exercise “Accidentally” Positive?

Moderate *physical activity* is associated with positive activated affect, a state of feeling positive energy and engagement, and has been found to be as effective in treating depression as both antidepressant medication and cognitive behavioral therapy (Cooney et al., 2013; Faulkner et al., 2015). Combining physical activity with social activity primes the brain for growth and maximizes the positive effects of both (Ratey, 2008). Studies show that group dance can lead to feelings of inclusion within a group and reduce feelings of stress and alienation (Hanna, 1995).

Elevating heart rate in a fun and playful way influences not only the body, but the brain, increasing positive affect and encouraging positive social connections.

An increase in positive emotion also comes as a result of positivity resonance. As Barbara Fredrickson (2009) reminds us, no one flourishes in isolation. This intervention provides the four ingredients for a *high-quality connection*: respectful engagement, support, trust, and play (Fredrickson, 2009). Face to face contact and being in the physical presence of others who are treating you with loving compassion (“Yes!”) can greatly increase well-being by establishing high-quality connections and shared positive emotions.

How to Add Intentional Well-Being Aims to the “Yes Dance”

PERMA. Appreciative inquiry focused on the elements of PERMA may be used to intentionally direct students’ attention to the well-being effects of the exercise, increasing savoring and appreciation of the experience, as well as anticipation about how to make the experience more positive in the future. After the exercise, the instructor may pose questions such as:

When is the exercise most fun?

How might you make the exercise more joyful for yourself in the future?

What are ways other people made it a positive experience?

Did anyone do anything that made you feel more connected to them?

If so, what and why?

What greater meaning can you pull from this exercise?

What did we accomplish together as a group in this exercise?

Shift of Focus. No one who is not participating, other than the instructor, should be watching from the outside. This guarantees the shift of focus is toward observing and supporting (other-focused) rather than performing (self-focused) thus diminishing self-consciousness (Plant & Ryan, 1985).

Ritualized Gratitude. Consider the addition of an enthusiastic shared unison “Thank you!” after the receiver exclaims “Yes!” While, at first, the focus of each individual in the circle and the person in the center is on themselves, the element of support, the mirroring and the “Thank you!” redirects attention to the other members of the group. This shift of focus creates a feeling of simultaneously supporting and being supported, or as Prilleltensky (2019) might describe it, of adding value and feeling valued, of mattering. The intervention also includes an element of what Fredrickson (2009) would call *ritualized gratitude* with its effective heart-opening powers.

Play. Playful physical activity optimizes the brain’s ability to function, increasing alertness and motivation, helps one retain new information, elevates endorphins, boosts dopamine, and counteracts the effects of the stress hormone, cortisol (Ratey, 2008). If the group seems particularly self-conscious or tentative, make a point of asking them to begin with “uncool” dancing, making clear that the goal is not to be a “good” dancer. In my experience, direct instruction to be weird and goofy on purpose can relieve a lot of fears around performing and generate uninhibited play. Additional coaching might include: “Even more enthusiastic! Make him feel like a rockstar!”

Collective Effervescence/Hive Switch. Consider using self-created music rather than pre-recorded music as a variation. Encourage students to create a beat and melody using their voices and bodies from the outer circle that supports the physical action developing in the center. Allowing space and time for the energy (and volume) to build can help ensure success. Synchronous, hive-like group behavior, such as seen in bees and ants, that ensures collective success over individual success, is one of the most pleasurable ways to encourage connection

within a group and it has been practiced by human societies throughout history (Haidt, 2006; Haidt et al., 2008)

Nature. Multiple studies have demonstrated the extraordinary and copious well-being benefits of nature including increased positive affect, heightened immune function, lowered stress hormones, and decreased anxiety (Ratey & Manning, 2014; Park et al., 2010; Selhub & Logan, 2012; Zelensky & Nisbet, 2014). To intentionally capitalize on the positive effects of exposure to nature, consider holding this positive improvisation intervention outside in a park or field, weather permitting.

Breaking down the “Positive Yes Dance” using the Elements Model

To use Pawelski’s (2020) Elements Model, the “Positive Yes Dance” may be considered in the following way:

Table 2. Applying the Elements Model to the “Positive Yes Dance” Group Warmup

<i>Activity:</i>	Ritualized group dance (which includes observing, playing, dancing, speaking)
<i>Active Ingredients:</i>	Relatedness, performance experience, physiological/emotional state
<i>Target Change:</i>	Shift of focus, increased positive emotion, increased trust, better teamwork
<i>Target System:</i>	Affect, attention, relationships, physiology, heart rate
<i>Desired Outcome:</i>	Improved group relations

How to measure the effectiveness of the “Positive Yes Dance”

In order to measure the effectiveness of the “Positive Yes Dance,” one must first consider either the *desired outcome* or the *target change* intended (see Table 2 above). If I choose to measure change in positive emotions, I might ask students to complete a validated scale such as The Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Thompson, 2007) pre- and post-intervention in order to compare their levels of positive emotions before and after completing the “Positive Yes Dance.” If I intended to measure trust, I might apply the Interpersonal Trust Scale (Rotter, 1967). If I wanted to measure a specific construct for which I couldn’t find an existing validated scale, I could create my own quantitative scale. I might also collect qualitative data by asking individual students about group relations before and after the intervention, and then code their responses for references to positive emotions. In addition, I could choose to collect objective measures such as the number of times each student smiles or laughs in the hour preceding the intervention and compare this data with the number of smiles observed in the hour during which the intervention is conducted. Each method of measuring the effectiveness of the “Positive Yes Dance” would measure different constructs in different ways and provide us with unique information in order to determine whether our Positive Improvisation Intervention was having the desired outcome.

Based on the research I highlighted previously, I might expect to see increased positive emotion, group bonding, increased positivity resonance, more support, greater willingness to engage in positive risk-taking, laughter, and increased cardiovascular function when practiced on a regular basis. However, I cannot confirm that my students are experiencing a positive transformation unless I am able to measure the outcomes of my Positive Improvisation Intervention.

Section VI - Caveats and Considerations for a “Positive Improvisation”

The difference between “meaning well” and “doing good” is of primary importance in the promulgation of positive psychology. Historically, the theatre, while attempting to entertain, enlighten, and inspire others, has not always been the most ethical of institutions. A 1945 Code of Ethics for actors employed by the Circle Players in Los Angeles included the following rules of ethical conduct:

- “1. I shall never miss a performance.
2. I shall play every performance with energy, enthusiasm and to the best of my ability regardless of size of audience, *personal illness*, bad weather, accident, *or even death in my family* [emphasis added]” (Thielke, 2009).

I think it is reasonable to suggest that today most people would disagree that it is an actor’s ethical obligation to show up and perform even when sick or grieving. In fact, such rules of behavior would be downright unethical in the case of a global pandemic.

How do we approach a branch of improv training that prioritizes the promotion of flourishing in its participants above and beyond the promotion of comedy? Consider first: other people matter (Peterson, 2006). The prioritization of ethics in the field of positive psychology and the arts is the prioritization of the well-being of others alongside our own. In using the arts, specifically improvisation, to promote human flourishing, ethical practitioners should consider Vella-Brodrick’s (2014) principles of integrity, industriousness, innovation, and impact as they relate to our clients and community. What Vella-Brodrick (2014) refers to as “industriousness” and “innovation” is the drive to keep learning, working, and contributing to the field. As the 1945 Actor’s Code of Ethics demonstrates, the rules of “good” behavior often change, and generally accepted standards may not be strictly ethical. In endeavoring to practice with

industriousness, we must embrace an approach to Positive Improvisation that is both hard-working and ever-learning. If we rely only on our own self-awareness and knowledge, or on outdated rules of behavior, we are limited. An industrious practitioner will seek out not only the most relevant information available to determine a course of action, she will consider cultural context outside her own experience (Jarden et al., 2019). This continued learning allows the development of *moral skill*, the ability to determine the right course of action in a particular situation which can require good judgment, listening skills, empathy, and the ability to improvise (Schwartz, n.d.).

In addition to keeping an open mind, educating herself about different cultures, and staying abreast of the latest research, a practitioner should seek to innovate (Vella-Brodrick, 2014). Remaining stagnant and following what has always been done can quickly become unethical as times and people change. Less than ten years ago, in my experience, it would have been very normal for a theatre director to pursue a romantic relationship with an actor he/she was directing (or in a position to hire in the future). After allegations of sexual harassment and misconduct in multiple theatres, however, Chicago's "Not in Our House" movement created and shared a set of "Chicago Theatre Standards" intended to address issues of misconduct unique to theatre settings. It explicitly declared that all actors should be free from solicitation or advances made by any person in a position to offer—or not offer—him or her a job (Fisher & Myers, 2017). Specific standards such as these had never existed in an organized way. This innovation positively transformed the culture of rehearsals for many, if not all, Chicago theatres by helping to create a safe space in which to do vulnerable work.

Positive Improvisation must be open to the possibility that the way things have always been done may not be the way things should always be done. As we learn and grow as a

discipline, we cannot know which innovations will be necessary, but we can choose to make innovation a priority. Choosing to remain industrious and innovative in the pursuit of ethically ideal behavior requires *moral will*. Moral will is an individual's desire to try to do the right thing (Schwartz, n.d.). In order to increase human flourishing, the goal of Positive Improvisation must be to have a broad, quantifiable positive impact on society (Vella-Brodrick, 2014). To have an impact requires both the moral skill to know how to effect change and the moral will to take action to effect change.

The field of Positive Improvisation must become resilient in order to thrive (and help others to thrive) in the face of modern challenges. If we examine the protective factors that bolster individual resilience (biology, optimism, self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-regulation, mental agility, connection, and positive institutions) and apply them to Positive Improvisation as a whole, we may be able to establish an arm of the Positive Humanities that is not only resilient, but *antifragile* and, thus, strengthened by the challenges it faces (Taleb, 2014). Building a curriculum that is self-aware when it comes to bias and impact, optimistic and self-efficacious about its ability to improve, and mentally agile in its approach to innovation is one way to begin to address the limitations of improvisation in its attempts to help all students flourish. Industriousness and integrity will be necessary to establish and maintain high quality, positive connections between students and instructors.

Approaching the dissemination of Positive Improvisation with the deliberate aim of creating an environment of inclusion, anti-racism, and psychological safety requires us to rethink how we teach the “rules” of improvisation. Listening, which is always prioritized in improv training, can be specifically directed toward those voices which have traditionally been marginalized or silenced in order to understand and uplift. The give and take of “yes and,”

wherein improvisers contribute equally, building scenes by adding information back and forth in mutually collaborative creation, must be expanded to intentionally encourage the give and take of ideas and voices in the classroom, including the exploration of when to speak up and when to listen and support. Zoe Galvez, founder of Unscripted Leaders, one of many organizations that uses improvisational exercises to train business leaders, proposes these and other ways to approach teaching improvisation through an intentionally anti-racist lens and acknowledges that mistakes will be made, but, as in improv, every mistake is a gift (personal communication, June 30, 2020). In improvisation we are always failing forward toward success if we can develop the self-awareness to learn from our mistakes by embracing them rather than hastening to hide them.

As we proceed in a world transformed by Covid-19, a world where theatres have gone dark, improvisational training centers in Chicago and New York City are closing permanently, and positive psychology programs around the world have sent their students home, Positive Improvisation practitioners will need to draw from even deeper wells of moral skill, moral will, innovation, and industriousness to make an impact in these unprecedented times (Bowman, 2020; Levenson et al., 2020; Paulson, 2020; Ryzik, 2020). But moving quickly without moving carefully may result in unintended outcomes. In this case, moral will without moral skill may lead us astray. As we consider novel and effective ways to encourage human flourishing virtually, to address the racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination that exist within current improvisational communities, and to diminish the loneliness of government-mandated social distancing, let us continue to improvise to the best of our moral abilities.

Section VII - Concluding Thoughts

“You know you can handle the ‘scary’ things and you often come to those moments with more bravery, creativity, empathy, playfulness, and flexibility that you might not as easily be able to access without those years of improv experience.” (Participant 10)

It will likely be a long time before I am crammed backstage in a tiny green room again, warming up for an improv show, laughing, lazily stretching, slapping my teammates’ backs and repeating the mantra of improvisers everywhere: “I got your back.” It will be a long time before I am standing in front of a packed, raucous crowd, electric with possibility, asking for a suggestion of anything at all. It will be a very long time before I am leading a group of nervous ad execs or law students in a round of “Bippity Bippity Bop,” watching them open up to each other with delight and vulnerability (and respiratory droplets).

For many of us our plans for the year went out the window in early March. Our vacations, our graduations, and our weddings were canceled. We lost our jobs or scrambled to set up makeshift home offices. Our children came home from school and never went back. People we knew got sick and we couldn’t visit them or attend their funerals. Life stopped unfolding the way we expected it to. We were all forced to surrender our agendas. Improv has taught me that I don’t have to be “prepared” to be successful.

Sheldon Patinkin, founding member of the Compass Players, as well as my improv teacher and friend, was (in)famous for instructing his students, “Better an asshole than a chickenshit.” I always understood him to mean that it was better to try something, anything, and risk being wrong than to do nothing out of fear. In my opinion, trying and failing rarely makes you an “asshole” (unless you refuse to try again after you realize you were wrong). The word “unprecedented” is perhaps overused these days, especially by television commercials trying to sell us peace of mind. However, these *are* unprecedented times, and we will have to move

forward as individuals, as a nation, and as a planet toward a future that feels even more uncertain than usual. We're going to have to make bold moves and face failure.

As I approached my capstone, I tried and failed at several points along the way. For instance, a very cool organization that agreed to allow their students from all over the world to participate in virtual improvisation training and well-being surveys, ultimately determined that the technology and timing wouldn't work for them. Another organization that had agreed to allow me to survey their (thousands) of improv students and performers just a week prior suddenly went out of business with no warning and closed their doors permanently. Each stumbling block, however, led us to reassess our goals and discover a path forward that was even better than our original plan. When we inevitably fail, if we trust that every mistake is a gift, and we look for those gifts, we are less likely to be crushed by regret over our spoiled plans and disappointed dreams. When we focus on exploring what is possible, there is very little time to bemoan what is impossible.

In his poem, "love is a place," E. E. Cummings (1991) reminds us that "yes" is replete with possibility:

yes is a world
& in this world of
yes live
(skilfully curled)
all worlds

Covid-19 can feel like a lot of "no." No parties. No handshakes. No sports. No theatre. No travel. No throngs of family and friends gathering to support you when you give birth to your first child in November. Improvisation (and positive psychology) suggest we savor the "yes."

Improvisation (and positive psychology) suggest that we take autonomous action by determining our own “ands” to improve our lives, relationships, and situations. Improvisation (and positive psychology) suggest we look around at our masked neighbors and friends and say, “I got your back.”

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Appendix A

Coding Frame for Qualitative Coding

The PERMA Model of Well-being (adapted from Seligman, 2011)

Positive Emotions	Joy, hope, contentment, pride, love, gratitude, awe, interest, amusement, and inspiration are all emotions that contribute to “the good life.”
Engagement	The feeling of complete absorption and interest in what you are doing, such that you may lose track of time, contributes to well-being.
Relationships	Strong, positive, supportive relationships enhance well-being.
Meaning	The feeling of belonging to or serving something larger than oneself increases well-being and life satisfaction.
Accomplishment/Achievement	Feeling a sense of accomplishment, winning just for winning’s sake, can contribute to overall well-being.

Appendix B

*Basic Instructions: The “Yes Dance”***How to Play:**

A group of 6-30 (or more) participants stand in a circle with one person in the center. That person is instructed to “dance” in any way they want to pre-recorded music of the instructor’s choice. At any point the person in the center may lock eyes with someone on the outside and continue to dance while moving toward them. The person with whom they have made eye contact must then throw their hands in the air, exclaim “Yes!” with as much enthusiasm as humanly possible, and immediately begin to mirror the center person’s dance. They dance together in unison for a moment before trading places. Once the new person has entered the circle, they may transform the dance in any way they like. Whenever they so desire, they may lock eyes with someone on the outside circle who will energetically exclaim “Yes!” They will then mirror the current dance as the two of them trade places.

After everyone has participated, a second, third, or fourth person may join the center of the circle to dance (as directed by the instructor), creating a circle with several people dancing together in the center. The rules remain the same and dancing continues until the music ends or the instructor indicates that the exercise has concluded.

When, Where, and Why to Play:

This is an exercise focused on verbal and physical “yes and.” It is highly physical in nature. As an intervention it can be used anytime the goal is group bonding, trust-building, physical surrender, and increased positive emotion (both at the individual and group level). As it is a fairly intense (and potentially sweaty) group intervention, encourage appropriate clothing (removable layers, stable shoes or bare feet) and choose a location with open space and privacy.