

Understanding Leadership Through the Arts

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This study seeks to elucidate an alternative form of leadership training—that of improvisational theater—in which acting under conditions of uncertainty, accepting offers, crafting a disciplined imagination, suspending judgment, letting go, being present and enhancing awareness skills may become learnable components of leadership development. The question was whether improvisation can transform the thinking and orientation of individuals in such a way as to make them efficient leaders. And the study found that improvisation may encourage creativity, possibility, resourcefulness and an ability to manage uncertainty and ambiguity, provided that it is appropriately applied and practiced.

Introduction

The primary research question of this study was as follows: when practiced by individuals, can improvisation transform the thinking and orientation of those individuals in such a way

as to make them better or more equipped leaders?

This study hoped to elucidate an alternative form of leadership training—that of improvisational theater—in which acting under conditions of uncertainty, accepting offers, crafting a disciplined

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imagination, suspending judgment, being present and enhancing awareness skills may become learnable components of leadership development. It sought to test whether a discipline such as that of improvisation could improve individuals' psychological and interpersonal skills, in order to lead in more uncertain and unpredictable times.

Adler (2006) lists the following trends, which have caused businesses to turn to the arts for inspiration and guidance: (a) rapidly increasing global interconnectedness, (b) increasing domination of market forces, (c) an increasingly turbulent, complex, and chaotic environment, (d) advances in technology that have lowered the cost of experimentation, meaning organizations' scarcest resource becomes their dreamers, not their testers, and (e) a yearning for significance, whereby success is no longer perceived as being enough. Whyte (1994) suggests that corporations now require more creativity, more commitment, and more innovation. While such trends are certainly in evidence today, the relevance of art to business is no new thing. Previously, artists have been utilized in business settings to bring "emotional truth to established principles". Organizations in the business, education and mental health sectors have all previously used theatrical role-playing to gain understanding of, and find solutions to, underlying problems. Taylor and Hansen (2005) suggest at least four ways in which the arts can contribute to leadership development: (1) for understanding organizational action, (2) to display organizational practices, (3) to generate artistic content, and (4) to evoke the 'feel' of an organization.

Our research sought to understand an additional application of arts-based learning, in this case for leadership development, by testing

the manner in which the arts may help individuals develop leadership skills and competencies to work within organizations more effectively. Vera and Crossan (2005, p. 203) posit:

If musicians and actors can learn to improvise and to be innovative in real time, can these skills also be learned by work teams in organizations? Despite the considerable attention given to the need for teams to be more nimble and to develop an improvisational capability, little is known about how team members can learn this skill and successfully apply it in organizations.

Our research focused on two areas: 'cultivating leadership' and 'developing individual skills', and built upon it by identifying seven constructs that appear consistently in both the improvisation and leadership literature. We also analyzed whether these overlapping competencies can be compared and developed—so we list the relevant seven constructs below:

1. Being present (Frost and Yarrow, 1990; Goleman, 1998; and Brown and Ryan, 2003).
2. Avoiding blame and overcoming the fear of failure (Johnstone, 1979; Klein and Knight, 2005; and Wheatley, 2005).
3. Dialogue (Spolin, 1973; and Senge, 1994).
4. Seeing possibility (Hodgson and Richards, 1966; and Zander and Zander, 2000).
5. Creativity (Leonard and Swap, 1999; and Sloane, 2003).
6. Resourcefulness (Weick, 1993; and Poynton, 2000).
7. Dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity (Merry, 1995; Barrett, 1998; and Boyatzis and Mckee, 2005).

What Is Improvisation?

Improvisation is derived from the Latin 'improvisus', meaning 'not seen ahead of time'

and can also mean “playing extemporaneously ... composing on the spur of the moment” (Schuler, 1989, p. 378). It is found in all areas of life and, not surprisingly, there are a number of studies that look at how improvisation operates in the group and organizational context (Eisenhardt and Tabrizi, 1995; Moorman and Miner, 1998; and Miner *et al.*, 2001). While these studies focused on the role of leaders in the improvisation process, our study sought to understand specifically the value of improvisation processes for the development of leadership. Improvisation, in this context, can be seen as a special type of short-term, experience-oriented real-time learning process, during which change occurs. Theatrical improvisation is closely related to everyday communication:

We create an improvisation whenever we communicate with another person and without having previously rehearsed or memorized what we say or do, or without having the words or actions written down in front of us. Every form of communication is initially an improvisation (Chilver, 1967, p. 10).

As such, those skilled in the art of improvisation are increasingly seen to possess skills and capabilities that are desirable in the business context:

[Improvisers] are adept at dealing with changing and unpredictable circumstances. They know how to cope with uncertainty, be flexible, adaptive and creative under intense pressure. Moreover, since improvisational theater is based on a number of practices, not on innate talent, it can be studied, learned and applied to situations beyond the stage (Poynton, 2000, pp. 40-41).

Spolin (1973, pp. 383-384), the ‘grandmother of improvisational theater’ describes improvisational theatre in the following way:

... playing the game ... setting out to solve a problem with no preconception as to how you will do it; permitting everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for you in solving the problem ... it is not the scene, it is the way to the scene ... a predominate function of the intuitive ... ‘playing it by ear’ ... process as opposed to result ... not ad-lib or ‘originality’ or ‘making it up by yourself’ ... a form, if understood, possible to any age group ... setting object in motion between players as in a game ... solving of problems together ... the ability to allow the acting problem to evolve the scene ... a moment in the lives of people without needing a plot or story line for the communication ... an art form ... transformation ... brings forth details and relationships as organic whole ... living process.

To frame the context of what is meant by a theatrical improvisation session, the following guidelines provide a valuable starting point:

A typical improvisation workshop begins with a brief overview of the importance of improvisation to motivate individual investment of time and energy in the process. Individuals then work in small groups (10 to 20 individuals) with an experienced improvisation facilitator who takes them through a series of progressively more challenging improvisation exercises for about two-and-a-half hours. The facilitators provide coaching

on some of the important principles of improvisation as the exercises unfold. More concrete links to the practice of management are made once the individuals have had a chance to experience improvisation.

Spolin (1973, p. 43) reminds us that improvisation is not unrehearsed action but the rules, skills and learning that make such action possible:

Improvising in itself is not a system of training. It is one of the results of the training. Natural unrehearsed speech and response to a dramatic situation are only part of the total training. When 'improvising' becomes an end in itself, it can kill spontaneity while fostering cleverness.

Improvisation and Leadership

The present research is premised on the assumption that leadership can be learned and is not simply a gift of biology, but social connectivity and context, as supported by Doh's (2003) research. Our research specifically sought to look at techniques associated with theatrical improvisation as a method for individuals to 'cultivate leadership'. Training programs now exist whereby organizations take exercises commonly used by actors in theatrical improvisation and apply them to their own action-based contexts and problems. However, as Vera and Crossan (2005, p. 203) suggest, "limited theoretical work is available on what it takes to develop this skill. Also, there is a lack of empirical evidence supporting the success of any improvisational training effort". Our research sought to go some way to providing some of this empirical evidence. However, it did not seek to represent improvisation as the sole enabler of leadership capabilities. Indeed, there are numerous studies that question wholehearted endorsements of the practice.

Roux-Dufort and Vidaillet (2003, p. 111) suggest that in crisis situations improvisational attributes are only useful up to a point, particularly in organizational settings "that are unlikely to present a 'pure' form of uniting conditions that facilitate improvisation". Hatch (1997) has warned of the danger of romanticizing the benefit improvisation is likely to provide organizations, and Miner *et al.* (2001, pp. 327-328) suggest that "future researchers should not expect a single benefit from improvisation; instead, we should anticipate and examine such disparate valued outcomes as temporary action patches, troubleshooting, the successful use of serendipitous opportunities, and even aesthetic creations". Our research argued that rating improvisational outcomes as positive or negative is both counterproductive and contrary to the purpose of improvisation, which is an orientation that seeks not to label or ascribe values to actions.

Vera and Crossan (2005, pp. 203-204) remind us that "efforts to train teams to improvise need to be based on a realistic understanding of what improvisation is, and what it is not". Value judgments only enhance the "culture of blame" (Wheatley, 2005, p. 181) that leaders should be seeking to undermine. Johnstone (1979, p. 118) reminds his readers, "... if I want people to free-associate, then I have to create an environment in which they are not going to be punished, or in any way held responsible for the things their imagination gives them". Hodgson and Richards (1966, p. 18) propose a further link to leadership in describing acting as an "experiment in living"—taking part on the levels both of 'doing' and 'being', and it allows an actor to impersonate all aspects of the human situation, giving a "spontaneous human response to an idea or ideas, or a set of conditions". These authors are particularly informative in their description of

how improvisation might be a tool for learning, and more particularly the learning of leadership:

There are many useful means of gaining experience in a passive and substitute way, but drama calls for the living response and resourcefulness ... In more sophisticated societies the approach of impersonation seems a built-in response in helping to enable every one of us to keep the world in manageable proportions. The young child literally steps into her mother's shoes, puts on her clothing and carries out her duties, in order to grasp what that situation is really like.

Can a new kind of leadership be learned through improvisation? An adaptive leadership where:

... there is no defined leadership role. Individuals must make their own judgments about when to get involved, what to offer, and when to redirect the scene. Being able to take on different leadership roles at different times is heavily dependent upon the ability of the group to work as a team.

Through the lenses of the seven constructs listed above, our study aimed to elucidate an alternative form of training, that of improvisational theater, in which acting under conditions of uncertainty, accepting offers, crafting a disciplined imagination, suspending judgment, being present, awareness and listening were all part of the leader's *raison d'être* (Hodgson and Richards, 1966; Spolin, 1973; Ryle, 1976; Johnstone, 1979; Weick, 1993; Barrett, 1998; and Poynton, 2000).

Research Methodology

We approached the research by way of the following research questions:

Primary Research Question: Can improvisation transform the thinking and orientation of individuals who practice it in such a way as to make them better or more equipped leaders?

Secondary Questions: Are theatrical improvisation techniques applicable to leadership? Can improvisational theater provide learnable components to a wider canon of leadership training and development? Can improvisation improve individuals' psychological and interpersonal skills in order to lead in more uncertain and unpredictable times?

The aim of the research is to explore whether the seven constructs could be developed and enhanced through the practice of improvisation techniques. The approach, therefore, was inductive in that the researchers were not seeking to prove or disprove a pre-existing hypothesis. Rather, the aim was to explore a specific research problem (Creswell, 2009, p. 98), of which the principal method of inquiry was participant observation, consisting of: (1) participating and observing, (2) documenting observations in extensive field notes, and (3) following up with participants to conduct a series of in-depth, 'semi-structured interviews' to elicit from participants their experiences of, and responses to, the participatory sessions. The methods are further elaborated on in what follows. Organizations were invited to participate in a one-off improvisation session lasting approximately one-and-a-half to two hours. The research involved 41 participants across five sessions, conducted at separate venues. Session one comprised 14 MBA students. Session two included seven currency traders from a private investment management firm. The third session comprised a group of seven senior academics. The fourth session was held in the offices of a consumer media publishing company and comprised five participants, aged between 23

and 35. Lastly, the fifth session was conducted at a construction firm amongst a group of eight of its administrative and secretarial staff. This was an all-female session and comprised participants from working class and less-educated backgrounds, as compared to the previous four sessions. In each case, the session was run by an improvisation specialist, with the researchers present and participating. Of the 41 individuals who took part, 30 were women and 34 were personally interviewed no later than three days after having taken part.

Atlas ti, the Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) software, was used to categorize and structure the data thematically. Data analysis was informed by a grounded theory approach, which began with the data and sought to build a theory from it, literally from the ground up. First, open coding was used, whereby the data was fragmented and organized into similar discrete groups, where the data was labeled conceptually and concepts were categorized. After having been categorized, the data was examined for properties or subcategories. In this case, the initial categories were determined by the seven constructs identified in the literature review. Second, axial coding was used to organize and link categories and concepts from the open coding stage. Third, selective coding was employed to identify links between categories at a dimensional level. Interrelationships between categories were combined to form a narrative of the phenomenon under study. Finally, a theory was developed based entirely on the data that was collected.

Research Findings and Discussion

Introduction

The 34 interviews were transcribed and through a process of open coding the researchers identified 77 subcodes, and 10 themes/family codes outlined in Table 1. Seven of the family codes align with

previously discussed constructs, while three were areas newly discovered by the researchers. These anomalous, though valuable, data emerged due to the “serendipity pattern” allowed by the research method employed.

The following sections present the responses, clustered and analyzed in respect of the research areas identified and discussed. The analysis derived from the full sample, although direct quotes were drawn from the more analytic and reflective respondents interviewed.

Being Present

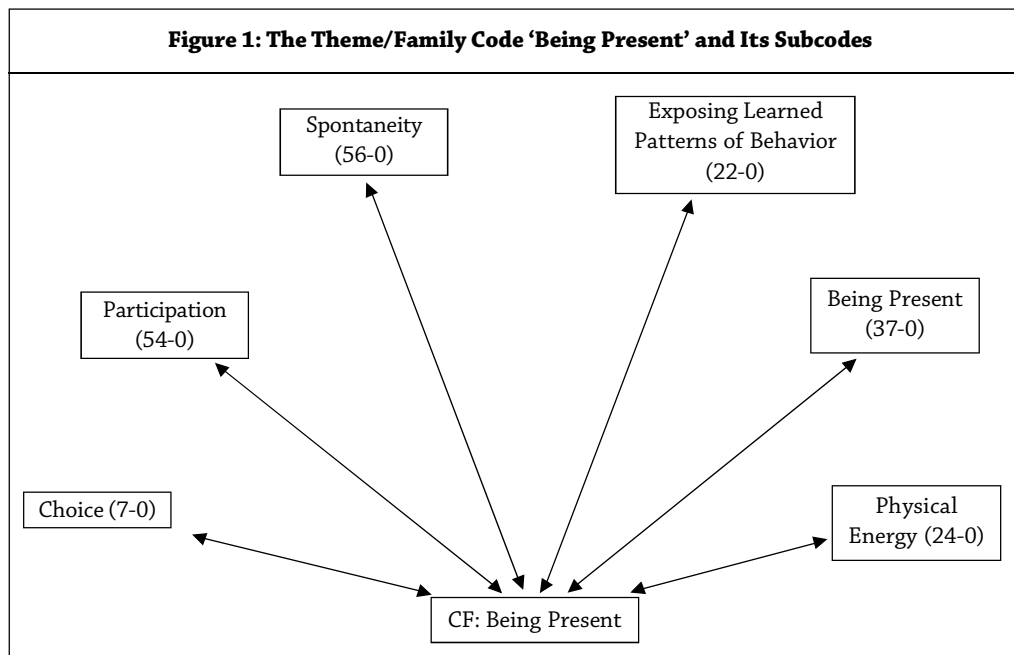
The majority of respondents felt that improvisation increased their *capacity to be present* and within the family of constructs related to *Presence* (see Figure 1). It did so by requiring *spontaneity* and not allowing participants to prepare their responses in advance.

Thirty-seven references were made to ‘being present’. While some were not conscious of it at the time, when asked to reflect on being present, participants realized that the session had forced them to *concentrate, focus and attend* to the present moment in a way that was enhanced compared to their everyday experience.

Several participants spoke about *choice*, and 22 comments suggested that respondents had noticed something during the improvisation workshop that revealed to them a *pattern in their own behavior* about which they had not been previously aware. This was not a deliberate experience but can be likened to what Barrett (1998) refers to as “provocative competence: deliberate efforts to interrupt habit patterns”.

Engaged participation was commented upon on 54 occasions, and 24 respondents mentioned the *physicality* of the session, particularly with regard to the *energy it created* within the group. P6 described a different, more active form of *engagement* that increased as the session

Being Present	Originality	Listening
Being present	Problem solving	Tie with language or familiar vernacular
Choice	Spontaneity vs. creativity	Seeing possibility
Exposing learned patterns of behavior	Personal capabilities and education	Altered perspective
Participation	Age	Curiosity
Physical energy	Authenticity	Freedom
Spontaneity	Compliance and rebellion	Fun
Facilitation	Confidence	Imagination
Contracting	Difficulty	Laughter
Facilitation skills	Education	Positivity
Generalized anxiety	Gender	Seeing possibility
Group dynamics	Individual talent	Silliness
Process challenges	Personal idiosyncrasies	Truth and lies
Rank	Personal mood	
Rules, boundaries and containment	Personality type	Avoiding blame and the fear of failure
Team-building	Self-consciousness	Blame
Trust	Self-revelation	Competitiveness
Validation	Resourcefulness and responsiveness	Failure and mistakes
Volunteering	Adaptability	Judgment
Living with uncertainty and ambiguity	Making do	Performance anxiety
Comfort zone	Planning and information gathering	Power
Managing change	Preparation	Safety
Personal anxiety	Resourcefulness	Standard of performance
Relaxation into the session	Dialogue	
Uncertainty	Altered perspective	Applicability and pragmatism
Uncertainty in life	Collaboration	Continued practice
Uncertainty regarding the session	Communication	Having something at stake
Creativity	Enhancing other peoples' ideas	Real life
Creativity	Letting go of your agenda	Usefulness
Necessary environment	Limited time	Work vs. home life



progressed. *Spontaneity* was one of the more dominant themes of the interviews, yielding 56 mentions. *Spontaneity* was required predominantly in the storytelling games because participants had to *build upon the contributions of others*, without necessarily knowing what those contributions would be. P9 explained: "... one of those games that we played, everybody was involved and the story changed all the time. So you couldn't stand there and think: 'Okay, this is what I am going to say'... it is just in the moment, very quickly you've got to come up with something that is still continuing in the story and allow the other person also the opportunity to build on that."

Avoiding Blame and the Fear of Failure

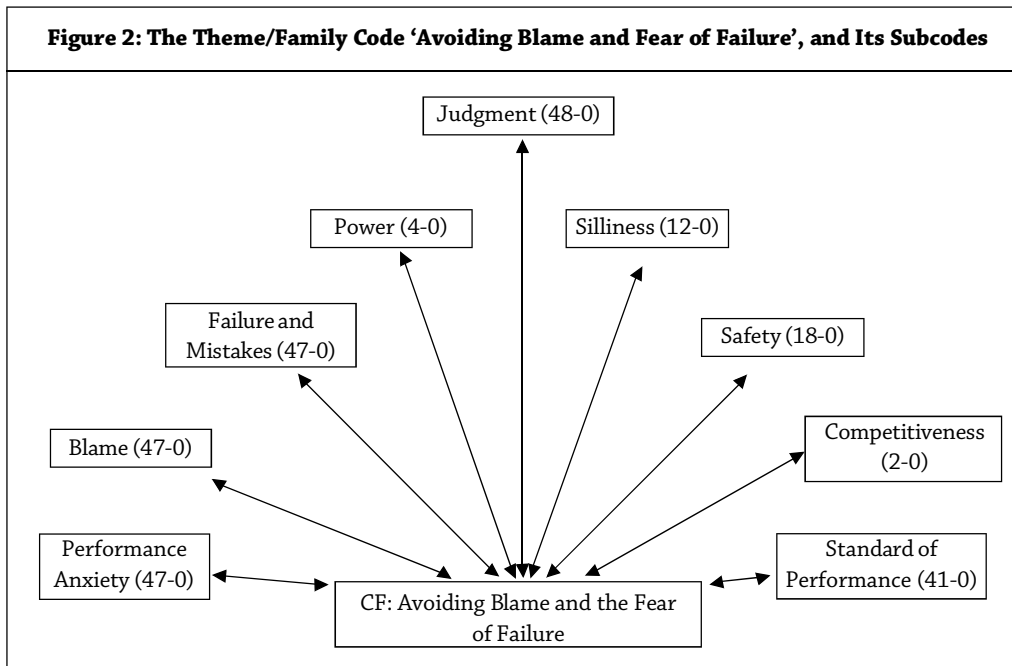
By providing a context in which the notion of blame was anathema (see Figure 2), improvisation *reduced the level of judgment* to which individuals were exposed. While participants generally had a negative orientation towards failure in their

lives, the sessions *made them feel* like it was not possible to make a mistake. Participants described an experience of *liberation* and *freedom* in this process.

Blame

Blame featured on a prominent 47 occasions during the interview phase of the research. One game in particular—"it's my fault"—sought deliberately to address the question of blame. P5: stated: "That little game which we played with the bottle ... 'it is my fault' ... I think it is good sometimes in life to *admit that it is your fault and learn from it* and carry on ... there's no wrong and right way."

Despite Hodgson and Richards' (1966) assertion that improvisation requires non-competition, cooperation and attention, two remarks were made about how improvisation *brought out a competitive streak* in participants. P8 claimed: "I think there was a *positive competitiveness* also, where we wanted to say the better thing but we also wanted to say it in the sense that nobody is really going to win because



there aren't any prizes, there's no salary attached to it. There's just a *free-flowing flow of ideas*, which could result in something being extremely fun."

Respondents were asked about their orientation towards failure and whether it might be possible in the context of improvisation to make a mistake. Forty-seven comments were made in this regard. A large majority of interviewees did not think it was possible to make a mistake in improvisation, though a number did suggest that *breaking the contract of the session would constitute a mistake*. P27 said: "I don't think a mistake would ever be a mistake in a session like that. I don't think it's possible to spot a mistake; because *nobody is wrong*. There is *no wrong situation*; so in my opinion there won't be mistakes in there."

The term judgment here is used to indicate negative or harsh judgment, and not the more neutral use of the word that might make it a simile of words such as 'appraisal' or 'consideration'. *Judgment* was discussed on 46

occasions. The predominant view was that improvisation provided an environment that was *less judgmental* than those to which participants were accustomed.

A great number of respondents expressed concern about the *perceived need to perform* during improvisation. This is closely related to *self-consciousness*, but refers specifically to performance in the theatrical context. For many participants, improvisation was associated with acting and public performance. For some this perception remained, and in others it was confounded by their experience in the session. Of the 47 comments about *performance anxiety*, many also displayed concern about the *quality of the offering that they had or would be giving* to the group.

For others, the fact that they *knew other people* in the room contributed to their *desire to put on a good performance*. There appeared to be a *self-generated pressure* among some respondents to be entertaining. P6 described this feeling:

“I was quite conscious of maybe not having something funny or not having something too innovative.”

Four references were made to *power*. Respondents recognized that, in the context of improvisation, participants had the *power to give challenging—or affirming offers to others*.

The concept of safety is similar to the theme of trust, but in our research referred to being in some way *protected from judgment or criticism*. Eighteen mentions were made of being or *feeling safe* in the session and how this helped participants to overcome the negative consequences of blame and the fear of failure.

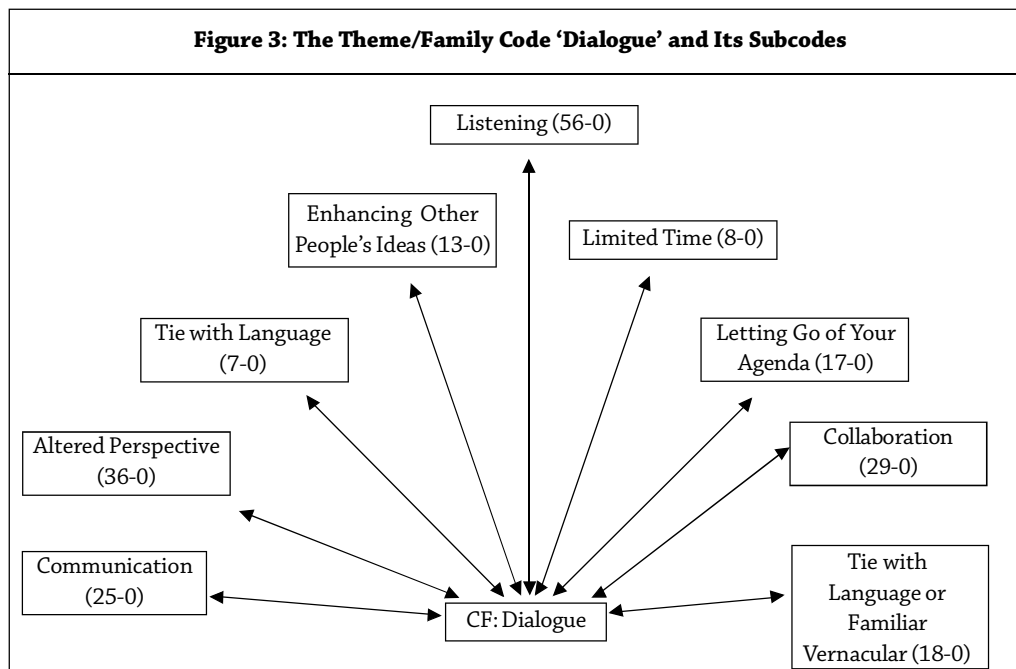
Dialogue

There were no specific references to the term ‘dialogue’, although the *nature and quality of communication* were discussed in some detail by participants (see Figure 3). Firstly, it emerged that improvisation encouraged participants to take note of the *manner in which they communicated their offers to others* in order to be understood

effectively and, secondly, it brought into sharp relief *the way in which they then listened to others*, through various *sensory mechanisms*. The quality of listening was remarked upon—it was not a listening style that included anticipating what the thoughts or message of the other person would be, but rather a *focused concentration* on, and *focused attention* to, what it was they were actually saying.

Communication

There were 25 references made to communication. The predominant view was that *improvisation aided communication*. P8 stated: “Improvisation skills taught us *basic people skills*, essentially. *The way you speak to people, the way you approach people, your body language, what exactly you are saying*, and an *awareness* that if somebody says a certain thing do you just react and completely cut them off without fully hearing what they have to say. I think improvisation is a well-rounded package to basically take us adults in the working industry back to basic



communication skills ... because we've learned just to send an e-mail without any emotions attached to it. We know how to write a proper e-mail, but in face-to-face setting we can't communicate effectively. So I think that improvisation forces you into a *relaxed environment* to do that."

The *capacity to listen* was something that emerged on 56 occasions during the interview process. Participants commented on the *increased level of focus and attention* that many of the games required. P13 asserted: "... it just makes you focus really, which is good, you know. I don't know if it enhanced the quality of my listening, but it did make me focus ... *everyone had to work together and listen carefully to each other* in order to *respond well*, as well as *bounce ideas and energy off each other* ... which is good and it kind of forces you to communicate. You can't be passive and just show up physically."

The interviews yielded 36 mentions of improvisation providing some kind of *altered perspective or context* in which to operate, outside of daily or 'normal' life. P4 stated: "It taught you to *look at things and the influence of contexts in a different way*. You had to *reframe the way in which you expressed and understood things*, in order to see the *potential* in things which you couldn't see before."

Participants spoke about collaboration on 29 occasions. Again, this topic was not prompted through questioning, but arose organically. P13 described the collaboration process as: "... *feeding off the other person* perhaps, and *trying to think together*, which is good for *collaboration and team work*; and *funny* and *very entertaining*."

Thirteen references were made about participants either *building upon or enhancing the opinions of others*, particularly with reference to the 'yes, and' game. P28 provided a summary as follows: "'Yes, and' was probably the game

that I could see as the most direct translation towards something like a brainstorming session because it *forces you not to contradict what someone is saying*, or to depart from it. It forces you to *build on what the other person is saying*; so it *makes you take an idea further* than just what one person says ... *the idea can get built out to its limit*; so it seemed like that was the most directly translatable lesson into the kind of work that we do."

There were 17 mentions of participants *having to let go of their own points of view*. The sessions uncovered some participants' tendency, particularly in the 'yes, and' storytelling game, to drive home their own agendas. P8 uttered: "Initially, I found it very difficult because ... we were kind of trying to fix each other's story every time." P4 also remarked on a divergence of agendas during the 'yes, and' game, but highlighted how *letting go of one's agenda created a better story*.

Much mention was made of participants' reliance on language as their primary means of communication, and particularly how through *physicality and gibberish*, improvisation broke this down somewhat. P6 described an *enlightening* moment for her, in which she uncovered her own ability to *interact non-verbally with others*: "... the weirdest [was] the gibberish session because ... I didn't necessarily predict what I was going to say. You know, with something like that that's not pure language *you can't really predict it*, so it is by default *quite spontaneous* and I think that surprised me the most about my participation. If someone was to say to me out of that context you know you're going to be required to *offer a piece of information that doesn't make sense and make sense of someone else's offering*, I wouldn't really have engaged with that. I would've thought: 'Well what is that, what are you talking about?' Whereas, in the session, I was able to do that, so that was the most weird thing for me ... and it really highlighted that so often I think

communication tends to be very verbal or one-dimensional and this highlighted that communication is actually about a whole lot more than that.”

Eight mentions were made of the *limited time in which to communicate with one another* and also how short the session was. Speaking about gibberish P18 suggested: “... *your mind needs to think quickly* to let the next person answer what you are doing ... I just need time for my mind to think what I am going to do and *let go* ... I’m not that good with when people throw stuff at me. I can give a better response when I have a bit more time.”

Seeing Possibility

With the modern imperative for leaders to inspire innovation and new ways of imagining existing problems (Wheatley, 2005), respondents saw value in improvisation’s ability to *open up possibility* (see Figure 4).

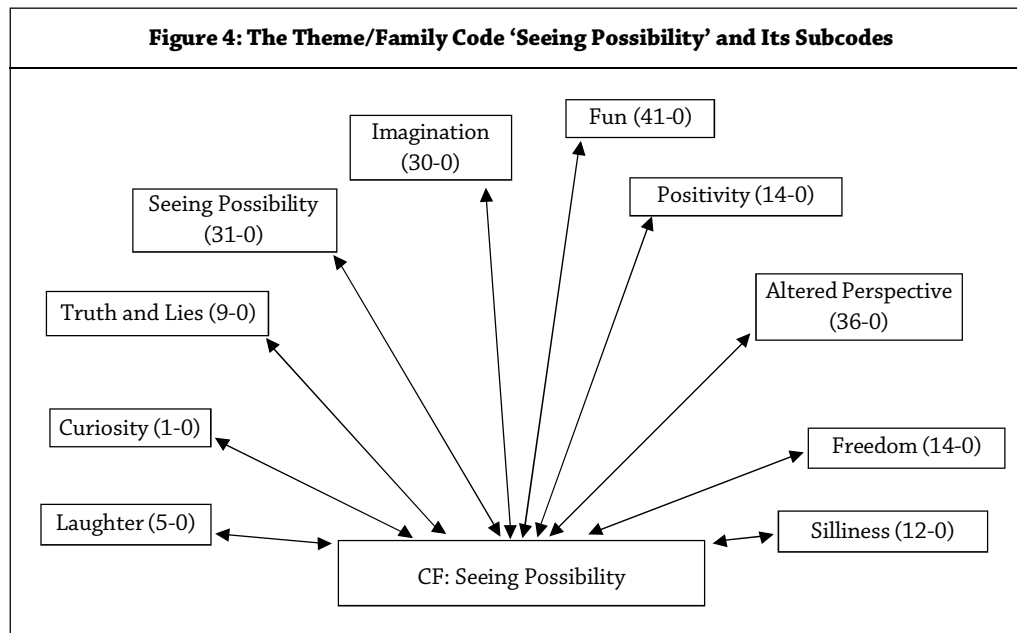
Thirty-one respondents spoke about the notion of *seeing possibility*. They argued predominantly that *the practice of saying ‘yes’*

to everything was what enabled this perspective. P4 stated: “It taught you to *look at things in a different way. To reframe them* such that you could see more potential in things where you couldn’t see if before ... people found that those games allowed them to *look at things in a different way.*”

P4 was also one participant who mentioned *curiosity* and *learning agility* as being useful attributes to have in approaching improvisation. He also suggested that *improvisation provided an environment that encouraged curiosity within diverse contexts*: “I think that as anxiety and defense mechanisms fall away, that door becomes seemingly worthless and you can step out and *wander freely in that uncertainty with more of a curiosity than an abject fear* of what you might encounter. And then you’re *more likely to find something really cool* and that would *break the initial fear* that you would have had.”

Freedom

Despite the fact that improvisation is a rule-based environment, 14 interviewees spoke about *a sense of freedom which engages the ‘whole person’*. P19 mentioned: “... *it frees you up from the formal*



environment where conversation is highly structured ... and, in fact, in a free conversation like that *you end up understanding each other much better* than when it is structured.” P6 stated: “You learn to *listen from a different place, from a different source ... and you allow others to be more real with you.*”

Fun

Forty-one comments confirmed that for most participants, the sessions were *a great deal of fun*. P31 remarked: “I enjoyed it thoroughly. It was fun.” P8 argued that making challenging aspects of one’s work more fun gives one *more of a chance of succeeding*. He suggested that improvisation might allow this to happen: “There’s just a *free-flowing flow of ideas*, which could result in something being extremely fun ... same thing with improvisation ... if the hard things of communication are difficult to do, make it fun and then *an aspect will work and you want to do it because it’s fun*. And I think the improvisation for us became a fun activity even though the meaning and outcome of whatever the project is, you want it to be business-oriented, about the bottom line, you want it to be serious, and this will help your business. A lot of times you think, ‘you can’t be serious if you’re having fun’. And if you’re having fun and making money I think that the best scenario for me anyway.”

Imagination

Imagination was a theme that yielded 30 comments. P9 believed that improvisation: “... allows you to *just come up with anything*”, while P24 felt that: “... the *imagination was fantastic* and I was really *impressed with what people did.*”

Laughter

Five mentions were made of the *laughter that was present* in each session. P6 said: “I thought it was very funny.” P16 remarked: “... there was *lots of laughter, much looser body language, and*

greater interaction, while everybody was very much less uptight. I felt very light at the end of the session. I think a *combination of the laughter and maybe an element of catharsis*—that’s how I explained the ‘feeling light’; but maybe I was feeling light *because I couldn’t fail*, and maybe that’s a different way of explaining that lightness I felt.”

Positivity

Fourteen mentions were made of the fact that the session was a *very positive and affirming of one’s character*. In fact, P8 suggested that positivity was part of the contract: “We were almost *forced not to be negative. We were forced to look for a solution together* to whatever challenge was thrown at us”.

Silliness

Twelve comments were made about *silliness*. Some of the games required participants to do purposefully *ludicrous things* that participants commented upon. P6 claimed: “It was silly as well.” P7 commented: “*people were prepared to be mildly silly ... but with unexpected outcomes.*”

Truth and Lies

Part of the way in which participants were invited to see possibility was to tell lies about themselves and to *make up things* that were not true. P25 mentioned: “It was so funny how every day, or more or less, I think *we all do it*; or I do it. Lying is very easy, but when you are put in an environment where you are told to make up a lie or something you didn’t have to come with on your own, it *takes quite a bit of time*. But I liked it ... when we had to lie [about] what somebody is doing—I liked it; *it was innovative; it was different*. I have never come across a game like that before.”

Creativity

Improvisation enhanced the creativity of respondents during the time that they were participating and it was speculated that with increased practice improvisation might *make them*

more creative in general (see Figure 5). The primary reason cited was that sessions provided the *necessary, conducive environment* in which creativity could be achieved or accessed. This environment *gave permission for new ideas, promoted originality, encouraged adaptability, built an atmosphere of spontaneity and encouraged participation through persistent affirmation*. Respondents largely suggested that the kind of creativity inspired by improvisation might be *most usefully applied in a problem-solving context*, predominantly by allowing *alternative- and diverse ways of viewing a problem*.

Creativity was a major theme and was covered by participants in all interviews. Overall, it was discussed on 48 occasions. P10 suggested that in improvisation there is almost an “*expectation to be creative*.” Many people observed that *improvisation allowed them to think more broadly and creatively*. P5 said improvisation helped: “*To stimulate and exercise your mind, to think a little bit more out-of-the-box, or to be a little bit more agile with your cognitive competencies*.” P9 shared a similar view, and also pointed to different forms of creativity: “*It allows you to, individually and collaboratively, think differently about things and become creative ... softly or aloud. I think it is something that we all have within us*.” P7 claimed

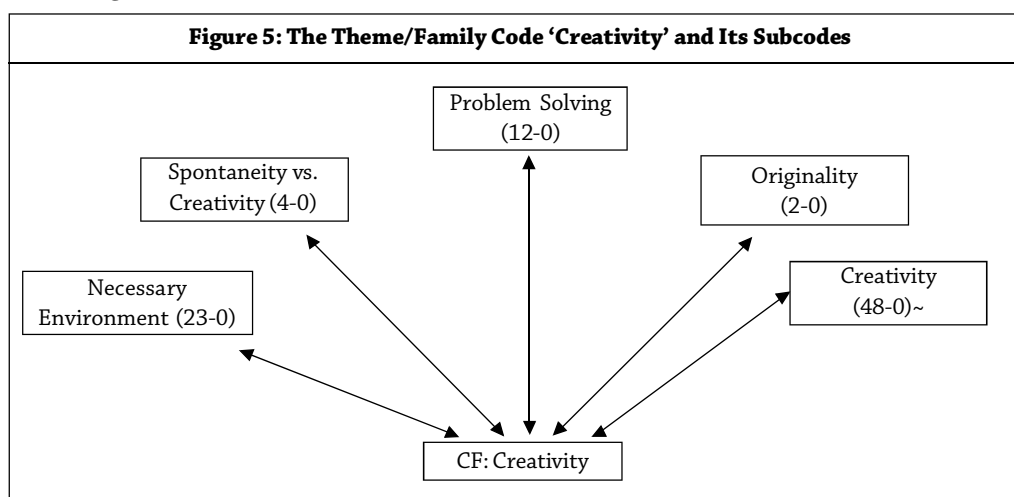
that “*We have been educated out of our creativity ... we have allowed others to determine how and why we think in certain ways. Creativity from improvisation is how we allow ourselves to express it that is different for every person.*”

Necessary Environment

Twenty-three comments were made about the *environmental conditions* that are required to facilitate and enable constructive improvisation. P22 remarked: “*So being imaginative you know, and consciously thinking, and being spontaneous about new ideas, being open to others experiences and histories, and pushing to find new ways of thinking about things and relationships ... must be done in the right sort of context.*” This links to April’s (1999) assertion about special *dialogue spaces and locations* within organizational settings—which can be *complemented with social enhancers*, such as food, drinks, appropriate music, quiet and stillness where necessary, color, nature and reflective zones/areas.

Originality

Despite Johnstone’s (1979) assertion that improvisers should not necessarily seek out novelty or originality, creativity was equated in two instances with *originality*. P14 suggested that his creativity was thwarted because: “*I was going*



to do exactly what the person before me did”, so instead “I went with what I thought of before; but, I felt not as good doing it, because someone else did it before me and I couldn’t think of anything else to do on the spot.” P9 stated that “It is *hard to be original ... it can make you anxious and want to withdraw*. It is like everything I think of has already been thought of, or done, before. The *problem was that I was always trying to think of very big original ideas ... instead of being original is just a process or small element in life*.” P3 said, in relation to being original in organizational settings, that “I have got to *learn to be more flexible ... negative feedback can be constructive if I do not let my emotions overwhelm me when I hear it. Too much organizational focus is on original idea generation, but too little focus on evaluation of ideas and being able to both give, and receive, feedback constructively*.” P6 shared similar sentiments: “In trying to be popular by throwing out a lot of ideas, we forget about the *appropriateness of our original ideas or whether it is reality-oriented*.”

Problem-Solving

Respondents spoke of problem-solving on 12 occasions. The dominant pattern of responses was that improvisation provides *an alternative way of discovery, novel approaches to thinking about problems, appreciating all forms of diversity in team settings*, as well as innovative and creative ways for *inviting and generating solutions*. P13 said: “I think [improvisation] is a good way to solve problems and to come up with creative ideas as well ... maybe *truly listen to, and listen better, to other people ... not only thinking out of the box, but expanding the box I already have ... finding a solution where there isn’t one*, particularly for persistent social problem or business headaches, or *reading more broadly and outside my discipline and being open to meet people outside your usual network* so that you don’t only talk and think about conventional things.”

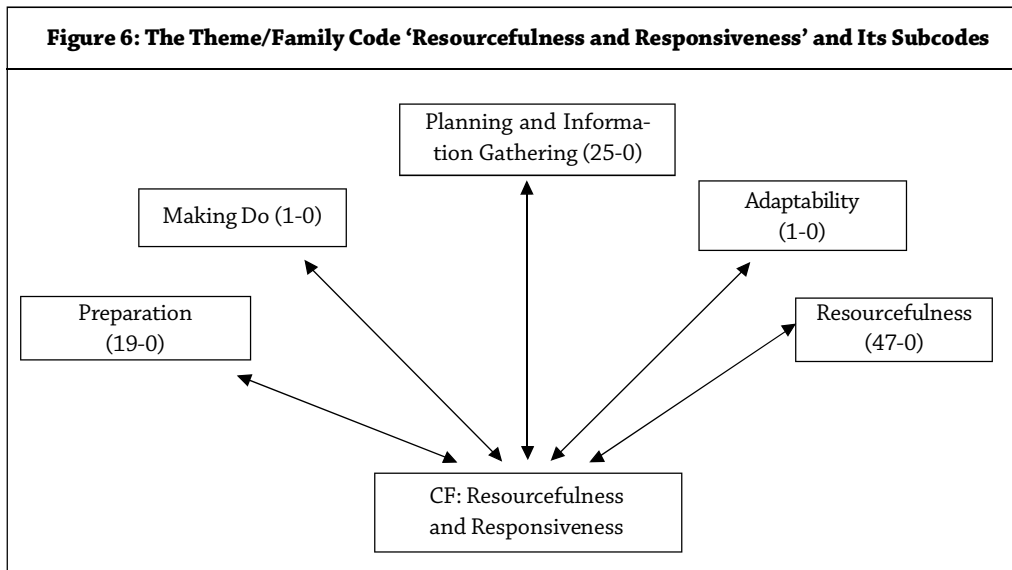
Spontaneity versus Creativity

A number of participants drew a distinction between creativity and spontaneity (linking with what was stated in the previous description), as if to suggest that *creativity required more time than spontaneous ideas*. P4 stated that “... creative scientists spend years in labs honing their original ideas ... *with conscious monitoring, micro-adjustments and subtle insights*. Uniqueness is not instant.” P11 claimed that “*professional creatives are able to make what they do look spontaneous ... but it often isn’t. It comes from hours and years of dedicated practice*”. P30 explained how she viewed the distinction: “You could already tell who was trying to be creative, or who was just grabbing the first thing that they could think of to say ... I mean, when I do things like that, I will on purpose not just go with the first thing that pops into my head ... I’m thinking: well that’s kind of boring; and then I’ll think of something else like taking an elephant to work; or whatever; because that isn’t something that somebody else is going to say. You know, I’m not going to pick what one of them said? Owning a ship or something because those are possible; I would rather think of something—I suppose an elephant isn’t impossible; but it is hardly going to happen. I would like to see *more organized expression*.”

Resourcefulness and Responsiveness

The family code resourcefulness and responsiveness is broken into five sub-codes: resourcefulness, planning and information gathering, adaptability, making do and preparation (see Figure 6). This section refers to respondents feelings regarding the lack of props or resources both within the improvisation session and in general life.

Improvisation forced participants to *rely solely on their own physical, emotional and mental faculties*



rather than providing them with props, costumes or other resources. For many respondents, this was an alien and disconcerting experience, especially when asked to consider how they might do their jobs without the resources they were traditionally used to using. Others however, experienced a *great deal of liberation in a lack of resources* because it forced them to be more imaginative and meant that an *element of equality* was introduced to the group.

Resourcefulness

Forty-seven mentions were made of the need to be resourceful. Respondents commented on the manner in which improvisation puts one in a position where *one does not have any tools to rely upon* apart from one's own physical-, emotional- and mental faculties. Participants had differing responses to how this made them feel in the session, and how a lack of resources affects them in everyday life. P21 said that not having tools to hand made her feel "*vulnerable, frustrated [and] incompetent*" when she approached a task. Others continued this theme by suggesting that *resources can often become a crutch*. P15 suggested: "I think you feel comfort in having things there

as props. I mean, it is *almost as a disguise*; like you put on a funny hat or a bow around your neck, and *you know that all the attention isn't necessarily on you ... so it is a form of mask*. Definitely having people, objects, and props around you definitely makes me feel more comfortable, more relaxed."

While some respondents above felt it was difficult to operate without resources, *others found it freed them up*. P11 said: "It's *liberating*. I mean, if you were to work in environments where you can't have a laptop, that's not liberating; but usually when you are reduced to some absurd circumstance which you can't possibly be expected to deal with, it's very liberating ... because then *you have to let go and you can't do wrong*. P20 remarked about the session: "I like *space and no clutter. Clear spaces opens up my emotions and mind*. You are not tied to anything, which is actually quite freeing."

Adaptability

Adaptability is a *continuous behavioral response* by individuals. One participant, P14, mentioned that improvisation had increased his capacity to adapt and that while one should: "... have a

bit of preparation planned initially, don't feel as if [when] you get thrown off course think: 'oh no, I'm in trouble now'; but rather *go into it thinking on the spot*, accept the situation, *think through what you could do with the information or situation you have been confronted with*. This attitude actually makes me *hold less anxiety*." P11 claimed that "... *coordinating my emotions and individual will* has often been the path to greater adaptability for me. *A little structure* goes a long way, but most of life has required me to be adaptable and *open to change ... it's darn tiring, and often annoying*, but it is the only way we can *stay relevant and evolve*." P3 stated that "... *adaptability is a special kind of learning, which is learnable*."

Making Do

Allied to adaptability one respondent referred to 'making do' while two others alluded to it with phrases like 'making a plan' or 'adapt or die'. P4 explained how improvisation ensures resourcefulness by citing the phrase: "*Necessity is the mother of invention*." For him, improvisation placed him in a position where he had to make do. P24 remarked that improvisation "... gives you those skills ... when you do that, you've got to be *open to possibilities* and *in a space where anything goes really*... I don't have a speech prepared and I don't have 20 slides to back me up, but if I'm comfortable enough in myself and I'm comfortable enough in a group, then we can come up with something."

Planning and Information Gathering

Twenty-five comments were made about the need to *face uncertain situations by planning and information gathering*, particular in scenarios where resources are scarce. Some respondents felt that planning was a highly important coping mechanism, while others preferred to use it *in conjunction with spontaneity*. P13 had more of the latter approach: "I don't plan my life. I don't have a plan of what I want, or what I do; but I

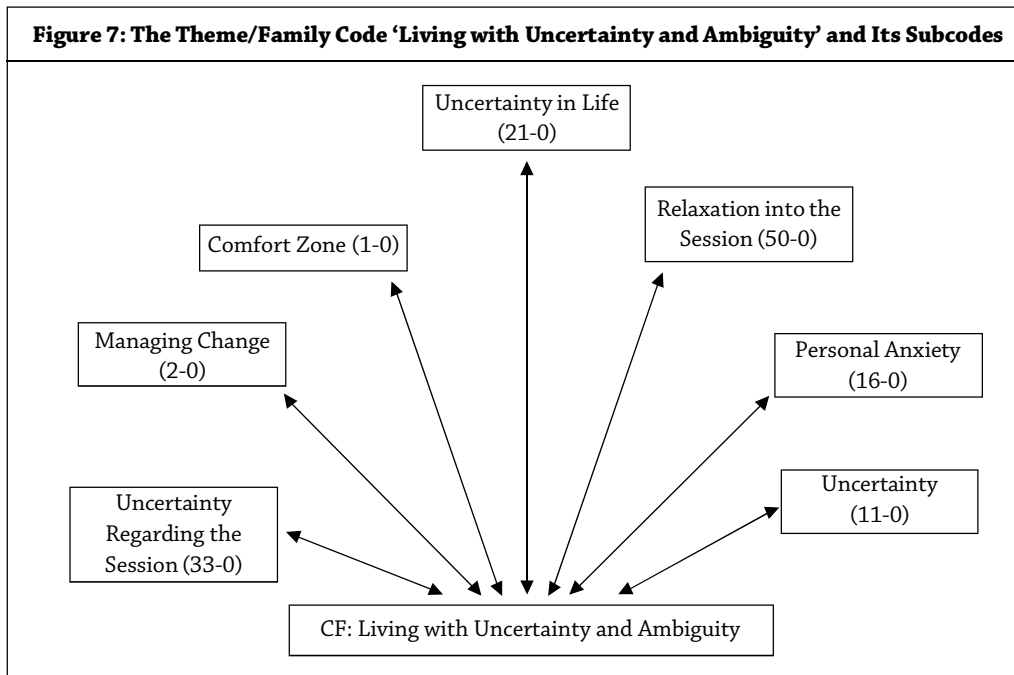
do make sure that every step I take is the right one. So as decisions come up, I make decisions based on *what would make me happiest ...* I think about it until I've got an answer. *I like to sleep on it* if I'm not certain of something." Other respondents placed their *identity* in their ability to plan. P32 remarked: "I'm a planner. I plan ahead and think of all possible options and scenarios and plan for them. As well as back-up plans. I mean I'm a planner by profession, that's what I mean. So I suppose that probably spills over into my personal life a bit."

Preparation

Alongside planning and information gathering, there were a further 19 references to preparation, particularly within the session. Often games would progress in a circle with participants *anticipating and preparing their contribution in advance*, thereby reducing the spontaneity of their responses. At other times, they were unable to prepare until such time as they had heard the contribution of the person who offered it to them. P16 found herself preparing "... and then forgetting what I had prepared. Yes, and of course, when it went round the circle and got to me, it was a different story anyway." P20 remarked: "In some of it I did [prepare] and some I didn't. I think the first gibberish thing I did; and then the second time round I thought: 'Let's wait and see what comes out'; and I think *I do better if I do actually have an answer prepared* than if it just comes out."

Living with Uncertainty and Ambiguity

Uncertainty and ambiguity were *a source of anxiety* for the majority of respondents (see Figure 7). The ability to live with uncertainty and ambiguity was fundamentally linked to participants' ability to manage anxiety, whether that was the anxiety experienced at the start of improvisation session or the anxiety provoked by uncertainty in life and the future. The uncertainty that respondents



felt improvising, which for many was something they had never previously experienced, was a source of much anxiety. Through a process of *facilitation, information gathering, trust-building, conscious breathing* and *time* however, they were able to relax into the session. Responses to the session were compared with respondents' views of uncertainty in life, which took a variety of forms: some dreaded uncertainty, others took a proactive information gathering approach while several individuals were more *laissez-faire*, finding the experience of not knowing 'fun' and 'exciting'. Respondents were unsure of what to expect, so improvisation was seen initially as a source of anxiety. Later, participants relaxed sufficiently enough to recognize that rather than being a source of anxiety, *improvisation might be a potential solution to overcoming, or at least dealing with uncertain situations*. The fact that participants were thrown into an uncertain situation, comprising "high rates of change, ambiguity, unpredictability, and turbulence", and were still

able to relax speaks to the power of improvisation to manage uncertainty.

Personal Anxiety

P4 provided an eloquent and sophisticated analysis for how, in his view, anxiety is a stumbling block for managing uncertain situations: "I think uncertainty is heightened when you're anxious ... if you think there was a black box that lay beyond that door and it was full of uncertain things, which is essentially what this exercise is, the more anxious you are, the less likely you are to step freely through that door and figure out what's on the other side and play around in that space and then come back with what you find. You might be tempted to stick your head out, have a quick look and come back in. I think that *as anxiety and defense mechanisms fall away* that door becomes seemingly worthless and you can *step out and wander freely in that uncertainty* with more of a *conscious curiosity* than an abject fear of what you might encounter. And then you're more likely to find something really cool".

P8 claimed that continuous anxiety in the workplace has led to negative health consequences: “The quality of my sleep has been bad because of ongoing work stress and anxiety, and my doctor says that I am in a state of low-level depression. I would never of thought that I, of all people, would be depressed one day ... so I am on daily medication. Improvisation seems like it can reorient my way of engaging with stress and anxiety ... go off the tablets one day ... I am positive as a result.”

Uncertainty

Uncertainty was a prominent theme amongst interviewees. This research distinguishes between general uncertainty (11 mentions), uncertainty regarding the improvisation session (33 mentions) and uncertainty in life (21 mentions), outlined below.

Speaking of uncertainty P5 explained: “I try not to panic. I think about it, you know ... when I’m in that situation I just make the best of it. I am not going to worry about it.” P8 said: “I have learnt that you can ... and it is okay to ask for help when you are worrying too much. It doesn’t make me a failure or less of an employee ... in fact, improvisation has taught us that it is quite a mature response to turn to others.” P19 described her experience of uncertainty as making her feel: “... a bit anxious, because I like to be in a place where I know what I have to do. Uncertainty, you know, is a way of life and it makes one feel quite anxious that you don’t know—either you don’t have the information, or you haven’t heard the response to something, or you are waiting for someone to do something and they are not doing it, and so on. You kind of put your life on hold while you wait for something indefinite. I think in our organization we are all kind of used to definite, rather than uncertain. And so any uncertainty that creeps in sometimes even makes you feel like you have failed”. P11 asserted that

“I can’t wait for my leaders to do something about the uncertainty ... I must do something. We were told about *locus of control*. I’m not sure I understand it all, but I learnt that you must balance your need to solve this all on your own with waiting for someone to come save the day ... I think they called that *bi-local* or something”.

Uncertainty in Life

Twenty-one comments were made about interviewees’ approaches to uncertainty as part of their day-to-day lives. P8 mentioned: “... you have to *expect the unexpected*.” Generally, respondents favored a *balance between planned certainty and low stakes uncertainty in their lives*. For example, P7 explained: “I like to have a degree of uncertainty in my life, to the extent that I still haven’t got a cellphone contract in the last three or four years; because I am at a point now where I don’t know where I will be in six months time. Yeah, I don’t want to map the future out too much.” P6 claims that “I have found much stress relief in *co-constructing the uncertain future with my loved ones*... gives me a sense of togetherness, *belonging* and *knowing that they have my goodwill at heart*.”

Uncertainty Regarding the Session

Thirty-three mentions were made of participants being uncertain about what to expect in the session, even from respondents who had prior experience of improvisation work. P5 said “Nobody knew what to expect.” P16 said: “... my feeling—and I think a lot of people going into that room at the beginning, I would imagine, felt—certainly expressed feelings similar to mine, which is: God, *what have we let ourselves in for; what’s going to happen?*” P20 remarked: “Initially I was *unsure* exactly what it was going to be about; what it was going to be like; what’s going to be expected.” P31 said: “*You feel a little bit uncomfortable* because you are not—because it is not what you do; but it is fun... I think in the beginning everybody

was a little bit uncertain about what to expect and what is going to happen.”

Relaxation into the Session

While the session inspired a great deal of uncertainty there were 50 mentions of how participants became *increasingly relaxed as time elapsed*. P6 said “... it’s a short session but somehow it was less awkward as we got into it. *As the group engaged more I felt like I could engage more ... [I sensed] a very distinct difference in the mood, or not the mood but the behavior within the session ... in the beginning I sensed there was a lot more reserve whereas again as we got more into it and also the activities, it might be my imagination ... it was a progression of involvement.*” P23 described the session as “... scary at the beginning, but you get used to it. You try and think quicker, you try and do things quicker.”

Comfort Zone

One respondent (P32) made mention of the fact that the session took her out of her comfort zone: “It’s not something I would choose to do under normal circumstances, let me put it that way.” “Theatre of the Oppressed” has been used by groups to motivate hope and raise self-esteem and self-awareness. Sociodrama, in particular, is an approach that allows participants to examine collective group or social problems through dramatic methods involving role play, improvisation, and tableau (Torrance, 1975). Participants choose social issues of importance such as racism, poverty, and pollution, and then propose, test and evaluate solutions to these problems through dramatic techniques. Boal (1985) states that theater and drama encourage human interaction, and outlet for expression that encourages theater practitioners to explore themselves, their peers. P14 stated: “I was able to discover more of the world around me... some of the unknowns, even in the region where I live and the very workplace where I work. Through

improvisation, I think I will be able to reinvent myself ... a more aware and resilient me.” P9 claimed that “... within that I was able to find more of my voice ... a part of me that wasn’t allowed to exist before, or which I didn’t allow to exist before. I have the tools now to step out of my traditional comfort zone.”

Managing Change

Two interviewees mentioned *having to cope with and manage change* as part of their understanding of uncertainty. P4 provided a detailed analysis of how improvisation plays a role in adapting to change: “I think the nature of reality is more that you start off under a certain set of assumptions... but as you go in you actually end up finding that what you had expected to encounter is slightly different to what you thought you were going to encounter and that’s when you need to understand, how and what it is that you have is different to what you thought it was going to be. What difference does it make? If you think of the world in terms of objectives and goals, a set of constraints that sit between you and those objectives and goals. It’s very easy to improvise *as long as you figure out how it has changed? How are the constraints now different?* So maybe the mountain I was supposed to climb is now a lot bigger than I thought it was but just to figure out the nature of that change and to figure out where you are in relation to your objectives and goals as a result, and then it’s very easy to *compromise.*”

Conclusion

The predominant conclusion that resulted from this study is that the seven constructs previously identified play an important and significant role within improvisation.

Our research findings suggest that the major outcomes of improvisation are that it may encourage creativity, possibility, resourcefulness

and an ability to manage uncertainty and ambiguity, provided however, that it is appropriately applied. In terms of achieving this application, not only do leaders have to be present, practice dialogue and avoid judgmental behavior patterns but they also need to leverage their individuals skills, capabilities and education in a properly facilitated fashion.

The research indicated that practitioners may become better at improvisation over time, much like becoming physically fitter through exercise and that some participants had a better base level than others. However, there are a number of inhibitors to the practice and utilization of improvisation such as unwillingness, incompetence, anxiety, avoidance or a lack of awareness. The major inhibitor to the practice of improvisation demonstrated in the research findings was anxiety, whether performance, personal or generalized group anxiety. The researchers also observed a correlation between the level of anxiety felt by individuals and their opinions about whether improvisation could then be usefully applied. For example, P12, P22 and P32 were among the most anxious participants but were also those who questioned whether improvisation would be of any use to them as leaders. A willingness and an open disposition to the process yielded more positive responses as to improvisation's potential benefits. P26, for example, was a devotee before attending the session and the research intervention did little to sway that view.

A number of respondents commented on limited time, applicability and continued practice, and it accords with the researchers' own views, that a single one-and-a-half hour session can only constitute an introduction to the art of improvisation. As such, participants' thoughts about improvisation's usefulness remain largely speculation. While this does not render the

findings null and void, a more long-term engagement with participants would be required to test such speculation. That said, a number of legitimate and authentic responses to improvisation indicate that even in the space of an introductory session, learned patterns of behavior may become exposed, particularly with regard to criticism and judgment, creativity may be enhanced, anxiety typically diminishes, focus, understanding and listening are all increased, and one's confidence in one's ability to make do without resources or certainty can increase. The question then becomes, 'How does one make this a constructive habit?' and practice would seem the next avenue to pursue. ☺

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