

IMPROV COMEDY AND IDENTITY FORMATION:
THE IMPORTANCE OF SERIOUS LEISURE IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this autoethnography is to evocatively and vulnerably share my story of participating in a collegiate improvisational comedy troupe in order to understand how my participation influenced my identity as an emerging adult. In this personal narrative, I take the reader through my experience of the practices, shows, feelings, emotions, and significance that accompanied my membership on an improv comedy troupe. I then analyze my experience from the framework of serious leisure and from the viewpoint of an emerging adult in order to bring light to how serious leisure, especially improv comedy, can significantly influence identity formation in emerging adulthood.

An analysis of my personal narrative revealed that serious leisure, namely improv comedy, contributed significantly to my identity formation as an improviser as well as an emerging adult. The study also revealed that passion and peer relationships have significant roles in serious leisure pursuits as well as the formation of identity. This study proposes additions to Stebbins' (1982) serious leisure perspective and to Kleiber's (1999) conditions for identity formation through leisure. It also adds to the literature of positive youth development and the discussion of emerging adulthood as a significant developmental stage.

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NOMENCLATURE

The following definitions will be used in this study:

1. Casual leisure: “immediately, intrinsically rewarding; and it is a relatively short-lived, pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it. It is fundamentally hedonic; it is engaged in for the significant level of pure enjoyment, or pleasure, found there” (Stebbins, 1997, p. 18).
2. Serious leisure: “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that is highly substantial, interesting, and fulfilling and where, in the typical case, participants find a career in acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). Stebbins (1982) notes that “serious” in this context means “earnestness, sincerity, importance, and carefulness, rather than gravity, solemnity, joylessness, distress, and anxiety” (p. 258).
3. Emerging adulthood: stage of development from ages 18-25 “distinguished by relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations” (Arnett, 2000, p. 1).
4. Improv comedy (improv): an art form in which actors perform without preparation or the use of scripts, props, sets, costumes, or predetermined roles (Crossan, 1998; Hackbert, 2010; Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994); in short, it is “making it up as you go along” (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994, p. 14).

5. Freudian Slip: collegiate improv comedy troupe at Texas A&M University.
6. Perm: a permanent member of the Freudian Slip improv comedy troupe. Permanent members have at least one semester of experience on the troupe. In order to become a permanent member, students must audition at the start of a semester, pass auditions, improve and succeed at their improv practices and shows throughout their first semester, and then audition the following semester. If they pass auditions for the second time, they become a permanent member, referred to as a “perm.”
7. Probie: a probationary member of the Freudian Slip improv comedy troupe. Students who try out and pass auditions at the start of a semester become a probationary member on the troupe. They attend practice and perform in shows with the rest of the troupe; however, their membership on the troupe is conditional of their performance, their capability to learn improv comedy, their compatibility with the rest of the troupe members, and their commitment to the troupe. Probationary members can be cut from the troupe by a permanent member anytime during their probationary semester.
8. Backline: refers to an imaginary line on an improv comedy stage on which improvisers stand before stepping forward into a game or scene. Improvisers on the backline are viewed as “invisible.”
9. UCB: Upright Citizens Brigade; an improv comedy school in New York City

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Funny Girl

Ever since I was a child, I have been told I am funny. While watching old family home videos this past fall, I can confirm that I have always had a funny and goofy side to me; however, I never realized how much of a unique gift being funny is until my senior year at Ursuline Academy, an all-girls Catholic high school in New Orleans, Louisiana. My mother told me in her interview with me: “Ursuline gave you the space to be you. You were blessed to have John Gabriel as a principal who adored you and recognized your capacity to lead. You two sparred over the intercom during announcements. He let you lead with humor. You quickly figured out how humor could teach, and/or diffuse a situation.”

Leading with humor became a common occurrence in my high school career. As student body president, I led pep rallies and forums in ridiculous costumes—like an 80s prom dress, kitten heels, and large, red glasses with the lenses removed—just to make school a little more exciting for my fellow classmates. I performed skits and songs during pep rallies when the faculty needed me to buy some time because the speaker had not arrived at the school yet. This past summer, in June 2018, I took a trip back to my high school to visit the high school office coordinator. She and I became very close during my time as student body president, and I wanted to stop in and see how she was doing.

While I was visiting with her, she told me that she would never forget the time when the whole high school was in the auditorium waiting for a guest speaker, and the faculty told me to simply entertain the students in the meantime. Apparently—and I say apparently because the actual event escapes my memory—I took to the stage with a microphone in my hand and

naturally started telling stories. She said I had the crowd laughing and cheering well past the guest speaker's arrival. Still to this day, I do not remember that specific instance, but I do remember how much I loved being on stage entertaining the student body and making both students and faculty laugh.

In my interview with my mother, I asked her when she realized I had an interest in comedy to get a better understanding of my comedy interest before doing improv. She shared another instance in which I used humor in a leadership role:

“Your senior year Rally Night (a sports and spirit competition between the high school classes), the judges were taking far too long to return with results. The gym, full of 400 eager teenage girls and their families, were getting restless. Too much down time. The athletic director was at a loss with how to fill the time. You jumped in and took over. If I remember this correctly, you stood in front of your class and started the whole gym on the wave. But this was not just any wave. Without using any words, (no shushing the crowd, no “can I have your attention, please), you got the wave started. Once it was well under way and coordinated, you (again without using any words) changed things up. You would point, in no particular order, to each class to get them each to stand up and do the wave. By this time, you were standing in the middle of the gym floor and would point, over your head, behind your back, through your legs, to a class. The entire class, would, on cue, stand up and do the wave. It was a bit like an orchestra. It was impressive that everyone (parents and students) followed your lead. You were having a blast directing everyone, and the crowd had fun following your antics. The time passed, and the judges soon emerged with their results.”

My soccer coach was often in the crowd at pep rallies and at Rally Night, and he would always comment on my comedy performance at practice the following afternoons. One night at a team dinner, my coach yelled across the table to me in his thick, Trinidadian accent: “Sens, Sens! Ok, I have one for you! You’re a mom at a grocery store with two kids...go!” Though I was incredibly confused at first, I quickly realized that he was giving me a funny situation to act out. I immediately assumed the role, and, in front of my teammates and coach, I performed a quick, one-man scene as a Southern woman trying to wrangle her two toddlers while shopping for dinner at a grocery store. After my performance, I remember my coach said: “Sens! You need to be on *SNL!*” I thought to myself: “I can only dream...”

Marcus & Randall

In college, I had no way of performing and sharing my talent besides cracking jokes in my close group of friends. In my sorority, my best friend Mary Grace and I were known as a yin-and-yang duo because we constantly bounced jokes back and forth between each other, making each other laugh as well as anyone who was in an ear-shot of us. We made each other laugh so hard we could not breathe. We would have to take breaks from each other to check our heart beat and make sure our lungs were still in our chests. Together, we had a natural “act” for comedy.

In August 2015, we were approached by a senior in our sorority who was director of our sorority skit. For those of you unfamiliar with the sorority life, each sorority had a skit to perform for the potential new members in order to show the personality of the sorority in a fun and exciting way. Our sorority’s skit was a showcase of different rock stars at a 1950s diner. Our skit director approached Mary Grace and me a week before Skit Day saying that she needs

us to be the janitors that host the skit, adding dialogue between each musical act. While every other girl in the skit had been practicing their part for months, we were given one week to prepare. However, because Mary Grace and I played off of each other so well and had a natural act for comedy, we decided to write down three, maybe four lines, and then make up the rest on the spot. Mary Grace was scared because she was not as comfortable on stage as I was, but I told her to trust me and act like we are having one of our natural conversations.

Before we performed the skit for the potential new members, we performed a dress rehearsal for the parents of girls in our sorority. Ninety parents filed into our Chapter Room while members stood along the perimeter of the room. Dressed as janitors named Marcus (me) and Randall (Mary Grace) wearing khaki jumpsuits, red and blue trucker hats, fake mustaches taped to our upper lips, and cowboy boots, we took to the stage with brooms in hand. From the opening line to the curtain call, we had the whole room laughing. Mary Grace said: "Everyone would ask how we wrote up our scripts and we would tell them what script? We never knew what the other was going to say and it was hilarious. Laughing at each other (or trying not to laugh at each other) and trying to throw the other off was a large part in what made it so great."

We had parents approach us after the skit telling us that they cannot remember the last time they laugh so hard. Another parent quoted one of the lines we spat out on the spot and told us how it was the funniest line he has ever heard. After we left the stage, two women approached us in the kitchen and said we were "a hoot" and "Y'all need to be on *SNL*!" Again, I thought to myself: "I can only dream..."

Following that performance, Mary Grace and I performed the skit nine other times: eight times for each round of potential new members, once for the entire sorority on Bid Day, and then once the following year for the new members of the sorority. We were even contacted a year

after our graduation by the new member director asking if we could come back and perform the skit for that year's new members. Though we were flattered, my best friend and I had already moved too far away from where we attended college and could not make the trip back.

The encouragement I received from my fellow classmates, high school faculty, soccer coach, sorority parents, and fellow sorority members made me realize that I have a unique gift of making people laugh. I always felt very purposeful and fulfilled when I was able to make my friends and even strangers laugh. However, while comedy was something I knew I loved watching and I loved performing, I never knew how to cultivate that gift or talent into something bigger. It just became a little ice-breaker fact about me: I am a funny girl. I never thought I could make something more of my talent until I discovered an improv comedy troupe while attending graduate school at Texas A&M University.

Freudian Slip

In January 2018, I was having a conversation with Mary Grace, and we began to reminisce about how fun it was performing our sorority's skit in back in college. We then started to joke about auditioning for *SNL* or creating our own comedy show. Longing to perform comedy again, I decided to shoot an arrow in the dark and Google search "improv comedy in College Station." Waiting to read the words "No results found," I became absolutely shocked when a link appeared for an improv troupe at Texas A&M. I followed the link, and it brought me to a Facebook page titled "Freudian Slip Improv Comedy Troupe." Already feeling very adventurous, I messaged the group through Facebook asking about auditions (see Figure 1):

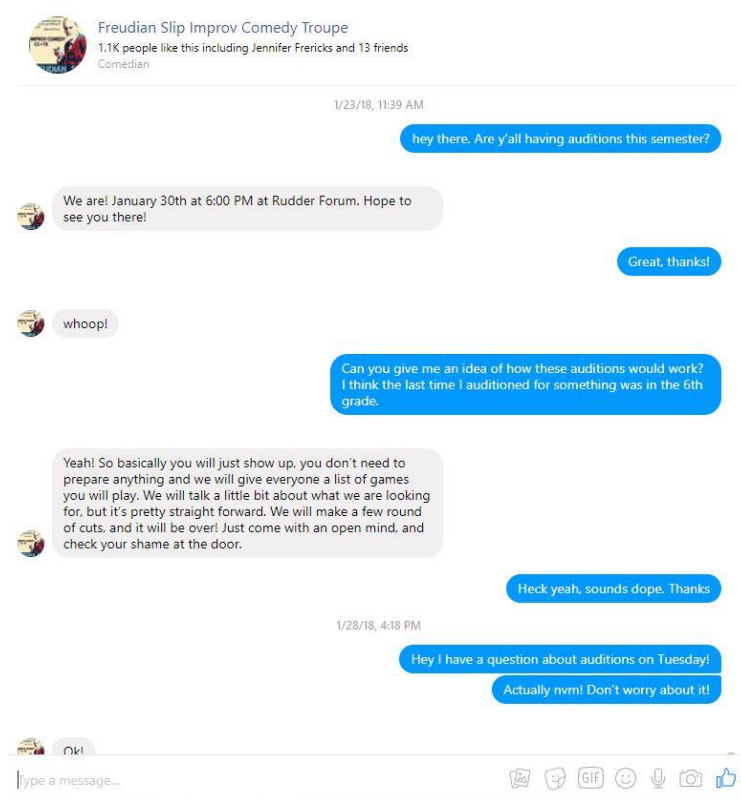


Figure 1: Freudian Slip Facebook Message.

When I read Freudian Slip’s response to my initial message, I thought: “January 30th. 6:00. Rudder Forum. Got it. Wait... where is Rudder Forum? Am I seriously going to do this? I’ve never done improv before. What am I thinking?” While debating back and forth with myself about whether to audition or not, I started to reflect on my past year...

I graduated from college and decided I wanted to attend Texas A&M University and pursue a master’s degree in Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences with a specialization in Youth Development so that I could learn how to run my own summer camp. However, before I even arrived in Texas, I decided I did not want to run my own summer camp, which left me out

of focus, without drive or passion, and without a clue as to what I was doing here at Texas A&M. So, should I try out for an improv comedy troupe? Why not!

On January 30, 2018, I arrived at Rudder Forum at 5:50 PM. I typed my name, phone number, e-mail address, and classification into the spreadsheet they had pulled up on a laptop sitting at the doors of the theater. I quickly realized I was the only graduate student at auditions, so I immediately felt out of place. I then grabbed a handout, proceeded towards the stage, and found myself a seat toward the end of the row. I read the list of improv games and descriptions that were provided on the handout, and I immediately felt my heart sink to my stomach. “What have I gotten myself into?” I thought. No time to think further--auditions are starting.

A young man walked onto the stage wearing jeans, boots, and a navy blue, button-down shirt with the words “Freudian Slip” patched on the back. He enthusiastically welcomed everyone to the theater and briefly explained how auditions would work. “We are going to have you play a couple of improv games, then we will make a round of cuts, and then some more games and some more cuts, until we are satisfied with the group we have. Just remember to have fun and good luck!” You could tell he was no stranger to the stage: he spoke loudly and was animated and confident. In that moment, I was very jealous of his confidence.

Before long, my name was called with a group of other students to line up on stage. I stood there in line with strangers—a stranger on my right and a stranger on my left—staring out into the audience of mostly chairs and a few faces here and there. I remember suddenly feeling very hot. With my heart racing, my muscles tense, and the lights of the forum beaming down on my face, I began to sweat. Suddenly, I was startled by a powerful, loud, yet nonchalant voice that called out from the audience: “Ok, let’s go down the line and just tell me your name.” He sounded bored already. I waited patiently in line for my turn. After the boy to my right said his

name, I said mine. The voice replied: “You’re in grad school?” Oh goodness. I could feel every eye in the forum staring at me. “Yes?” I replied nervously. “That’s cool, for what?” he responded, sounding intrigued. “Um, youth development?” “That’s cool” he finished. I thought to myself: “Phew...passed my first test.”

After everyone had finished stating their name, we were instructed to think of a song based on the suggestion they provided. When we had a song in mind, we were to step out into the center of the stage, and confidently, loudly, and boldly, sing the song to the audience. When another person has another song in mind, you are to tap out the person singing, and begin singing your song. The game will continue until the group is told to stop. “Your suggestion is...weather.”

After a quick moment of watching other courageous students burst into songs about weather, I found myself reaching out my right hand to tap the singing student on the shoulder. I took a deep breath, filled my lungs with air, and with a smile on my face I sang: “Somewhere over the rainbow! Way up high! There’s a...” I was tapped on the shoulder by another student and resumed my spot on the back line. Although my heart was still racing and my face was still sweating, I was not tense. I was neither nervous nor shaky. I was excited. I was comfortable. And although I am a terrible singer, I was ready to sing again. Every student, including myself, sang one more song before the director ended the game. I walked off stage, and I sat back down in my chair waiting for the director to announce the next improv game to play. From then on, I knew this was something I really wanted in my life.

After a long, exhausting hour of more improv games, such as Freeze and Cocktail Party, and two nerve-racking rounds of cuts, it was time for the third and final round of cuts. The students that were left, including myself, were asked to gather our things, leave the forum, and

wait in the lobby until the roster was posted. I was back to my original state of heart racing, muscles tense, and sweating. Before I could calm my nerves, the doors of the forum swung open and a piece of loose-leaf paper was taped to the lobby wall. My heart began to race even faster as I located my name scribbled in pencil on the sheet of paper. I was excited, and I was relieved.

I gathered my things and walked back into Rudder Forum where I was introduced to a group of sixteen other funny people. They congratulated me and the other new students for passing auditions. They explained that being a part of this improv troupe is like taking another course in college. We were to learn and practice improv comedy nine hours a week, and once a month, we would perform an improv comedy show to audiences ranging from 50 to 200 people. I realized quickly I may be in way over my head. I wondered how I would be able to balance grad school and being a member on the troupe. However, I had a feeling I would make it work, because I wanted to make it work.

In the weeks that followed, Freudian Slip soon started to dominate my schedule. On days where I would usually leave campus, go home, cook dinner, and watch TV, I stayed on campus late, ate a snack, and headed to improv practice at 8:00 PM. However, this was not a problem for me. I looked forward to practice and thoroughly enjoyed my time practicing improv with the other members of the troupe. I also found myself more driven in my studies at Texas A&M. I found a focus and a goal. Most importantly, I felt more comfortable in who I was and more purposeful than I could ever remember.

Throughout my time studying, learning, practicing, and performing improv comedy with a college improv troupe, feeling comfortable in who I was became a recurring theme. This made me question why my participation on this improv comedy troupe was changing how I felt about myself. Why is improv so important to me? Is it the people? The laughing? The performing? The

fun? Have I finally found my niche? Is improv affecting my life outside the theater? What is it about improv comedy that was making me feel purposeful and fulfilled? I propose the answer is that I have found a part of my identity in improv comedy.

CHAPTER II

DEVELOPING THE STUDY

Introduction

Positive identity development is crucial for an individual's healthy youth development and successful transition from adolescence to adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Kleiber (1999) argues that leisure is an outlet that gives individuals the opportunities to discover attributes, explore interests, and thus develop identity. Kleiber also believes that serious leisure, a specific type of pursuit through which participants experience a greater sense of fulfillment and purpose (Stebbins, 1992), offers challenges and growth for participants, and consequently has a significant effect on human development and the formation of identity. I believe improv comedy is a serious leisure activity that offers opportunities for challenge, growth, and identity formation among all participants. Therefore, this study examines the relationship between improvisational comedy, serious leisure, and identity among emerging adults. Specifically, this study seeks to answer how serious leisure activities influence identity and what specific characteristics of improv comedy contributed to my development of identity.

Statement of Problem and Study Purpose

Little is known about how improv comedy can be a source and means of identity formation among emerging adults. Stewart (2016) completed a study that explored the relationship between improv comedy and academic skills, social skills, and identity development among college students. Through individual and group interviews, Stewart found that students reported improv comedy benefited both their academic and social skills, as well as impacted their identity development. However, the process by which improv comedy can benefit identity

development in emerging adulthood remains unclear. Therefore, the purpose of my study is to explore the relationship between improv comedy and identity formation in emerging adulthood through the writing of an autoethnography. Using Stebbins' (1992) serious leisure framework and Kleiber's (1999) conditions in which serious leisure can contribute to identity formation, I reflected on my experience as an emerging adult participating in the serious leisure of improv comedy. By writing an autoethnography, I revealed and analyzed the process through which improv comedy influenced my identity development as an emerging adult.

Research Questions

My autoethnography will answer the following questions:

1. How was my participation in improv comedy considered serious leisure according to Stebbins (1992)?

If through my reflexive analysis I can explain how my participation was serious leisure, then I will move forward to examine the role of serious leisure and its impact on my identity by answering the following:

1. Which of Kleiber's (1999) conditions for identity formation through serious leisure were fulfilled by my participation in improv comedy?
2. What role does my participation in serious leisure play in my life as an emerging adult?

Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to the relatively new study of *emerging* adulthood as a significant developmental stage. It will also contribute to the study of the relationship of leisure and identity development and its significant role in emerging adulthood. Given that multiple

experiences in varying leisure activities occur during the adolescent and emerging adulthood stage of life, a more nuanced understanding of how serious leisure becomes an influencing factor in an individual's life trajectory is critical for both the field of leisure and recreation and youth development.

This study will also contribute to the growing body of research of improv comedy, especially among emerging adults. While there are many collegiate improv comedy troupes around the nation, college improv comedy is often viewed as a joke, a way to clown around, or a simple hobby (“College Comedy Improv”, 2019). Rarely is improv comedy taken as seriously as other student organizations such as fraternities, sororities, or student government (“College Comedy Improv”, 2019). This notion was made very apparent to me when I first called my sister and told her I had joined an improv comedy troupe; laughing over the phone, she responded to my news: “You’re an idiot.” I laughed along with her because, at the time, I thought I had really joined a group of people who just like to goof around. However, improv comedy is more than just “idiots” goofing around for laughs—it is learning teamwork; developing listening skills; adapting to new situations; taking risks; failing repeatedly and charging ahead nonetheless; and finally, it is perfecting a craft that is rooted in a long history dating back to the 16th century (“College Comedy Improv”, 2019; Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994; Spolin & Sills, 1999). Because participation in improv comedy offers a myriad of psychosocial and cognitive skills beneficial for positive youth development (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006; Caldwell & Witt, 2011; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson, 2000), improv comedy deserves more recognition from scholars and practitioners in the youth development field. Hopefully, this study contributes to the recognition of improv comedy as a beneficial youth development resource and leisure activity.

Most importantly, as an autoethnography, this study gives researchers a more realistic, unconstrained, evocative, first-person understanding of identity formation and emerging adulthood, and how emerging adulthood is different from both adolescence and adulthood. Furthermore, this study advocates for an increased use of autoethnography as a research method in youth development. I have always told myself that every child is different, and every person is different; consequently, everyone learns and experiences education, recreation, and development differently. Therefore, the use of autoethnography in youth development research is warranted because it can provide researchers with different, unconstrained, and authentic perspectives and stories of development in adolescence and emerging adulthood.

Limitations

Because this study is an autoethnography, there are significant limitations mainly because autoethnographies do not follow traditional scientific methods. Autoethnographies rely on “narrative truth” rather than “external, unconstructed truth” (Ellis, 2004, pg. 30) and are constructed through the lens of an individual, therefore making it difficult for other researchers to prove, test, and replicate studies. Autoethnographers are often criticized for being either too artful or too scientific (Ellis et al., 2011), which makes it hard for artists and/or scientists to accept autoethnographies as valid research and literature in their respective fields. Lastly, because autoethnographies are single case studies (Ellis, 2004), validity, reliability, and generalizability of research is at risk. In addition, the use of improvisational comedy as a leisure activity for this study is very limited due to the small number of participants across the United States and even a smaller number of adolescents and emerging adults.

Structure of the Thesis

In Chapter I, I explained to you how I became interested in improv comedy and how I became a member of a collegiate comedy troupe. That experience inspired the topic of this study: identity formation and serious leisure, specifically improv comedy. In this chapter, I explained the problem and study purpose, as well as limitations of the study. From this point forward, I will provide definitions to assist you in understanding the literature, data, and findings of the study. In Chapter III, I provide a literature review of emerging adulthood, leisure and development, serious leisure, and improv comedy to better orient you to the topic of the study. In Chapter IV, I explain the qualitative nature of the study and the methods that will be used to conduct the study. In Chapters V through IX, I provide a descriptive, emotive, and in-depth story of my experience and participation on a collegiate improv comedy troupe beginning in January 2018. Chapter X then answers my research questions and presents the deeper meanings that I found through the writing process. Finally, Chapter XI presents the theoretical and practical implications of my study.

CHAPTER III

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emerging Adulthood and Identity Development

According to the Eriksonian psychosocial theory, identity development and formation is most important during the developmental stage of adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Sokol, 2009). Unfortunately, Erikson (1968) did not determine a specific age range of adolescence, but it is hypothesized that the developmental stage refers to ages 12-18 (Arnett, 2000; Sokol, 2009). Additionally, based off of Erikson's belief in the existence of a "prolonged adolescence" that is marked by young adults' experimentation in society (Erikson, 1968, p. 156), Arnett (2000) proposes the existence of *emerging* adulthood, a developmental stage that is distinct from both adolescence and adulthood.

Emerging adulthood is the period of development between adolescence and adulthood-- between the ages of 18 and 25 (Arnett, 2000; Sokol, 2009). Research on this stage of development is relatively new compared to research on adolescence and adulthood due to society redefining the ages and stages of development. As a result of social changes within the past thirty years, adolescence has been redefined as ages 10-18 due to a decline in the age at which puberty begins and a significant increase in high school attendance (Arnett, 2000; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Researchers have recognized there are distinct characteristics, developmental tasks, and social roles, or lack thereof, that define emerging adulthood as its own stage of development (Arnett, 2000; Sokol, 2009; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006).

Through examining data from the 1997 U.S. Bureau of Consensus, Arnett (2000) discovers that there is little demographic variation between adolescents from ages 12 to 18 and for adults ages 26-30; however, for the age 18-25 population, there is more variation and diversity in demographic data, such as residence and school attendance, which Arnett (2000) attributes to the experimental nature of emerging adulthood. Unlike adolescence, emerging adulthood is a stage in which individuals take greater responsibility for their development (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006) and are not preoccupied by the rapid physical and cognitive changes associated with adolescence (Adams et al., 2006; Codina et al., 2017; Erikson, 1968). Instead emerging adults are focused more on psychosocial factors, such as peer relationships and personal identity (Adams et al., 2006; Codina et al., 2017; Erikson, 1968). During emerging adulthood, youth are free of the responsibilities and commitments associated with adulthood and free of the supervision associated with adolescence, therefore making emerging adulthood a stage of increased experimentation and exploration (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006; Arnett, 2000; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006).

Because of this freedom to experiment with roles, friendships, work, beliefs, love, and worldviews, emerging adulthood offers more opportunities for identity development than in other developmental stages (Arnett, 2000; Sokol, 2009; Waterman, 1993; Waterman & Archer, 1990; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Erikson believed that identity would be formed when individuals were able to discover their attributes and express their personal strengths through different outlets in their environment (Sokol, 2009). Extensive research found that students who attend colleges and universities experience important developments in identity formation because universities not only offer different outlets and opportunities to experiment with and explore different social groups, activities, entertainment, and studies, but it is encouraged that youth

experiment and explore within the college setting (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006; Sokol, 2009; Waterman, 1985; Waterman, 1993; Waterman & Archer, 1990; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Although experimenting with relationships, beliefs, and studies offers opportunities for identity formation (Arnett, 2000; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006), this study focuses on the significant influence of serious leisure on identity formation in young adulthood. While there are multiple definitions of identity (Erikson, 1963; Hoare, 2002; Snelgrove, 2015; Sokol, 2009), for the purpose of my study, identity is defined as “a personal theory of self” (Kleiber, 1999, p. 94). It is this “personal theory of self” that emerging adults, like me, are so itching to discover and develop so that we can simply begin to answer questions that are constantly breathing down our backs: What do you want to be when you graduate? Where do you see yourself in 5 years? What makes you unique? I believe engaging in serious leisure pursuits may give us some of these answers.

Leisure and Development

Kleiber (1999) asserts that engagement in leisure activities is linked to developmental needs across the lifespan. Considering that the bulk of youths’ time is spent in leisure activities (Caldwell & Witt, 2011; Larson & Verma, 1999; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000), there has been a significant amount of research examining the relationship between leisure and youth development (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006; Caldwell & Darling, 1999; Caldwell & Smith, 2006; Caldwell & Witt, 2011; Codina, 1986; Codina, Pestana, & Stebbins, 2017; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Eccles, Templeton, Barber, & Stone, 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Kleiber, 1999; Larson, 2000; Larson & Verma, 1999; McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 2001; Silbereisen & Todt, 1994).

Stebbins (1982, 1992) distinguishes between two different types of leisure: casual leisure and serious leisure. Casual leisure is engaged in by both youth and adults more often than serious leisure because of the ease and pleasure associated with casual leisure (Stebbins, 1992). Because casual leisure includes both unstructured and structured activities, there are a number of costs and benefits to participating in casual leisure (Stebbins, 2001b). When youth engage in leisure with peers, it is easier and more rewarding for youth to participate in deviant behavior during unstructured leisure time (Caldwell & Darling, 1999; Caldwell & Smith, 2006; Osgood et al., 1996; Steinberg, 2014). Because of the negative behaviors associated with this type of unstructured leisure, the field of youth development encourages engagement in structured leisure activities (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006; Caldwell & Darling, 1999; Caldwell & Smith, 2006; Caldwell & Witt, 2011; Codina, 1986; Codina, Pestana, & Stebbins, 2017; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Eccles, Templeton, Barber, & Stone, 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Kleiber, 1999; Larson, 2000; Larson & Verma, 1999; McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 2001; Silbereisen & Todt, 1994).

Youth participation in more structured leisure activities is strongly associated with higher levels of belonging, self-esteem, and prosocial norms (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fredrick & Eccles, 2005; Mahoney, Schweder, & Stattin, 2002; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005; Putnam, 2015; Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997). It is also associated with lower levels of antisocial behavior (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996) and depression (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Mahoney et al., 2002; McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 2001). Within the academic setting, youths' participation in organized structured activities is positively associated with school and social satisfaction, academic achievement, and academic engagement (Cooper,

Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 2001; Putnam, 2015).

Therefore, leisure plays a significant role in identity development for youth in that it gives individuals the opportunity to differentiate and integrate themselves into society (Caldwell & Darling, 1999), and it allows individuals to explore interests, develop identities, and express who they are (Codina, Pestana, & Stebbins, 2017; Kleiber, 1999; Snelgrove, 2015; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006).

Though this type of leisure must not be neglected in the area of identity formation, it is serious leisure that deserves our focus. Serious leisure is most conducive to positive identity because of its capability to satisfy youths' needs of autonomy and freedom and numerous benefits it contributes in the formation of identity (Codina et al., 2017; Kleiber, 1999; Stebbins 2001b, 2015).

Serious Leisure

Serious leisure is the most intense and arguably most beneficial form of leisure. It stands apart from casual leisure in that it is more substantial, fulfilling, and long-lasting (Stebbins, 2015). Stebbins (2015) defines serious leisure as: “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combinations of its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (modified from Stebbins, 1992, p. 3).

Stebbins put six identifying characteristics of serious leisure (see Figure 1): “need to persevere at the activity; availability of a leisure career; need to put in effort to gain skill

knowledge; realization of various special benefits; unique ethos and social world; an attractive personal and social identity” (modified from Stebbins, 1992, pp. 6-8).



Figure 2: Stebbins' (1992) Six Characteristics of Serious Leisure.

Perseverance in serious leisure is defined as the continued pursuit of the leisure activity. Each leisure activity proposes its own challenges and difficulties, yet participants must overcome those challenges in order to continue their leisure pursuit. While conquering challenges may get tiring, serious leisure participants experience “positive feelings” from overcoming adversity, which further increases their need to persevere (Stebbins, 2015). The second quality of serious leisure is the “availability of a leisure career” (The Serious Leisure Perspective, 2006). This quality is one of serious leisure’s more distinguishable characteristics

in comparison to casual leisure or project-based leisure in that it contributes significantly to serious leisure's fulfilling and long-lasting nature. For example, when I was in middle school, I played every sport offered by my school: volleyball, baseball, and basketball. However, I was terrible at basketball--I could not run up and down the court constantly; I was terrible at shooting the ball; and I genuinely did not like practice or the games. Therefore, there was no leisure career available for me. As a middle-schooler, I recognized I would never make a high school basketball team. The "availability of a leisure career" relies heavily on the third quality of serious leisure: "significant personal effort using their specially acquired knowledge, training, experience, or skill, and indeed at times, all four" (Stebbins, 2015, p. 11). Take for example my playing basketball in middle school: if I put forth significant effort in practice determined to become a greater basketball player, and I took the time to watch other players to learn from their technique and skill, I would have had a better chance of playing basketball past my middle school career. Clearly, basketball clearly was a serious leisure pursuit for me.

The fourth defining characteristic of serious leisure is the "realization of benefits" (The Serious Leisure Perspective, 2006). Stebbins (2015) lists eight long-lasting benefits of serious leisure: "self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness, and lasting physical products of the activity" (p. 11).

In *Leisure Experience and Human Development* (1999), Kleiber addresses some of the benefits of serious leisure in adulthood and old age. Adults experiencing a mid-life crisis may use leisure as a "newly found place for reflection, self-expression, and personal enrichment" (Kleiber, 1999, p. 143), or as a means of generativity, which is the process "of creating, maintaining, or providing for those who are to follow" (Kleiber, 1999, p. 146). Kleiber further

examines leisure engagement and disengagement of the elderly, noting that the “activity theory” argues that people who continue to participate in activities and leisure will find greater satisfaction in the later stages of their life (Hendricks & Hendricks, 1981; Kelly, Steinkamp, & Kelly, 1987; Longino & Kart, 1982). However, Kleiber argues that a balance of disengagement and engagement from leisure activities greatly contributes to satisfaction with life in old age.

Serious leisure’s fifth quality is a “unique ethos” (Stebbins, 2015), or social community. Unique communities generate around serious leisure activities because community members share in and relate through the commitment and effort to leisure pursuits, such as sports, art, and music. Members of unique ethos or social worlds are free to come and go as they please (Unruh, 1979), and communities maintain their connectedness through communication, such as e-mail, media outlets, and newsletters (Stebbins, 2015).

The sixth and final characteristic of serious leisure is the formation of an identity (Stebbins, 1992; Stebbins, 2015; *The Serious Leisure Perspective*, 2006). All five of the aforementioned qualities of serious leisure--perseverance, leisure careers, personal effort, benefits, and unique social worlds--can contribute to development of favorable and comfortable identities in leisure pursuits (Stebbins, 2015; *The Serious Leisure Perspective*, 2006). However, aside from the 5 qualities listed by Stebbins (2015), Kleiber (1999) hypothesizes that there are six conditions that, when fulfilled by leisure, can contribute most to the formation of identity (see Figure 2):

it affords an opportunity for exploration of and experimentation with emerging interests; the interests that emerged and are refined are truly personal and in keeping with other values; action taken in response to interests creates feedback from the environment, including recognition from others, that reinforces the interests; there is competence

achieved in that action that defines and reinforces one's potentialities; there is a degree of commitment to that action and to others who are involved; comfort with others emerges in the social world that is created around those interests and skills. (p. 103)

Kleiber's (1999) conditions (see Figure 2) affirm that leisure is not only a means but a significant resource in the formation of identity in multiple ways. Furthermore, because Kleiber's hypothesis refers to leisure in general, I believe that serious leisure also fulfills these conditions in the following ways. First, serious leisure contributes to the formation of identity because leisure affords opportunities to explore and experiment with interests (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Kleiber, 1999; Snelgrove, 2015; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). When youth explore, pursue, and commit to a single leisure interest, that interest partly defines who they are as an individual (Snelgrove, 2015). Second, when the leisure interest pursued aligns with personal values already established, that interest becomes an expression of those personal values. Third, positive feedback from the environment, such as encouragement from peers or applause from an audience, reinforces an individual to continue their leisure.

In addition to positive feedback, feeling purposeful and competent in a serious leisure results in the serious leisure activity becoming a greater part of an individual's identity. Fifth, because serious leisure requires a sense of commitment to the leisure activity and the people involved, dedication to the serious leisure starts to take up more of the individual's time and effort. However, the more a person is able to socialize with others through leisure in which they feel competent and expressive of who they are, they will begin to feel more comfortable with others. Sixth, socializing and interacting with peers through that pursuit allows an individual to define themselves in contrast to others--it allows them to discover their uniqueness (Kleiber,

1999). Opportunities to define oneself as an individual and in contrast to others increase in emerging adulthood because the opportunities to explore different leisure interests increase.

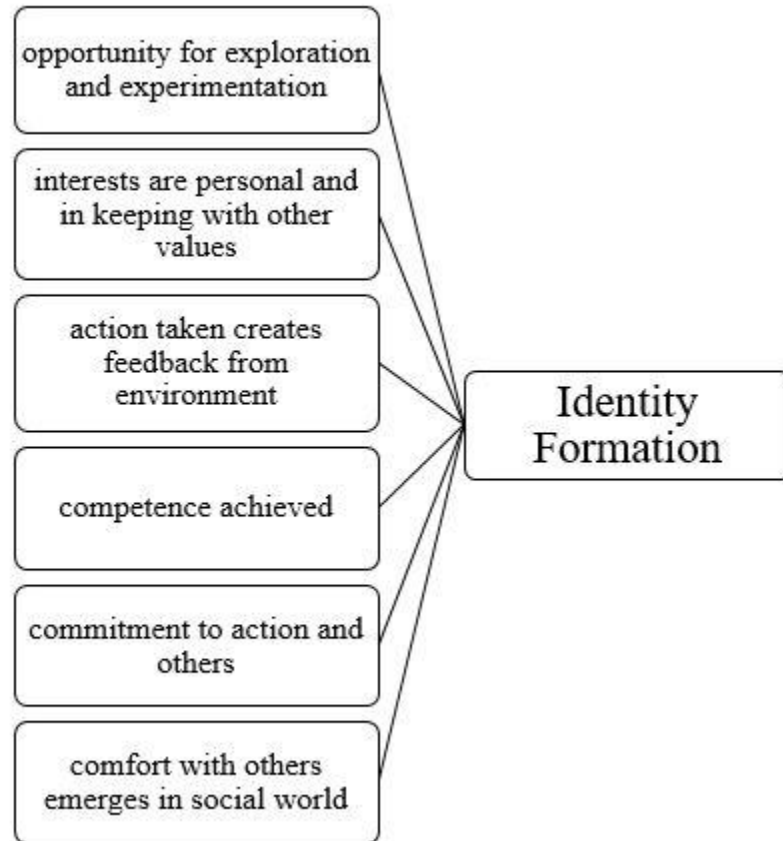


Figure 3: Kleiber's Six Conditions for Identity Formation.

Although this study will use Stebbins' serious leisure framework to explore identity formation, there is a myriad of other perspectives that attempt to define "intensity of participation," as Scott (2016) identifies as variability of participation between leisure participants. Schreyer, Lime, and Williams (1984) proposed experience use history (EUH) as a way to understand leisure involvement at a given point in time, while Backman (1991) proposed activity loyalty to accomplish the same task. Other measures include ego involvement (Selin & Howard, 1988) and commitment (Buchanan, 1985). However, most similar to Stebbins' (1982,

1992) serious leisure framework, Bryan's (1977) "recreational specialization" identifies a continuum of leisure behavior between participants, examining skill development, equipment, and recreational setting preferences. However, recreational specialization would be inappropriate for this specific study due to the lack of equipment associated with improv comedy and consistent recreational setting. Consequently, serious leisure is more appropriate for the current study.

Because of the influence that participation in serious leisure has on the formation of identity, this study encourages emerging adults to engage in serious leisure pursuits. Personally, I pursued my interest in comedy and became a member of an improv comedy troupe. Throughout my time practicing and performing improv comedy, I realized that improv comedy provides significant benefits to my development as an emerging adult. Therefore, while I encourage emerging adults to pursue a serious leisure career for the developmental benefits it provides, I want to encourage emerging adults to consider pursuing improv comedy as serious leisure because I believe improv comedy offers more opportunities for identity development than other types of serious leisure.

Improv Comedy

Improvisational (improv) comedy is, in short, "making it up as you go along" (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994, p. 14). It is significantly distinguishable from other forms of theater in that there are no props, scripts, sets, costumes, predetermined plots, or predetermined roles (Crossan, 1998; Hackbert, 2010). Actors, or players, of improv take the theater stage without any planning or preparation (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994). Because of the unplanned nature of improv, there is a common misconception that improv is a lazy, unserious form of art

(Besser, Roberts, & Walsh, 2013); however, improv comedy is its own art form with its own rules, techniques, disciplines, and structure (Crossan, 1998; Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994).

The history of improv can be traced back to 16th century Europe (Hackbert, 2010; Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994). Groups of actors would travel around Europe performing shows in town squares on makeshift stages; while they performed in costumes and had predetermined scenarios, the actors would improvise their dialogue (Hackbert, 2010; Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994). Though it is a descendant of commedia dell'arte, improv comedy as we know it today is most heavily influenced by the teachings and philosophy of Viola Spolin, “the high priestess of improv” (The Second City, 2018).

The High Priestess of Improv

As a student of Neva Boyd at the Hull House in Chicago, Viola Spolin was trained to use the arts of theater and dance to help immigrant children learn English more easily and integrate into the American culture (Spolin & Sills, 1999). Both Boyd and Spolin understood the importance of play to stimulate creativity and spontaneity in both children and adults in order to foster self-discovery (Spolin & Sills, 1999). Boyd believed: “The spirit of play develops social adaptability, ethics, mental and emotional control, and imagination” (“Viola Spolin Biography”). This philosophy laid the groundwork for Spolin’s own teaching philosophy.

Spolin used games as a means of theater training because the games captivated children’s attention and permitted children to be creative and spontaneous (Spolin & Sills, 1999). Spolin recognized that children were often under the authority of parents and their surrounding culture; consequently, she found it necessary to promote ways in which children were free from familial and cultural limitations and free to act on their own intuition (Spolin & Sills, 1999). Spolin

characterized her teaching method as non-verbal, non-authoritarian, and non-psychological (Spolin & Sills, 1999). Through games, Spolin would determine a focus or a problem for children to solve as a group; then, as children would start to solve the problem, they would learn through experiencing (Spolin & Sills, 1999). There are no cultural or psychological restrictions within improvisational games--everything happens because a player acts spontaneously on their own intuition. Creativity, intuition, and spontaneity characterize the essence of Spolin's teaching philosophy:

Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality, the bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole. It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression. (Spolin & Sills, 1999, p. 4)

Viola Spolin's Theater Games assisted in the creation of The Second City, one of America's most popular improv comedy theaters. "There would be no Second City and, likely, no school of modern improvisation if it were not for the work of Viola Spolin" (The Second City, 2018). Spolin's book *Improvisation for the Theater* (1963) serves as a tangible representation of the peak of Viola Spolin's career. Published by Northwestern University Press in 1963, *Improvisation for the Theater* includes an explanation of Spolin's Theater Games, her teaching philosophy, as well as over two hundred theater games for actors and directors. The publishing of this book sparked the creation of improvisational theater troupes across the United States ("Viola Spolin Biography").

Improv Comedy and Development

Considering the art of improv comedy in America is largely grounded in youth development principles, the belief that improv comedy has a heavy influence on positive development and identity formation is warranted. Multiple studies have found significant value in the use of improv because of its ability to cultivate creativity and spontaneity both in and outside of the theater, such as music (Chase, 1988; Hamilton, 2019; Sawyer, 1992; Wigram, 2004), organizations (Hackbert, 2010; Nisula & Kianto, 2018; West, Hoff, & Carlsson, 2017), medicine (Bing-You, White, Dreher, & Hayes, 2018), education (Hackbert, 2010; Stewart, 2016; Toivanen, Komulainen, & Ruismäki, 2011), and therapy (Ayers, 2016; Gray, 2015; Farley, 2017). Most significant to my study is Stewart's (2016) exploration of the role improv comedy plays on the development and growth of college students.

Through a grounded theory framework and individual and group interview, Stewart (2016) explored the relationship between student development and improv comedy among students ages 19-22. Some of the benefits reported were positive effects on students' academic and social skills, such as retaining and recalling information, memorization, listening, problem-solving abilities, adaptability, supportive relationships, and public speaking. Most importantly, Stewart (2016) found that students reported improv comedy assisted in identity formation because it allowed them opportunities to explore new characters, personalities, feelings, and opinions in a safe and supportive environment. "Improv comedy helped them find their own voice, believe in themselves, gain new perspectives, and gain cultural competence" (Stewart, 2016, p. 224).

Stewart's (2016) findings are significant to my study in that it supports my idea that participating in improv comedy can significantly impact the development of identity in emerging

adulthood. However, unlike Stewart (2016), I will use Stebbins’ (1992) serious leisure perspective and Kleiber’s (1999) identity formation framework to explore my participation in an improv comedy troupe and how it assisted in the development of my identity as an emerging adult. I propose that, not only is improv comedy considered serious leisure, but it fulfilled each of Kleiber’s (1999) conditions in which serious leisure can contribute most to identity formation (see Figure 4).

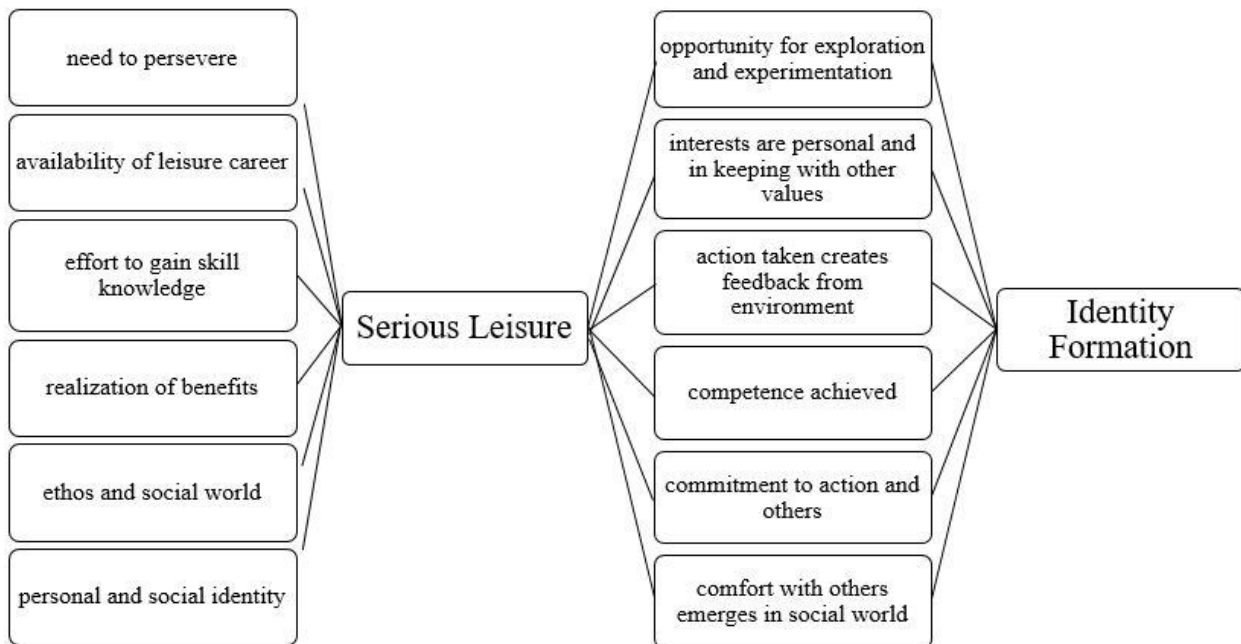


Figure 4: Proposed Theoretical Framework.

I can say in confidence that, even before collecting and analyzing data for this autoethnography and simply by looking at Stebbins’ (1992) framework, participating on a college improv comedy troupe is absolutely considered serious leisure. I would be shocked to find that improv comedy does not fulfill even one of Stebbins’ (1992) characteristics.

Furthermore, just by reminiscing briefly on my participation on a collegiate improv comedy troupe, I propose that Kleiber's (1999) conditions of "action taken creates feedback from environment," "competence achieved," and "commitment to action and others" contributed most to the formation of my identity as an emerging adult. The other three conditions do not stand out to me as significant as the others, but that is not to say they did not have a role in the formation of my identity.

Apart from Kleiber's (1999) conditions for identity formation, I believe there may be other conditions under which improv comedy has assisted in the development of my identity. Because improv comedy is its own unique art form and is substantially different from most serious leisure pursuits like sports (Dilley & Scraton, 2010; Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002; Liu, Baghurst, & Bradley, 2018), I believe improv comedy may fulfill more conditions to identity development than originally listed by Kleiber (1999). I also propose that my passion for improv comedy has played a significant role in the formation of my identity, although passion is not mentioned by neither Stebbins (1992) nor Kleiber (1999).

CHAPTER IV

METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to discover how my participation on a collegiate improv comedy troupe influenced my identity development as an emerging adult. I will view improv comedy from Stebbins' (1982, 1992) serious leisure framework and Kleiber's (1999) work on identity development to highlight ways in which improv comedy has influenced my identity. More importantly, I will view improv comedy as its own entity and art form in order to reveal how the rules and components that are unique to improv allow an improviser to form and discover her identity.

Qualitative Approach

Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative research methods seek to understand a situation or problem from the perspective of the population being examined by focusing on concepts, descriptions, behaviors, meanings, experiences, and intangible factors of the population that cannot be made apparent through quantitative methods (Berg, 2001; Firestone, 1987; Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). A quantitative approach would be entirely inappropriate for this study because I would not be able to fully express my experience, feelings, and emotions from being on a collegiate improv comedy troupe through numbers and fixed structures of academic writing (Berg, 2001; Creswell, 1998). Creswell (1998) explains that qualitative studies allow researchers to write of theater, stories, or poems in a flexible literary style that differs from the rigid, formal methods of academic writing. Therefore, I will use a qualitative approach because it allows me more freedom to express my experience as well as my

identity. The most common qualitative study is the ethnography in which researchers attempt to write about and describe a certain people or culture by immersing themselves in the culture (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Firestone, 1987). As I am the sole subject of my study, I will use an autoethnography to accomplish my study.

Autoethnography

Described by Holman Jones (2005) as “a balancing act” (p. 764), the autoethnography lies at the intersection of art and social sciences, and it is both a process and a product of research (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). As a qualitative method of study, an autoethnography permits a researcher to examine and reflect on her own experiences in order to reveal an unknown aspect or phenomenon within a specific culture (Adams, 2008; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Holman Jones, 2005; Mendez, 2013). In this study, the unknown aspect is how serious leisure, specifically improv comedy, contributed to my identity development; and the specific culture is myself, and through extension, emerging adults. Autoethnography “refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture” (Ellis, 2004, p. 37). The goal of an autoethnography is to derive meaning from experience and to create an evocative narrative that connects to readers and the culture studied; hopefully, this connection will inspire readers to reflect on their own past experiences and change the way they view the world around them (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Holman Jones, 2005; Mendez, 2013). As an autoethnographer, it is important that I connect my story and experience with the greater culture of emerging adulthood because, without that connection to culture, this would simply be my autobiography.

There are multiple types of autoethnographies that differ from each other based on relationships, the role of the researcher, how the culture is studied and analyzed, and the context of the study (Ellis et al., 2011; Mendez, 2013). This particular autoethnography is a personal narrative, a story in which I will write an “evocative [narrative] specifically focused on [my] academic, research, and personal [life]” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 7). For example, in “Body and Bulimia Revisited: Reflections on ‘A Secret Life’”, Tillmann (2009) shares her struggle with bulimia as an adolescent and emerging adult and invites readers to find ways of healing from unhealthy relationships. Tillman (2009) vulnerably and explicitly shares her own personal story in order to change the culture of body image among girls in adolescence and emerging adulthood. In a similar way, I will discover through the writing process how finding serious leisure in a college improv troupe helped me define and connect with my identity as an emerging adult.

Given that individuals experience serious leisure differently due to its social construction based on gender, class, race, within institutions and societal structures, the use of autoethnography as a methodology is completely necessary. Kivel, Johnson, and Scraton (2009) argue that understanding of serious leisure is phenomenological, and focus on the individual through alternative methodologies can provide a more holistic understanding. Autoethnographers use memories, field notes, personal documents, and informant interviews as data, and they use writing and coding as a method to analyze their data (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Dey, 1993; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Richardson, 2000). In this particular autoethnography, I will use field notes, social media platforms, informant interviews, and most importantly, memories as data for the study.

Trustworthiness

Because autoethnographies rely on “narrative truth” rather than “external, unconstructed truth” (Ellis, 2004, p. 30), the validity of autoethnographies is often under question by more traditional fields of study. Ellis et al. (2011) state that the scientific values of validity, reliability, and generalizability have different meanings when applied to autoethnographies as opposed to other social science methods. In an autoethnography, reliability is determined by the narrator’s credibility; generalizability is judged by whether the narrator can reveal specific cultural processes through the narrative; and validity is judged by the likelihood and believability of the narrator’s story (Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis & Ellingson, 2000).

Many authors provide ways in which autoethnographers can increase the trustworthiness of their study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Feldman, 2003). Triangulation, thick and detailed descriptions of data, reflexivity, peer reviews, prolonged engagement, disconfirming evidence, and external audits are all ways in which researchers can strengthen the validity of an autoethnography (Creswell, 1998; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Feldman, 2003). For the purpose of this study, I will use thick, detailed descriptions of data, disconfirming evidence, and triangulation of data to increase the validity of my study.

Study Participant

Because this study seeks to understand how my participation on an improv troupe has influenced my identity as an emerging adult through the writing of a personal narrative, it is a single-case study in which I am both researcher and study source (Mendez, 2013). As both researcher and participant, I will use the first-person voice in order to more comfortably and effectively create my narrative and share my story with the audience. Using any other writing

style and language other than my own would simply take away from authenticity of the autoethnography.

Data Collection

When conducting an autoethnography, researchers use memories, field notes, personal documents, and informant interviews as data to help with the recollection of past experiences (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Dey, 1993; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016; Richardson, 2000). In this particular study, I will use field notes from my Freudian Slip improv practices, social media, informant interviews, and memories of my experience on an improv troupe.

Field Notes

An important data source of this study is handwritten notes from my experience studying improv comedy as well as from retrospectively reflecting on my participation in improv comedy. I believe field notes are an important data source in this study not only because they serve “as triggers for memories [I] did not write down” (Coffey, 1999, 127), but because the content of the field notes speak to what I found important and unique to my experience at the time. In other words, I did not create these field notes knowing that someday I would need to use the notes as a data source for a scientific study. Instead, I took the time and effort to record my experience because I felt what I was learning and feeling was important to who I am and what I want to become. Consequently, it is just to believe there is a close relationship between my field notes and my identity development in emerging adulthood. Coffey (1999) explains the significance of field notes perfectly: “In taking and making field notes we are involved in the construction and production of textual representations of a social reality of which we are a part” (120). I took

notes because I wanted to learn, change, and specifically, become better at improv. The very fact that I took notes during improv practice is a testament to my “need to persevere,” one of Stebbins’ (1992) characteristics of serious leisure, and my “commitment to action and others,” one of Kleiber’s (1999) conditions for identity formation.

Informant Interviews

Including informant interviews as part of my data collection provides many benefits to my study. First and foremost, conducting informant interviews is a way in which I can increase the validity of my study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016) because information that I may provide in my personal narrative could be confirmed by the interviewee. Secondly, informant interviews allow me to see different perspectives of not only my participation in improv comedy but also on how comedy has played a large role in my identity throughout my development. Lastly, interviews can help me remember and reflect on events, experiences, and feelings that I may have otherwise forgotten if it was not for the information provided in the interview.

I conducted interviews via e-mail with my mother, my best friend from college, and three past members of the Freudian Slip improv troupe. Each interviewee permitted me to reveal their identity in the study as well as any information they provided, which allowed me to be more authentic and genuine in my writing. Each interviewee was chosen carefully based on what information pertaining to my identity they could provide to my study. I chose to interview my mother, Madeleine Landrieu, to gain a greater understanding of when my interest in comedy emerged and how that interest was revealed earlier in my life. My interview with my best friend from college, Mary Grace Gitz, gave me a more holistic picture of my first time doing improv

comedy. Lastly, my interviews with past members of Freudian Slip—Mike Duncan, Rachel White, and Ryan Oatman—gave me a more detailed picture and different perspectives of my experience and growth throughout my time on the improv comedy troupe. They also provided me with ways in which improv comedy had influenced their identity, which I used to compare and contrast with my own experience.

Social Media

Another source of data I decided to use in my study is social media, including text messages, Facebook messages, and GroupMe messages. These messages shared between members of Freudian Slip improv comedy troupe and me and have been beneficial not only through their content but through the dates and times received. For example, the entire Freudian Slip troupe participated in a GroupMe group text throughout the Spring 2018 semester. Messages pertained to practice dates, topics of focus in practice, show dates, performance notes, and information for social gatherings. By reviewing the entire semester through these messages, I was able to create a calendar of practices, events, and social gatherings (see Figure 4). Consequently, I could more easily organize my timeline of events and memories. The messages also served as triggers for memory recall.

In order to maintain an ethical study, I asked for and received permission from those whose direct quotes and text messages I wished to use in my study. I also asked for permission to use their legal name next to their messages in the study. However, there are some names that I did not wish to reveal in order to maintain their good image. Although I had negative interactions with some members and do not associate with those specific members anymore, it is

not my place nor my wish to depict them in a negative light for others. Consequently, their identities remained anonymous in my study.

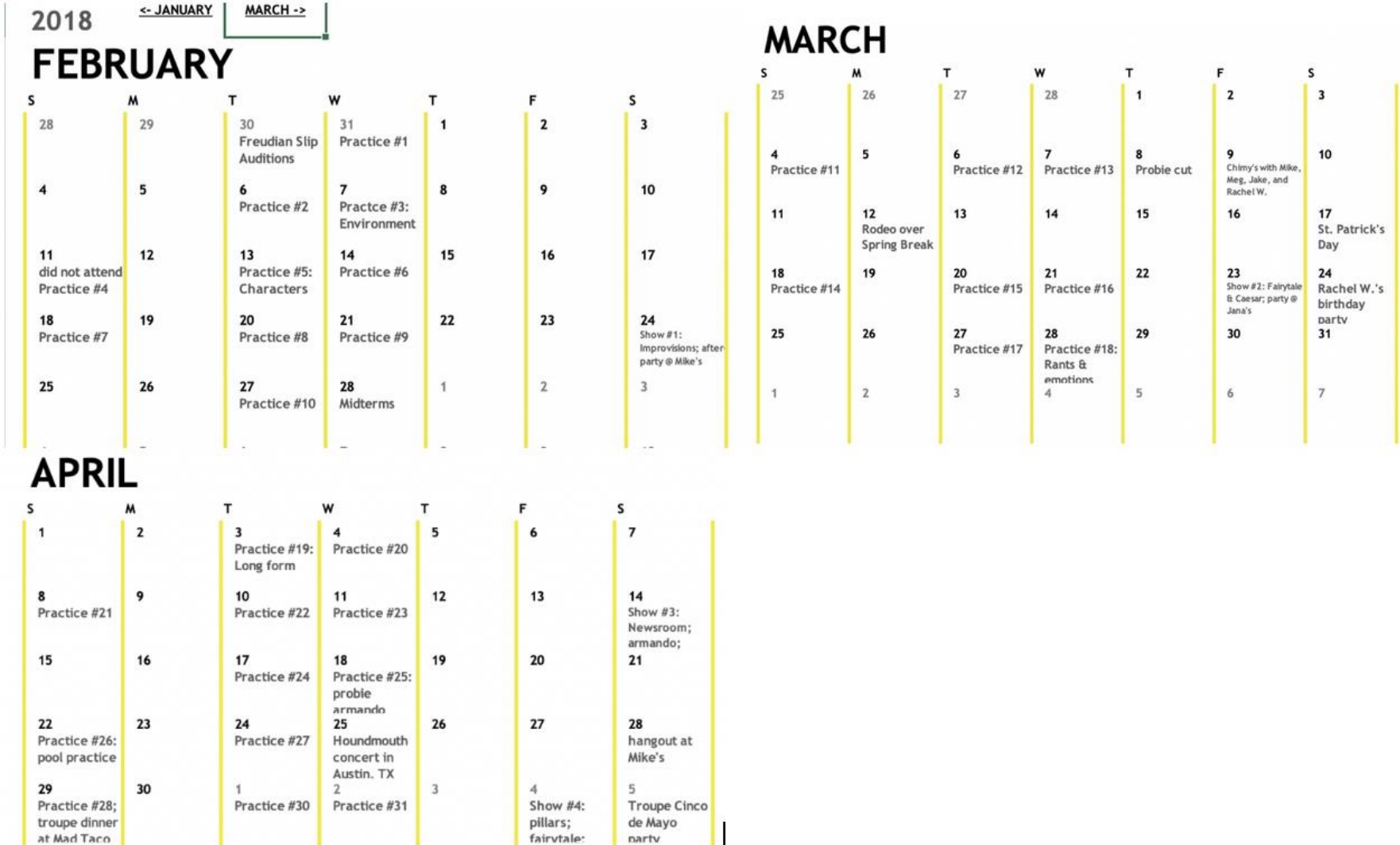


Figure 5: Calendar of Freudian Slip Events.

Memories

The most important and most dominant source of data for my study was memories of my experience on a college improv troupe. While memory is fallible and may seem like an unreliable source of data, the remembering, ordering, and telling of memories is crucial to creating an autoethnography as “ethnography is an act of memory” (Coffey, 1999, 127). Writing an autoethnography requires the researcher to reflect on past experiences (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008; Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011); therefore, writing an autoethnography is near impossible without using memories as data. Field notes provide concrete data from the subject’s experience, but unlike memories, field notes may fail to encompass the entirety of the event, feelings, or thoughts of the subject’s experience (Sanjek, 1990). Memories have the unique power of providing information beyond textual data collected throughout the study (Coffey, 1999; Sanjek, 1990).

Even more so, memories share a special relationship with identity. The way I perceive events, emotions, people in my life contribute to my identity, my “personal theory of self” (Kleiber, 1999, p. 94). Therefore, identity is completely dependent on memory. Who are we if we cannot remember where we came from? Or what we have done? Or what has happened to us over the course of our life? Memory is where we construct our identity. Therefore, memories were justly the largest source of data as well as data analysis in this study. Through the recollection of memories from my participation on an improv comedy troupe, I began to understand how improv comedy influenced the formation of my identity.

Data Analysis

Field notes, text messages, GroupMe messages, and informant interviews were collected into a Microsoft Word document, analyzed, and coded. In qualitative studies, coding is a

significant part of the analyzing process (Basit, 2003). Dey (1993) asserts that dividing data up into categories and then even sub-categories allows the researcher to compare and contrast data and more clearly discover themes and new phenomenon.

I first used color coding to divide data, such as words, phrases, or ideas, into categories of serious leisure characteristics; identity formation conditions; and additional information important to me as an emerging adult. This categorical system allowed me to determine what parts of my story were relevant to my study. I then used color coding to determine which words, phrases, or ideas related to Kleiber (1999) and/or Stebbins (1992) frameworks. For example, a phrase that fulfills Stebbins' (1992) "need to persevere" characteristic of serious leisure was underlined in pink; likewise, a phrase or idea that relates to or fulfills Kleiber's (1999) "competence achieved" condition of identity formation was highlighted in green. This coding process continued until I, as the researcher and analyst, was "satisfied that all relevant distinctions between observations have been drawn, and observations can be compared effectively in terms of an established category system" (Dey, 1993, p. 102).

Then, I assigned each characteristic or condition a superscript code in order for the audience to see what parts of my story I found significant to the study. For example, "need to persevere" is the first characteristic of serious leisure. Therefore, its code is S¹. For additional information that I found important to emerging adulthood, I assigned a code of A[#], the number corresponding to an *additional* category. For phrases, words, and sentences that addressed a negative aspect of serious leisure or a negative influence on identity formation, I assigned the superscript *NC* for *negative case* (see Table 1). I also counted how many times each code occurred in the data in order to understand how prevalent each category was in my experience.

A cycle of coding, analyzing, writing, re-coding, re-analyzing, and rewriting continued until I felt I produced an evocative and aesthetic description of my personal experience on an improv comedy troupe (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008; Bochner, 2000; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), and I could answer my research questions:

1. How my participation in improv comedy considered serious leisure according to Stebbins (1992)?
2. Which of Kleiber's (1999) conditions for identity formation through serious leisure were fulfilled by my participation in improv comedy?
3. What role does my participation in serious leisure play in my life as an emerging adult?

Coding Key			
S1	Need to persevere	I4	Competence achieved
S2	Availability of a leisure career	I5	Commitment to action and others
S3	Effort to gain skill knowledge	I6	Comfort with others emerges in the social world
S4	Realization of benefits	A1	Passion
S5	Unique ethos and social world	A2	Flow
S6	Attractive personal and social identity	A3	Laughs/laughter
I1	Opportunity for exploration and experimentation	A4	“College students”
I2	Interests are personal and in keeping with other values	A5	Teaching
I3	Action taken creates feedback from the environment	NC	Negative case

Table 1: Coding Key for Data Analysis.

CHAPTER V

NEVER TRY TO BE FUNNY

Introduction

After auditions in Rudder Forum, both new troupe members (probies) and existing troupe members (perms) were invited for a drink at O'Bannon's Tap House, a local Irish pub across the street from Texas A&M's campus. Although I had a hefty load of coursework to do for class the next day, I convinced myself to go out for a quick drink to show the troupe I am committed to being part of the troupe¹⁵. I knew how important first impressions were, and I did not want my first impression to be the stressed-out grad student who would rather read about consumerism than meet new people. Although that was exactly how I was feeling, I got in my car and headed to the Irish pub.

When I arrived at O'Bannon's, I took a quick look around the bar before a voice said, "Hey Hannah, we're sitting over there in the cart." I followed in the direction her finger was pointing and found the troupe sitting at a large, secluded booth with two tables in the middle. Since I barely knew anyone in the group, I definitely did not want to be seated in the middle of everyone, so I took a seat at the very end of the booth near the wall. Probies and perms continued to file into the booth, with perms contributing most of the conversation. I took a quick scan around the group and noticed none of the probies were saying much, which I found to be comforting considering I clearly was not the only one who felt awkward or out of place^{NC}.

I sat at the booth quietly, listening to the conversations being had between the troupe members. The perms were talking about events and situations that the probies could not relate to, and the probies were talking about how they felt during auditions, why they auditioned, and

who they found to be funny. However, I continued to sit there quietly, taking it all in. My quietness on this night was very contradictory to my true personality^{NC}. Normally, I am a bubbly, goofy, outspoken individual, but I have learned over the years that sometimes my personality is overwhelming for some people upon their first time meeting me^{NC}. I can come off a little strong, and it can be off-putting to some. Recognizing this about me, I chose to simply listen to the troupe while they conversed. When I had something relevant to add to the conversation, I would speak up, but for the majority of that night, I sat there quietly, praying to the good Lord that I would make a good first impression.

Suddenly in my right ear, I heard the same loud, powerful voice from auditions: “You look miserable^{NC}.” Apparently, Ryan, one of the seniors, had been sitting to my right the whole time. Great. Here I am trying to be quiet, like a sweet, kind, not normally obnoxious, young woman, and apparently, I look miserable.

“Oh! I’m not miserable,” I quickly responded with a fake smile. “I’m just taking it all in and listening to everyone.” I sounded like a creep. The truth is, while I was not completely miserable, I did want to be at home in the comfort of my own bed watching “The Office” on Netflix. I do not like meeting people in large groups, and I do not like small talk. I do not like going to bars in order to get to know people better--it feels staged and unnatural to me. But somehow, the troupe already started to take priority in my life^{I5}. I wanted to show them that I was committed and excited about improv^{I5}. I wanted to be accepted not just as a probie but also as a friend in the troupe^{I5}. So, I did what they wanted to do: I continued to sit at the booth while they drank beers, and I forced myself to have small talk^{NC}.

Finally, Ryan, the senior sitting next to me, decided it was time for him to leave. He had to work on writing a grant for his biomedical engineering project. Hearing this was like a breath

of fresh air to my lungs because it validated my excuse to leave the bar and head home “to read five articles for class tomorrow.” Although I was exhausted and knew I would not get any reading done that night, I slowly stood up, delivered the troupe members my excuse in a tone that sounded like “I wish I could stay,” told everyone how lovely it was to meet them (which it was, they were nice people) and headed toward the door. I got in my car, drove home, climbed in bed, and mentally prepared myself for my first improv practice the following evening. I had no idea what to expect.

My First Practice

On January 31, 2018, the day after auditions, I arrived at the PEAP building on Texas A&M’s campus at 7:50 PM, ten minutes before practice started ¹⁵. I walked into the classroom to find some of the troupe members clearing tables and chairs to make room for a stage. Since I was a probie, I was told to take a seat on the left side of the room. Quietly, I took a seat in the back, put my notebook and pen on the table, and watched other members file in to the room, one by one. Each perm walked in already talking and smiling, ready for practice. On the other hand, each probie walked in relatively quiet, eyes wide, and waiting for instructions. One of the probies, Rachel Roberts, sat next to me, and we struck up a good conversation (she and I later became very close friends). Once everyone was in attendance and seated, the Director walked to the front of the room, welcomed me and the new probies to our first practice, and instructed the troupe to come forward to begin warm-up improv games, which opened every single practice. The perms taught us games such as: (1) Expert, during which a person stands in the middle of the circle, and members ask the person random questions to which they must give a made up answer in a most sincere, honest voice; (2) Where Have My Fingers Been, during which you create a

three-line scene, and your index fingers are the main characters; (3) Bunny Bunny, a nonsense game that requires constant awareness of your troupe members actions and words; (4) One Word Story, during which troupe members go around the circle creating a story by each member contributing one word at a time; (5) and finally, Twenty-One, the last game played after every warm-up in which the troupe attempts to count to twenty-one by following a strict pattern of motions without using any words.

After warm-ups, the troupe sat back down at the classroom tables with the probies on the right side of the classroom and the perms on the left. On the whiteboard, Meg, one of the senior perms, wrote “5 Rules of Improv.” With the marker in her hand, she tapped on the board as if her title were Professor Improv. She quickly began to read down the list, and tapped on the board as she read each rule:

“Yes, and... (Tap!); know each other, like each other (Tap!); no questions (Tap!); truth in comedy (Tap!); and C.R.O.W. - character (tap!), relationship (tap!), objective (tap!), where (TAP!).” Meg looked away from the board at us probies and paused: “Y’all need to be writing this down.”

I quickly flipped open my notebook, clicked my pink pen, and jotted down the five rules of improv, though I was clueless as to what each rule meant ^{S3}. I felt like when I fell asleep in calculus class in high school, and when I woke up, the professor had already gone over every problem that was going to be on the exam. Luckily, Meg began to explain the rules to us. I wrote out each rule as fast as I could^{S3} while she effortlessly explained them as if improv was her first language. It was not until after practice that I found out Meg had been performing improv since she was in high school. I never felt like such an amateur in my whole life. There was so much to learn!^{S3}

After Meg explained the rules, the Director announced we would now do 3-person scenes. My eyes widened, and my heart stopped. “I’m not ready to actually *do* improv. You haven’t taught us anything yet! What are we supposed to *do*?” I thought to myself. While inside my head I was screaming, on the outside, I appeared cool, calm, and collected ^{NC}. Then the Director called my name, and I desperately wanted to act like my name was not Hannah ^{NC}. I was thrown into a 3-person scene with two other perms, we were given a suggestion, and then the scene began. While the other two perms confidently improvised their dialogue and utilized the entire stage space by moving so naturally as if they were not even acting, I stood in the same 2 ft. square perimeter watching them and only speaking when spoken to. I was in awe of how effortlessly they built a scene. They were so funny and amusing that I found myself laughing while I was on stage during the scene!¹² Then out of nowhere, the Director yelled: “End scene!” Everything happened so fast.

When I started to walk back to my seat, the Director said “Wait! Stay up there!” He and the perms began to pick apart the scene, saying what they liked, what they did not like, and giving advice for future scenes. They reminded me of the rule “no questions” and how questions do not build a scene. I thought about how hard it was to not ask questions in the scene because I generally did not know what I should have been doing or saying. Although the perms were cautious of how they delivered their opinions and criticisms of the scene, I was slightly uncomfortable standing in front of everyone being critiqued after a performance^{NC}.

Going back to my seat, I knew I barely contributed to the scene, I did not get any laughs from the audience, and my acting skills were sub-par. However, after doing just one scene, I knew I wanted to become great at improv^{S1}. I wanted to be the best^{S1}. I was jealous of the two perms in the scene--watching them converse with each other and move about a make-believe

environment as if it were their only reality. I wanted so badly to be a part of their make-believe world^{S1}, and I knew the only way to get there was to practice tirelessly and be prepared to fall on my face time and time again in front of a live audience^{S3}. But this thought terrified me. Like everyone else, I do not like feeling embarrassed, and I absolutely hate failing, especially in front of a live audience. I would rather get hit by a train than publicly fail in front of college students^{A4}. However, I felt improv was something I was called to do^{S1, S6, I2, I5, A1}. I remembered how I felt in auditions--how I felt excited, purposeful, and confident^{S6, A1}. So, I decided to chase that feeling. Every time my name was called, I swallowed my pride, prepared for the worst, and fell on my face time and time again^{S1, S3, I5}.

One of the hardest challenges during practice for me was to avoid teaching scenes, which was echoed in my interview with Rachel White. Rachel said: “A few problems that Hannah encountered in her scenes early on was her need to be in charge in scenes, this turns into a “teaching scene,” so we call it. Basically, these scenes fizzle out fast because you are just barking around other people.” For example, my lines would sound a lot like “Let’s do this...,” or “How about we do this...” The perms explained that, while it is clear teaching is a normal role for me in my everyday life^{A5}, it is boring to watch in an improv scene. Not only is it uninteresting, but it takes away my scene partner’s ability to add their own creativity to the scene. I understood completely what they were telling me, but time and time again, scene after scene, I ended up teaching one way or another. It was the most difficult habit to try to break because I desperately wanted more control over what was happening^{A5}. I wanted the comfort of being in control. In order to break this habit, I knew I needed to keep practicing^{S1, S3}.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Although my first practice was quite uneventful, the following practices were packed with improv games and scenes that were frustrating, trying, and uncomfortable--not because of the game or scene itself, but because of what it demands from a player^{S1, S3}.

You see, in improv comedy, there is a saying “truth in comedy” coined by Halpern, Close, and Johnson (1994). Truth in comedy refers to the fact that people laugh at things, characters, and scenes they can relate to. Therefore, improv players are called to rely on what they know, who they are, and facts and situations from their personal life in order to build authentic, relatable scenes. You must never try to be funny. When you try to be funny, you are not being authentic or realistic, and you will not get laughs the majority of the time. I struggled with accomplishing truth in comedy during my first couple of practices for three reasons. First, I found it difficult to be authentic when performing in front of a group of people I was not yet comfortable with^{NC}. How was I supposed to be myself when I had fifteen other college students^{A4} waiting for me to make them laugh^{NC}? There is very little comfort in that situation^{NC}. Second, every time I would try to clear my head to make room for authenticity and true improv, I always found myself teaching in a scene^{I1, A5}. I was still trying to break my habit of teaching scenes^{S1, S3}, but with every scene, it seemed harder and harder to break. Third, sometimes I would try to be funny so that I could get a laugh from at least one person in the audience in order to feel more comfortable and the slightest bit confident and successful^{A3}. In fact, it was not until I heard Meg give advice to another probie that I realized improv is not about being funny. After a couple of the troupe members, including myself, did a scene together, one of the probies explained that he was having a hard time in scenes because he did not think he was funny. Immediately, a couple of the perms started to shake their head and say “No, no, no.” Professor

Improv told the probie that if he was doing improv to get laughs, this was not the club for him. When Meg said this, I was very confused, but then she referred us back to truth in comedy. If you are realistic, authentic, sincere, and not trying to crack jokes, the funny will appear, and it will be hilarious and enjoyable^{S4}.

With all of this new information shoved down my throat and constantly being thrown into scenes like Daniel being thrown into the lions' den, rarely was I happy with my performance during the first couple of practices^{NC}. Luckily, the perms were understanding because they had all been in my position before^{S5}.

On February 13, 2018, during my third week of practice, I sent a text message to a couple of the perms voicing my frustrations and asking for advice: "Hey [perm name]! I feel like I'm missing the mark a little bit with improv. I don't feel I'm as creative as the other probies or maybe I get too nervous and just can't relax during a scene--I don't know what it is! Are there any pointers you have for me that I can work on next practice? I just feel like I'm stuck and I'm getting frustrated^{S1, S3, 15}." One of the perms responded: "You are doing better than you probably think you are¹⁶, we are always our own hardest critics. So, when you are doing a scene just do your best to get out of your head! It's super easy to overthink a scene, so just do you!" Another perm reminded me that I am learning a lot of information in these first few practices^{S3}, and that I should be patient with myself. She reassured me that it takes a lot of practice to be great at improv^{S3}, and the more you actually *do* improv, the better you get^{S1, S3}.

Having supportive troupe members helped me keep my chin up in practices. While often times they would critique my and the other probies' performances after our scenes, they made sure to balance their criticisms with encouragement, pointing out parts of scenes that worked well and were funny, as well as reminding us what we needed to work on¹³. Over the next three

weeks, I learned how to act with emotions; how to create and realistically utilize an environment; how to create fun, intriguing, and sincere characters; how to listen carefully to scene partners; and finally, how to get out of my head and truly improvise scenes^{S3}. I also looked outside of the troupe for opportunities to learn improv^{S1, S3}. Instead of watching shows on Netflix or television, I began watching YouTube videos of professional improv shows in New York and Los Angeles during lunch breaks, while I was getting ready, when I was cleaning my room, and every night before bed. I listened to improv shows in the car and while I was grading papers. I happily surrounded myself with improv comedy because I wanted to learn as much as I could in order to perform well in practice and shows^{S3, S5, 15}.

For the first month of practice, the other probies and I were put into short-form improv games, such as the Dating Game, Improvisations, Newsroom, and Pillars. These games are called short-form games because they have the most structure and last anywhere from 5-7 minutes. While I enjoyed short-form improv games, Improvisations was my least favorite game because I had a terrible experience playing the game for the first time. The premise of the game is that you and a partner are a television channel, and when the audience clicks on your channel, you improvise a television show or commercial, hence the name Improvisations. This game requires you to be exceptionally quick, creative, and always on your toes; however, this particular night, I was feeling slow, dull, and wanting to sit on my butt.

The Director announced the pairs for Improvisations--he paired three probies with three perms. Unfortunately for me, I was paired with Ryan, the perm I found to be most intimidating^{NC} because he was one of the best members on the troupe along with Rachel White; he was exceptionally funny and quick witted; his wit and humor was unmatched by any other perm; and, when not doing a scene in practice, he was quiet and completely disinterested in most

practices. He could not care less about us probies. Consequently, he scared me, and I knew my improv skills were nothing compared to his. Of course, I was being unfair to myself by comparing my skills to his because he had been on the troupe all four years of his college career; nevertheless, I was still scared. Unfortunately, there was no way out of playing this game with him as my scene partner. When my name was called after his, I walked up to the stage and stood on his left. I wanted to turn to him and apologize in advance for my poor improv skills, but it was too late. We were Channel #3, and our suggestion was “Oh no, please don’t.”

The only thing I remember from this scene is that at the beginning I was holding a baby while he tried to take it from me. I said, “Oh no, please don’t!” Then the next minute, I was on the ground acting like I was hit. That is all I remember because I believe I blocked the rest from my memory since I was incredibly embarrassed. We got zero laughs^{A3}. Every time the audience clicked to our channel, our scene was either uninteresting, slow, or just downright weird. He was the funniest guy on the troupe. However, when we worked together, there was absolutely no chemistry between us, and it was very evident through our improv. Every part of me wanted to leave practice after the Director ended the game. I was embarrassed and felt like a failure. I could not look at Ryan for the rest of practice. I made up my mind: I hated Improvisations.

Fortunately, other short-form improv games came to me easier than Improvisations. I enjoyed playing the Dating Game and Newsroom because they have a lot of structure and rely on character work. I started to feel more and more comfortable in the short-form games because the structure gave me somewhat of a sense of control. For the most part, I could predict what was coming up in the game, regardless of my other scene partners. Unfortunately, as soon as I started to feel comfortable performing with the troupe, it was time for my first show^{I1, I2}.

“The Next One: The Improv Show You Said You’d Come To”

On February 24, 2018, I arrived at Rudder Forum at 5:30 PM, 90 minutes before the show. I met the other troupe members on stage, where everyone was gathered around talking. We then started to play warm-up games, which was nothing out of the ordinary. As usual, they were fun and goofy. Then, the Director told the other probies and me to stand on the back line of the stage to do a Mic Check. He informed us that, one by one, we would come forward to the center of the stage and will be given a line to say over and over again. Perms were in the audience telling each of us to say our line in different voices, for example, “Say it like your angry,” “Say it like your scared,” “Yell it!” or “Stage whisper.” This exercise oriented us to the stage and ensured the audience would be able to hear us no matter what we were doing during the show.

After the Mic Check, we all gathered in a circle, and the Director began to read out the set list for the show--which games the troupe was playing, the order of the games, and which members were to play which game. Because it was our first show, each probie was to only be in one game. When he said this, I immediately started praying I would be in the Dating Game or Newsroom. I felt confident I would do well playing those games for my first show. Biting my lip and swaying back and forth, I nervously listened for my name.

“Improvisations is next! We’re gonna have [two boys] on Channel 1, Mike and Hannah on Channel 2...!” My eyes widened, my heart stopped, and I held my breath as I felt my stomach fall at my feet. I was completely frozen in fear then overcome with anger. How could they set me up to fail for my first show? Did they not see how terrible I was in Improvisations in practice? Out of all the games they could have placed me in, they chose Improvisations? Was this a joke? Do they want me to suffer a humiliating public death? On the outside, I was quiet and still, but

inside, I was screaming and running around setting fire to everything I knew about improv. I felt like I was being sentenced to my own death in the middle of the town square for all the people to see. I thought about walking out the forum right then and there, but I was frozen in place and refused to show any sign of weakness¹⁵.

After the Director finished reading the set list, we made our way backstage to put our purses, wallets, bags, and water bottles in the dressing rooms. While everyone was talking to each other about the improv game they were in, the after party, or their plans for the weekend, I was nervously pacing around backstage listening as more and more audience members took their seats. Although I had been practicing improv nine hours a week for three weeks straight, I felt exactly how I did the night of auditions: heart racing, muscles tense, and sweating. Because I was anxious, I was not talking to anyone. This was not excitement, this was fear. Pure fear. Then the Director appeared behind me and said “Hey, we’re all meeting outside.” I walked outside to the back of the forum where everyone was gathered in a circle. As Freudian Slip tradition goes, one of the perms began the chant: “Oh, I feel so good, like I knew I would! Oh! I! Feel! So! Good!” One by one, every member of the troupe joined the chant until we were screaming at the top of our lungs. All I could think was: “I’m lying. I do not feel good!” Five minutes later, the show was starting.

As soon as the music started to play and the lights came on, we ran out on stage and through the aisles of the forum, clapping, cheering, and high-fiving the audience¹³. The energy was high, and the audience was excited¹³. “Off to a good start,” I remember thinking, nerves still shaking. The troupe lined up at the center of the stage, and one of the perms welcomed the audience to the forum. They announced to the audience that it was the probies’ first show, and while the crowd applauded¹³ and I smiled, all I could think was: “Great. Now they know I’m a

beginner. Let's get this over with." I was so pessimistic. I was not ready to play my least favorite game in front of this live audience and ruin their night. Luckily, the first game went very well, and the second game went off without a hitch. Then it was time for Improvisations.

Since Mike and I were Channel 2, we stood in the very center of the stage, with the Channel 1 pair on our right and Channel 3 on our left. The stage lights were beaming down on me. I could hear the audience, but I could not see their faces. I could not decide if this made me feel better or worse, but it did not matter. I was still nervous. One of the perms asked the audience: "What is our suggestion for Channel 2?" From the third row, a man shouted: "Dairy!" "Dairy? What kind of TV show talks about dairy? Does Oprah talk about dairy? Stupid suggestion..." I thought to myself. Within seconds, I forced myself to clear my head, took a deep breath, and the game began^{S1, 15}. All I remember was talking about a cooking show, and then the next time, I was a newscaster and my scene partner played a cow^{A2}. The next thing I knew I was yelling: "Milk milk milk milk milk milk!^{A2}" Then, the host of the game decided to speed up our channel, so my scene partner and I had to talk faster. When she slowed it down, we of course had to talk slower, and then our voices got louder as "the volume went up." I could not figure out why the game host kept retuning to our channel and giving us more things to do^{A2}, then I realized it was because the audience was thoroughly enjoying our scene. I was so outside of myself that for the first few minutes I was on stage, I completely forgot there was an audience^{A2}. Their laughs were not registering with me^{A2}! With the perms behind me and out of sight, I felt free to improvise^{A4}. Before I knew it, the game was over. I walked off stage with a smile on my face^{S6, 14}.

Did I do well? Did I actually do good improv? When I returned backstage, other troupe members whispered to me "That was so funny!" and "You did so well!^{I3}" Not only was I finally

relaxed, but I felt so good about myself^{S6, I4}. I felt confident, proud, successful, and competent^{S6, I4}. I could not wait to get back out on stage again^{S1, I2, A1}, but that would have to wait. Until then, I stood backstage watching the other troupe members continue the show, and I had a wonderful time^{S5}. Watching the rest of the troupe do improv and listening to the audience laugh brought joy to my heart^{I2, A3}. I was happy^{I2, A1}.

After the show, the troupe gathered together in the forum lobby to thank the audience for coming to the show. Audience members approached me in the lobby and told me I did a great job. One audience member said “The cow was hilarious! You were so funny!^{I3}” While I wanted to give her a huge hug, all I could manage to say was “Thank you so much!” A group of my close friends who was in the audience ran up to me after the show. Though they usually like to tease me by telling me I am not funny or that they hate my jokes, they were so happy for me^{I3}! One of my friends said “Honestly, I didn’t know what to expect, but that was surprisingly funny! You did so well!^{I3}” I could not have been happier^{S6}. Although I wanted to stay and talk with my friends, the Director told me it was time for the troupe to debrief about the show, so I said my goodbyes and headed back to the stage.

The Director congratulated the probies on our first show and congratulated the entire troupe for a successful night^{I3}. We then started to pick apart the show game by game. When it came time to discuss Improvisations, one troupe member said “Hannah, I think you did really well^{I3},” and another echoed “Yeah, you were really funny^{I3}.” Then from behind, Rachel White, the best female perm and someone who I looked up to on the troupe, said: “Hannah, I thought that cow scene was so funny. That was awesome^{I3}.” Before I even had time to process her compliment, Mike, my scene partner, added: “Yeah, Hannah, I thought you did really well in that game, and I enjoyed doing those scenes with you. I also think we had really good give and take.

I was really happy to see you initiate a scene and not rely on me to initiate all the scenes. I think we did a really good job^{I3}.” I could not stop smiling because I was on cloud nine^{I4}. Not only was I proud of myself^{I4}, but I felt I made the perms proud^{I3}. Even writing this right now is making me smile and bringing so much joy to my heart^{A1}! My first show made me fall in love with improv^{A1}. I fell in love with the feeling of having a successful improv show and the sound of the audience’s laughter^{A3}. I fell in love with the supportive teamwork that builds a scene^{S4}, and I enjoyed watching friends do improv^{I2}. I was absolutely hooked and already excited for practice the following week.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT IS HAPPENING?

Midterms

Walking into the first practice since the show, I was eager to learn more about improv and how to be better^{S1, S3}. I was the first one up anytime the Director asked for volunteers, I continued to take notes in my journal, and I started to take notes when watching other troupe members' scenes^{S1, S3, I5}. I taught myself how to identify different improv techniques from different players, and to pick out what worked and what did not^{S3, I5}. However, there were many times during practice that I still struggled. While I was not teaching as much, every now and again I would jump into a teaching role^{A5}. Luckily, I was able to quickly recognize when I was teaching, so I would quickly change roles. However, the goal was to avoid teaching all together^{S1}.

I was also told many times to try to make scene partners funny. The perms explained to me that improv is more exciting and humorous when players work to make their scene partners funny, so they always reminded me to “give your scene partner a baby.” This phrase referred to a tip they learned at The Second City in Chicago. One of their instructors told them that if your scene partners plays a clumsy character that continues to drop items, such as a glass of water or a pen, give them a baby--instead of trying to fix their quirks, egg them on.

While I understood what they were saying, I did not understand how to incorporate their advice into my own improv scenes. I struggled to find opportunities to “give my scene partner a baby.” As soon as I started to succeed in one area of improv^{I4}, such as avoiding teaching scenes and being more creative, I found myself faced with more challenges^{S1}. This constant seesaw of

successes and challenges, switching between good and bad improv from scene to scene, made it very difficult for me to analyze if I were actually improving or not^{S1}. It made me question if I were an asset or a burden to the troupe. The frightening idea of being cut from the troupe was constantly running around my mind, and the perms *never* let the probies forget that we could be cut at any time throughout the semester^{NC}. With every good scene, I felt safe and assured¹⁴, but with every bad scene came doubt and fear^{NC}. Not only was I constantly questioning my improv skills, but I was questioning my relationship to the troupe members, especially the perms^{NC}.

We did not interact outside of practice, and I could not figure out why that was^{NC}. I started to develop close friendships with the other probies because we were all learning improv together and experiencing the same struggles^{S5, I6}. On the other hand, the perms seemed like this untouchable group of comedian friends, especially when they were all gathered on the glorified left side of the room from the probies^{NC}. The left side of the room was this “holy land”—only those well versed in the holy scripture of improv could enter into the holy land; until then, stay on right side of the room, peasant^{NC}. It created a powerful divide that made every practice slightly uncomfortable and intimidating^{NC}. However, what felt most odd to me was that I—a successful, smart, 23-year-old graduate student who knew she was funny^{A3}--was intimidated by and looking for validation from a small group of college students^{NC, A4}. Why? Why did I feel so small compared to these other college students^{A4}? Regardless of how I was feeling, I knew I was going to have to become friends with at least some of the perms one way or another because you cannot perform good improv with strangers^{S1, I5}. You must foster positive relationships and good chemistry between troupe members in order to create positive, energetic, funny scenes. Rachel White reiterated this point saying: “Improv is so heavily based upon chemistry and comfortability; we’re all funniest around people we want to be around.” I knew very well that in

the past, probies have been cut from the troupe for not “fitting in” with the rest of the troupe^{NC}. This caused me to worry even more about my status on the troupe^{NC}. I was conflicted between whether I should choose to be confident in myself and only care about if I am happy; or if I should put myself out there and desperately try to win the approval of the holy gods of improv^{NC}. I would say I felt like I was back in high school, but I was way more confident in high school than I felt around the troupe members. In high school, I was a successful athlete, student body president, and I had a solid, supportive group of friends. In improv practice, I felt like a freshman student who was the water boy for the football team^{NC}. I was a graduate student on the path to getting a master’s degree, yet for some reason my mind was occupied with trying to get the approval of a small group of college students^{A4} who play make believe with each other. To make me feel even smaller, a text was sent to the troupe after practice on February 27, 2018, saying: “TOMORROW: is a business day. We want to give you guys some good notes before we get too far from the show. Be here at 8 sharp. Attendance is mandatory. Unfortunately, we won’t get to do improv tomorrow, but it is midterm season, and this is FSlip’s midterm! Please bring a pen, paper, and your resume.” I am in graduate school. I have midterm papers due for each class. Now I have an improv midterm and you want to see my resume? What is happening?

On February 28, 2018, I arrived to the PEAP building on campus dressed business casual with a pen, paper, and my resume in hand, as I was instructed to do¹⁵. Only one other probie, Rachel Roberts, was sitting in the lobby at the time. I sat down next to her and asked if she knew what this midterm was all about. She said the perms were going to ask us questions and give us notes about our improv. I was worried. I thought surely if I was going to be cut from the troupe, it would be tonight. Not knowing what to expect, I simply sat in the lobby of the PEAP scrolling

through social media on my phone until my name was called. After thirty minutes, it was test time.

I walked into the practice room to find the perms dressed in business attire sitting at a row of tables that created a semi-circle facing a single chair in the middle of the room. Mike, who was sitting in the very last chair to the left, gestured to the seat in the center and politely said: “Hi Hannah, you can give me your resume, and then please take a seat.” I handed him my resume and took a seat. I nervously sat down on my hands and crossed my ankles. I am sure I looked like a small child, because with every perms’ eyes on me, I definitely felt like one. Looking at my resume, Mike said: “You have a 4.0 in grad school? That’s impressive.” I started to feel less nervous, but still, I was nervous. Then, to my relief, he began to tell me how I have been doing well in improv. He mentioned that the troupe appreciated how I have always come to practice on time, ready to learn, and always working hard^{13, 15}. He mentioned how, while there are still things to work on, I have been consistently improving^{13, 14}. Upon hearing this, I began to smile and relaxed my shoulders¹⁶.

Then, he put down my resume, looked up at me and said: “So, you’re funny. Everyone thinks you’re funny. You know you’re funny^{12, 14, S6}.” I was taken back. They think I’m funny¹⁴, ^{A3}! But... why do I feel like he’s about to say but? He continued: “But your comedy style is very much stand-up. You know how to crack good jokes and make yourself look funny.” When he said this, I was quite surprised. I had never done stand-up comedy. Am I *that* funny? Mike continued: “Now we want you to make others look funny.” He continued to explain that from here on out, they would be watching whether I can make others look funny and support other people in scenes. They needed me to “give them a baby.” If they did not see me improve in that area, they would cut me from the troupe. This thought scared me, but I told myself I was not

going to get cut^{S1}. At this point in the semester, I was in too deep to get cut--I liked improv too much to get cut from the troupe^{A1}. I was also happier and having more fun at Texas A&M this semester than my first semester^{S4, S6}. Even one of the faculty members in my department told me that since I joined improv, I looked brighter, happier and walked taller around the office^{S4, S6}. Therefore, I knew I had to put all of my focus toward making my scene partners funny^{S1}. Improv made me happy^{S6, I2, A1}, so I was not going to let myself get cut from the troupe^{S1}.

After he finished sharing the perms' notes with me, other perms asked me questions about my time on the troupe so far. Thankfully, most of the questions were goofy questions to relieve the tension in the room. After all, this was a group of college kids who loved comedy and serious tension made everyone very uncomfortable. Once the Q&A section of my midterm was over, the troupe reassured that I am doing well but need to continue working hard^{S1, I3}. I took a deep sigh of relief, said thank you to the panel of perms, and headed towards the door. "They think I'm funny," I thought, smiling as I walked away^{I2, I4, A3}. I left the PEAP building with my chin up, head held high, and feeling two inches taller.

The following practices, I was fully focused on making my scene partners funny, and I continued to fail time and time again^{S1, S3, I5}. However, I never gave up^{S1}. One afternoon before practice, I was sitting in class daydreaming about improv^{A1}. While two students in my class were arguing about grassroots movements, I was doodling on my hand "Give them a baby." That evening, I walked into practice fully determined to give my scene partners "a baby^{S1, I5}." After warm-ups, the perms called for 3-person scenes, and my name was called along with Rachel White and the Director^{I1}. I stood in the middle of the stage space, with the Director to my right and Rachel W. to my left. Remembering the advice I was given during my first week of practice, I cleared every thought from my head, even the stress of trying to make my scene

partner funny. I took a couple of deep breaths and welcomed the audience's suggestion. I let the suggestion sink in for a split second, and I improvised:

Me: (lying on my stomach with my feet in the air acting like a child coloring a picture) "My mom is gonna fire you."

Rachel W.: (panicking) "No, please don't tell anyone."

Director: (acting like another child) "Yeah, you're gonna be in big trouble!"

Rachel W.: (continuing to panic) "Kids, I'm sorry! I didn't know my boyfriend was going to show up at school!"

Me: "I'm going to tell my mommy that you and your boyfriend kissed each other."

Rachel W.: (with prayer hands in the center of her chest) "Look, I know your mom is on the school board, but please don't tell her anything. I didn't know!"

The scene intensified as the Director and I shared intriguing and colorful details about what we saw occur between Rachel White's character and her fictional boyfriend. Rachel W. continued to panic and tried to reason with us "children."

Rachel W.: "Here, let's just get back to the slideshow and what we were learning before."

I pointed to "the slide show" and yelled: "Ewwww!"

Director: "What are you and your boyfriend doing?"

Rachel W. yelled "Nooooo!" as she ran to cover the computer screen.

END SCENE!

Coming to my feet, I looked at the audience to find them applauding and smiling^{I3}. “That was really funny, you guys” said one perm^{I3}. “I really, really enjoyed that. I couldn’t stop laughing,” said another^{I3}. Then suddenly, I heard a perm say: “That is how you make your scene partner funny^{I3}.” Bingo. Words had never sounded sweeter^{I4}. Not able to contain my excitement, I threw my hands in the air jumping up and down. “I did it! I made someone funny^{I4}!” I looked down at my hand and remembered that I had written earlier “give them a baby.” Up until that moment, I had completely forgotten about making my scene partner funny^{A2}. That is when I realized how important it is in improv to clear your head before you begin a scene. Every practice, I had always been incredibly tense and focused on chasing laughs and doing well that I was never able to truly improvise. I realized that my best improv was when I acted without concern for what people thought of me or whether I would get cut or not^{S6}. I performed my best improv when I was purely me^{A2}. When I left practice that night, not only did I feel good about my performance, but I felt good about myself^{I2, I4, S6}. I felt I was finally learning about what improv was all about.

New Friends

It is no secret that during the first month of my membership in Freudian Slip, I was more anxious, worried, and self-conscious than excited and happy around the troupe^{NC}. I was happy to do improv and eager to learn more through each scene, but I was constantly worried of the judgement from the perms. Both Rachel White and Ryan Oatman touched on this in their interviews. Ryan said that in the beginning of the semester, I was “involved but timid^{NC}.” Rachel White elaborated saying I “was very guarded in the beginning, which is likely why [Hannah and I] had a hard time connecting^{NC}. Whether this was in fear, instinct, or anger, it’s

justified. Improv is very personal and very upfront in the beginning. It's absolutely emotionally draining, and it takes some time to get used to."

Fortunately, with each practice, I started to become more comfortable in my improv abilities, and I started to let down my guard¹⁶. However, with each harsh criticism from the perms, I would retreat back into my shell^{NC}. When it came to my relationship to the troupe, though I was slowly becoming more comfortable as a troupe member, I felt I was not as comfortable as I should have been. I have never been one to hide, nor have I been one to silence my personality^{NC}. Unfortunately, it was different around Freudian Slip^{NC}. My passion for improv became so powerful^{A1} that I started to sacrifice my confident and independent personality in order to remain on the troupe^{NC}. During improv practice, I grew closer with a couple of the probies, specifically Rachel Roberts and Zach¹⁶. Because we would converse regularly in practice and through a "probie-only" group text, we became comfortable with each other quickly. However, it was not until I forced myself to actively pursue friendships with the perms¹⁵ that I started to feel like a real part of the troupe¹⁶.

The Friday before spring break, I joined a couple of troupe members for drinks at Chimy's, a local Mexican bar near campus. We then made our way to the Dixie Chicken for cheese fries and dominoes before ending the night on the roof of a probie's house^{15, 16}. I found it incredibly easy for me to be myself around the troupe members when socializing outside of the improv classroom¹⁶. When we were casually hanging out with each other, I was not worried about my performance or whether they found me funny or not¹⁶. This allowed me to start to develop positive relationships with some of the troupe members^{S5, 16}. Like any social group, I had stronger connections to some more than others, and within this group, I connected more to the seniors and probies than the juniors and sophomores. Over spring break, although we did not

have practice or any shows, I maintained connections with Meg and Rachel Roberts. Meg, Rachel R. and I attended the Houston Rodeo and celebrated St. Patrick's Day together¹⁶. While at the time these events seemed like nothing more than hanging out with new friends, I believe they were a significant turning point in my improv career.

Because I shared friendships with Rachel R. and Meg outside of practice and the structure of the troupe¹⁶, I felt more comfortable during practice and within the troupe as well^{S6}. I noticed a change in how I approached practices and shows. My approach shifted from "ready to work hard and survive" to "ready to have fun and thrive^{S6}." I began to view practice as a time to work together rather than a time to continuously try to impress each other. I saw the troupe more as new friends rather than intimidating comedians¹⁶.

This shift in how I approached practice also shifted how I felt during practice. I felt more comfortable, confident, and competent in myself^{S6, 14}. I found myself having more fun and laughing more^{S6}. I started to give more audience suggestions and to take more initiative^{S6}. I was not hesitant to step into scenes^{S6}. I began to try more characters that were outside of my comfort zone^{S3, S6, 11, 16}, and I also started to develop friendships with other troupe members¹⁶, which further increased my comfort, confidence, and competence performing improv¹⁴. However, this is not to say that, since becoming a closer friend to the troupe, my improv was always good. Absolutely not. In fact, Mike Duncan revealed in his interview that my close relationships with Meg and Rachel R. "had significant and negative impacts on [my] improv because they caused [me] to favor working with them during scenes^{NC}. It also held [me] back on creativity because [Rachel R. and Meg] created a safety net for [me]^{NC}." Taking his words into consideration, I agree that my friendships with Meg and Rachel R. prevented some creativity because they provided comfort^{NC}; however, without that comfort, I believe I would have never let down my

guard or even improved in the slightest¹⁶. I believe you need to be comfortable in order to be able to be creative. None of the other troupe members offered that comfort^{NC}. In fact, it is almost a policy of the troupe that perms distance themselves from probies. Rachel W. said: “In past years, usually perms try to refrain from becoming too involved with probes due to the fact they can get cut and because of the unspoken but very intense power divide^{NC}.” Without Meg’s friendship, I would have never even started to let down my guard. I would have still been “timid” and self-conscious.

Regardless of my developing friendships, there were still many practices where I would have one good scene and three bad scenes or all bad scenes and then all good scenes. There were still practices that made me question my membership on the troupe. There were times where Practice #17 and Practice #23 felt a lot like Practice #1 because I was just feeling off, tired, exhausted, and did not want to do improv. On top of that, the perms became more aggressive and harsher when critiquing our performances^{NC}. There were many times where I felt like the probes and I were being yelled at rather than critiqued. I remember a specific instance in which the probies were told to do our own mid-form game without the help of any perms. Up until this point, 3-person scenes and large scenes were all a mix of perms and probies. However, for this scene, they decided to throw us into the water to see if we would sink or swim. After our naturally awful performance, the perms sat there staring at us saying how it was terrible, how we did everything wrong, or “I’ve seen worse, but that was really bad.” What were they expecting? Instead of congratulating us on taking on the terrifying challenge of our first mid-form performance with no help from more experience improvisers, they insulted our performance^{NC}. How do they expect us to want to continue after that point? In the middle of the semester, their criticism shifted from less constructive and more destructive. Encouragement and praise felt rare

at this point in the semester. Rachel W. had a similar experience when she was a probie: “It does not help that you are trying to impress these random kids... It can be a very stressful and frustrating situation. I almost quit my probationary semester multiple times, and I solely held on to prove myself to the older members.” It was not unusual for practice to be hostile at times^{NC}, which resulted in my comedy level being quite inconsistent.

Fortunately, while the quality of my improv in practice was usually inconsistent, it was made known to me by other troupe members that I always did very well in shows^{I3, I4}. In her interview, Rachel White said: “Hannah did great in shows^{I3}. Not that she was bad in practice, but when she hit the stage in front of a real audience, she really was in her element^{S6, I2, I4}. It was a bit frustrating at times because we would think we understood her, then she would have a great show and pull lots of laughs and leave us all surprised^{I4}.” I can absolutely attest to this drastic difference. While rarely I felt comfortable in practice^{NC}, I always felt comfortable on stage^{S6, I2}. From playing a Southern woman arguing about peanut butter and jelly with her twin sister to playing God talking on the phone with his arch angels, every improv show I participated in brought a lot of joy to my heart, even when I was on the back line watching my friends perform^{I2, A1}. With each show performance, I became less nervous before taking the stage. By my third show, I was no stranger to the stage. Whether the audience was there or not did not matter to me. If I was on stage doing improv, I was happy^{S6, I2, A1}.

New Life

From the second improv show on March 23, 2018, until the end of the spring semester, improv became a very natural part of my life^{S6}. While it was never dull nor a burden, my participation and membership on the troupe became very routine. We would practice improv

together on Sunday nights from 6:00 to 9:00 PM, and then on Tuesday and Wednesday nights from 8:00 to 11:00 PM. From the auditions to the very last practice of the semester, I only missed one improv practice because not only was I dedicated to improv but, as Rachel W. said: “Hannah showed great dedication to the troupe as well.” I attended thirty Freudian Slip improv practices, which totals to ninety hours of improv, not including shows. In other words, I spent just as much time, if not more, studying and doing improv than I spent attending the 9-hour combination of my graduate classes¹⁵.

Within those practices, I, along with the rest of the probies, progressed from performing short-form improv to mid-form and then finally long-form improv. Long-form improv is the style of improv that originated in The Second City in Chicago. It has very little, if any, structure. It is improv in which players begin by standing on the back line, asking for a suggestion from the audience, and simply improvising from there. Because long-form improv is the most difficult style of improv to do, it was not until April 3, 2018, that the probies learned how to do long-form improv. However, it is through long-form improv that I found myself having the most fun. The little structure of long-form permitted me to be more creative and spontaneous than I was usually allowed in improv^{S6}. Coincidentally, it was around this time that I found myself more confident in my comedy^{S6, I4}, growing closer to the troupe as a whole, and deepening my existing friendships with some of the troupe members^{I6}. Mike Duncan revealed in his interview that the troupe understood me better and felt more connected to me after I delivered my “rant.”

Before jumping in to long-form improv, we had a practice focused on emotions and deep, personal truths. Each probie was asked to stand before the troupe and “rant” about something that they were passionate about, was significant to them, and was an emotional topic. Because I have never been afraid of having deep conversations about touchy topics, I offered to go first

while the other probies continued to think about what they would talk about. I walked to the center of the classroom and stood there fiddling with my fingers. I warned the perms that sometimes when I get too anxious and emotional, my hands start to shake, and I might get sick in extreme cases. “That’s fine,” said Meg. Staring at a spot on the carpet, I started to talk about my family, and my voice began to quiver. I told them how both my parents have incredibly successful careers in law; how my grandfather, aunt, and uncle were all Louisiana politicians; and how my older sister was in law school at the time. My hands began to shake. I explained to them how I always thought I should go into law because it is like a family business, but that I was never passionate about it. My hands continued to shake, and my sentences started to run into each other. Instead I am passionate about kids and summer camps, but now at Texas A&M, I still do not know what I want to do in my career, and everyone asks me why I did not go to law school. As soon as I started to go off in a tangent without taking a breath, I heard “Ok Hannah.” I looked up at the perms. “You’re fine,” said Ryan. I then asked if I could go to the bathroom to compose myself, and I headed out the door.

Though I did not realize my rant was a significant point in my improv career nor in my personal life, Mike saw it clearly: “It became obvious you were ‘one of us.’ You developed listening skills--not just in an improv setting but in a social setting as well. You also received some of the benefits of spending nine hours a week practicing being funny. You grew comfortable in silliness, embraced the absurd in a way that seemed to remove a certain need for control in your life. This came across most clearly in your rant, where you discussed an internal, mental pressure to live up to a certain identity you inherited from your family. This rant really marked a turning point in your relationship with the group because it bonded you to us in an honest and vulnerable way that allowed us to appreciate the way you tackle problems^{S6}.” Similar

to Mike's opinion, Ryan said: "You were more bold and confident in how you presented yourself. Your conversations with others seemed to flow easier than be forced^{S6}." My rant was significant to my improv career and my personal life because it became clear I immersed myself in a new community.

When I was not organizing social gatherings for my graduate school friends, I would catch dinner with some of the troupe members, and I would go to every after-party with the troupe^{I5, I6}. Sometimes I would bring snacks to practice to share with the troupe. Rachel Roberts and I started a tradition of bringing chips and queso to practice just for the fun of it. On April 25, 2018, the majority of the troupe and I travelled to Austin, TX, together to attend a concert instead of having practice. We also had a troupe dinner before our last week of practice, and then a week later we celebrated Cinco de Mayo together after the semester had ended^{I6}.

As a result of these social gatherings at the end of the semester, I considered four of the graduating seniors to be close friends of mine: Rachel White, Ryan Oatman, Meg Rose, and Mike Duncan^{I6}. Being that each of them had been on Freudian Slip for at least three years, they were all incredibly talented improvisers, and I often found myself looking up to them in practice. On April 18, 2018, Ryan texted me after practice saying: "U did really good at practice tonight btw...ur improv was really good^{I3, I4}." Although his message may seem insignificant, hearing that validation was a big pat on the back for me. It assured me that I was becoming a bigger asset to the troupe^{S6}.

Later that month, on April 28, 2018, I was having a conversation with Meg and Mike. To my surprise, Mike told me that he has enjoyed watching me come into my own in improv, and that since midterms, I had consistently been improving^{I3}. Meg agreed with him and added that I picked up on improv quickly and understood the games, rules, and disciplines of improv well^{I3}.

This was also echoed in my interview with Rachel White: “I seemed to notice that Hannah understood improv more so than some of the other probe members. She got what was funny, and she knew how to deliver the punchline...Hannah had a good understanding of improv from the beginning¹¹. You cannot teach people to ‘get it.’ That is something that comes naturally, and she ‘got it.’^{13, 14}” At the very last improv practice of the semester on May 2, 2018, Rachel W. explained to me that, although we started out the semester on the wrong foot due to a miscommunication, she had come to like me both as a friend and as a troupe member, and wished that we had more opportunities to perform improv together. In her interview, she said: “Towards the end of the semester, Hannah and I slowly started to connect and joke around on a personal level¹⁶. I vividly remember being at one of the last events of the semester, and her and I having this all night banter, which finally ended up in us saying ‘hmmmm... this was a missed opportunity. You and me.’ It was during this time, I realized that Hannah and I had strikingly similar humor--a missed opportunity indeed.” When I think about this “missed opportunity,” it really is bittersweet. Throughout the entire semester, I was intimidated by Rachel because (1) she was an amazing and hysterical improviser and (2) she was usually cold towards me; however, understanding her sense of humor through improv, I knew we would be good friends. Unfortunately, I was never comfortable enough to reveal my personality early on due to the constant judgement of the perms, and, of course, an unfortunate miscommunication obviously did not help the situation. Now, though I gladly consider her a great friend and confidant, it is sad to think about all the missed opportunities throughout the semester to do hilarious improv together and to have a genuine friendship. Fortunately, our friendship has only grown since the end of the Spring 2018 semester¹⁶.

My last improv show of the semester was by far the most fun I have had performing improv. I was able to play in a short-form game, a mid-form game, as well as a long-form game¹⁴. This was a very drastic difference in comparison to my first show in which I only played a short-form improv game⁵³. While I had an absolute blast performing long-form improv with the seniors for their last show, I had the most fun playing “God” during a mid-form game called “Fairytale.” While the other players moved around the stage acting and animating, as “God” I stood on the backline acting like I had a phone to my ear, and I would talk to my “archangels” over the phone. Hearing the audience’s laughter and applause¹³ was one of the best feelings I had ever experienced because all I was doing was speaking my mind⁵⁶. I was not performing any silly action nor was I talking in an accent. I remember part of the scene in which I was on the phone with the archangel Michael who was asking for advice on how to save a child in the scene. I made a pop-culture reference to the gorilla Harambe saying: “Michael, you need to have confidence in yourself. You’re not my number one angel for nothing. You did a great job last year with that little boy in the gorilla enclosure!” The audience suddenly erupted with laughter. I saw my friends in the audience clapping and slapping their knees. I had to wait for the audience to calm down before saying another line because they were laughing so loudly¹³. My most effortless performance resulted in my most successful show¹⁴. While I was not able to meet with audience members after the show, I had other troupe members tell me that their family thought I was hysterical and that their friends said “God” was so funny. I felt a strong sense of accomplishment, even though I put very little effort in my performance. All I was doing was talking and playing--which is what I do every day. The only difference is that I was on stage this time. This is where I belong. I absolutely loved doing improv^{A1}.

Although the start of the semester with Freudian Slip was trying, frustrating, uncomfortable, and mentally exhausting, the end of the semester was very enjoyable. I was thankful for my time performing improv nine and sometimes eleven hours a week, and I was especially thankful for the friendships I made along the way. I was incredibly happy to find a way in which I could express my goofy, humorous personality with people who shared the same characteristics^{S4, S5, S6, I6}. I was thankful for the opportunity to share my humor with others and bring laughter into strangers' lives^{I2, A1, A3}. Though I was going to miss practicing improv over the summer, I knew I had a lot to look forward to for next semester. For the first time in a long time, I was eager to start school again.

CHAPTER VII

THE UPRIGHT CITIZENS BRIGADE

Understanding that I could only get better at improv the more I practiced, I did not want my improv skills to simply sit and rust over the summer. So, I took a big jump into the improv comedy world and registered for an intensive class course of Improv 101 at the Upright Citizens Brigade in New York City^{S2, S3, S5, 11}. I talked Meg and Rachel R. into registering for the class with me. After we registered for the class, we immediately booked our flights to New York City. On July 22, 2018, my friends and I flew to New York and settled in Brooklyn before taking the subway the next day to our first class at the UCB.

For those of you who don't know, the Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB) is an improv and sketch comedy school founded by actors and comedians Amy Poehler, Matt Walsh, Ian Roberts, and Matt Besser. UCB offers classes year-round in both New York and Los Angeles to people who want to learn and perfect the art of improv comedy. Their weekly calendar is packed with course offerings as well as improv shows at multiple theaters throughout New York and Los Angeles. From July 22 - July 30, 2018, my friends and I took eight 3-hour classes at the UCB training center in Manhattan practicing improv comedy 6 hours a day. As UCB students, we had a free student discount to their improv shows, so we caught a show at UCB on the East Side and two shows in Hell's Kitchen. As I was watching each show, I began analyzing the show from an improviser's perspective--I looked for the "Yes, and," the organic game, the truth in comedy. I realized it was impossible for me to just be an audience member. I was a fellow improviser.

Taking a summer improv course at UCB was an unforgettable and priceless experience. While Meg, Rachel R., and I were on a more advanced level than the other students in the class,

learning the basics of improv again and in a different way than how we learned at Texas A&M was incredibly beneficial to our improv skills. I learned about purpose and benefits of specific warm-up and improv games. I was able to watch other students' performances and understand why their improv was or was not successful. I learned a lot of new improv tips and phrases such as playing to the "top of your knowledge" or the "height of your morality." I learned more about truth in comedy and how to get in touch with that truth. On top of that, learning improv with a new, diverse group of people made the trip exceptional. In Freudian Slip, everyone was a white college student. There was very little diversity in the group. Yes, we had different personalities, different senses of humor, and we were all from different towns and cities; but on the surface, we were a small group of funny, white college students.

In New York, I became friends with a mother from Sweden; a nanny from England; a middle-school teacher from Staten Island; a music and theater teacher from Brooklyn; a stand-up comedian from New Jersey; a world-traveler from Australia; an improv director from Michigan; an actor-singer-dancer from Texas; and a student from California^{S5}. Although this group was vastly different than what I was used to in Freudian Slip, the diversity of the group brought a wide array of characters and new perspectives to our improv scenes. Diversity was our biggest strength as an improv troupe. It also provided me with the challenge of getting out of my comfort zone and performing improv with people I just met and did not have much in common with. Trying to develop connections with such a diverse group of people was difficult to accomplish, especially since we only had a week to work together. However, when we were able to make connections in improv scenes, not only was it funny, but it was incredibly rewarding.

Being able to create comedy scenes with people from around the world brought a lot of magic and beauty to the art of improv. It made me appreciate improv as its own art form and discipline rather than as a way to simply goof around with friends. My experience at UCB strengthened my passion for improv and made me realize that there is something truly beautiful about making connections through truth in comedy with people you had never met before. Not only did I learn about my new friends through constructing make believe worlds, but I was able to share the joy of comedy with them as well as with an audience of strangers^{12, A1}.

After my week at UCB, I was excited to get back to Texas A&M and share with the rest of the troupe what I had learned. I felt I had a lot of information and new improv games that would improve the quality of our improv as well as bring us closer together as a troupe^{A5}.

Though I knew I would still have to audition again at the start of the semester in order to become a permanent member (perm) on the troupe, I felt I was well prepared, and I was excited to reunite with the troupe.

CHAPTER VIII

ROCK BOTTOM

Introduction

This is the part of my story that is very tough to talk about. Although it occurred back in September 2018, the feelings and emotions associated with what happened are still very raw and painful. Last night, February 4, 2019, I got in bed at 10:30 PM hoping to get a good night's sleep before continuing the writing process the next day. However, when I laid my head on my pillow, I started to brainstorm about how I would write this chapter--the language I would use, how I would organize my thoughts, how much I would reveal. I then started to become very angry, annoyed, frustrated, irritated, mad, and miserable. I was not able to fall asleep until 3:00 the next morning. I simply laid in bed for four and a half hours, tossing and turning, and trying to get rid of the terrible thoughts that were plaguing my mind and keeping me from falling asleep. I started to cry. I came to the conclusion that the best way to explain and show my readers what happened is to be as authentic, genuine, honest, and true to myself as I can be. That being said, let me show you where my story hits rock bottom.

Back to School

Coming back to school after a long summer, I was very excited to reunite with all of my friends and especially excited to get back to improv practice for the Fall 2018 semester. I knew we had a free improv show coming up for the university's open house, so I was eager to get back on stage. Remembering how I can always come off a little strong to others, I started to think about how I was going to share with Freudian Slip what I learned at UCB over the summer without coming off as a know-it-all. I recognized very well that I was still a probie and that my

membership on the troupe was not final; consequently, I tried to dial back my excitement because I was not interested in stepping on anyone's toes or speaking when it was not my place to speak^{NC}.

I also realized that all but one of the troupe members that I became close with over the last semester had all graduated^{NC}. The troupe members that were left I still considered to be friends, but I did not connect with them as much as those who graduated. Therefore, I knew the dynamic of the troupe would be different, the atmosphere would feel a little awkward, and the improv would be a little off at first. The significant impact the graduating members had on the troupe cannot be stressed enough. Like I said earlier, the seniors had all done improv for at least three years together. Through years and years of performing improv together, they developed this unique dynamic that added so much richness to their improv. Because they were able to read and complement each other so well, they were the superstars of every Freudian Slip show. Every improv scene they were in was funny, joyful, chaotic, and fun. Consequently, their absence was very noticeable when the fall semester started, not only to me but to the rest of the troupe. It felt like our grandparents and parents had left the family, and the kids were left to defend for themselves.

Not only that, but their absence made me feel less supported in improv^{NC}. The graduating seniors were the ones who told me I was constantly improving and that I had really grown into my own over the semester. They were the ones who told me I was funny. They were also the ones who I hung out with outside of improv practices. In fact, Ryan Oatman, one of the seniors that graduated, and I entered into a romantic relationship over the summer. While we had become good friends over the spring semester, it was not until the summer that we decided to date. We did not want to begin a relationship at the end of the semester out of respect for the

rest of the troupe. We felt it would have made things quite messy and uncomfortable for the whole troupe. That being said, it became evident over the summer that some troupe members did not support our relationship for their own personal reasons. They felt I had lied to them throughout the entire the semester and betrayed their trust. However, neither Ryan nor I understood the depth of our relationship until after the semester was over, and we hid our feelings for each other from the troupe in order to protect the troupe's dynamic and chemistry. While I was not going to let their opinions affect my personal, happy, and healthy relationship with my boyfriend, I respected their opinions and was prepared to act professionally and maturely when we reunited at the first improv practice. Understanding that I only had one very close friend on the troupe now and knowing that some troupe members thought I betrayed their trust, I felt I was automatically a few rungs down the ladder from where I ended last semester, regardless of my improv abilities^{NC}. Nevertheless, I still wanted to be on the troupe because I truly loved doing improv^{A1}.

On August 28, 2018, I walked into the first improv practice of the semester feeling both excited and hesitant. I was excited to do improv again, but I was hesitant to engage in conversation with some troupe members because I did not want to step on any toes. I assumed my seat on the left side of the room because, although it was new semester, I was still a probie. More troupe members started to file in the classroom, and Rachel Roberts and I reunited after parting ways in New York. I was happy to hear the rest of her summer went well, and we began talking about the open house show and auditions. I also enjoyed speaking with Director again after a long summer. He and I always had pleasant conversations with each other, and for some reason, I was the only one who laughed at *all* of his jokes. He had a weird, quirky sense of humor that I thoroughly appreciated, and doing improv scenes with him was always easy and

enjoyable. He was an incredibly supportive improviser. After about 20 minutes of the troupe catching up with each other, we played warm-up games and then jumped into 3-person scenes. There was nothing too exciting or funny about this practice--it was simply an average practice, which made it very evident that the troupe was missing its group of talented seniors. However, we did end practice with a “jam sesh,” something I always enjoyed. Essentially, it’s just long-form improv during which the audience provides a suggestion and our creative minds run as far as we can with it.

The second practice of the semester was similar to the first in that we simply performed improv scenes over and over again; however, we also started to prepare for our open house show coming up that Sunday. We played a couple of short-form improv games, such as Asian Flick, Dating Game, and Newsroom. We then practiced a long-form Armando, in which we do long-form improv using a troupe member’s monologue as a suggestion, before we closed out the night. Like the first practice, there was nothing too exciting or funny about this practice. It only proved that trying to get back into the swing of improv is quite difficult to do, especially after a long summer. But it was not just getting back into a routine that made it difficult--it was the fact that Freudian Slip was essentially a completely different improv troupe than the previous semester; the troupe’s dynamic was very different than the previous semester; and the pressure of auditions to become a permanent member had already grown into a very powerful force.

On September 2, 2018, I arrived at the MSC for Texas A&M University’s Open House. I weaved, zigzagged, and pushed my way through crowds of boisterous and curious students until I finally found the Freudian Slip table. I grabbed some flyers and began passing them out to students walking by the table¹⁵. A couple of students stopped to ask my questions about improv and our troupe. At one point, I had four students gathered around me listening to me explain my

first show experience. I enjoyed so much talking to students and introducing them to improv. I explained how much I fell in love with improv and how Freudian Slip was such a great group of friends. I explained how at times improv can be stressful, but the audience's laughter is worth the challenge. I finished my conversation with each student by inviting them to our free show that evening. As each student walked away, I hoped I gave them a good understanding of what improv was all about. I hoped they would take a leap of faith like I did and try out to be on the troupe. Improv comedy made such a positive impact on my life that I could not help but share that impact with others^{S6, A1}.

Around 6:00 in the evening, I started to make my way to Rudder Forum with two other troupe members. We had closed down the open house table and grabbed dinner together before walking over to the forum for the show. We met up with the other troupe members and started to play warm-up games. For some reason, I had a really fun time playing these games before the show. I think everyone was in a good mood and excited to be back in Rudder, so the troupe morale was fairly high, and the mood was a positive one. With this being my fifth improv show with Freudian Slip and my sixth improv show overall (I performed once in New York City)^{S2}, I was not nervous or scared in the slightest. I was very calm and simply ready to get back on stage. Still, I was not used to the fact that the seniors were not there; nevertheless, the show must go on.

Since our show was titled "Back 2 School," we opened the show by each troupe member giving freshman and new students little tips and pieces of advice for college life. I advised the young audience: "If you do not want to call your Mom on the phone and ask for more money when you run out, simply download Venmo and request money from her so you can save yourself some embarrassment and an unwanted lesson on finances." The audience laughed and

seemed to respond well to my one-liner^{A3, I3}. We then progressed into our short-form games.

First was Asian Flick, then the Dating Game, and finally Newsroom. I was one of the bachelors in the Dating Game, which I very much enjoyed because playing a male character was always a challenge for me; however, I enjoyed exploring and experimenting with new characters. I played a character that was very contradictory in and of “himself.” I was a cardiac surgeon from the bayous of Louisiana who already had seven kids and was married. You may be wondering why a married man was able to be on the bachelor, and that is a fair question. The truth is that I slipped up in the show, made a mistake, and became a married man playing to win the heart of a bachelorette. The audience laughed at my mistake, and in true improv form, I went with it^{I3, A3}.

After the short-form improv games, the perms played “Shotgun,” and then the entire troupe did a long-form Armando before the perms closed out the show with a Nightmare, another long-form improv game. I had a lot of fun playing in the Armando because, like I said before, long-form improv gives players the opportunity to be creative, spontaneous, and act on your own intuition^{I1}. There are also opportunities for players to make connections between completely different scenes, and audiences always respond well when they see players make connections. It’s one of the magical aspects of improv that make it an art in and of itself. Overall, the show was a success.

After the show, the troupe debriefed in the forum as usual. When we started to pick the show apart game by game, I made the bold choice to voice some of my own opinions about what worked and what didn’t. Although I was a probie, I felt since I was a contributing member of the troupe, I should not be scared to voice my own opinions. The Director and another troupe member agreed with my opinions, which was relieving to hear. After we debriefed the show, the Director changed focus from the show to upcoming auditions. He explained that over the next

couple of days, he would contact us with notes to keep in mind for auditions: “These are the things we’ll need to see from you to gauge your progress, but you should think of them as pointers to help you out.” I left the forum and waited patiently for my notes.

On September 4, 2018, at 12:08 AM, I received a text from the Director: “You’re good at leading scenes, but now we want to see you let someone else take the wheel. Even if the people you’re in the scene with tomorrow night don’t have a clue what’s going on, try to get back to the basics of ‘yes, and.’ That being said, you should also give your scene partners a hand if they are struggling. Avoid being the mom of the scene, both as character as someone who controls the scene... All that being said, you have great character work and are naturally funny. I love having you around, so just know that tomorrow is all about improv mechanics. Either way the decision is not a personal one. To show us perm material, we need to see these notes tomorrow night.”

I read this text message multiple times to make sure I understood every note they wanted me to touch on. Let someone else lead a scene. Do not be a mom. Do not try to control a scene. Simply “yes, and...” and go along with the other improvisers. Got it. This reminded me of my time doing improv in New York City over the summer when I worked with less experienced improvisers. I learned how to simply support and go along with the scene, so I was prepared to do the same in auditions.

On the day of auditions, I could not stop thinking about improv and how badly I wanted to be a perm. My mom kept on bugging me about sending her the show schedule as soon as I made the team. My parents never had the chance to see me perform improv, so they wanted to visit me over a weekend and finally see what I had been talking about since January 2018.

When I was talking to my boyfriend the night before, I told him how nervous I was for auditions. He told me I had absolutely nothing to be worried about because I was a shoe-in. This was echoed by other friends as well, including one of my probie friends. I was told over and over that I had nothing to be afraid of because, not only was I funny, but I was good at improv. However, in the back of my head, I was worried about whether my relationship with my boyfriend would affect my auditions. Would they really cut me because of who I was dating? Did it even matter if I were funny or not? If I did well in every show, including the open house show, would they still cut me? I was also worried about whether my relationships, or lack thereof, to the present troupe members would affect my auditions. I was close with the seniors the previous semester, but now they are all gone. I felt the Director was a good friend of mine, but he is only one person. The other troupe members did not know me as well as the seniors did, and I feared all they thought about me was that I “betrayed their trust” when I started dating Ryan. All I could hope for was that sticking with the notes would get me to perm status, like the Director said.

With my boyfriend, friends, and probies texting me good luck and trying to reassure me that I was going to be on the team, I continued to get more and more nervous before auditions. However, when I thought about being on stage doing improv, a huge smile came across my face. I was so excited, I couldn't contain myself^{A1}. I tried to stay in my office as long as I could, but at half past five, I couldn't take it anymore. I grabbed my backpack and started on my way to Rudder Forum.

Auditions

I arrived at the forum at 5:50 PM, ten minutes before auditions were to begin. Just like auditions the first time around, I walked into the forum, entered my name (a fake name because why not--they already knew who I was), email, and classification into an Excel sheet, took an improv game handout, and sat at the very end of the first row all the way to the right of the theater. I saw my other probie friends, but because we were told to act like we did not know each other and to not reveal that we were probies, I simply looked at them and smiled.

I quietly scanned the room, looking at the perms sitting in the rows at the top of the forum and at the new faces of students wanting to be on the troupe. I saw the other probies talking to new students about improv and why they wanted to audition. It was fun watching them try not to reveal they had already been on the troupe for a semester. A freshman student walked towards me and took a seat to my left. As you already know, I do not like to talk to people when I am nervous and anxious. Since I was not in the mood to talk to new people, I kept quiet until he decided he wanted to talk to me. He explained to me how he was on an improv troupe in high school and how he has wanted to audition for Freudian Slip ever since he found out Texas A&M had an improv team. Seeing how animated and eager he was, I began to pray for his fate in auditions since I knew the members of Freudian Slip were not too kind to know-it-alls and eager beavers.

Shortly after my conversation with him, the Director came to the center of the stage, welcomed everyone to auditions, and explained how the night would go. Deja vu. As he was talking to the students, I started to finish his sentences in my head: "Alright, now we're going to play a little game called..." "Hot Spot," I thought to myself. The first group of names was called out by one of the perms, and the game began. I immediately started to judge who would

be through to the next round and who would be cut. Some students were confident and comfortable on stage, but others looked at the floor or looked unnatural. When my name was called with another group of students, I quietly walked to the stage and stood on the back line with my hands behind my back fiddling with my fingers. Remembering that my notes were to let others control the scene and take the lead, I made sure I was not the first person to jump into the game. In fact, I only sang two songs in Hot Spot: “Uptown Girl” by Billy Joel and “Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina,” the ballad from *Evita*; I let the other students dominate the majority of the game.

After Hot Spot was the game Freeze. I was called up with a group of other students for the first round of Freeze. A student whose name was called two or three after mine started to walk toward me. As he got closer, he looked at me and said “I know you. You were really good in the show on Sunday¹³.” Trying not to reveal that I was a probie, I simply did not respond. The Director explained the directions of the game: two people begin a scene, and then a person on the back line yells “Freeze!” The person on the back line then taps out one of the people in the scene, assumes that person’s exact frozen position, and then they begin an entirely different scene as before. Normally, a person on the back line should tap out Player 1, and then the next person entering the scene from the back line taps out Player 2 so that not one single person is in every scene. However, when I was playing the game, people on the back line did not want to tap me out, so I ended up doing 3-4 scenes in a row in which I just let my scene partner take the lead, as I was instructed to do. I “Yes, and”-ed the whole time--I made sure of it.

After Freeze, it was time for the first round of cuts. I grabbed my belongings and walked into the forum lobby. Because I was anxious, I did not talk to anyone. I simply sat by myself away from the pods of chatty students waiting for the call back list. After five minutes, I was

invited back into the forum and saw other students leaving the forum lobby with their backpacks on and their heads hanging low.

In the second round of auditions, we were divided into pairs for a game called Cocktail Party. In this game, there are three pair of players who are all attending a cocktail party. Each pair develops their own story line by stepping out from the backline and starting a scene. After a 20-30 second dialogue, another pair steps out from the backline while the pair on stage returns to the backline. This pattern of stepping out and stepping back continues until each pair has stepped out from the backline three times. The purpose of this game is to try to develop scenes that connect in one way or another to another pair's scenes. Therefore, this game stresses the importance of listening and making connections in improv.

I could tell the person I was paired with was very inexperienced in improv, but, as the Director instructed me to do, I let my partner take the lead and simply "yes, and"-ed. The only time I did not "yes, and" in the scene--and I remember this vividly because I did it on purpose--was when my scene partner wanted our characters to drink alcohol in the scene. One of Freudian Slip's biggest rules is no scenes with getting drunk or getting high because it's a cheap way to do improv. Therefore, I purposefully "no"-d one of his suggestions to save him from making that mistake. In my opinion, it was not a good scene.

After the "cocktail parties," it was time for another round of cuts. Just as I did before, I gathered my belongings, followed the other students back into the lobby, and sat quietly on a lobby bench. After five minutes, I was again invited back into the forum while other students left.

The third round of auditions included 3-person scenes. Although I was experienced and confident in 3-person scenes¹⁴, I knew that there was a chance doing scenes with inexperienced

students could throw me off my game. However, as I was instructed, I took the back seat and went along with the other students. I began having flashbacks to doing improv at UCB. In one scene, I decided to have some fun and play a “quiet kid” character. Laying on the floor of the stage acting like I was finger painting, I gave my scene partners surprising information to deal with, trying to “give them a baby.” From the audience’s reactions, it seemed to be a successful scene, and I was proud of my scene partners. With the end of that scene, it was time for the third round of cuts.

While I was sitting quietly on my bench in the lobby, one of the new students approached me: “Why are you over here being all quiet?” I looked up, smiled, and explained to him that I normally do not like talking to big groups of new people and that I prefer to stay quiet when I’m feeling anxious. He nodded his head and was understanding. He then proceeded to tell me that he recognized me from the show. He told me that he found my cardiac surgeon from the bayou character to be really funny, and he said: “You did a really great job playing a dude. Like, you had all the mannerisms and everything¹³.” I laughed and explained to him that I usually have a hard time playing men in scenes, but that I really appreciated his compliment. He also reassured me that I was doing well in auditions, and that he thought I was very talented at improv. My conversation with him made me feel more relaxed and less anxious. I told him he was also doing very well, and that I was impressed with his scenes. It turns out that he was also another graduate student, and he was an improv troupe in undergrad. Before we could finish our conversation, another list was posted outside of the forum doors. He and I were invited back into the forum for the last round of auditions.

Like the previous round, the last round of auditions was strictly 3-person scenes. I patiently waited in my seat for my name to be called. For my first scene, I was paired with two

younger boys who I noticed throughout auditions both had senses of humor that were very different than mine. One was aggressive and brought a lot of intensity to his scenes. He often raised his voice and pointed at his scene partners. Another was goofier and had an immature sense of humor. He was the kind of guy who laughed when someone said, “do do.”

Understanding their senses of humor, I prepared myself to expect the unexpected. As I predicted, the scene was neither funny nor very substantial. I tried to let them push the scene along, but it did not seem to be going anywhere. I tried aggressively agreeing with one of the players to give them some obvious support by mimicking their actions, but it still did not seem to be going anywhere. The two boys ended up fighting in the scene, and I was stuck between trying to end the conflict and adding to it. My training said end the conflict, but my basic improv notes said “yes, and” it. In all honesty, I do not recall how the scene ended. All I know is that it was a chaotic scene in which one boy was the captain of a ship, I was a passenger, and the ship began to sink. That was the storyline of the scene, as well as a metaphor of the scene’s fate.

After each person participated in a 3-person scene, the perms divided us up into groups to give us notes. I was in a group with the two young boys again, and the Director was our group leader. He sat us down and gave us notes, but the majority of the time, he was looking at the two younger boys. The only words he directed to me were to “have fun” in my scenes. “Have fun?” I thought to myself. Easy enough for me. Considering these were his only notes for me at the time, I felt pretty good about auditions. Not only that, but the other students in the auditorium seemed to be responding well and enjoying my scenes, so I felt even better. However, there was still a little voice in my head asking: “What if you get cut?” At this point, that seemed highly unlikely.

After each group was finished talking, everyone came back to the middle of the forum for the final round of 3-person scenes. I was paired with two younger girls, one who seemed normal and who I found to be funny, and another who I thought to be a little on the crazy side. In each of her scenes, her high energy level was unmatched by every other student. As soon as our scene began, both girls decided to start twirling their hair and talking in high-pitched, “valley girl” voices. Throughout my probie semester, I learned when it comes to characters, opposites work best, so you should try to counter high energy characters with low energy characters to give scenes a base reality. Consequently, I decided to play a low-energy high school boy who was asking his two best girlfriends for advice before he goes on a date. For the most part, I let the other girls take the lead. This was my last scene in auditions, so I made sure I did not lead or control the scene. The Director specifically said: “To show us perm material, we need to see these notes tomorrow night.” I was showing them those notes. I made sure of it.

When the scene ended, I headed back to my seat and gathered my things for the final round of cuts. I followed the other students out to the lobby, and everyone began to worry. After all, this was it. I assumed my position on my bench, and another guy came up and talked to me. He told me he recognized me from the shows and said that he thought I was one of the funnier members of the troupe. I told him that I thought he was one of the funnier students at auditions and that I hope he makes the troupe. We then started to talk about mutual friends of ours and how we got into improv--more small talk. After what seemed like 30 minutes, the doors of the forum opened, and three perms walked into the lobby. One perm walked over to my best probie friend, and the other two perms, who I noticed were the troupe members I was the least close to, called me over to speak with me privately.

We walked away from the other students and other probies to a small space off the side of the lobby where the vending machines were. My heart started pounding, and my hands were shaking. One of the perms asked me: "So how did you feel about auditions?" Still shaking, I responded: "I thought overall it was good and I had fun. During the Cocktail Party, I know I did not 'yes, and' at one point but that's because I was trying to steer him away from doing a drunk scene. But other than that, I feel like I hit all of the notes you gave me. I don't know--I'm just nervous!" He cracked a fake smile and then turned to the other perm.

The Verdict

(It is at this moment in the writing process where I am glad I'm not writing on paper because I would be getting tears all over my thesis. Reliving this moment is one of the hardest things for me to do. I wish so badly that I could stop writing at this very second. I'm currently trying to wipe tears from my eyes just so that I could see the screen. I still have so much anger in my heart from what happened this night.)

When he turned to the other perm, I could tell he did not know how to begin. With his fingers twiddling over his stomach, he let out a little laugh that still haunts me to this day and said: "Well I really don't know how to say this." No. You're joking. "We won't be taking you on as a perm this semester." I stopped breathing. My jaw dropped slightly. I stopped shaking. I looked at the other perm, who could've easily read the words "Surely you must be joking" that were shooting from my eyes. In the most annoying, condescending, offensive voice I have ever heard, he decided to say: "Yeah, we feel like your improv has plateaued." Do you even know what the word plateaued means? It means something has ceased to change after a time of progress or activity. The semester just started! How can someone plateau when the semester just

started? Also, last time I checked, I did very well in the show we had two days ago. Two days. You want to tell me my improv has plateaued since then? I was still waiting for them to tell me this was all a joke, but that point never came. Because I was screaming in my head, I did not hear anything else they said until the same perm condescendingly reached his hand out to shake mine saying: "It's nothing personal. We've really enjoyed having you on the troupe." The other perm said: "Yeah, we still think you're funny, and we want you to still hang out with us and come to our shows!" After overcoming the initial misjudgments about me at the beginning of the semester and an entire semester of constantly being judged, critiqued, and threatened to be cut; after overcoming every damn challenge you threw at me; after not only surviving but thriving in the face of those challenges; and after constantly improving and making the audience laugh in every show I was in, you have the audacity to shake my hand and tell me it is nothing personal? After an entire semester of putting up with your games, it's entirely personal! It is 100% without a shadow of a doubt personal. In that moment, I wanted to sit the two perms down and give them a very intense lesson on having a sense of decency and humanity. Unfortunately, as they walked away, I stood there in shock of what just happened.

Once I was able to feel my legs under me, I began to walk back into the lobby. Rachel Roberts ran up to me saying "You made it, right? I made it! So, you must have made it, right?" She was so sure I was going to be a perm that when she found out she was a perm, she was certain I was, too. With my eyes filling with tears, I looked at her and shook my head no. Her jaw dropped. She didn't understand, and neither did I. I congratulated her, put my head down, and walked away.

I picked up my phone and called my boyfriend Ryan, who was a member on the troupe the previous semester, as well as all four years he was in college. When I told him the news, he

thought I was joking. He, too, was in disbelief. With Ryan still on the phone. I left Rudder Forum and walked the 1.1 miles back to my car in tears. When I finally reached my car, I laid my head on the steering wheel and wept. Sobbing over the phone, I asked Ryan: “How could this have happened? What did I do wrong?” He told me I did nothing wrong, but that was so hard for me to believe. The fact that I used to think these people were my friends shocked me. I felt like a pig who was raised and fattened to be slaughtered at their convenience. The Director did not even have the guts to cut me himself! They had to send the two people I was least close with to do the dirty work! I was shocked, angry, furious, hurt, livid, distraught, confused, repulsed, sad, bitter, and overall heartbroken. I felt embarrassed, used, and played. I started my car and drove home.

When I got home, my sadness and bitterness quickly turned into rage. I began to throw pillows off my bed as hard as I could. My face was red, and my eyes were bloodshot. I cannot remember a time I was more hurt and angrier in my life. I laid there in bed looking at the ceiling while my boyfriend tried to calm me down. I knew he was there but none of his words were registering. I stared at the ceiling looking for answers as to what went wrong. Everyone said I was a shoe-in. Everyone said I had absolutely nothing to be worried about. The seniors who graduated said I was constantly improving. The troupe thought I was funny. I performed well in every show. What did I do wrong?

Out of pure rage, I began furiously punching my bedroom wall, over and over again. Never in my life have I taken my anger out through violence, but if I was to start, now was the time. I cannot underestimate how angry and furious I was. I wanted to get in my car and drive back to Louisiana. I continued to punch the wall. I wanted nothing to do with the lying, misleading, careless, thoughtless, distrusting, senseless people sitting in the forum that night. I

thought my commitment to the troupe, my tireless effort, and my improvement from where I started meant something. Turns out neither commitment nor talent meant anything in the forum that night. I was doomed from the start.^{NC}

Answers

That night, I lied in bed for hours trying to fall asleep, but I knew it would be impossible to sleep until I heard some answers to the atrocity that occurred earlier that evening. I texted the Director. Giving me an explanation was the very least he could do after the way they treated me. When I told him I had followed every single note he gave me, and when I asked him what I did wrong, he responded: “We did pay attention to how you followed the notes, and I personally appreciate that, but as a group we felt like you followed them to the extreme.” So, he is telling me that I was cut because I followed every note too perfectly? He specifically said before auditions: “To show us perm material, we need to see these notes tomorrow night.” So, he told me I hit each note, but I did it too well? He continued: “As for not controlling scenes, you followed that note well. But we would have liked to see you initiate a scene.” This really confused me because in the notes he sent me before auditions, he said: “You’re good at leading scenes, but now we want to see you let someone else take the wheel.” So, he admitted he knew I could lead a scene, but he needed to see it again? Rachel White even spoke of this in her interview: “[Hannah] was successful in finding her own voice in improv. She did not rely on others to carry a scene, which is one of the biggest lessons we have to teach. She could effortlessly handle any scene that was thrown at her.” If he knew that about me, which he admitted he did, why did he need to see it again in auditions? He told me to focus on other things! Why does he keep contradicting himself? I told him how confused I was about

everything he was telling me because it sounded like whether I hit their notes or not, I was going to be cut from the troupe. When I reminded him that the feedback I received last semester was drastically different than what he was telling me now, he responded: “Teaching this past semester was weird because of the seniors. It was a lot more relaxed than usual and we didn’t give more detailed and honest feedback to anyone like we should have, and I’m sorry about that.” In other words, I was misled and eventually cut because other members on the troupe, including the Director, failed to teach properly. I was being punished as a result of their failure. How was this fair?

It was at that point that I stopped responding to him. I was not interested in having a conversation with someone who gave me standards to meet only to cut me from the troupe when I met those standards. Not only that, but I considered him a good friend. However, it was at this point that he completely betrayed my trust. I was only being misled and lied to for eight months.

While I was trying to fall asleep that night, I heard a knock on my door. I wanted nothing more than to stay in bed on my tear-soaked sheets, but the knocks were persistent. I opened the door to find Rachel Roberts standing in my doorway with tacos, chips, and queso. While I appreciated the gesture, I genuinely did not want to see her that night. I was jealous of her. I did not understand how she made the team and I did not. It made no sense to me. When I told her I was not in the mood to eat nor did I have an appetite, she asked if we could still talk. We walked back to my bedroom and sat on my bed.

She started to tell me how sorry she felt for me and how she could not believe what happened earlier. She told me that, while she does not know their reasons for cutting me, she said one of the perms removed themselves from my vote so that there would not be any negative bias in my vote. The perm she mentioned is the same perm who completely disapproved of my

relationship with my boyfriend. I am no fool. I am not stupid. That information made it very clear to me what happened in that forum. It may not have been the entire reason as to why I was cut, but to think it did not have a significant effect on the vote would be foolish. It also made it very clear to me that I wanted no part of an organization that treats its members with complete disregard to their commitment, talent, and feelings.

CHAPTER IX

MOVING ON

The morning after auditions, my face was still red, I had broken out, and my eyelids were almost swollen shut. My boyfriend called me to check up on me, but I did not say much. I stayed in bed for the majority of the day, debating on whether I wanted to go to class that afternoon. Given my emotional state, I was leaning toward not attending.

Rowan, one of my best friends from graduate school, texted me that afternoon asking how auditions went. When I told her the news, she began yelling through the text messages. Two minutes later, I received a text from her boyfriend comforting me and voicing his own frustrations with what happened. I told both of them thank you for the comforting words, and I put my phone up. I did not want to talk about it.

Twenty minutes later, my bedroom door swung open, and Rowan was standing there with Raising Canes in her hands. “I’m assuming you haven’t eaten in hours.” She knew me too well. She took a seat on my bed, I laid my head on her shoulder, and we sat there eating chicken tenders. Though I did not have much of an appetite, I forced myself to eat a couple of bites because I knew this was probably the only thing I would eat all day. After about fifteen minutes, Rowan packed up the food and headed to campus for class. I stayed in bed for a couple more hours, crying on and off. I began to ask myself if I was going to finish my master’s program at Texas A&M, because at that point, improv was the only thing keeping me in school. It had become my saving grace^{A1}. Now, my boyfriend is graduated and has moved across the country for his new job; my best friends from the previous year have all graduated Texas A&M and

moved elsewhere; and now I've been cut from my improv troupe. I felt I had nothing. I felt like everything was ripped away from me. Now what?

Trying to process everything that happened, I started to review everything that was said to me between the time I was cut to now. I was looking for answers. I wanted definitive instead of contradictory answers as to why I was cut. I wanted someone to tell me where to go from here. I wanted someone to tell me what my next move was. I began to cry again. I started going over my conversation with Ryan from the night before, hoping to find some answers. One thing he said stuck out to me because it was neither comforting nor helpful (at the time). In fact, it made me furious. So casually, he said to me: "I had no idea not being able to play make believe anymore with a group of college kids would hurt you this bad." Upon hearing this, I clenched my teeth together, widened my eyes, and through the most intense frown and piercing eyes, I asked him "Are you serious?" I was offended and livid. He was on the same improv troupe all four years of his college career, and he has the audacity to downplay my experience as just playing make-believe? This infuriated me, but I could not understand why. Although, when I truly thought about it, he was right (this was the last time I ever admitted he was right).

At the essence of it, improv is in fact playing make-believe with friends. Like Halpern, Close, and Johnson (1994) said: "improvisation is making it up as you go along" (p. 4). But through every scene, every practice, every show, I quickly learned improv was so much more than just make-believe. It's working together; it's being committed to your scene partner and sincere to the audience; it's being vulnerable, sensitive, and raw; it's walking onto a stage and falling on your face; it's honest reactions and constant discovery of both self and others; it's experimenting with characters, identities, and exploring possibilities; it's taking risks and leaps of faith hoping that your scene partner catches you. It is taking your own experiences from

reality, and using creativity, intuition, and spontaneity to change the story. At its peak, improv is magically working together to reveal the funny out of the most ordinary of situations.

When I realized how important improv is to me^{AI}, I also realized that improv is so much bigger than one collegiate troupe. Viola Spolin developed improv games to foster creativity and spontaneity in both children and adults in a most non-judgmental way. Improv was not created to be an avenue for college students to threaten to discontinue someone's membership in a club if they suddenly changed preferences and found them to not be funny anymore. Judgement was so prevalent in the system and interactions of this specific improv comedy troupe that it in fact prohibited the cultivation of creativity and connectedness of improv among between perms and probies until the very end of the semester^{NC}.

I actually went to one of the troupe's earlier shows last semester to watch Rachel R. perform as a perm. I noticed a significant difference in both her and another past-probie's performance. They looked 100x more comfortable on stage between their last performance as probies and this performance as perms because they were not under the judgement of other perms! Judgement is poison to improv. Judgement is in fact the exact antithesis of the essence of improv comedy, but it was so centrifugal in the constant interactions between perms and probies.

While at first, I wished my fate on the troupe was different, I'm happy the way things worked out. Without having the demand of Freudian Slip dominating my schedule, I have been able to spend more time with my graduate school friends, my roommates, as well as my boyfriend. Not being on the troupe has also given me the opportunity to reflect on my experience and appreciate everything improv comedy has to offer. I've been introduced to the world of improv that stretches across the globe, from Sacramento to Houston to New Orleans to

New York to Ireland, England, Germany, and even Greece. I like to seek out other improv troupes and theaters in cities I visit^{S5}.

I am also already a member of another improv comedy troupe in the Bryan/College Station area^{S2, S6}. While this specific improv troupe is nowhere as serious and demanding as Freudian Slip, it is still an opportunity to do improv. It is a community theater troupe in which members range from 22 years to 60 years old and come from all different backgrounds, lifestyles, and occupations. Within the troupe, I actually have a voice and, because of my previous experience on Freudian Slip and at UCB, I have a large role in teaching and directing improv on the troupe. While it does not provide me with the challenges and opportunities to significantly grow in my improv skills, it provides me with opportunities to teach^{A5} and share the art of improv and perform without the judgement of college students^{A4} constantly hovering over me.

As a teaching assistant in graduate school, I have incorporated improv games in my youth development lectures^{S2, I2}. My students thoroughly enjoy playing the improv games in class, and considering improv comedy's root in youth development, they learn about fun and non-conventional ways to foster positive youth development. Every time I have played an improv game with my students, I have noticed a significant boost in class engagement and a change in some students' behaviors. For example, just last week I spent one entire class period playing improv games and teaching students how to incorporate them into their own youth development strategies. During this class time, I noticed a student who usually sleeps in class come to life. He was fully engaged in class and started to encourage other students during the games. Another student even told him: "This is the most awake I have seen you in class." It was very fun watching his personality come to life. After class, I had a couple of students asking me for

instructions of how to play each game because they want to play the games with their campers. I received an email from another student after class saying: “I had a lot of fun in class today, and I can’t thank you enough for being your goofy self and sharing all those improv games. It helped the class to contribute and loosen up. Thank you again!” Given the positive feedback, I will continue to use improv games in class not only to teach youth games but to mainly foster interactions, creativity, spontaneity, and teamwork among students¹³.

Since being introduced to improv, I have become more aware of the actions and words of myself as well as others. I am also more vocal about my feelings, thoughts, and emotions in my relationship with my boyfriend and friendships with others as I have learned it is better to be honest and sincere rather than withhold thoughts and feelings.

When asked to describe changes in my level of comedy before and after membership on Freudian Slip, Ryan Oatman said: “In the beginning, you were involved but timid. Your comedy was there, you just didn't know how to channel it. You treated scenes motherly and by teaching. Towards the end, you were able to figure out what you wanted, and you were more confident in yourself as an improviser, which in turn made your comedy less forced and more natural.” I find this to be descriptive of my approach to my life as an emerging adult. I am more comfortable and confident in the direction my life is headed than before I started improv. I am content and happy with my current circumstances. Though I do not know where I will be headed after graduation, I am not scared, anxious, nor worried, and I do not feel the need to control my situation. Two years ago from today, I was in the final semester of my senior year at LSU, waiting desperately for an acceptance letter from Texas A&M. I needed to know what my next move was. I needed to be able to answer where I go from here. I needed control over my situation. Although I am in a strikingly similar position to where I was two years ago, my

outlook is drastically different. My approach to the unknown is hopeful rather than fearful. Of course, I will apply for jobs, and I hope to land a job to start over the summer. However, I am not going to restrain myself to single possibility. I am open to whatever happens. Like Mike said earlier, I have learned to embrace the absurd and the unpredictable in life. I have become more comfortable with the uncomfortable and with the situations I cannot control. Because of this, I am also more open to working with others. When addressing changes in my level of comedy, Mike said in his interview: “When I graduated, you had grown in important ways. You began to help teammates on stage in a meaningful way.” I believe this is reflected in my everyday life. Rather than assuming the position of group leader, I like to assume the back seat now. I like to see what others have to offer before I offer my own skills and talents. I also listen more intently to others and have become more patient^{S6, 16S3}.

Most importantly, since my membership on Freudian Slip, I have been relieved of the constant search for approval from college students who are also going through the changes associated with emerging adulthood. I realize that peer acceptance is still important to me as an emerging adult. However, I am smart enough to know when the search for approval becomes unhealthy. Although being cut from the troupe was incredibly painful, this autoethnography process has been a cathartic experience. So, some judgmental college students decided to cut me from their club--I’m still funny, and I’m good at improv!

CHAPTER X
THE DEEPER MEANING

Introduction

The purpose of this autoethnography is to understand how my participation in serious leisure influenced the development of my identity as an emerging adult. Throughout the writing process, I examined the relationship between my experience on Freudian Slip, a collegiate improv comedy troupe, and identity development. In this section, I answer the following research questions:

1. How was my participation in improv comedy considered serious leisure according to Stebbins (1992)?

If through my reflexive analysis I can explain how my participation was serious leisure, then I will move forward to examine the role of serious leisure and its impact on my identity by answering the following:

1. Which of Kleiber's (1999) conditions for identity formation through serious leisure were fulfilled by my participation in improv comedy?
2. What role does my participation in serious leisure play in my life as an emerging adult?

While the previous four chapters presented the story of my experience on Freudian Slip, this chapter will reveal the *deeper* meaning of that experience. It will define the relationship between improv comedy and my identity as an emerging adult in terms of serious leisure and its capability to cultivate identity development. I will answer my research questions in the order in

which they are proposed. First, I will answer whether my level of participation in improv comedy is considered serious leisure. If I fail to answer this question, the relationship between Stebbins' (1992) characteristics of serious leisure and Kleiber's (1999) identity formation conditions cannot be examined in this study. Second, I will identify which of Kleiber's (1999) conditions of identity development were fulfilled by my participation in improv comedy. It should be noted that not all of the conditions must be fulfilled in order for serious leisure to influence the formation of my identity. I will also address in this section characteristics specific to improv comedy and not listed in Kleiber's framework that influenced my identity development. Lastly, I will discuss the role that serious leisure plays in my life as an emerging adult. Answering this question will provide a holistic understanding of why emerging adults should engage in serious leisure and why the study of youth development should dedicate more research to serious leisure in emerging adulthood.

Serious Leisure and Improv Comedy

Stebbins (1992) defined serious leisure by six exclusive characteristics: need to persevere at the activity, availability of a leisure career; need to put in effort to gain skill knowledge; realization of various special benefits, including "self-actualization, self-enrichment, renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, self-expression, social interaction and belongingness, physical products, and pure fun" (Stebbins, 1992, p. 257); unique ethos and social world; and finally, an attractive personal and social identity. Throughout the writing process, it became very clear that my participation in improv comedy is considered serious leisure according to Stebbins' (1992) standards, just as I predicted.

My need to persevere at the activity, the first characteristic of serious leisure, is evident through my effort to overcome challenges associated with the nature of improv comedy as well as the social aspect of improv. Researchers assert leisure activities afford youth with opportunities to overcome challenges and persevere in the face of adversity (Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Larson, 2000). This assertion is supported through my experience on a collegiate improv comedy troupe. Learning improv comedy and being part of a new social group proved challenging in the beginning, especially during my first three weeks of improv practice when I was learning the basics of improv comedy. However, every time I overcame the challenge of not asking questions, of “yes, and”-ing, or not controlling an improv scene, I felt good about myself, and I knew I was capable of improving. Therefore, my need to persevere was increased. With every challenge I overcame, my perseverance only increased into a more powerful force.

Not only did I need to persevere in the face of challenges experienced on Freudian Slip, but I needed to persevere through the challenge of being cut from Freudian Slip! Being cut from Freudian Slip was incredibly painful and heartbreaking, and I did not get over that heartbreak until I wrote this thesis. After that challenge, I took on the challenge of joining another improv comedy troupe, which was weird, different, and definitely not easy. Still, I persevered, and I continue to persevere because I am passionate about improv comedy. This supports the assertion that youth persevere through challenges, especially in leisure, because we experience positive feelings from overcoming adversity (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997; Stebbins, 1992). However, it should be noted that my need to persevere was my own choice as an emerging adult. I did not have parents, teachers, nor friends telling me that I needed to continue learning improv. This is concurrent with Siegenthaler and Gonzalez’ (1997) finding that youth who are able to

independently determine how much effort to give and how much they want to persevere are more likely to experience a serious leisure career. This supports Stebbins' (1992) assertion that perseverance is defining characteristic of serious leisure, and it assists in accomplishing the sixth characteristic of serious leisure: an attractive personal and social identity. Additionally, because I independently made the decision to engage in improv comedy and persevere through the challenges, I took responsibility for my own identity development, which Zarrett & Eccles (2006) say is a significant characteristic of emerging adulthood and which will be discussed later in the chapter.

A *leisure career*, the second characteristic of serious leisure, became more available to me as my semester on Freudian Slip progressed, as well as during my time studying improv at Upright Citizens Brigade in New York. Research claims that a leisure career is dependent upon continued involvement, successful development of skills, and opportunities to participate in the leisure activity (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997; Stebbins, 1992). While I did experience successful development of skills, such as progressing from short-form to long-form improv comedy, and achievement throughout my involvement, they were not the only components of my leisure experience that determined the availability of a leisure career. I argue that my passion drove me to pursue a leisure career in improv comedy more than progression and achievement. After I was cut from Freudian Slip, I did not participate in improv comedy for nearly three months; consequently, there was a time where I was not continuing my involvement because I did not have an opportunity to participate. Therefore, I was not progressing nor achieving in improv comedy. However, my passion for improv still existed. My passion for improv comedy pushed me to seek more opportunities to do improv and pushed me to continue my involvement in improv comedy. It was my passion that drove me to continue developing improv comedy

skills and to pursue a leisure career. Therefore, I argue that the availability of a leisure career can be typified through passion for the leisure activity, as well as opportunities to participate, continued involvement, and development of skills. By these standards, as well as Stebbins (1992) standards, improv comedy fulfills the second characteristic of serious leisure, and it continues to do so. Although I am not on a collegiate improv comedy troupe, I am still performing improv comedy at a local theater. Improv comedy remains a highly salient career in my life.

Like other serious leisure activities, you must put in *effort in order to gain skill knowledge* in improv comedy, which is the third characteristic of serious leisure. While Rachel White said I had a good understanding of improv from the start, I still had to work tirelessly in order to improve my comedy skills. I had to learn how to create environments, funny characters, and substantial scenes, and I had to learn how to support others in scenes. I had to learn how to play short-form, mid-form, and long-form improv games. Outside of the improv classroom, I watched YouTube videos of professional improv performances in order to gain more skill knowledge. I also reached out to peers for advice on how I can better my improv skills. My effort to gain skill knowledge was also evident in the amount of time I spent practicing improv each week. Like other serious leisure activities, in order to be a better improviser, I had to continue to *do* improv. Unlike casual leisure, performing good improv comedy requires significant effort and training and is not immediately rewarding (Stebbins, 2015). The first three weeks of my improv career were painful and frustrating. It was not relaxing nor was it a way to pass the time, like casual leisure activities (Stebbins, 2015). I needed to persevere in the face of challenges and attend as many practices as I could, which I continue to do even on a different improv comedy troupe. The significant amount of effort I afford to become a better improviser

supports Stebbins' (1992) third characteristic of serious leisure; furthermore, because improv comedy offers youth the opportunity for skill building and demonstrate effort, it should be recognized as an avenue for positive youth development (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson, 2000).

The fourth characteristic of serious leisure—the *realization of various special benefits*—was and still is a continuous process. In the beginning, I felt *feelings of accomplishment* with every successful scene I performed and every time I made the audience and perms laugh. *Feelings of accomplishment* were scattered throughout my time on the troupe, both in practice and in shows. However, it was not until my second show that I experienced the *self-actualization* that I am a performer. Anytime there was a real audience, I performed well as a talented improviser. By my fourth show, I knew I belonged on stage and that I have a unique talent of bringing laughter into strangers' lives. Doing improv made me realize that my performances throughout high school and in Tri Delta were actually rooted in a unique talent rather than a simple “quirk.” It was not until the end of the semester when I realized improv comedy is a way to *express myself*. I always knew I had a funny side and a quick wit, but it was not until Freudian Slip that I was really given a stage to express my personality. Another benefit to constantly performing improv is *self-enrichment*. Every time I performed in a show or did well in practice, I felt purposeful. Every time I made even a single audience member laughed, I felt good about myself. Improv comedy enriched my life both on and off stage. *Social interaction and belongingness* are also benefits of being on an improv comedy troupe, though I did not feel true belongingness until the end of my semester with Freudian Slip. Last but not least, I experience *pure fun* while performing improv. There is no better feeling than working with another person to create a funny, substantial scene from a one-word suggestion. Like Ryan,

Rachel, and I said, at the end of the day, improv comedy is playing make believe with friends. My realization of benefits from participating in improv comedy supports the notion that leisure activities afford youth opportunities for self-actualization, self-enrichment, feelings of accomplishment, and social and intellectual belongingness (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997; Stebbins, 1992). My *realization of various benefits* from participating in improv comedy as serious leisure supports Stebbins' (1992) framework as well as Kleiber's assertion that serious leisure can be a place for "self-expression and personal enrichment" (Kleiber, 1999, p. 143).

Improv comedy also has a *unique ethos and social world*, which is the fifth characteristic of serious leisure. Consequently, like other positive youth development leisure activities, improv comedy offers improvisers opportunities for belongingness and social interaction (Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997). The world of improv comedy is not limited to collegiate improv troupes nor professional improv troupes. It is not limited to a specific city, rather it exists across the globe. As Stebbins (2015) explains, serious leisure communities interact through communication and socialization. Similarly, improv comedy communities interact through social media, emails, conventions, as well as through competitions and improv comedy shows. While most people think of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* or even *Saturday Night Live* when they think of improv, the world of improv is in fact quite vast. In addition, many improv comedy theaters, such as The Second City, UCB, iO Theater, and Sacramento Comedy Spot, offer classes for both youth and adults. Unruh (1979) asserts that members of unique ethos and social worlds are free to come and go as they please. While this is true for improv, it should be noted that standards of membership differ from troupe to troupe based on the seriousness of the troupe. For example, in Freudian Slip, probies are expected to be at every practice, and their

attendance, or lack thereof, at practice does have an influence on the status of their membership. However, on my community theater improv troupe, the standards are more relaxed. Regardless, the world of improv is open to everyone anywhere, but membership on an improv troupe is more serious.

The last characteristic of serious leisure that improv comedy fulfills is the development of *an attractive personal and social identity* (Stebbins, 1992). In the first month or so of my membership on Freudian Slip, I was timid and scared due to the constant threat of being cut from the troupe. I was also intimidated by some of the permanent members because they were distant and cold towards me at times. Fortunately, after persevering through challenges, progressing and developing improv skills, and experiencing feelings of accomplishment, I had started to “come into my own,” as Mike said. When I started to feel more successful and comfortable in improv, I was able to accomplish truth in comedy little by little. When I drew upon authentic situations and knowledge from my own personal life, I performed better improv comedy and I became more confident in my identity as an improviser. Through improv comedy, I was able to sync my passion and interests with my actions and truly express myself. Like I said in my story, I performed my best when I was purely me. Unfortunately, there were times when my identity outside of improv did not sync up with my identity in Freudian Slip due to the presence of judgement and hostility in interactions among troupe members. This finding has significant theoretical and practical implications in the area of youth development. Steinberg (2014) asserts that adolescents have a heightened sensitivity to peers due to changes in the psychosocial areas of the brain. This results in adolescents engaging in deviant behavior more often when they are around peers rather than when they are alone (Caldwell & Darling, 1999; Caldwell & Smith, 2006; Osgood et al., 1996; Steinberg, 2014). Although I never felt pressure to engage in deviant

behaviors with Freudian Slip, I did feel incredibly sensitive and susceptible to their judgements of my improv, which therefore made me feel like they were judging my identity. Because of this sensitivity to my peers and their judgements, I changed my own personality in order to be “one of them.”

For example, the miscommunication I had with Rachel White occurred at a party in which I was trying to get to know some of the troupe members. I attempted to joke with her the same way I joke with my friends outside of Freudian Slip, and it resulted in a huge miscommunication that turned her against me. When I heard from another troupe member that Rachel W. took offense to my joke because she did not understand my sense of humor, I felt like I was not able to joke with her nor Freudian Slip like I did with my friends because I feared I would be cut from the troupe. I do not think Freudian Slip nor I understood the substantial influence their judgement had on my identity development both in improv comedy as well as in emerging adulthood.

My experience with Freudian Slip was a unique and quite controversial leisure experience because it did not align with the positive social benefits that are usually derived from structured leisure activities, such as higher levels of belonging, self-esteem, and prosocial norms (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fredrick & Eccles, 2005; Mahoney, Schweder, & Stattin, 2002; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005; Putnam, 2015; Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997). Instead, my participation on Freudian Slip often resulted in lower levels of self-esteem and belonging as a result of negative peer interactions. When I finally experienced a sense of belongingness, it was at the very end of the semester, which leads me to believe that belongingness was rooted in my improved capability to perform good improv. That’s when I started to feel like “one of [them],” as Mike said.

While I was able to eventually form an attractive and personal identity through improv comedy, the development of my identity through improv comedy as well as in emerging adulthood was hindered by peers in Freudian Slip. I have three theories for why this was possible:

1. **Heightened sensitivity to peers:** Adolescents have a heightened sensitivity to peers due to psychosocial changes (Steinberg, 2014), but adolescents are also experiencing cognitive and physical changes. Emerging adults, on the other hand, are more focused on personal identity and psychosocial changes since they are not having to deal with cognitive and physical changes (Adams et al., 2006; Codina et al., 2017; Erikson, 1968). Therefore, I theorize that emerging adults are just as or even more sensitive to peers than adolescents.
2. **Lack of adult supervision:** Although improv comedy, specifically membership on Freudian Slip, is a structured leisure activity in that it requires practice, commitment, and skills, it lacks adult supervision, which is often associated with structured leisure activities and adds to the benefits of structured leisure activities. However, emerging adulthood is a stage in which we are free of the supervision associated with adolescence (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006; Arnett, 2000). Obviously, as emerging adults, we do not need adult supervision to monitor our behavior. However, we should be able to recognize when our behavior and words can be damaging to others. Either this recognition was never made in Freudian Slip, or it was recognized but because that was the “culture” or “policy” of how perms were to treat probies, as Rachel White attested to, nothing was done about it. Again, we fell victim to the presence of peers.

3. **Psychosocial aspect of improv comedy:** Unlike leisure activities that are rooted in physical abilities (such as skiing, kayaking, volleyball, and hiking) or cognitive abilities (such as computer gaming, reading, puzzles, cards, board games), improv comedy relies heavily on psychosocial connections and personal identity. It relies on your chemistry with your scene partners, your ability to appeal to the audience, and your ability to accomplish truth in comedy. It relies heavily on your ability to reveal parts of yourself and relate them to other people because people laugh at things they can relate to (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994). Therefore, when peers tell you “I’ve seen better” or “that was really bad,” not only will you feel like you have failed at improv, but you will feel like they do not accept you as an individual. You may feel they do not appreciate your creativity, spontaneity, and intuition, which is what improv is rooted in (Spolin & Sills, 1999). It is possible you may feel they are insulting you personally rather than your improv. This has a greater effect in adolescence and emerging adulthood when your sensitivity to peers is heightened.

Unfortunately, it was not until I went to New York and also joined a community theater improv group, where I experienced positive environments and acceptance instead of hostile, judgmental peers, that my identity in improv comedy was solidified. Regardless of my experience on Freudian Slip, I did eventually accomplish the development of an identity within improv comedy, which supports Stebbins’ (1992) assertion that an attraction personal and social identity emerges through serious leisure.

Through an analysis of my participation in improv comedy, it is obvious that improv comedy is a serious leisure activity. It is also becoming clearer, especially after understanding

how significant peers are in emerging adulthood, that improv comedy has influenced the formation of my identity as an emerging adult.

Conditions for Identity Formation

Kleiber's (1999) work on leisure and identity formation asserts that leisure contributes the most to the formation of identity when:

it affords an opportunity for exploration of and experimentation with emerging interests; the interests that emerged and are refined are truly personal and in keeping with other values; action taken in response to interests creates feedback from the environment, including recognition from others, that reinforces the interests; there is competence achieved in that action that defines and reinforces one's potentialities; there is a degree of commitment to that action and to others who are involved; comfort with others emerges in the social world that is created around those interests and skills. (p. 103)

While it is clear that I found a positive identity in improv comedy, I believe there are certain conditions of improv comedy that influenced my identity as an emerging adult more than others.

Participating in improv comedy influenced the formation of my identity as an emerging adult in that it provided an *opportunity for exploration and experimentation* in two ways. First, and as Kleiber intends, improv comedy gave me the opportunity to explore my interest in comedy and in performing. I have always had a very strong interest in comedy and humor; however, it was never cultivated in a traditional school setting. I was never able to explore and expand my interest in a classroom in high school nor in college. However, by participating in serious leisure, I was able to take my interest in comedy and cultivate it into something useful and beneficial to both myself and others. The numerous practices and shows allowed me to experiment with my

sense of humor and my comedy skills, pushing boundaries to see what works and what does not work, what I am and am not comfortable with. This eventually resulted in me finding my own voice in comedy—a sarcastic, witty, yet playful sense of humor. It allowed me to take all of the funny situations I concoct in my mind throughout each day and bring them to life. I noticed a while ago that many times when I am interacting with people or simply going about my day, I witness something happen or I hear someone say something, and I immediately think of a funny situation that plays out from that event. Therefore, usually I am laughing hysterically at the scenario in my head rather than what is actually happening in reality.

For example, when I boarded a plane to go visit my boyfriend in Sacramento, the flight attendants did their usual safety demonstrations. I started laughing hysterically to myself because, although I was watching a flight attendant simply do her job, I thought about how hysterical it would be if she took her safety demonstration too seriously and demanded that all eyes were on here. I pictured her telling a young kid: “Excuse me, please put your iPad down and look up here. Now I’m going to have to start over.” Then she would yell to the back of the plane: “Excuse me sir, can you please wake up? I have to show you this. Ugh, now I have to start over.” In my mind, it was a comedy sketch, although in reality it was dull and boring.

Luckily, being on an improv comedy troupe provided me with the stage to bring these scenarios to life. A suggestion from the audience is just like the “suggestions” I hear in everyday life. Improv comedy allowed me to cultivate my sense of humor and my craziness into a talent and piece of art. This discovery aligns with Waterman’s (1990) belief that “activities are personally expressive when they bring an awareness of some characteristics of self that are uniquely individual potentialities that prompt the feeling that ‘this is who I really am’” (cited in Kleiber, 1999, p. 97). It also gave me the opportunity to explore my interest not only in comedy

but in theater. In high school and throughout college, I played sports and intramurals, and I have always and still identify myself as an athlete. However, being on an improv comedy troupe was the first time I took up theater as a leisure activity. I soon realized I am just as comfortable on a stage in front of an audience as I am on a soccer field in front of spectators. I have always felt drawn to performing, as you could see through my high school shenanigans and my excitement to improvise my sorority's skit, but I never thought I would find a leisure career in performing. My participation in improv comedy proved otherwise, and I now identify as an improviser just as much as I do an athlete.

Second, improv comedy gave me the opportunity for exploration and experimentation with interests other than comedy and humor. Improv comedy's unique characteristic of "truth in comedy" allowed me to experiment with characters, identities, and every day scenarios. It gives me the option of playing any character I want, whether it be a teacher, a professional athlete, a mom, or a CEO of a company. By experimenting with different characters and playing to the top of my intelligence, I discovered there are some characters I feel more comfortable playing in comparison to others. For example, I discovered that I struggled with not teaching in scenes because I actually love teaching. I love sharing knowledge and helping others succeed. I also discovered that I am good at playing "mom" characters because of how my own mother raised me—very hands-on, very helpful, and incredibly nurturing. Therefore, it is easier for me to assume a "mom" character in improv rather than a CEO. I tried playing the CEO of a company in one scene, but I felt stuck because I did not actually feel like a CEO or know anything about the job of a CEO. I could not commit to the character. Improv comedy allows me to explore scenarios and situations I may not actually encounter in everyday life, but it still provides me with a sense of experience in those situations. Improv comedy is somewhat like a crash course

in life—you get to experiment with many different people and scenarios without having to deal with the actual consequences of crazy scenarios.

Because improv comedy provides opportunities for experimentation and exploration of interests, it had a significant influence on my identity as theorized by Kleiber (1999). This finding supports previous studies of exploring and experimenting with interests can influence identity development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Snelgrove, 2015; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). It also supports Erikson's belief that identity would be formed when individuals are able to discover their attributes and express their personal strengths through different outlets in their environment, such as improv comedy (Sokol, 2009).

Participating in improv comedy fulfilled Kleiber's (1999) second condition of identity formation in that my interest in comedy is *truly personal and in keeping with other values*, such as making others laugh, teamwork, and creativity. I have always highly valued comedy and making others laugh. Bringing laughter to others is important to me because it is how I connect with others. I have always believed that you can tell a lot about a person from their sense of humor; consequently, when I am able to appeal to someone's sense of humor, I gain a greater understanding of their personality, and I feel more connected to them. I have also always valued teamwork and supportive friendships. Usually when I think of teamwork, I think back to my volleyball and soccer teams in high school. However, improv comedy brought a whole new meaning and perspective to teamwork. I realized you cannot work together as a team if you are only interested in accomplishing your own agenda. In order to create with others, you must be open to others' suggestions and support their taking risks. In improv comedy, team work is “Yes, and...”—it is supporting your scene partner's choice and adding to it. Lastly, I have always highly valued creativity. Like my mother said in her interview: “You were a ‘make the rules,

test the edges, create a new path' kind of girl.” I always felt uncomfortable with strict rules and regulations and constantly felt the need to test the waters—see what I could do. Improv comedy’s nature of endless possibilities satisfies my creative drive. I also enjoy seeing others capitalize on their creativity and testing their own waters. I think it is one of the more beautiful aspects of improv comedy. Because improv comedy aligns with my personal interests and values, it has become a way for me to express my values and interests in a genuine manner and therefore allowing me to express my identity.

Throughout the writing process it became evident that Kleiber’s (1999) conditions of “*action taken creates feedback from the environment*” and “*competence achieved*” contributed greatly to the formation of my identity as an emerging adult. The coding process revealed that there were 34 instances in which I received significant feedback from the environment and 25 instances in which I achieved competence in my story, compared to 8 instances in which improv comedy gave me the opportunity to explore my interests and 18 instances in which my interests were in line with my personal values. I am discussing feedback from the environment and achievement of competence together because I believe they closely interact in improv comedy: competence is achieved in improv when you successfully perform comedy, which creates the feedback of laughter from the audience. Throughout my time on Freudian Slip, I experienced positive feedback from my environment during some scenes in practice, during midterms, in conversations with others, but most importantly in every show I performed. While receiving positive feedback from perms was very encouraging, their harsh criticisms on other occasions often diminished the influence of their positive feedback. Sometimes I felt encouraged by the perms, but other times I felt discouraged by the same people. On the other hand, the audience’s laughter was the most influential and consistent source of feedback I received throughout my

time performing improv comedy, and it is still a significant influence today. I believe the audience's laughter is most influential because it is a positive response to my true personality and comedic abilities. It was not until the end of the semester that I felt comfortable around the perms; therefore, when they would give me positive feedback earlier in the semester, I never felt it was positive feedback of my own personality. I felt I was just putting on a show. However, I was always authentic, genuine, and honest in front of an audience. I never felt the need to hide from an audience; consequently, when I would pull laughs from an audience, I always felt good about myself and purposeful, which brings me to "competence achieved." I felt most competent when I was able to make an audience laugh, as well as when I was able to master an improv skill, such as making others look funny. These also go hand in hand: when I made others look funny, I pulled laughs (feedback) from the audience, and felt competent. Every time I felt competent in my ability to do improv, my interest in improv was reinforced. This cycle of successful improv, feedback, competence, and reinforcement eventually snowballed into my passion for improv. If I was never able to make the audience laugh throughout my time on Freudian Slip, I would not have continued pursuing an improv career. The audience's laughter validated that I have a natural act for comedy and a true talent in improv comedy. However, now that I know I am a successful improviser and can make an audience laugh, it is not necessarily their laughter that drives my improv anymore. It is the pure joy and fun I experience when performing improv. In the beginning, I needed to hear that laughter because I needed to know I was competent. Now that I know I am competent, I am able to just have fun. I still make the audience laugh, but it is more about having fun and being creative and spontaneous than pulling laughs.

My commitment to action and others, Kleiber's fifth condition for identity formation through leisure, had an unexpected influence on the formation of my identity as an emerging

adult. I recognized early on that if I wanted to be on the troupe and become a good improviser, I needed to be fully committed to Freudian Slip. Therefore, I attended all but one practice; I always showed up to practice and to shows on time; and I went out of my way to develop chemistry with other troupe members. I took notes, watched YouTube videos, and was fully committed to learning improv comedy and being a contributing member on the troupe.

However, I became so committed to improv comedy that I suffered the damaging judgments of a group of college students. I became so passionate about improv comedy that I sacrificed my confidence and comfortability just to have the opportunity to perform improv. I endured the sometimes hostile environment of practice because I just wanted to perform improv. I, a normally loud, out-spoken, head strong woman, never once stood up to the troupe members to say their criticisms and coldness were actually hindering my ability to grow as an improviser because I knew they would cut me. They always reminded the other probies and me that we could be cut anytime throughout the semester. I was silenced because I was committed to my actions. I was also so committed to the dynamic and chemistry of troupe as well as performing improv that I hid from every friend of mine that I was falling head-over-heels in love with my now current boyfriend. For four months (FOUR MONTHS!) I hid my feelings from everyone because (1) I did not want to mess up the dynamic of the troupe, and (2) I did not want to get cut from the troupe because I desperately wanted to continue performing improv. My commitment to action and others was so intense that I silenced my true personality and hid my feelings in order to perform improv. Sadly, by feeling the need to hide my personality from the judgmental peers, the development of my identity as an emerging adult was hindered. I felt victim to the powerful and negative influence of peer relationships within Freudian Slip. This made me realize how significant peer relationships are in emerging adulthood. I felt so pressured to

conform to the already existing dynamic of the troupe in order to not get cut that I concealed the most joyful feelings of falling in love. I kept the biggest secret of my life just so that a group of college students would like me and therefore allow me to do improv comedy. They kept asking me to do truth in comedy, but if they would have discovered my biggest truth, I would have been cut immediately. So instead I held it in, only to be cut at a later date. Therefore, while my commitment to action had a positive influence on the formation of my identity, my commitment to others hindered the formation of my identity.

Kleiber's sixth condition in which leisure contributes the most to identity formation is when "*comfort with others emerges in the social world that is created around those interests and skills*" (1999, p. 103). As stated before, I did not experience comfort with others through improv until I attended a class at Upright Citizens Brigade in New York. However, when I did experience this comfort with others in improv, I really started to feel my identity develop in improv. Because others recognized me as an improviser, it was easier for me to identify myself as an improviser. This finding is particularly interesting because it reveals the fact that my identity, as an emerging adult, is still heavily impacted by peers and social interactions. Although identity is a "personal theory of self," (Kleiber, 1999, p. 94), it still matters to me how others see me. It matters that others also recognize me as an improviser because it is an expression of my personality. Therefore, serious leisure influences identity formation when comfort with others emerge because we partly define ourselves in contrast to others (Kleiber, 1999).

To sum up, improv comedy contributed positively to the formation of my identity as an emerging adult because it permitted me to explore and experiment with my interest in comedy and theater, as well as with other characters, identities, and scenarios. It also allowed me to

define and deepen personal values that are of great importance to me, such as laughter, teamwork, and creativity. The positive feedback and recognition from others as well as feeling competent in my improv comedy skills has had a significant influence on my identity formation as an emerging adult because it reinforced my potential to perform improv comedy. The positive feedback and competence helped me develop my passion for improv comedy and has given me a significant purpose in life.

Overall, my commitment to action and others had a positive influence on my identity formation as an emerging adult; however, this was not always the case. In the beginning, my commitment to improv comedy and to Freudian Slip was so intense that I often submitted myself to the toxic judgments of permanent members on the troupe. I also hid my personal feelings and truths in order to please the troupe and continue to perform improv. Consequently, my identity development was hindered as I felt unable to act on my own intuition and reveal my true personality out of fear I would not be able to do improv comedy. However, from being cut from Freudian Slip to the writing of this autoethnography, I realized it was not Freudian Slip that was a part of my identity, but it was improv comedy. I was committed to action and others on Freudian Slip, at Upright Citizens Brigade, and now at Off-Center Improv in Bryan, Texas. My commitment to action and others is rooted in my passion for improv; consequently, it is improv comedy that remains part of who I am as a person and will remain part of my leisure repertoire. Therefore, my commitment to action and others has positively influenced my identity as an emerging adult. Finally, while comfort with others in the social world created around improv comedy ultimately had a positive influence on the formation of identity, this influence was not experienced enough during my membership on Freudian Slip. It was not until I took a class in at

UCB in New York City that I felt my comfort with others through improv influenced the formation of my identity as an improviser.

Serious Leisure as an Emerging Adult

The final question I have asked myself in this study is “What role does serious leisure play in my life as an emerging adult?” Before I did this study, I did not have an answer to this question. Even throughout the writing process, the answer was still unclear. It was not until I read, reread, coded, reread, and recoded that I realized the significance of serious leisure in my life. In order to understand serious leisure’s significance in my life, let me put you in my shoes:

As an emerging adult, I am free of the responsibilities and commitments associated with adulthood and free of the supervision associated with adolescence; therefore, I am free to explore and experiment with friendships, work, beliefs, love, religion, and more (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006; Arnett, 2000; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). As an emerging adult, the world is my oyster. As an emerging adult, I am not preoccupied with the rapid physical and cognitive changes associated with adolescence (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006; Codina et al., 2017; Erikson, 1968). I already went through those horrifying changes already. As an emerging adult, I want to answer discover who I am; what makes me unique; what I can offer to society; what I can do with my life. So, I decide to go to college to get a degree so that I can get a job.

While in college, I change my major four times because no major truly captivated my interests. I do not want to be stuck doing a job I do not like, so I keep exploring. I’m an emerging adult—I have the opportunity to explore and experiment. Four years later, I am about to graduate college, and I do not know what kind of career I want. All of my other friends have already applied and have accepted jobs to start when they graduate. However, I do not know

what I want to do. I know I have an interest in youth development and summer camps, so maybe I will explore that interest.

I apply for graduate school, and I am accepted. However, before I even start the semester, I ask myself whether I want to attend graduate school for youth development. I decide to experiment, and I enroll in classes. I complete a semester of graduate school classes, and still, I do not know what I want to do. Not only that, but I feel bored. I have absolutely no focus in school. I complete the assignments to get the A, not to further my learning. Nothing is grabbing my attention, and nothing is setting a fire in me. I feel dull and useless. I need more time to explore, but I feel like I am running out of time. I quickly explore more interests. I take a leap of faith and pursue an interest I have had since high school. The second I experiment with that interest, I start to feel happier. I cultivate that interest into an activity, and I no longer feel bored. I then cultivate my activity into a skill, and I feel purposeful. My skill then becomes a talent, and I realize what makes me unique. I feel a fire has been lit inside me. I know what I like to do, I know what makes me unique, and I know what I can contribute to society. I am a talented improviser. I bring people laughter and joy. I help people cultivate creativity and spontaneity and act on their own tuition.

As an emerging adult, I am about to make my way into the professional world. I am about to look for a job in order to sustain myself. However, it is important that I realize my job might not define me. My career might not define me. My circumstances, nor money, grades, or awards do not define me. And that is absolutely, 100% perfectly fine. As emerging adults, we get upset that we do not feel passionate about our job or purposeful in our studies. It is frustrating finishing years and years of school only to graduate and not be able to answer the question you were asked as a four-year-old: what do you want to be when you grow up?

Unfortunately, the education system fails to cultivate every single person's interest, and that is also ok. That is where leisure programs come into play. We must realize that leisure, especially serious leisure, is just as important and influential, if not more, than our jobs and our circumstances. Godbey (2003) points out that by the age of seventy-five, the average individual will have spent 156,000 hours of their life in leisure activities. To label leisure as an unimportant, useless topic of study is to turn a blind eye to a dominant aspect of society. It is as impossible to define a whole person by a single title or degree as it is to define a person by their job. If we spend more time in leisure than we spend in our job or in school (Caldwell & Witt, 2011; Larson & Verma, 1999; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000), should we not look for our identity in leisure?

Leisure is important because it is a reflection of our attitudes, preferences, morals, and values as individuals as well as communities. Godbey (2003) put it perfectly when he spoke of the importance of studying leisure: "What you do during those hours may determine your happiness, your contribution to the world, and even the meaning of your life as much as what you do in your occupation or obligated time" (p. 1). While the study of medicine may answer how we live, leisure answers why we live. What defines us is our interests, our passions, our creativity, spontaneity, and intuition. Not how we make money.

My participation in serious leisure gave me a new passion in life. It gave me a purpose that was not fulfilled through school and through my graduate program at the time. Serious leisure allowed me to take an interest that had been growing within me for years and years and cultivate that interest into something meaningful—a skill for entertaining others and a passion to share with others. This finding is consistent with Scott's (2018) idea that we are drawn to play/leisure because of its transcendent meaning—its power to bring order and understanding to

different circumstances and situations. As an emerging adult, my serious leisure has provided me with a sense of comfort that, no matter what career I pursue and no matter what happens later down the line, improv comedy will always be there as long as my interest and passion remain. Even if I may not feel purposeful in a traditional nine-to-five job, I have a purpose and an identity in improv comedy.

Emerging Adulthood and Peer Relationships

I want to dedicate a section to the role peer relationships played in my experience because I think it deserves some recognition and understanding. I want to note that I did not understand the effects my social interactions in Freudian Slip had on my identity development until the writing of this autoethnography, which is somewhat scary. I think it is scary that you can be so invested in something or someone and not realize it is bad for you until you remove yourself from that something or someone. It just goes to show how powerful our words and actions can be to others.

This study revealed that peer relationships play a significant role in emerging adulthood. As emerging adults, not only are we focused on developing a personal identity, but we are also heavily focused on peer relationships (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006; Codina et al., 2017; Erikson, 1968), and probably more than we want to admit. Consequently, it is normal to look for our identity within ourselves, as well as within others (Kleiber, 1999). This is fine and normal; however, it can be dangerous, especially in emerging adulthood.

Because adolescents, and I hypothesize also emerging adults, have a heightened sensitivity to peers (Steinberg, 2014), it is possible that we may start to rely heavily on others when it comes to determining our identity, especially if we fail to identify ourselves in a

profession or area of study in school. In order to gain comfort and control over our circumstances as well as feel like a contributing member of society, we may rely on others to help us feel purposeful and connected to society. Consequently, when those “others” turn their backs on us or abandon us, the aftermath can be brutal. It can shake you to your core, and you may find yourself asking: “Who am I now?” This is ok, and this is normal. As emerging adults, it is ok to feel emotions, and it is ok to feel vulnerable to others. Experiencing hurt, pain, and sadness is just as important as experiencing joy, happiness, and passion. Viola Spolin, the high priestess of improv, said: “We learn through experience and experiencing, and no one teaches us anything.” Therefore, we cannot be taught how avoid negative relationships and we cannot be taught to overcome challenges. We must simply do.

This does not make us weak, nor does it make us immature. Maturity is not staying strong and overcoming adversity as quick as possible, nor is it avoiding drama and trying to remain untouched by emotions and others. Maturity is accepting your feelings for what they are, recognizing how you have been affected, learning from your experience, and moving forward. As emerging adults, we must understand that it is normal to feel significant, awful pain from the actions of others; it does not make us weak, nor does it deny our identity. In fact, the rejection of peers is just as important as the approval of peers in our identity development. Stebbins’ (1992) fifth characteristic of serious leisure is a unique social world. However, this unique social world is exactly what is at stake in emerging adulthood. Referring back to Arnett (2000), emerging adults, those in the age range of 18-25, are focused on psychosocial aspects of society—who one is, how one contributes to society, how one relates to others. Therefore, it is entirely likely, as shown in this study, for emerging adults to experience conflict in this fifth characteristic of

serious leisure. Regardless, the conflict experienced is still significant in serious leisure's influence on identity formation.

Negatives of Serious Leisure

Toward the end of my story when my experience in improv comedy turned negative, my coding fell away, especially in Chapters VIII and IX. The reason my coding fell away is because I did not find benefits of serious leisure or positive influences in identity formation. Instead of disregarding this lack of coding, it should be addressed because I believe it highlights the negatives of participation in serious leisure, something that is often ignored in leisure and recreation studies. For instance, Stebbins (1992) partly defines serious leisure by addressing the benefits that result from engagement in serious leisure while ignoring the disadvantages to serious leisure. The field of youth development commonly highlights the benefits of engagement in youth programs while disregarding the negatives that can be associated with youth programs. As this study shows, there are disadvantages to engagement in serious leisure, including negative peer influences, identity foreclosure, and social drama.

As stated previously, peers had a significant influence on my serious leisure experience as well as my identity formation in emerging adulthood. Their judgements as well as their approval were very important in how I defined and still define myself as an emerging adult and an improviser. Accomplishing a unique social world and comfort with others proved difficult but was eventually accomplished; however, this may not be the case for other emerging adults undergoing negative serious leisure experiences. Although I was able to persevere through my negative experiences, others may not be as resilient. Therefore, while participation in serious

leisure can benefit some, it should be recognized that peer relationships in serious leisure can have significant damaging effects on others.

Another disadvantage to serious leisure is identity foreclosure. Identity foreclosure occurs when a leisure participant so strongly identifies with their leisure pursuit that there is little room for exploration and experimentation. Consequently, identity foreclosure hinders identity formation and development (Kleiber, 1999). For example, I identified so intensely with Freudian Slip that when I was cut from the troupe, I thought about dropping out of graduate school and moving back home because I felt there was nothing left for me at Texas A&M. As dramatic as it sounds, it is truly how I felt in that moment. Fortunately, I was able to overcome my circumstances by recognizing that my identity is larger than a single improv group—but what if I did not persevere? What if I did not continue to explore and experiment with other interests and other groups? My hypothesis is that I would not be as confident and assured in my identity as I am now.

Finally, the intersection of social drama and serious leisure can prevent serious leisure participants from experiencing benefits of serious leisure. Anthropologist Victor Turner defines social drama as a “spontaneous unit of social process” that has four phases: “breach, crisis, redress, and *either* reintegration *or* recognition of schism” (Turner, 1980, p. 149). In short, a social drama occurs in a society or organization when there is a breach of a rule or norm (ex: I, a probie, started dating Ryan, a perm, and we did not tell anyone), a crisis occurs as a result (the group grew skeptical of me as a troupe member once they discovered my relationship with Ryan, and I was eventually cut from the group because I did not fit anymore), redressive actions are taken (the director’s contradictory explanation; my writing this thesis to make sense of events), and a recognizable schism now exists between myself and Freudian Slip. While social dramas

are common events in the life of a society—they can be as big as Watergate or as small as getting kicked out of a club—the presence of social dramas can be quite prevalent and messy in the unique social world surrounding serious leisure because social dramas are liminal periods. A social drama is a period of liminality in that the norms of a society or organization are suspended as soon as a breach occurs (Turner, 1987). Consequently, because the norms of an organization are suspended in a period of liminality, norms, morals, values, and the identity of an organization can be mixed and reset. When this period of liminality occurs in a serious leisure context, the mixing and resetting of the organization’s identity can result in participants being ostracized if their identity does not match with the new identity of the organization, which seems to have happened in my social drama with Freudian Slip. Consequently, a leisure participant is prevented from participating in serious leisure because of the new identity of the group rather than the ability of the participant. This is complicated even further in emerging adulthood, which is in and of itself a period of liminality between adolescence and adulthood. In other words, when an emerging adult experiences a social drama in serious leisure and their identity within the serious leisure pursuit is suspended and reset, this further complicates their already suspended identity as an emerging adult. In short, when social drama is experienced through serious leisure pursuits in emerging adulthood, the formation of identity can become an even messier process and benefits of serious leisure may be derailed.

CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSIONS

Theoretical Implications

This autoethnography adds to the literature of serious leisure, identity development, and emerging adulthood in the following ways:

1. Although Stebbins' (1992) serious leisure framework is supported by this study, I propose that passion should also be considered as a defining characteristic of serious leisure (see Figure 6). Stebbins (2015) defines serious leisure as: "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (modified from Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). From my understanding, his definition implies that passion is essential to serious leisure, and this is supported through my personal experience. Passion was a significant force in my need to persevere, my effort to gain skill knowledge, and in my development of a personal and social identity. It was also a benefit derived from serious leisure, and a driving force in my pursuit of a leisure career. Therefore, I am willing to modify his definition to: "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that [*people are so passionate for*] that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career..." (modified from Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). Consequently, I propose passion should be the seventh defining characteristic of serious leisure.

2. While all of Kleiber's (1999) conditions influenced identity formation, they did not all positively influence the formation of identity initially. *Commitment to action and others* hindered the formation of identity in emerging adulthood, and therefore hindered the achievement of *comfort with others*. However, they did positively contribute to identity formation at a later date. I also would like to add to Kleiber's framework that leisure can contribute most to identity formation when:
 - Action taken in response to interests results in self-actualization
 - It affords opportunities for self-expression (see Figure 7).
3. This study supports the finding that emerging adulthood is a unique developmental stage in that it affords endless opportunities for exploration and experimentation, which allow for significant developments in identity formation (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006; Sokol, 2009; Waterman, 1985; Waterman, 1993; Waterman & Archer, 1990; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Emerging adulthood is also heavily focused on peer relationships (Adams et al., 2006; Codina et al., 2017; Erikson, 1968), which can encourage identity development as well as hinder positive identity development. Further research should focus on emerging adulthood and sensitivity to peers, whether it increases after adolescence or starts to decrease. Further research should also examine emerging adulthood from an anthropological viewpoint. Emerging adulthood should be understood and examined as a period of liminality in which significant social dramas occur.
4. Arnett (2000) proposes that emerging adulthood is a stage that is different from both adolescence and adulthood in that there are distinct characteristics, developmental tasks, and social roles, or lack thereof (Arnett, 2000; Sokol, 2009; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). This study provides support to the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood: identity

formation and responsibility of development. Through this study, I discovered my identity development underwent more substantial and solidifying changes than the changes I experienced in high school during adolescence. Additionally, I believe the peer relationships I experience in emerging adulthood have a more significant influence on my identity than the peer relationships in adolescence. However, because both identity development and changes in peer relationships occur in adolescence, they cannot be used as characteristics distinct to emerging adulthood. On the other hand, I did take responsibility for my own identity development in emerging adulthood. I made the independent decision to pursue improv comedy and stick with improv comedy through thick and thin. No one else had a hand in my decision, which is unlike the decisions I made in adolescence. However, not all people in the emerging adulthood ages of 18-25 (Arnett, 2000; Sokol, 2009) can take responsibility of their development. This freedom to take responsibility of your own development is very much characteristic to American culture, but the same cannot be said for all cultures. Consequently, emerging adulthood may not be a significant developmental stage experienced by all people; however, in American culture, I believe it has a special significance in development.

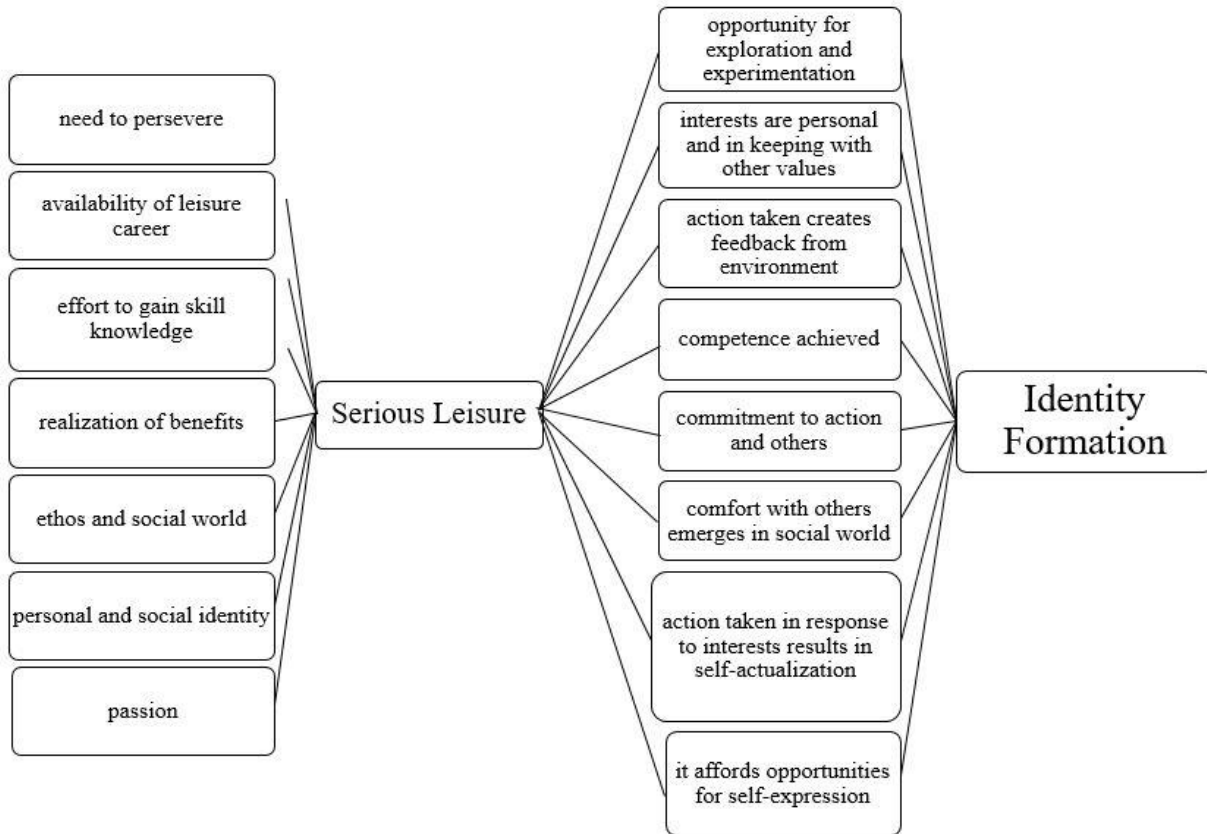


Figure 6: Theoretical Framework.

Practical Implications

This autoethnography adds to the practical areas of youth development as well as recreation and leisure studies in the following ways:

1. This study encourages emerging adults' engagement in serious leisure activities because of its influence on positive identity development (Codina, Pestana, & Stebbins, 2017; Kleiber, 1999; Snelgrove, 2015; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Therefore, recreation programs as well as college campuses should provide ample opportunities for emerging adults to pursue serious leisure careers as an avenue for identity development.

2. Although the importance of leisure and recreation studies is often questioned by money-focused, future-driven college students who prefer to study “important” topics such as economics, business, and medicine, a large portion of peoples’ waking time is spent in leisure, therefore making leisure just as important as the nine-to-five job. Youth development practitioners, educators, parents, as well as students must recognize that traditional educational settings may not satisfy all students’ interests and motivations. While this does not take away from the importance of an academic education, it does propose that an equal amount of focus and importance should be placed on leisure and recreation programs. As Godbey (2003) said: “What you do during those hours may determine your happiness, your contribution to the world, and even the meaning of your life as much as what you do in your occupation or obligated time” (1). Therefore, the importance of leisure and recreation must not be overlooked as it has the potential to hinder significant developments in identity formation.
3. Improv comedy has unique components that are beneficial to youth and emerging adults, including its cultivation of creativity and spontaneity; its reliability on human intuition; and its encouragement of truth in comedy (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994; Spolin & Sills, 1999). Therefore, youth development and leisure practitioners should develop more improv comedy programs for people of all ages in order to promote identity development through non-judgmental methods. Improv comedy should also be promoted in academic and university settings as a curriculum program, such as Emerson College’s Bachelor of Fine Arts in Comedic Arts. Emerson College is the first university to offer a degree in comedy (“College Comedy Improv”, 2019), but other universities would be wise to

follow their lead. O'Neil, a writer for *The New York Times Magazine*, said of the program:

A college education of any kind is no longer the guarantee of gainful employment it once was, and no student today thinks she's graduating into a fixed career path. But a comedy career, more so than most others, is a series of ad hoc improvisations and recoveries from repeated failure. A degree like this seems designed to ensure that when they do end up falling, there is a network in place to help students get back on their feet. (2016)

I firmly believe that if more students and emerging adults learned how to laugh; how to listen; how to work with others as a team; how to adapt; and how to fail over and over just to get up and keep charging ahead, more students would find themselves prepared and eager to take on the world ahead of them.

END SCENE.

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