Graham predicted the audience would be comprised of people who had nothing better to do, did not pay to see it, or had not seen a "real" show in years. Graham therefore implored Agnes to give her performance the best effort she could muster: the stakes were low and she had a great talent that she was undervaluing. The emotional exchange between these members beautifully illustrated the mutual support verbally described during the focus group, and indeed seemed to help assuage at least some of Agnes's concerns.

Summary. The traditional focus group format helped the participants and me generate a wealth of data reflective of how they understood their group's purpose and the role of teaching artistry. While respondents expressed idiosyncratic beliefs, by and large, most opinions were corroborated by at least a few other members. Despite the complaints that I requested to hear about, the group had the most to say about the benefits of the acting/drama group. Participation in the group positively affected the members, with a large contingent testifying to a profoundly positive impact on their lives personally and socially.

Embodied Focus Group Results

To further distill the themes found in the acting/drama group, I used a form of Arts-Based Research to devise what I called an Embodied Focus Group (EFG). After acting class on Monday, August 15, I requested from Yul permission to use a portion of time during the Theatre Games group that would occur on Wednesday, August 24, just one week before the end of my data

collection period. I described briefly what I wanted to do and why. Yul said he would discuss my proposal with the group. The following Wednesday, one week before the EFG took place, I arrived to CUSP a few minutes late. As I walked into the group room, I heard Eric say, “It's an honor that someone would want to come and do this.” He was interrupted by Todd: “Careful what you say!” Without thinking, I asked the group: “Who should be careful about what they say?” Todd said, “Oh, you heard that.” Yul, with a look of slight embarrassment, maybe for me, said, “Andrew, could you give us five minutes?”

When I was invited back into the room, Yul asked me to summarize the nature and purpose of the activity I proposed to conduct for the group. In my impromptu presentation, I tried to emphasize my intention to increase the amount of shared meaning-making occurring in my study, rather than making all the interpretations on my own. I added that it would be somewhat dramatically-based so it was still in alignment with the general goals of the group. I also highlighted that through the EFG group members would have opportunity to learn more about each other. I also pointed out that I would not have time to interview everyone in the group individually. The EFG format, I argued, would be a more efficient way for me to ask specific questions of many people at the same time.

Mitch asked me, “What more do you need to know after a few weeks? [The class] helps with self-esteem. This is an acting class and we like it the way it is.” I tried to check for understanding through paraphrasing: “It sounds like the purpose of group is acting and we don't want it to be a waste of time.” Without

responding to my statement, Max asked me, "You know this not just a gay group, right?" Edgar jumped in: "We don't have horns, we're human beings! We like to come here to have fun—you can see some people are wearing wigs." Edgar was referring to the skit structure prepared for that evening: Agnes would play the famous comedienne Joan Rivers from when she was a talk show host and interview members of the class in various roles.

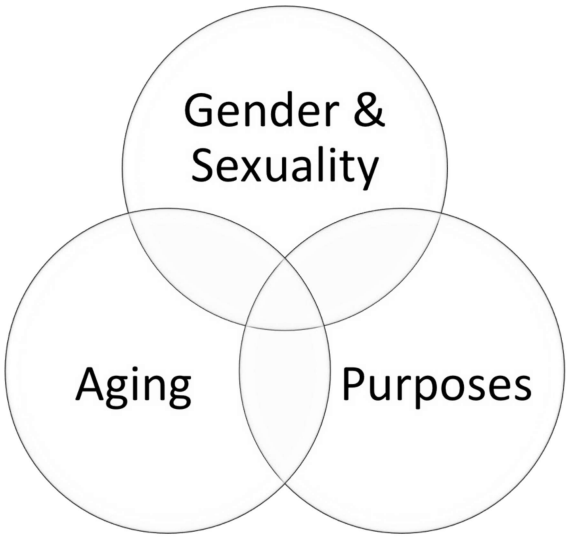
Yul redirected the conversation to asking me to clarify how long my EFG was expected to take. I said 30 minutes, at minimum, but that I was prepared to go longer if so desired. Yul suggested to the group that I use 45-60 minutes, and put his proposal up for a vote. Although a vast majority approved, the response to my proposal felt hostile. I began to worry that too many members of the group were no longer interested in my presence, which saddened me. I felt guilty that I did not better prepare the group through Yul about my proposal. Something might have gotten lost in translation, and in retrospect, I could have typed out a full description for Yul to distribute. Moreover, Mitch's challenge to me, that essentially I should be fully saturated with data by now, made me rethink for a moment if he was right, and if not, wonder exactly what more I *did* want to know.

The next week, on Wednesday, August 24 after Yul made some announcements about the upcoming Theatre Games classes, I was given the floor. I had prepared a number of large sticky chart papers around the room pre-written with information to give visual anchors to my instructions and prompts. I did this intentionally because I had noticed that misunderstandings frequently occurred

when leaders gave the group only verbal instructions. I began at the front of the room by summarizing what I believed to be the three major themes of the study so far: 1) the variety of purposes participants identified for attending both the acting and Theatre Games group (which I said I would conflate in one type of group called "acting/drama" for the purposes of the EFG); 2) the topic of aging; and 3) the theme of sexuality. Each topic was labeled inside of a triple venn diagram as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Major Themes of this Study Proposed to the Embodied Focus Group



The nexus at the center of the diagram where each sphere overlapped represented my research interests in this particular drama group. I had originally generated more than ten categories I wanted to explore, but after a consultation session with one of my committee members, Jan Cohen-Cruz, I prioritized these three topics due to the limited time available to me, and which categories would give me the most information based on the arts-based methods of sociometry and tableau.

As I discussed each topic, I noticed a look of shock come across Brett's face. To me, the expression said, "Wow; I did not realize that we had really been studied!" It was as if my presence in the room had been suddenly unmasked, revealing that I wasn't "just a student" but a researcher. That moment aside, my sense was that the group as a whole quickly joined my analysis. Below, I recount what transpired in the EFG, highlight sampled responses from the participants, and offer some analysis. In Appendix L, readers can find an edited transcript featuring more the participants' voices.

Spectrograms. To answer my first set of questions, I facilitated a series of spectrograms, with two sides of the room representing opposing poles. I purposely selected one pole to be represented by the door to the room as I have often found a room's architecture helps concretize metaphors. I will point out when such instances occurred for this group below. I employed the spectragram technique for a few reasons. According to Kole (1967), "The spectrogram is both diagnostic and therapeutic. It clarifies issues, makes abstract issues concrete, and forces the participation and commitment of usually nonverbal members" (n. p.). I

shared Kole's general intent to help the group make tangible their thoughts and feelings about teaching artistry and the drama/theatre groups at CUSP. Furthermore, I hoped to leverage observations of how the participants physically placed themselves "between the poles and among the other group members" (Kole, 1967, n. p.).

Group purpose. Returning to the first issue, I acknowledged that over the summer several members described two main camps among them: those who *just want to have fun* and those who *want to seriously study the craft of acting/drama*. I suggested that we divide up along a continuum to represent where each person fell, explaining that they could be at the extremes or anywhere along the imaginary line.

I also explained they had the option to decline to answer by sitting or standing in a designated area in a corner, indicated by a piece of paper hung nearby which stated, "I prefer not to answer." This portion of my explanation yielded a few chuckles and comments such as Brett asking, "Do we have to wear a dunce cap over there?" I laughed genuinely, but my nerves likely leaked through as I felt a bit embarrassed by the suggestion of shame associated with what I intended to be a courtesy to protect my participants' privacy. Mitch next took issue with my use of the word "serious." Serious, Mitch contended, might be too serious a word, which got a few laughs from his peers. I tried to explain that he could then place himself further along the spectrum towards "fun" based on his understanding of the words chosen.

Once we did agree on the wording, I wrote the descriptions on the papers at each end of the room. The door represented one extreme of the continuum, “I just want to have fun” and the opposing wall signified the other extreme, “I want to seriously study the craft of acting/drama.” I then invited the group to stand up and place themselves along the imaginary line to represent their main purpose for attending the acting/drama group. With the exception of a few outliers, the majority of the group placed themselves in the middle of room. I tried to take a photograph of the distribution, but I could not capture the whole span. (See Appendix K as one example).

Next, I sampled comments from three main segments of the distribution: one or two from the extremes and a few from the middle. Tara, standing with her back at the door to represent her strong commitment to having fun said bluntly, “I’m only here to have fun, basically for the laughs. I'm not the least bit interested in learning how to act.” The group laughed out loud at her honesty. Tara’s perspective was consistent with her interview data. Max, standing a foot away from Tara towards the middle of the room, explained that he attended the group to socialize and “to get out of the house,” but that he was mainly there to have fun. Mitch then spoke on behalf of those few people who were towards the other extreme, but still part of the large middle cluster. When Mitch explained, “You could be serious about it and still have fun,” most of the folks gathered near him on the serious end of the continuum agreed saying, “Yeah.” He added, “When

something is interesting, it's fun." Mitch's comment eventually became an important point to help me build hypotheses discussed in the final chapter.

Mitch went on to suggest that improvisation might have neurological benefits because it compels participants to think and react quickly. He also thought improvisation should be recognized for "planning ahead" which I did not challenge in the moment, but in retrospect, his point seemed to contradict a central tenet of improvisation which is to be present with your scene partner and not concoct a goal in advance. Lester, standing in the middle, condemned "both extremes" as being "horrible." Lester was unconvinced that anyone could come to the group for only "socialization and 'ha-ha' fun" or only for "totally professional" reasons. I pointed out that Tara's position at the door challenged his point, but Lester seemed to retreat from his position only minimally.

Aging. I moved on to the next issue in my triple Venn diagram. I explained that since the acting/drama classes took place in a senior center, I thought it was fair to clarify how age was significant to understanding what is meaningful about the group, if at all. I asked two questions during this segment on aging, the first being "What is your age?" I announced the question while I held up a piece of chart paper with the same question on it. As a variation on a spectrogram, participants were asked to line up on the same imaginary line, but with the door now representing zero years and the opposite wall representing infinity. Edgar asked me if he could go through the wall, towards infinity. His question exemplified how the spectrogram frame provided a helpful metaphor in

which someone like Edgar could safely express feelings about elderhood. Approximately four participants declined to answer.

I asked the group if the eldest member would identify themselves with their age, which I hoped would demonstrate my respect, and give those individuals a place of honor. Edgar said he was 86, which garnered some applause, and I thanked him. Mitch standing next to Edgar said he also was 86. From those that disclosed their answers to the whole group, the distribution was: 60, 61, 61, 68, 70, 76, 76, 86, 86. Generally, I observed that most of the group was arranged in the middle again, but skewed towards the "older" side of the room. I noted how the clusters of age ranges quickly formed microcosms of connection, marked by folks in their early 60s putting their arms around each other, or people sharing their birthdays.

Before I asked the group for comments, I flipped my chart paper to the next sheet to reveal the next question written out: "What is your psychological age?" My committee member, Robert Landy, suggested this category to me during one of our consultation sessions before the EFG. A few members asked for further clarification, to which I gave my prepared answer: "The age you feel right now." Using the same poles from the previous question about age, with the door as zero and the other wall as infinity, the whole group moved from the current positions, towards the door. When I polled the members for their answers, the following ages were stated: 18, 18, 20, 21, 25, 27, 28, 33, 35, 35, 38, 40, 40, 45, 75. A key outlier was Harold who said his psychological age was 75, the only

member who was older than his biological age. Harold also wanted to add that his "playfulness and pretending goes into writing poetry and singing" as well as drama.

Next, as a stimulus for open discussion I gave a prompt, which was repeated for the next few questions. I asked, "How is this significant to helping me understand what happens in this group?" Brett said the answer to my question was that "all actors are children," and clarified that he did not mean to that in an offensive way. Mitch agreed with Brett, stating, "Actors are…always pretending," just like children. I tried to summarize the significance of this point by drawing a connection to the previous two questions: It made sense why the same group of people who are interested in dramatic and imaginative play overwhelmingly felt substantially younger than their biological age. When I asked the group if I got that right, the vast majority agreed I had. A central takeaway from this segment on aging was that age might be as fluid an identity as gender. That is, while biological facts can objectively categorize a person in terms of sex (genitals) or age (birth year), how people experience and construct their stage of life might be more significant to their self-concept than what can be empirically measured.

Educational and therapeutic spectrograms. I returned to the purpose of the group using a set of different poles. The word *disagree* was placed on the door and *agree* on the opposite wall. I explained that for the next series of questions, I would make a statement and members could answer by standing at or between the two extremes according to their opinion. The group arranged themselves

according to the statement: “This acting/drama group is therapeutic for me.” While no one disagreed with the statement, the group placed themselves as either "somewhat" or in total agreement. I asked a few members who held strong agreement to share why they placed themselves where they had. Emily spoke about how the drama group helped her take a “refreshing” mental break from her daily problems. Edger poignantly acknowledged how, as he progressed in age, almost all of his “friends [were] starting to die,” and the acting/drama group mitigated the loneliness which had followed.

Shifting my focus to those in the middle of the spectrogram, I asked if there was a particular reason why they didn’t totally agree that the group was therapeutic. Max’s sentiment was that the escape Emily named was only a “temporary fix.” Mitch put it another way: “I don't think any activity can straighten you out.” The group laughed, but Mitch wanted emphasize his point: “If you have problems, you're gonna have problems.” Brett pointed out how much fun and laughter the group brought each meeting by stating, “Psychiatrists always say…laughter is very therapeutic.” Agnes needed to emphasize that she was not in 100% agreement with my prompt because the class was not actual therapy. Lester built on Agnes’s point suggesting that if the class was held “everyday, every hour,” he might be in total agreement.

To Naomi, the therapeutic import of the drama class might be traced to playing another person. From that process alone, Naomi suggested players can retrieve “something in you that you have not accessed [and] you discover other

parts of yourself." Naomi's point held firm sway with me because the same concept is widely embraced in the field of drama therapy. Also known as expanding the role repertoire, drama therapists help clients become unstuck from a limited and ultimately unhealthy way of thinking, feeling, and behaving by helping them identify and play out a wider variety of roles. This healing conceptualization of structured dramatic play was put forward at least since Moreno (1934) and largely built upon Robert Landy's (1991, 1992) role-based theory and method of drama therapy. That said, even if a drama therapist is not present for an acting class, Naomi's point is taken: the role repertoire is very likely to be expanded with enough exposure to acting, which can thus feel healthful, and even healing, depending on the limitations of one's internal role system.

Moving to my next statement, "This group is educational for me," participants first wished to discuss the meaning of the word educational. I tried to encourage the members to define the word for themselves and place themselves on the spectrogram accordingly. Beyond the interesting verbal discourse found in Appendix L, the defining terms of "education" were also negotiated physically in the space. Nate stood in the middle because the class had not taught him literally "everything." Max acknowledged that he had learned "about other people, and [found] out about their personalities." Yul appreciated how he had learned something unique from each TA as well as "group dynamics." Meanwhile, I asked Edgar to account for why he stood in disagreement about the educational

value of the group. The more he shared, the more clear it became that he did in fact find the group to be very educational. With each of Edgar's statements affirming his agreement, Nate beckoned Edgar through encouraging gestures to step closer to the "agree" side of the spectrum. With each statement of agreement he made, Edgar took another step to affirm his shifting opinion, smiling more upon each step forward. For instance, Edgar shared that because of the drama/acting class, he had learned to be less inhibited as evidenced by now being able to "tell people off." That statement got a laugh, but Edgar emphatically praised the play reading series, and attributed some of his professional acting success to practicing skills in the class. By the time of this particular admission, Edgar had moved clear across the room to the "agree" side, and Yul put his arm around Edgar's shoulder.

Kinsey Scale Spectrogram. Next, I used sociometry to survey the members' sexual orientation. I knew that a significant number of members in the acting/drama group were straight-identified; my curiosity was piqued to find out what drew them to CUSP. I also wanted to ensure that I had not under represented the LGBT identity of CUSP in my study. Moreover, I wanted to see if members made connections between their engagement with drama and their sexual orientation.

I combined the spectrogram technique with Alfred's Kinsey's *Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale* (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948), a "self-report measure of sexual orientation" (Bailey, et al., p. 49) commonly

referred to as *The Kinsey Scale*. I began this segment by summarizing my understanding of Kinsey's research stating, "Sexuality is not just binary of gay or straight but is experienced on a continuum." Indicating the large paper labels stuck along the walls, I then asked the group to self-identify their sexual orientation by distributing themselves along the wall, based on Kinsey's definitions:

0. Completely straight
1. Straight, with some incidentals
2. Mostly straight-leaning
3. Completely bisexual: Equally heterosexual and homosexual
4. Mostly homosexual-leaning
5. Homosexual, with some incidentals
6. Completely homosexual

For each category listed above, I also provided brief elaborations. For example, I explained that "some incidentals" could mean, "I fantasized about it," or "On a dare, I experimented as a kid" but that a two on the scale would signify, "It wasn't just incidental; I liked it, and maybe I would try it again." Once the participants settled into their position along the continuum, I asked, "How is this significant to helping me understand this group?" Table 5 illustrates how the group distributed themselves along the scale.

Table 5

Kinsey Scale Spectrogram Results

0	***1***	***2***	***3***	***4***	***5***	***6***
Emily	Mitch		Tara			Edgar
Naomi	Agnes					Lester
Edna	Tori					Max
						Nate
						Noah
						Yul
				Harold (4.5)	Brett (5.5)	

Aside from Tara representing bisexuality (although I was told the Randi would have probably also identified as bisexual had she been in attendance), a clear split was created between the heterosexual-leaning and the homosexual-leaning contingents. Brett stood next to me, comparing the factions to gangs in the musical *West Side Story*: "You know what this is like? The Jets and The Sharks!" As the group arranged themselves, a number of spontaneous exchanges ensued. Nate teased, "If there was an actual scale, someone here might break it." Brett tried to get my attention three times to see that he was against the wall on the "6"

end of the scale, bending over with his hands on his buttocks, spreading the cheeks apart. "You're embodying the survey, I see," I said to Brett, not trying to play into his antic too much. Meanwhile, Max began to tease the straight-identified people saying, "Stone them! Stone them!" as he pretended to throw stones at Mitch and Emily, who played along by blocking their faces, feigning fear. I admired the group's ability to playfully flip the biblical punishment for homosexuality onto the heterosexuals.

Brett called out Harold, who placed himself between 4 and 5, as "a traitor." Harold defended his position:

> I had perfectly good sexual relations with women when I was very young, all right? So I think we shouldn't completely disacknowledge that, but…all my adult experiences—Also, at this point in my life, I haven't had sex in many years; it's almost irrelevant.

Max tried to relate to Harold saying, "It's all up here [referring to his head]," suggesting that the experience of sexuality is ultimately psychological, not physical. Harold's comment was a natural segue into my next question to clarify if this topic of sexuality was significant to helping me understand this group, the answer was a near-unanimous, "No." Tara gave voice to the general consensus: "In this class it doesn't matter…everyone gets along." Despite these unifying sentiments, Yul shared how much CUSP mattered to him as a gay man, stating "It means a lot to my sense of security and comfort." Although only a few LGBT members spoke out in defense of CUSP's mission to provide a safe space, these comments provided a powerful backdrop to frame the rest of the focus group.

I tried to bring the heterosexual contingent into the conversation by asking them, “Why [CUSP]? You could go to any senior center.” Mitch immediately replied, “This particular center is akin to being the Waldorf Astoria of senior centers.” Unlike the typical center which feel more institutional and depressing, Mitch had found CUSP refreshing because “most people here don’t act old” and felt that that point was more important than sexual preference.

In retrospect, I see that Yul’s perspective about CUSP being a safe haven was easily overtaken by straight-identified folks telling their story of being accepted by the LGBT center. Risking that I might appear to diminish the importance of straight-allyship, I do see how it might be difficult for those at the 0, 1, 2 range of the Kinsey scale to appreciate the value of CUSP for those at the 4, 5, 6 end of the continuum. As a case in point, when Mitch shared that “we’re not self-conscious that we have to be heterosexual” he underscored his straight-privilege of which he might not be fully aware. As a member of the straight-dominant world, Mitch had not experienced defamation or injury due to his sexuality. Notably, no one from the gay-identified contingent spoke about the negativity of having CUSP become a public senior center, which was discussed with me more privately. In fact, Max echoed Mitch’s message, which seemed to be that as long as everyone at CUSP was “comfortable,” each person’s sexual preference was ultimately irrelevant. As another example of member-checking, I tried to summarize what I understood from the discussion of this segment on sexuality at CUSP: for people on the homosexual or homosexual-leaning end of

the spectrum, CUSP is a comfortable senior center as an oasis of solidarity. Members who were heterosexual, heterosexual-leaning, or bisexual were more accepting anyway so "everyone's happy just to get along." The group affirmed that I had understood their dynamic accurately. There was a clear desire across the group to be seen as a person first and to not be defined primarily by their sexual orientation. Brett argued that "the arts bring people together," and I could see some evidence to support his generalized perspective—namely that the group was united mainly by their shared interest in drama. Yet I was not yet convinced that creative arts programming should be seen as a pat panacea for mending social inequity. After all, art can also drive people apart. Furthermore, the notion of transcending the identity politics based on sexual preference was only possible because of decades of advocacy by organizations like CUSP. Brett wanted to add that homosexuality and the profession of acting/drama had a historically long connection, but this thread was not pursued.

In my estimation, the theme of sexuality was actually a bit more significant to the group than their initial response indicated. First, in my private interviews, I was aware of strong feelings of remorse from the gay-identified members about how CUSP had changed for the worse since merging with the DoA. Yul and Nate diplomatically made this point by sharing how much safer they feel at CUSP. Second, my observations and interviews confirmed the group's strong inclination to play with sexual themes inside and outside their improvisations. Third, I would argue that such a diverse group has bonded in spite

of their sexual differences, and perhaps because of that diversity, which provides an important testament to what is actually meaningful about this collection of elders. However, I acknowledge that the public forum of an EFG probably inhibited people to some degree. I should also acknowledge that I had planned another spectrogram to explore a continuum of gender, if time permitted, but chose to use the following tableau exercise instead.

Tableaux. In the penultimate stage, I divided the participants into four subgroups, with three or four participants in each cluster. Their task was to make a collective tableau vivant, a living picture representing a completion to the following sentence: "Participating in acting and drama in this group makes me feel…" After approximately five minutes of working independently (with minimal guidance from me as I circulated), each of these collective images were presented to the rest of the group. While the presenting group remained frozen in their posture, I invited each member to bring the stage picture to life, also called "dynamising an image" by Augusto Boal (2002, p. 177). The particular technique I employed was called thought-tracking by Neelands and Goode (2000), whereby I asked each participant of every tableau to speak aloud a word or a phrase to express their position within the image when I gestured to them or touched their shoulder. The next segment captured the tableau vivant images each subgroup created, followed by a transcript of what each member in the image said during the thought-tracking.

Tableau one (Appendix G): Brett, Tara, Emily, and Nate. Brett began by striking a powerful stance leaning forward on his left leg, his arms stretched out fully uplifted on a diagonal out slightly in front of him. Brett's gaze was also upward and his face beamed with an open mouth, as if he were singing a show-stopper in a musical played up to the balcony. The three remaining group members each took their poses, one by one, in this order: Tara, Emily, Nate. Each of them seemed to be hiding behind Brett to various degrees with two of them exposing their arms, which hugged around Brett's middle and upper torso. Tara, standing on Brett's right, was most hidden—which perhaps was another expression of her desire to just have fun, but also reflected her discomfort with performance and improvisation. Emily peaked her head under Brett's left armpit with a gleeful smile as she crouched down, suggesting a childlike wonder and discovery. Nate stood behind Emily, holding her waist, smiling broadly, exposing more of his own body, yet still took a diminished stance relative to Brett's expansive posture.

When I conducted my thought-tracking, the participants' words portrayed a joyfulness and celebration of camaraderie that was a bit less obvious when only looking at the image. In particular, I was struck by Tara stating, "I love you all." The statement messaged that her fellow group members watching should not mistake her quiet and hidden posture to be a reflection of her feeling of connection. Brett's phrase poignantly juxtaposed his physical expression of pride and power: "I always wanted to be a showoff because my relatives couldn't bear

it." I surmised Brett received some of the affirmation he did not receive from his family through the platform provided by CUSP. Furthermore, when Nate stated, "fun and love, together" the emerging theme of tenderness from this tableau subgroup further solidified.

Tableau two (Appendix H): Noah, Tori, and Edgar. The three members of this tableau chose to express what the classes meant to them by sitting in chairs to embody the famous adage "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." Thought tracking, however, yielded only a little more information: Tori and Edgar said, respectively, "I hear/see no evil in this class," and Noah did not say anything because his hands covered his mouth, embodying "speaking no evil." Looking at the photograph, the participants are visibly delighted by presenting their image, especially Tori's broad smile, which perhaps reflected how much they enjoy the class. However, the irony of their spoken text was not lost on me: "Evil" elements of the class may very well exist, or at least some aspects warrant critique. Yet these three members intentionally agreed to not-not disclose those negative aspects. I appreciated how they found a clever way to make light of their negative feelings, which might have been too uncomfortable, otherwise.

Tableau three (Appendix I): Harold, Naomi, Agnes, and Yul. In their tableau entitled *The Four Ages of Humans*, each member of the image assumed a developmental role from across the lifespan. Their title was strongly associated to a theme that had surfaced within the EFG: A penchant for acting in older adulthood might be linked to traits rooted in childhood. The spoken words

accompanying their poses helped clarify what they each represented. Naomi was a petulant child, seated cross-legged on a chair in the background, her forehead buried into her palms. Her inner thoughts paradoxically shed light on the tension between playfulness and older age: "I just want to grow up and go to my acting class!" Agnes's words more overtly revealed that she was playing a defiant and "naughty teenager." Her posture indicated a pre-pubescent teen, based on how she jutted her torso and head forward, tongue protruded, with her hands framing her face on each side. I suspected that Agnes represented the oppositional behaviors I often observed in the class, which did indeed remind me of adolescence. Yul played the elder, physically depicting someone 20 years his senior, hunched far over an imaginary cane and leaning on his own knee, grimacing in pain. However, Yul's line, "I'm acting like an old man, but I don't feel it," exposed a hidden youthfulness, perhaps playing on the EFG prompt about psychological age. It was unclear what "age" Harold represented because his line, "return and regression," encompassed all the ages. His stalwart posture, fists clenched at his chest—staring at the horizon—firmly embraced creative practices as a noble pathway towards revisiting and resolving inner conflicts, ostensibly from any age.

Tableau four (Appendix J): Max, Mitch, Lester, and Edna. Standing together, all physically connected, these four elders presented more of a pastiche than a cohesive image. To the right, Mitch, Lester, and Edna were chunked in one unit lovingly focused on Edna who was looking at the camera with a bright smile. Meanwhile Max pulled at Mitch's right arm feigning exertion saying, "I want

him, I want him." Why Max "wanted" Mitch and how his expression connected to the meaning of the group, was unclear to me. When I used thought-tracking with Mitch, he responded directly to Max, telling him, "Stop," which did not tell me much more about the group that I already observed: they enjoyed to bicker and provoke each other. Edna and Lester's lines "Joy" and "Camaraderie" respectively were much more obviously a direct response to the prompt. As a whole, I could only guess that maybe Max was acting out his hot and cold feelings about the group, or maybe his ambivalent feelings about Mitch who was so outspoken about his heterosexuality.

Discussion prompts. The final phase of the EFG consisted of an open discussion about the EFG process and answering two questions: 1) How was this process different than our first focus group? and 2) What has it been like for you to be part of my study? I let the group know that I would be open to criticism, negative feedback, or constructive feedback.

Several group members preferred the EFG to the traditional focus group (TFG) format. Nate remarked on the "interactive" qualities of the EFG. Agnes noted that whereas the TFG format privileged verbal expression, the EFG allowed the group to "completely express ourselves" and be more authentic. Edna said that in contrast to the TFG, which "was much more static," she described the EFG as having "a lot of movement, and liveliness, and we really got into it." Yul appreciated that each member had "a chance to participate in a significant way." Tori pointed out that the EFG "was so much more informal and relaxed and fun."

Several members pointed out the disadvantages of conducting the TFG in a café: lack of privacy, inability to hear what each person was saying, and that the flow was more "haphazard." Yul maintained that the TFG, even at the café "was helpful to a certain extent, but not as much as this one here." Emily also pointed out how she had grown more comfortable with me during the time that had elapsed since the first focus group. She also liked that I participated in the EFG and learned more about me, too. Max agreed saying, "Especially now that you're bisexual," which got a big laugh. Max was referred to me placing myself at a 1.5 on the Kinsey Scale, which he joking equated to a 3. In reflection, Max's comment struck me as interesting when I compared it to how Brett called out Harold out a "traitor" for being at a 4.5. As much as tolerance and playfulness was found in the group, the notion of Kinsey's proposed continuum might not have resonated as strongly for some of the members.

Summary. As I predicted, the embodied and interactive format was particularly enjoyable and effective for these participants and generated far more information than I could attain solely by verbal interview. That is, since these individuals were drawn to the creative modality of drama/theatre, the conceit of creating an imaginary line and playing with the arrangement of our bodies in relation to one another and the room symbolically was a helpful way to elicit opinions candidly. However, after the EFG concluded, I also received some private criticism from Brett in the café during a casual conversation. Brett noted that the tone of my EFG was overly positive; he seemed to suggest that I did not

evenhandedly elicit negative feedback from the group. In my reflections later on, I noted that I had not intended to avoid negative topics or provide a forum to air grievances, but I felt it was a fair critique. To Brett's point, the second tableau (hear/see/speak no evil) could be construed as an indication of those underlying tensions within the group.

The Embodied Focus Group I led also seemed to result in a palpable release of spontaneity, and potentially assisted some group members in forming more cohesive bonds. Lastly, I wanted to find more ways to include the participants in the co-construction and use of the data meaning-making, another goal of Moreno's sociometry (Hale, 2009) and Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory. To that end, I was very satisfied with the outcomes of the EFG. The experience helped me clarify the perspectives of the elders at CUSP in a way that many of them seemed to enjoy. All the concerns I felt from Edgar and Mitch the week preceding the EFG had melted away. In fact, Mitch told me afterwards in the café that the experience was much more enjoyable than he had anticipated. In the following segments, I will deconstruct some of the prominent themes brought out by the two focus groups, interviews, and participant observations with the elders.

Camaraderie

When I asked older adults what drew them to the acting/drama group, the word "camaraderie" emerged as a trope. In the spirit of a symbolic interactionist approach to analyzing how language shapes human behavior (Strauss, 1959), I began to search for more indicators of what camaraderie meant to the elders. I first considered tacit implications of the word camaraderie. To me, camaraderie first implied the foundational significance of socialization in drama. Long before the study, I knew the widely-accepted view that drama activities were particularly beneficial for improving the social skills of children and adolescents. I had internalized a notion from drama education matriarch, Dorothy Heathcote, that the primary contribution of drama was it being a social art. To Heathcote, drama "demands consensus from participants" (Heathcote, 1980 cited in O'Neill, 2015, p. 89) to create and take action within their co-created alternate reality. Yet, I suspected that camaraderie implied a form of socialization of particular value for these elders, one that went beyond the benefit of agreeing on fictional circumstances.

Another clue about the meaning of camaraderie was the etymology of its root, comrade. Early on in the study, I began to see the elders as a troop of soldiers, bonded together by a battle. But what were they fighting for and against whom? Notably, Heathcote also described dramatic situations to be quintessentially about people trapped in encounters, or being in a mess. Perhaps playing out difficult negotiations between characters in a fictional realm imbued

the actual group with extra connectivity? Or was the battle *outside* the center, on the city streets as they all dwelled among a busy metropolis of young urban professionals and students who no longer saw them fully, as useful, valuable, or at all? In the drama class, elders could maintain their dignity within their own sense of community, and imbue their lives with meaning by reflecting back to themselves, through their performance, a sense of identity, either in reality or metaphorically.

For those who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, camaraderie was part-and-parcel of what probably drew them to CUSP in the first place, built on their need to band together in the face of discrimination, exclusion, and violent hate crimes. Moreover, all of them survived through the plight of the AIDS epidemic, and then lived to celebrate the federal legalization of same-sex marriage. Indeed, some of the older adults began attending the city's LGBT center as young adult volunteers and are now the elders receiving services at CUSP. Over four decades of community pride truly earned them their comradeship.

The acting/drama group had specifically come to know each other quite well, and now shared a collective history, which one member echoed: "I think we have a certain comfort level with each other—each one of us with—among us." To clarify, as cohesive as their group dynamic seemed to be, I noticed a fair amount of cattiness, mostly of a loving variety, where playing rough meant they cared. As one example, when Max chided the group, "Lets go already, it's almost 7:40pm." Eric yelled back, "What?! It's 6:40. Tell time right!" Then Eric turned

to me and said with a smirk, “See what we have to put up with here?” In some ways, their familiarity reminded me of a family who had developed enough comfort to bicker freely. Perhaps playing with dramatic reality created a space were they had permission to be brutally honest.

The group’s cohesion might have also been indicative of a human tendency to form cliques and subgroups. One collective identity for this group was their shared interest in drama. I was reminded of my adolescence years in high school, where I developed a kinship with the other teens drawn to theatre. Amidst our personality differences, we seemed to share a collection of personality characteristics that differentiated us from the rest of the school. We were the artist-types, and our penchant for dramatic flare bolstered our identity as much as being “not jocks.” Similarly, Norman commented to me about the other members at CUSP who do not come to acting/drama, and took pride in his perception that their ranks were so strong compared to the average group size at CAD. Norman was not entirely wrong. However, I observed that groups such as Musical Memories were just as large and consistently popular. More importantly, Norman believed the acting/drama group attracted a more energetic stratum of seniors at CUSP, another point of pride for him. Again, I could find evidence to disprove Norman’s assumption: some of the drama/acting attendees could be quite subdued at times, and plenty of energetic members attended the movement, music, and art groups. However, there were also plenty of members napping in Musical Memories, and certainly some of the other more passive group formats I looked

into, such as lectures or movie watching. Returning to Norman's point and Heathcote's argument: the art form of drama compels involvement. Indeed, the etymology of the word drama comes from the Greek *dran*, meaning 'to do' or 'to act.' Respectively, the drama group's sense of camaraderie could be further justified by their vitality, winning the battle as it were, against an inevitable decline in functionality and agency.

Across the literature on aging, researchers agree that elders' heath is at particular risk due to isolation. Considering the social import of drama, I presume camaraderie also speaks to the life-affirming quality generated by playing together. Lester observed the sheer loyalty of the members, almost all of whom "come week after week because of the love, the art, camaraderie." In a way, the more time the elders spend together reaffirms that they *must* stick together. For some members, their level of commitment is so high that they commute from outside the city limits to participate, which requires combining multiple forms of public transportation. In fact, several members lived near other CUSP sites in districts located far away, but still choose to attend the acting/drama classes at CAD. For Agnes, priority was not just finding the most convenient location. She described to me how the acting/drama class was part of her network and a lifestyle. The class brought meaning to her life, and inspired her to keep developing as a person.

Over course of many months and several years, the acting/drama group connection has deepened, and not just in the classroom, but afterwards as well.

When the center closed each night, the entire class relocating en masse to the nearby café was reminiscent of actors piling into a bar after a show to debrief and de-role—until that closed for the night at 9pm. Over soup and coffee, they would rib each other about their performances that night, complain about the center or the class, discuss current events, and share their aches and pains. In one touching moment I observed, a few group members commandeered the café staff to put candles in a birthday cake to surprise one of the members.

Some or all of these factors in combination might account for the meaning of camaraderie cited by many members of CUSP's acting/drama group. On a surface level, the word simply indicated how strongly their social bonds had been forged. Yet on a deeper level, camaraderie spoke to their collective identities surrounding age, sexual orientation, abilities, interests, and their very aliveness or vitality.

Negotiating Group Purpose

About halfway through the study, a debate emerged organically among the acting/drama group members. What was the purpose of Monday night's acting class? Was it for learning the craft of acting or to just have fun? The impetus for the discussion was Yul announcing that Reed, a teaching artist, would be returning to lead the class because Larry had left for his trip following their recent performance at the center.

Zack shared that he found Reed's object activities completely repugnant: "Acting with stuffed animals? That's deadly to me! I like to work with people!" Some people disagreed, stating that the activity—which involved improvising imaginary circumstances in relationship with inanimate objects—was a positive stretch of their imaginations. These members appreciated Reed's activities as "classic acting exercises." Other members took issue with the competition and anxiety bred by Reed's activities. The tasks Reed assigned were too open-ended, they argued. For instance, when a player invented a particularly clever scenario with the object, Agnes felt intimidated that she could not "top" it with her idea. Similarly, others admitted to feeling disappointed when another player would "take" the same idea they had already planned out. Yul pointed out that this tendency toward competition was why Reed discouraged clapping after each performance.

No one took issue with this point, so Yul went on to try and persuade the group that they "had to accept" the leaders assigned to the acting class. A member objected: "We are not Broadway-bound. We come here to have fun…when you don't it ruins the psyche." Yul observed that this position only accounted for one contingent of their group. There was another faction that wanted to learn acting skills with stronger proficiency, and possibly mastery. Yul pointed out that the Theatre Games group on Wednesday nights was "more open" and probably better suited to those in the group who sought more amusement.

Yul's effort to quell the conflict among the group members was successful. The elders were able to move on from this discussion and enjoy the rest of their time together improvising scenarios. Members like Zack seemed somewhat assuaged by Yul's solution of using Wednesday night's Theatre Games format as the best venue to maximize amusement. However, based on the evidence collected in both focus groups, this discussion did not reflect the more silent subgroup of participants who believed that Monday night's Acting Class should still be fun without sacrificing rigor.

Humor. Tara told me the only reason she attended on either night was for the "outrageous comedy," and that "the guys" generated most of that entertainment. Tara explained to me in an interview that at her advanced age, medical issues and mobility concerns made "life is very serious…[and] can become depressing…I need something light. I need laughter…it's like medicine." For Tara, having fun at the acting class was not just a matter of preference, but a necessity. As an observer, I can attest to the unmitigated delight produced in these group sessions. Raunchy, bawdy, and hysterically wisecracking are some the adjectives I'd use to begin to describe what happened within the group. As one elder Eric put it: "[When] we get together, it's like a party in that room." For a glimpse into some of the data I collected on this point, below are few examples captured in my Research Journal:

> One scene-starter improvisation featured a character that wanted to go through sexual reassignment surgery. Graham began to encourage Max to play the part, but Max declined saying, "I'm afraid I won't say the right

> things." Graham then gave him a $5 bill to persuade him. Max ended up playing the character, but gave the money back.

This situation was not just funny to Graham; with every plea he made to Max the room swelled in a collective guffaw. In this instance, I saw the drama group as a safe place to play out fantasies for one another, even if only as a gift to amuse another member. Moreover, this example supports my earlier point about the group's preference—or perhaps tolerance—for teasing.

Graham was a frequent jokester, and in this example, his blue humor was clearly not for the faint of heart:

> During another improvisation led by Reed, Eric decided to exit at the peak of its crisis. Immediately following the scene, Reed critiqued Eric's choice to leave his scene, stating that Eric should have been more committed to his character's objective. Without missing a beat, Graham doubled down on Reed's comment by chastising Eric: "Yeah! You don't walk out of a scene in the middle! Eric: It's like sucking a guy's cock, and then right before he comes, walking out the door!"

Again, Graham's outlandish comment yielded a huge laugh from the group across gender and sexual orientation, including Eric. The collective laughter elicited in this example not only bespoke how comfortable the group was with graphic imagery, but how much freedom Graham felt to interrupt Reed's leadership to make a crude joke. I can't recall if Reed laughed along, but he certainly did not attempt to admonish Graham or try to redirect the group's attention to his commentary. Suffice it to say that this example vividly portrayed how the group members owned the authority of the room, and not the TA.

In another scene-starter, Tori and Agnes played two strangers. One character (played by Tori) was scripted to ask the other character (played by

Agnes) if she was a lesbian, and was then told to mind her own business. Agnes and Tori's improvised dialogue epitomized, I felt, the humorous power of agreement in improvisation, where the goal was to support, not undercut, the premises offered by each member of the scene:

> Tori: Are you [a lesbian]? Are you? I've never seen one so close up before!
> Agnes: If I was, I wouldn't tell you!
> Tori: You know, where I come from, we don't have any in my town. I'm in the big city, and I met my first one!
> Agnes: You wouldn't know. I didn't say yes, I didn't say no. And if I was, I wouldn't tell you. I think you're disgusting, and it's none of your business!
> Tori: Well listen, if you're not, would you point some out to me who are?
> Agnes: You should go to the LGBT center.
> Tori: Oh there'll be a whole bunch down there? Can I bring my family?!…. Let's take a selfie!

Beyond being an exemplar of quality improvisation, this example also exemplified the group's willingness to be playful about topics that might otherwise be painful: stigma, prejudice, and alienation due to one's sexual orientation.

However, a hidden cost comes with being so dedicated to making each other laugh: members who struggle with stage anxiety and then try to seek the approval of their peers. Agnes had a breakthrough realization one night during the study that her performances do not always have to be funny, and moreover, "Some scenes actually won't be as effective with humor." Agnes admitted to struggling with her fears of criticism, as did a few other respondents in the acting class. Meanwhile, for someone like Graham who often took on the role of Class Clown—but who could also produce an emotional powerhouse performance—the

acting class was not a high-pressure situation. Graham enjoyed getting the laughs, it seemed, but not necessarily to prove anything. He was part of the group experience, and got what he needed for himself to boot.

Criticism

Fears of criticism underscored for me how very scary performing in front of an audience can be, even in front of twenty close peers. Not only might the player face judgment from their peers or the teaching artist, but also several people confessed to me their own harsh self-criticism. The same dynamic recurred when the group rehearsed and performed a composition for the CAD site. However, returning to theme of camaraderie, collectively facing the ordeal of such a public performance further solidified their group connection and collective purpose.

Moreover, the inherently interpersonal aspects of drama intensified many of the core issues and concerns related to social engagement: wanting to belong, evaluating how much we can trust one another, desiring to be seen but without becoming too exposed. In the first focus group, Graham highlighted that the group's sense of camaraderie was not an end, but more of a means to giving the experience a deeper significance:

> I was hoping to learn to act, but what I did learn, frankly, is to be myself. Whoever that self is, at whatever scene I'm doing, and I'm comfortable with doing it primarily because of the company I'm in. Somebody else said it was very supportive. It is supportive, okay? You can be whatever you want to be, be whoever you want to be, be as outrageous, as crazy, as

> vulnerable as you want to be in this particular class…. Everybody here makes it okay.

In light of how many social hang-ups the members brought into the group, receiving such generous social support could be deeply affirming, and embolden more participation, more openness, thus breeding a virtuous cycle of camaraderie.