

Playback Theatre and the Transcendental Gift
of Empathy

A Multi-Disciplinary Study

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Contents

Introduction	1
Empathy: Perspectives in Neuroscience.....	7
The Art of Ritual and Myth	21
Playback Theatre: Origins, Methods, Ritual, and Performance	34
The Case Study	41
Conclusion.....	51
Appendices	53
Appendix A: Diagram of Empathetic Circuit.....	53
Appendix B: Zero Degrees of Empathy Venn Diagram	54
Appendix C: The Empathy Bell Curve.....	54
Appendix D: Empathy Quotient.....	55
Appendix E: Informed Consent Form.....	59
Appendix F: Playback Terminology.....	61
Appendix G: Playback Workshop Lesson Plan	62
Appendix H: Full Text of Audience Responses.....	63
Appendix I: Word Cloud Based on Audience Responses.....	65
Works Cited	66

Audi alteram partem (“listen to the other side”)—Saint Augustine

A troubling predicament for the modern man and woman is not a lack of connection, but rather, the lack of an enduring one. Those in developed countries, with the world of social media and information at their fingertips, are perpetually plugged in. The great technological advances of our time enable two individuals to connect across the world. How and why is it then that these same individuals often struggle to achieve a comparable degree of connection in person? Perhaps individuals are connecting, but not in a way that ultimately fulfills them. Cyberspace may offer less personal risk and rejection for technological users. The anonymity of cyberspace provides an opportunity for solidarity among like-minded individuals. Whether the screen serves as a shield or a crutch, many people would agree that face to face conversation requires more risk, and ultimately, more reward.

Consider individuals participating in online dating: regardless of how many engaging conversations two may have had online, the risk of the first date *in person* inspires nerves and excitement. Only when the real interface occurs can two individuals determine whether or not they may have a tangible connection. Technology provides a starting point to connection. However, it is only through an interpersonal, physical exchange that connection transforms. Man’s indelible socialness may account for this. The desire for physical affection is present throughout an individual’s lifetime, from infancy to adulthood. Technology simulates the meaningful emotional connection that individuals desire. However, interface connection offers more biological and social benefits. The problem seems to be that Americans have less time to invest in personal connection.

Several economic and social factors may contribute to why Americans have less time for face to face connection. The increasing demands of the workforce make it logistically challenging for friends and family to reunite. Studies suggest that nonstandard work schedules and shift-work have adverse effects for children and family dynamics. Lyndall Strazdins’s article, “Unsocial Work? Nonstandard Work Schedules, Family Relationships, and Children’s Well-Being,” illustrates changing economic trends of the last several decades from eight-hour work days five days a week to flexible schedules on evenings and weekends. The article demonstrates that, around the world, more people work longer hours with a downward pressure on wages. The rise of dual earner families may also have unintended consequences:

Children’s well-being depends on the quality of family relationships (Cummings, 1994; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002), and nonstandard work schedules may make it harder for parents to build family closeness [...]

Relationships require *face time* to give and receive support, build intimacy, or repair when conflict arises (Galinsky, 1999), and this is true for both marital and parent-child relationships. (qtd. in Strazdins 396)

According to a 2015 Pew Research study, “How American Parents Balance Work and Family Life When Both Work,” both parents work full-time in 46% of households (Patten). Parents have less time to spend with their children as a result. Lack of paid leave for American parents has come to the political forefront in recent years. These aforementioned statistics demonstrate why empathetic engagement may, in some cases, prove challenging. Building a strong relationship requires time and effort in a distraction-free space. Relationships often require a conscious choice to make time for another person. Nonstandard work schedules may decrease the amount of free time for individuals to reconnect with their support network. Strong family units serve as the building blocks of society. When the individual family deteriorates, the greater society also breaks down.

Interestingly, Americans’ lack of free time may be a combination of factors, both obligatory and conscious choices. Silvia Bellezza’s article, “Conspicuous Consumption of Time: When Busyness and Lack of Leisure Time Become a Status Symbol,” in *The Journal of Consumer Research* offers a compelling argument that Americans consider busyness the new status symbol. The article examines the change in American commercials and social media over the last decade to reflect Americans’ borderline worship of exhaustion and lack of leisure time. Busyness may serve an integral part of identity for some individuals, and consequently, leisure time is deprioritized. One might suppose that this trajectory of more work and less relaxation is not sustainable—eventually an individual “crashes.” In such cases, an individual often wishes to return to that primal connection, be it with nature or reconnection with family and friends. In both the microcosm of the family unit and the macrocosm of the world, being busy and technologically connected may inhibit meaningful connection. The need to be constantly busy prevents individuals from achieving intimacy that maintains their sense of cosmic worth. Collective society, and the individuals that make up that society, must risk their time and risk connection in order to experience progression.

The problems facing our world at large— war, poverty, drugs, education, sex-trafficking, sexual assault, terrorism, gender inequality, racism, and bigotry— are complex and multi-faceted. These issues share an intriguing commonality: lack of empathy. Although there are many contributing factors to inhumane acts, lack of empathy is one aspect that merits further investigation. This analysis focuses primarily on how empathy, or lack thereof, relates to human connection and indifference. In layman’s terms, a lack of empathy prevents connection by blinding one

person from another point of view. Failure to see the dignity of every human person may begin to explain how and why heinous crimes occur. The inability to understand the struggles and desires of others, individually and collectively, contributes to racism and bigotry. In the most extreme cases, a lack of empathy is indicative of psychosis. In the Diagnostic Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, lack of empathy is a common symptom for many personality and psychopathic disorders, particularly in narcissistic personality and antisocial personality disorders. The dangerous ramifications of a lack of empathy, be it from biological or social factors, lead many to conclude that a lack of empathy is not natural. More importantly, a lack of empathy seems *inhuman*. Empathy is an important signifier for psychological health. It is also indicative of a healthy society.

History demonstrates how empathy advanced world civilizations. Empathy brought compromise in volatile circumstances. In horrific acts of war, humankind realizes its potential for great evil, and the need for reform. Empathy allows humankind to re-examine social justice issues by identifying corrupt policies and oppressive mechanisms that affect certain communities. More importantly, empathy is what distinguishes a person imbued with a soul from a base animal that holds no regard for anything outside of his or her needs. To demonstrate empathy for another requires selflessness and sacrifice. Often it means going outside of one's own comfort zone. Heroes and saints emerge from the ashes of indifference. Empathy transcends this mortal coil by allowing humankind the opportunity to achieve divine transcendence.

Empathy is an exercise in complete presence—and perhaps it is for that reason that technological societies struggle to connect on an interpersonal level. Technological screens may serve as metaphysical blockers, inhibiting a person from engaging his or her own sense of empathetic intuition. Online engagement often involves memes, GIFs, and online forums. Instagram and Facebook selfies illustrate a person through a literal filter, obscuring the reality of who the person truly is. Self-presentational theory argues that an individual will present himself or herself for his or her own benefit first and foremost, and social media is a strong example of this. Terri Chan's 2014 article, "Facebook and its Effects on Users' Empathic Social Skills and Life Satisfaction: A Double-Edged Sword Effect," offers more detailed analysis regarding the role of empathy in maintaining and strengthening social skills online. Barry Schlenker's 1980 book, *Impression Management: the Self-concept, Social Identity, and Interpersonal Relations*, explains self-presentational theory as conscious management of self-image in social contexts. Photoshop software alters the reality of what a person really looks like to advance an individual's own self-image. These distractions and diversions mask the true essence of a person: a soul filled with strengths, weaknesses, hopes, and dreams.

Technology distorts individuality, instead grouping an individual with similar people whose commonalities may be based on hobbies, interests, religion, culture, or political affiliation. The “People like You” feature on dating sites or social media sites boils a person down to a simple algorithm. The failure of technology is that it cannot account for, explain, or illustrate an individual as a culmination of their unique life experiences. Social media often creates an echo chamber in which individuals seek only those with whom they agree. The charged rhetoric featured in many political online forums exemplify how broad categorizations or stereotypes can escalate into ineffective discussion. When technology lacks a mediating force, the quality of dialogue deteriorates. Empathy grows and flourishes in an open and respectful environment, in which all viewpoints and ideological positions are respected. Sympathy can be exerted over categorical groups, but empathy is exerted only between one unique individual and another. Therefore, empathy requires an acknowledgement that every person has a unique and equally important worldview. The Jesuit tenant of *cura personalis*, or care for the whole person, demonstrates an intimate understanding of this, particularly in its focus of the unique talents, gifts, and wisdom each individual embodies.

If one should ever hope to reconcile the partitions of race, religion, class, and politics in the world, one must begin with open conversation. *Presence* is the critical foundation upon which empathetic engagement is built. Presence requires complete commitment to the moment, and thus, cannot occur when one or more individuals are distracted. Metaphysical walls, whether or not consciously constructed, prevent rewarding present connection. Human beings have to rectify the fact that true connection is a risk, and risk can be a terrifying prospect. For this reason, some individuals may choose artificial technological connections over substantive personal ones.

The redemption that human beings desire is often found in face to face connection, where human beings can reconcile themselves with the world they inhabit. Redemption or salvation is the realization that an individual does not exist in a vacuum, but rather exists alongside other human beings who often experience similar struggles and anxieties in everyday life. Individuals who feel trapped inside the mind may feel alienated within a community. Tangible connection reminds that individual that he or she is not alone or unusual. This particular kind of connection and affirmation provides joy, engenders mutual trust and respect, and gives necessary hope.

Humanity holds to an idealistic hope that one day all nations may coexist harmoniously. Therefore humanity must believe, on a systemic level, that this endeavor is *possible*. Unfortunately, history demonstrates peaceful coexistence as an uphill battle. Violence and war may jade individuals from seeking to actualize peace in their communities. It is

impossible for an individual to look beyond his or her own prejudices unless they are willing to listen to the other side. More importantly, an individual must be open to the change that this perspective may offer. This present openness to transformational change signifies a deeper understanding of humanity. Sometimes it is this singular redemptive moment which can sustain an individual through difficult times and offer the possibility of a better future. Possibilities alone may serve as humankind's earthly redemption.

Transcendence is a brief existential state in which an individual emerges from his or her own solitary confinement of mind into a reunification with the greater universe. These transcended individuals experience the intense ecstasy of harmony and mutual empathy. Consequently, human beings often desire to replicate and revisit the experience. The state of transcendence also offers cosmic significance, by justifying an individual's self-worth and existential purpose. Transcendence is possible for all humankind, but tends to occur more frequently under certain conditions. This experience may occur in religious or cultural rituals, and for those in ascetic periods of isolation, abstinence, and meditative reflection. Others view alcohol, drugs, and sex as a transcendental agent. Whatever form it embodies, the need for transcendence is innate in the human heart. Transcendence may be a form of escapism or may demonstrate a desire to change an unjust world. In an increasingly "busy" society, it may seem difficult to remind ourselves how to slow down, and more importantly, how to actively engage another person.

Playback theatre exemplifies how transcendence and empathy can be a tool for reconciliation, conflict resolution, and social change. Playback utilizes oral storytelling and the spontaneous re-creation of personal stories through music, theatre, and movement to facilitate mutual understanding and respect. One important aspect of Playback theatre is that, as a spontaneous act, it is entirely committed to the present moment. Playback is not premeditated or planned and is thus a reactive gesture. When a story transforms, and the storyteller and the artist experience an empathetic exchange, transcendence is possible. Empathetic engagement serves as the precursor to transformation and transcendence. The mechanics and parameters of Playback fosters transcendence by creating an environment of complete presence and mutual respect. Playback theatre provides all participants with the opportunity to engage in spontaneous choice and free will, without which transcendence becomes impossible.

Understanding empathy as a means of human transcendence is the aim of this exploration. Accomplishing this goal means, primarily, that one procures the terms to quantify and qualify this experience. This study will first offer perspectives in neuroscience and modern psychology as a

defining foundation of what occurs for humans on a physical and often unconscious level when they experience empathetic engagement. This particular field of neuroscience is still developing, with changing technologies offering new insights for scientists and patients alike. Empathy is equal parts biology and learned behavior, and this study seeks to substantiate why that is. Once the neurological mechanics are clearly defined and understood, one may shift to more philosophical avenues.

Empathy: Perspectives in Neuroscience

The brain is wider than the sky — Emily Dickinson

Neuroscientists, psychologists, and poets would all likely agree that the human brain is a particularly captivating and controversial subject in academia. Although the lenses in which these three schools examine the human brain are very different, the approaches are equally important and worth inclusion in this examination. The brain is of interest to these populations because the organ directs both complex and simple functions. The brain is also dual-purposed: it powers basic motor functions and possesses the individual's conscious mind. Consequently, there is some multi-disciplinary crossover in research. Neuroscientists primarily focus on the brain as an organ and how the organ functions, while psychologists study human consciousness and the mind as a thought-processing, motivated entity. The two sides of the coin inform the other by providing a broader picture of the full capacities of the brain itself. In contrast, an artist's focus and primary objective is not as easily defined. Artists may take more metaphysical and subjective means into consideration. These three approaches—neuroscience, psychology, and art—offer vital insight and perspective into how humans think, feel, and connect.

Connection is an integral part of empathy, and so it seems fitting to first examine the abstract concept of empathy through more measurable and finite means. Growing advances in technology have enabled neuroscientists to create a more detailed blueprint of the brain. However, understanding how the individual parts of the brain work together remain a challenge. The synthesis of brain and mind, organ and consciousness, are not fully understood. One unconventional and rewarding starting point to understanding the synthesis of brain and conscious mind may be found in the field of criminology.

Criminology incorporates aspects of both neuroscience and psychology in analyzing criminal behavior. Empathy may seem more relevant in psychology than criminology or neurology. However, the intersection of these fields provides valuable information on human behavior and the elusive question of why a subject may behave a certain way. Whether brain health may affect the degree of aggression, compassion, and even empathy within a subject is one emerging question. Is empathy a learned behavior or does it have some biological basis? This chapter will feature several studies in both neurology and psychology to further explore this question. The relationship between the health of the neurological organ and outward expression of human behavior is critical to understanding empathy as scientific construct.

Mirror Neurons and The Art of Imitation

The 19th century case of Phineas Gage opened a line of inquiry as to how damage to the brain might affect a subject's personality. Phineas Gage experienced a tragic railroad accident, in which a railroad spike was impaled through his frontal lobe. Although Gage miraculously survived the accident, changes surfaced in his behavior and personality. The frontal lobe of the brain controls personality, linguistic expression, and judgment making. When the brain is damaged, whether due to genetics, an accident, or illness, the subject often manifests physical and psychological changes. The slightest brain impairment may have significant effects on a subject's mobility. Brain damage or abnormal growth may affect a subject's actions and personality. These changes often make the subject's behavior far less predictable than their healthy counterparts. In extreme cases, these unpredictable behaviors may have dangerous consequences. Abnormal brain scans and lack of empathy are not uncommon in serial killers. "Neurodevelopmental and Psychosocial Risk Factors in Serial Killers and Mass Murderers" cites several studies in the last fifteen years which focuses on the statistics of head injuries, autism spectrum disorder, and psychosocial stressors among the serial killer population (Allely, et. al). Biological abnormalities influence psychological behavior to the degree that one may question the culpability of the subject. Differentiating the criminally insane and the debase criminal is a fine line.

The consequences of empathetic ineptitude are discussed at length in both the fields of criminology and psychology. George Palermo's 2012 article, "Do Psychopaths feel Empathy?," demonstrates how empathy is a key part of psychological health:

Empathy is the capacity to recognize the feelings that another person may be experiencing. It is the precursor of moral motivation. This capacity is strictly connected with the human mirror neuron system and is basic to the capacity for moral reasoning. Both empathy and moral reasoning are basic to human living, and one could opine that they are almost innate. They develop from infancy through childhood and adolescence and into adulthood, especially when an individual is raised in a moral society. It could be said that to live with a moral sense in any society, one should demonstrate an empathic concern for the other. [...] It is at the basis of altruistic behavior and prosocial behaviors. It is generally differentiated in cognitive and affective empathy. A lack of empathy is usually associated with alexithymia or with reduced mirror activity in the brain (inferior frontal gyrus) and may be observed in autistic

persons due to an impaired theory of mind. Criminals, in general and psychopaths in particular, often act in an antisocial, 'anti-other' way because they lack the capacity for empathy and, of consequence, for moral reasoning. (1)

Low empathy has far reaching implications which cannot be understated. As one embarks into deeper exploration of neuroscience, it is helpful to visualize how these anatomic parts work together (Appendix A). Simon Baron-Cohen's critical research on empathy not only begins to answer the question of those implications, but offers solutions to the low empathy epidemic. Simon Baron-Cohen is a Professor of Developmental Psychopathology and Psychiatry at the University of Cambridge, and an Autism expert. His 2011 book, *The Science of Evil: on Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*, possesses an interesting take on empathy in relation to cruelty. Baron-Cohen's opening chapter, "Explaining 'Evil' and Human Cruelty," reminds the reader that *evil* is a casual term used to explain truly callous and unempathetic acts. However, the author makes an important distinction that this word is not enough to serve as an explanation, *nor should it*. Simon Baron-Cohen argues that the Holocaust is not a standalone case of horrific violence and objectification of human beings. The author cites examples in Kenya, Austria, Armenia, and Uganda demonstrating unspeakable cruelty to the degree one cares not to repeat here.

Simon Baron-Cohen ambitiously tackles the "evil problem" with an alternative that combines logical reasoning and compassionate respect for every person. He achieves this primarily through three methods: Zero Degrees of Empathy Venn Diagram, Empathy Bell Curve, and the Empathy Quotient (Appendices B, C, D). Individuals fall upon an empathetic spectrum between low and high empathy. The author offers an important alternative to the categorization of personality disorders: namely that personality disorders often share zero degrees of empathy. Individuals who possess a zero-negative degree of empathy likely fall into one or a mixture of the following categories: Borderline (Type B), Psychopath (Type P), and Narcissist (Type N). Interestingly, an argument for a Zero Degree Positive category for individuals possessing Autism or Aspergers is also included. Simon Baron-Cohen clarifies that individuals who possess zero degrees of empathy may not necessarily become violent offenders. The author's methods and theories are comprehensive, and worth further study, particularly for psychologists and criminologists. The strength of his argument is largely because Baron-Cohen does not dilute the complexity of the human person into simple categories.

The book also argues that low empathy may also be caused from biological factors. The included neurobiological diagrams of the

empathetic circuit in the brain address treatment options for individuals suffering from low empathy. Empathy is a combination of environmental and biological factors, which is why Baron-Cohen clarifies what he means by empathy gene. Baron-Cohen contends:

Some genes are *associated* with your score on various measures of empathy. Even with these caveats in place, some people will be alarmed at the very idea of genes for empathy because they fear the deterministic implications of such a view. I would remind those readers that genes are not the only deterministic factor because the early environment also is. And I would ask them: Should we simply sweep such genetic evidence under the carpet just because it makes us uncomfortable? In pursuit of trying to understand how human beings can end up doing awful things to each other, we have to look at *all* of the evidence, not just the bits that suits our worldview. (127)

In Chapter 5 “The Empathy Gene,” the author explores studies of twins in relation to empathy as well as genes for aggression, emotional recognition, empathy quotient (EQ), among others. Genotyping and neuroscientific studies are offered to explain these phenomena. The mirror neuron system found in the inferior parietal lobule and inferior parietal sulcus has often been cited as a means to understanding empathy. Baron-Cohen argues that the human mirror neuron system (hMNS) is too simplistic of an explanation for an experience as complex as empathy.

Mirror neuron research is a relatively new science. The foundation of mirror research began in the early 1990s with Giacomo Rizzolatti and his team of neurophysiologists at the University of Parma in Italy. Rizzolatti primarily studied macaque monkeys as a means of constructing his theory of mirror neurons. While one monkey grasped an object, a neuron in an observing monkey would fire. It was as if the observing monkey *experienced* the same action as the one who grasped the object. The initial criticism of Rizzolatti’s work was largely due to the fact that the activated parts of an animal’s brain does not necessarily have an equivalent in a human’s brain, leading some to conclude his work as conjecture at best. The use of monkeys as a means of predicting human behavior is not new in the scientific community.

Harry Harlow’s 1950s “Cloth Monkey” examined the role of touch and social connection between mother and infant monkeys. Harlow created wire and cloth monkey models in order to examine the effects of isolation and the infant’s preference for comfort. The predictable outcome was that the infant would prefer the soft cloth monkey, even if it lacked food and water. The use of animals in scientific experiments is a

subject of controversy for animal advocacy groups. Such advocates often doubt that the use of monkeys or other animals can be a strong predictor for human behavior. Modern psychology has laws and practices in place to prevent irreparable physical or psychological damage to human subjects, resulting in some degree of speculation. Regardless of pitfalls, these early experiments offer valuable insight into the desire to understand how one interacts and socializes with another.

Rizzolatti and Arbib's "Language within our Grasp" offers early attempts to compare the activated parts of a monkey's brain with the human equivalent. The article's charts and references illustrate the detailed mechanics of how mirror neurons function. Rizzolatti and Arbib clarify how mirror neurons function for humans, and where they are located in the brain. Mirror neurons are predominantly found in the parts of the brain involving speech perception and production. "Language within our Grasp" also includes insight into the evolution of human mirror neuron system beginning with proto-humans. Early evidence of speech areas in proto-human fossils supports the evolution of the hMNS in both verbal and non-verbal, gestural communication. Arbib's 2010 "Mirror System Activity for Action and Language Is Embedded in the Integration of Dorsal and Ventral Pathways" builds on his previous research and makes important distinctions regarding mirror neurons, namely, that "Activity seen in mirror systems involves not only mirror neurons but other cell types as well" (14). He also argues that, regarding mirror neurons and empathy:

Some so-called mirror neurons may not code for execution of the recognized action as such but rather for related actions that might be invoked in response. In observing a blow, the neurons may encode a response to the blow, not the action of punching itself. Again, if we see an angry face, we may be more likely to react fearfully than to empathize with the anger that the face expresses. (Arbib 17, 2010)

Arbib's research offers important counterpoints to those who hold more sensational contentions.

The role of mirror neurons, and its relation to empathy, is of particular interest and relevance to this research study. Supportive evidence of the role of mirror neurons in human socialization and engagement is growing, and by extension, its influence on empathy. Since Rizzolatti's initial discovery, opportunities have grown for mirror neuron research. Subsequent research employing human subjects for mirror neuron research is worth consideration. Avenanti's 2005 study, "Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation Highlights the Sensorimotor Side of Empathy for Pain," used "transcranial magnetic imaging to record

changes in corticospinal motor representations of hand muscles of individuals observing needles penetrating hands or feet of a human model or noncorporeal objects” (955). The results of this examination are intriguing:

We found a reduction in amplitude of motor-evoked potentials that was specific to the muscle that subjects observed being pricked. This inhibition correlated with the observer's subjective rating of the sensory qualities of the pain attributed to the model and with sensory, but not emotional, state or trait empathy measures. The empathic inference about the sensory qualities of others' pain and their automatic embodiment in the observer's motor system may be crucial for the social learning of reactions to pain. (Avenanti 955)

Understanding another’s pain, even on a neuronal level, carries a sense of gravitas. V.S. Ramachandran’s 2010 nonfiction, “The tell-tale brain: A Neuroscientist’s Quest for What Makes Us Human,” possessed similar findings:

The surgeon places an electrode in Smith’s anterior cingulate, a region near the front of the brain where many of the neurons respond to pain. And sure enough, the doctor is able to find a neuron that becomes active whenever Smith’s hand is poked with a needle. But the surgeon is astonished by what he sees next. The same neuron fires just as vigorously when Smith merely watches another patient being poked. It is as if the neuron (or the functional circuit of which it is a part) is empathizing with another person. A stranger’s pain becomes Smith’s pain, almost literally. (Ramachandran 6)

Ramachandran is not alone in this narrative. Sandra Blakeslee’s 2006 *The New York Times* article contended that mirror neuron cells “read minds”. University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) psychologist Patricia Greenfield, in an interview with Blakeslee contended, “Until now, scholars have treated culture as fundamentally separate from biology [...] But now we see that mirror neurons absorb culture directly, with each generation teaching the next by social sharing, imitation and observation” (Blakeslee, 2006). The prospect of super smart cells enabling one individual to identify and simultaneously experience the action of another being is exciting. Current research has tempered scientists from jumping to hasty conclusions.

Ramachandran's work was controversial in the neuroscientific community, particularly for what many believed was an overdramatization of mirror neurons and its capabilities. Anthony Gottlieb's *The New York Times* review of Ramachandran's *The Tell-Tale Brain* observes that "Although Ramachandran admits that his account of the significance of mirror neurons is speculative, he doesn't let on just how controversial it is" (12). Simon Baron-Cohen also critiqued Ramachandran's work, particularly in Ramachandran's assertion that dysfunctional mirror neurons are related to autism spectrum disorder (340). The degree to which humans imitate or empathize with the actions of another through neurons may seem far-fetched to skeptics. Mirror neurons often stir serious debate in the scientific community, particularly regarding its function. Mirror neurons imitate the action of another, yet whether they inherently contain any kind of knowledge or conscious intelligence is questionable.

The main point of contention among scholars is whether mirror neurons are intentional or based in associative learning. Rizzolatti's 2014 article, "Confounding the Origin and Function of Mirror Neurons," argues that current evidence favors an associative account versus genetic. The dialogue and controversy continues. However, these various studies share a common desire to understand this particular kind of mental connection between beings. Whether mirror neurons are themselves intelligent or can read minds, or merely a small part in the greater linguistic framework that constructs meaning, is an emerging question. Scientists remain captivated and steadfast in the search for understanding of how humans connect and engage with one another. Mirror neurons are one proposed method of inter-being connection. Physical connection and touch also affect neurotransmitters and hormones.

Coan's 2006 psychological experiment in Madison, Wisconsin revealed the neurological effects of hand-holding for married women threatened with electric shocks. The experiment progressed from the female subjects holding their spouse's hand to a stranger's hand and finally, with no hand-holding. This experiment demonstrates the important relationship between physical connection and neural brain activity. Physical connection reduced the neural threat of physical shock. The threat was most reduced while holding the husband's hand, and then the stranger's hand, and least reduced when the subject was not holding any hand. Physical connection enables individuals to withstand difficulties and threatening situations. Human beings need to rely on each other, and to reaffirm and reassure emotional support for one another when challenges arise.

One can imagine the incredible source of comfort a hug might be to a grieving individual. Touch is a source of affection and bonding. For example, the embrace of a mother and infant for the first time forges a

bond for a lifetime. Interestingly, touch has important biological benefits. Supportive evidence of the benefits of touch is increasing considerably, particularly in increasing weight, temperature, and pulse rate in premature babies. Other examples include therapeutic touch among cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy and also the general populace with recreational massage. Massage is growing in popularity, namely for its ability to release endorphins, leaving participants more comfortable and less stressed. Touch also serves as an integral part of attachment theory.

In Jones's "Exploring the Psychological Processes Underlying Touch: Lessons from the Alexander Technique," psychological health is analyzed in relation to touch:

Research also suggests that touch can induce positive hormonal changes. Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham, and Light (2008) investigated married-couple groups taking part in a warm-touch intervention programme and found increased levels of oxytocin and decreased levels of amylase, which they linked to participants' reduced stress levels and increased feelings of calm. Theories of embodiment outline that we interact with the world through our physical being, and psychological ill health occurs when we move our identity away from our body experience (Kepner, 1993). The theory suggests touch to be a vehicle for reducing feelings of separateness from one's physical presence, thus increasing psychological well-being. (qtd. in Jones 140)

Physical touch and emotional connection are important aspects of a happy, fulfilled life. Human contact is important through all stages of life, without which one can expect a less fulfilling and vibrant existence.

In contrast to positive human contact, isolation and lack of healthy touch can have devastating effects for the victim. In extreme cases, the degree of psychological damage often requires long-term assessment. The 1970s child abuse case of "Genie" demonstrates how extreme periods of isolation cause permanent physical and mental damage even decades after rescue. The details of Genie's isolation, from being strapped down to a toilet for eight to twelve hours a day, lack of healthy human touch, and never being taught a first language, have greatly influenced psychological theories of the linguistic and emotional repercussions of isolation. Genie's case informed upon language acquisition theory, as she was never able to form a first language. Due to her demonstration of base instincts and lack of social filter, Genie was labeled a "feral child." One of the most heartbreaking consequences of Genie's abuse was her paralyzing fear of any positive physical contact. Considering that the perpetrators were

Genie's own parents, it is difficult to grasp how her parents had little remorse for their actions, and little empathy for their disabled daughter.

Whether or not Genie ever developed any sense of empathy herself remains uncertain as her known whereabouts and health have since become confidential. Genie lacked human contact in the early stages of her development; a fact which may have contributed to her poor physical health and recovery later in life. Genie's case may also inform on mirror neuron theory. The hMNS network supports, "a link between perception and action in both gestural and linguistic domains" (Rizzolatti and Arbib, 1998). Additionally, "Mirror neurons are thought to support observational learning and promote imitation" (Cross et al., 2009). Genie's case is a powerful reminder of the consequences of isolation and lack of reassuring positive human contact. It also demonstrates that, without having the opportunity to engage her mirror neuronal network, Genie was prevented the opportunity to engage, learn, grow, empathize and connect.

Technology and the Mirror Neuron Network

Society is undergoing an interesting transition from real-face, real-time connection to screen-time and technological connection. A recent debate has emerged among scholars as to how technology prevents or enhances connection. The hMNS network functions differently through technology than in person. The evidence of how empathy increases or decreases with technology is mixed. Chan's "Facebook and its Effects on Users' Empathetic Social Skills and Life Satisfaction: A Double-Edged Sword Effect" presents a complex picture. Chan used a college-aged population for the study. The author argues that personality, whether one is outgoing or neurotic, as well as the amount of Facebook usage, affects the subject's empathetic skill-set. The study demonstrates the lack of a "one size fits all" formula regarding technology's effect on empathy. Kelly Dickerson similarly proposes in "The Role of the Human Mirror Neuron System in Supporting Communication in a Digital World" that:

Given the converging evidence across learning environments and development periods [...] the exaptation of the neural architecture supporting communication (hMNS) in the real world operates less efficiently and effectively in the presence of temporal, spatial, and social disruptions inherent to virtual communication and screen media platforms. This assertion is based on an emerging literature demonstrating that the temporal and spatial decoupling in virtual and screen based interactions are fundamentally disruptive to processing communication information, both gestural and linguistic. (2)

The 2017 publication featured in *Frontiers in Psychology* makes a compelling argument of why this research field faces obstacles:

The information processing and sensory transformations required to solve the correspondence problem and learn from the gestures and expressions of those around us are demanding even under the most ideal conditions of real-time face-to-face interactions. The use of digital interfaces for communication and learning introduces potential difficulty in translating visual information to action. Currently, the impact of moving an interaction from real-time to a partial or fully virtual space on perception and action understanding is not well understood. The research literature has effectively documented many of the parameters of dyadic interactions in the real world, but the availability of new communication technologies has outpaced the available research. The emergence and broad acceptance of virtual and distributed communication has presented a unique opportunity to re-examine the neural and behavioral systems that support resolution of the correspondence problem and enable social interactions. (Dickerson 2)

Dickerson's assertion that technologies have outpaced research suggests that the field has room for growth. Given the overwhelming fascination with what mirror neurons are or are not, scholarship continues to utilize new technological methods in mirror neuron research.

Mirror Neurons as Myth

The mirror neuron narrative can be challenging to understand, due to polarizing viewpoints of its capabilities. C. Fred Alford's authoritative "Mirror Neurons, Psychoanalysis, and the Age of Empathy," provides an insightful and balanced overview of both sides of the mirror neuron debate. His analysis examines why the discoveries have caused a peak of interest in both the popular media and general public, as well as the possible roles and purposes of mirror neurons. Alford cites scientists in favor of mirror neurons' intentionality, as well as those who believe mirror neurons lack "action understanding" (Hickok, 2008, 1240-1241; Hickok and Hauser, 2010). Perhaps the most disturbing case that Alford makes against mirror neurons is the following proposal: "Mirror neurons are not free of personal and cultural bias" (16). Furthermore:

Using whole-head magnetoencephalography (MEG) to record cortical activity of human subjects while they watched a series of videos of

an actor making a movement recorded from different viewpoints, Kilner, Marchant, and Firth (2006) demonstrated that the cortical response to action observation is modulated by the relationship between the observer and the actor. They conclude that this modulation reflects a mechanism that filters information into the ‘mirror system [...] allowing only the actions of the most socially relevant person to pass.’ (qtd. in Alford 16)

Alford clarifies how this filter works, and why this filter may inhibit empathy for certain groups outside of one’s comfort zone:

The key point is that mirror neurons are not isolated from the rest of the brain’s information processing system. They are not in direct contact with anything but the brain itself. Only the actions of socially relevant people pass the mechanism that filters information into the mirror neuron system, or at least this mechanism allows the socially relevant to pass through more easily. This explains why it is easy to feel empathy for someone in one’s in-group, and relatively easy for many people to ignore the suffering of outsiders. (16-17)

Alford does not offer an easy answer, leaving the reader to come to his or her own conclusions. However, what Alford does offer is a refreshing alternative narrative: the importance of mirror neurons as *myth*. In his conclusion, Alford provides a striking explanation on the importance of myth:

The somatic society is a society without imagination, one that has lost access to myths or narratives that help populate rich inner worlds. Not just religious myths, but Freudian myths are a good example. To call them myths is not to say they are false. It is to say that they are rich and variegated stories about humanity’s place in the world and the inner angels and demons that drive us all. (18)

Just as the stories of Phineas Gage and Harry Harlow’s “Cloth Monkey” have reached mythic proportions in psychology textbooks, so might mirror neurons take on mythic character. As Alford rightly argues, myth does not equate to a falsity or lie, rather it enhances the human experience. Regardless of where one stands on mirror neuron research, the greater takeaway is that human beings engage with, question, and contemplate greater connection within humanity. From the scientist to the artist, the skeptic to the believer, humans seek an intrinsic meaning to connection. Science does not have to hold all of the answers for humans to find the idea captivating. Myth is inherent in storytelling, and in our understanding of art and aesthetics.

Mirror Neurons and Art Reception

Piechowski's "Universal Connection through Art: Role of Mirror Neurons in Art Production and Reception" explores a lesser known topic of mirror neurons and art reception. This article supports the argument of a relationship between mirror neurons and art reception, which has been present throughout the course of human history. "Universal Connection through Art" begins with the earliest forms of art in history. Although many art historians use the term primitive art, Wilkinson and Moore suggest folk art as a preferable term. Wilkinson and Moore contend that folk art "shows the very essence of human to human connection with its straightforward statement embedded in it" (103). Folk art is a spontaneous and direct act, which transfers raw messages between the creator and recipient. A study in folk art reveals important neural mechanisms behind its production, and is critical to understanding group cohesion and survival in the contexts of early human social groups (Zaidel 1-2). Translating the purpose and meaning of folk art is, according to the article, aided by symbols and Carl Jung's proposed archetypes. Archetypes are seemingly universal figures which cross boundaries of culture, religion, language, and nation. The authors suggest Zaidel's work on the evolutionary gain of art as a basis of understanding biology's role in art production and reception.

Survival and the universal construct of beauty seem to be instilled in early development. Studies confirming that children as young as 2-3 months react to beauty differently in regards to race, gender, and age. Attractiveness affects children as young as five years (Short et. al 338). Griffin and Langlois's, "Stereotype Directionality and Attractiveness Stereotyping: Is Beauty Good or is Ugly Bad?," include several studies which suggest unattractiveness as a disadvantage, and beauty as conventionally good and positive. Defining beauty and empathetic engagement similarly translates to art. Freedberg and Gallese's research on mirror neurons in relation to empathy offers a more biological counterpoint to a subjective view of art. His research examines how the mirroring system processes on multiple levels, and can be visual, tactile, auditory, and emotional. Freedberg and Gallese's "Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience" offers important insights into the neural mechanisms that embody the elementary framework of an aesthetic response to art. Live performance or stationary art may activate these neural mechanisms to produce various actions, emotions, or bodily sensations. The authors propose that empathetic response to art is based on the association of the empathetic feelings in the art receiver and the content of the art itself, as well as the empathetic feelings of the art receiver and the technique of artistic production.

It may seem challenging to demonstrate how art affects the recipient in scientific terms. “Universal Connection” includes two interesting experiments using functional imaging data to explore this problem. In “Neural Correlates of Beauty”, Kawabata and Zeki investigate which areas of the brain are specifically activated while viewing conventionally beautiful art. Using a functional scanner, they tested the response of subjects viewing different forms of art, such as a portrait, still life, or abstract. Kawabata and Zeki asked the participants to assess the art as beautiful, neutral, or ugly. They found that when an observer is given beautiful and ugly stimuli, the orbitofrontal cortex engages and mobilizes differently. “Universal Connection” also discusses the results and implications of the work of Di Dio Cinzia and his colleagues:

[Di Dio and colleagues] tested a very difficult hypothesis: whether the biological basis for the experience of beauty in art is subjective or objective. The authors used functional imaging techniques. They presented to non-expert viewers images of masterpieces of Classical and Renaissance sculpture. The images were either original or they contained a modified version of the same sculptures. The authors found that the observation of original sculptures, relative to the modified ones, produced activation of the right insular as well as of lateral occipital gyrus, precuneus, and prefrontal areas. When participants were asked to give an aesthetic judgment, the images judged as beautiful activated the right amygdala, relative to those judged as ugly. The authors concluded that the objective beauty perception is related to the insular region and the perception of subjective beauty was driven by one’s own emotional experiences and related to the activation of amygdala. That is, the insula was activated as part of a spontaneous reaction and the amygdala was activated as part of an induced aesthetic attitude. (Piechowki-Jozwiak 6)

These two studies create an important bridge between the realm of neuroscience and art, demonstrating that one viewpoint, the literal versus abstract, right-brained versus left-brained, is not superior to the other. These converging ideas and viewpoints can work together, and do work together, in a way that still inspires and confounds scholars from diverse fields. Biological connection, survival, and universal communication arise from a neural network. Although interpreting art has basis in neuroscience, it would be remiss to consider powerful literature and art solely in neuroscientific terms. Empathy and transcendence in relation to

philosophy, art, and human ritual does not offer the data and statistics that neuroscience does. Entering into murkier metaphysical waters may leave the querent with more questions than answers.

The Art of Ritual and Myth

*Every human is an artist. And this is the main art that we have:
the creation of our story. –Don Miguel Ruiz*

The search for meaning, as it relates to cosmic specialness, existential purpose, and spiritual fulfillment, is present in both the scientific and artistic realms. Current neuroscientific research demonstrates how human beings are neurologically wired to create and interpret creation. Mirror neurons, and a study in the empathetic circuit, illustrate man's ability to empathize with fellow human beings. The previous chapter featured scientific experiments supporting the active role of mirror neurons in relation to art reception. These experiments suggest that art criticism and assessment are processed differently in the brain relative to its aesthetic beauty. Art is not merely an emotional response, but a neurological one. Folk art exemplifies its ability to communicate important evolutionary and biological messages in survival. Folk art is powerfully raw and serves as a vibrant example of how archetypes can surpass boundaries of language, culture, and custom. Although particular kinds of art may elicit different critical responses by the recipient, art retains universal value and importance. Art has evolved with humankind, informing on survival and the perpetuating myths and stories for future generations. Human beings seek to leave behind something substantive and important after death. The need to create may manifest differently in every individual, and as such, the creative byproduct varies. By examining the heart of this need, one may begin to understand the nature of man's creative tendency. The journey, be it scientific or artistic, begins with a question.

Questions emerge as a result of intellectual curiosity or meditative introspection. The scientist may ask, "What parts of the brain are engaged when experiencing empathy?" The artist may ask, "How do I illustrate empathy with pastel?" Science aims for objectivity, reliability, and supportive data either to refute or support one's primary question. Scientific assertions require evidence, and the ability for the experiment to be replicated again with the same results. As such, experiments are rarely one-time events, and are often carefully investigated and reviewed by others. The associates of the primary researcher may interpret and challenge the experiment in open dialogue. Similarly, a poet may experience a new artistic period thanks to the suggestions and criticism of his or her contemporaries. This dialogue is often what advances the project.

One such philosopher of science who supported this line of inquiry and dialogue was Thomas Kuhn. Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996), a summa cum laude Harvard physics graduate, argued that scientific inquiry

experiences revolutions, rather than being a linear acquisition of knowledge. His multi-disciplinary approach to science and education is evidenced throughout his academic and post academic career. In fact, in a Phi Beta Kappa address in 1943, Kuhn affirmed “the importance of a liberal arts education” (Marcum 6). Kuhn continued to succeed in academia, procuring a masters and doctorate in physics from Harvard. In 1962, Kuhn began *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn’s greatest contribution was his revolutionary examination of science’s process rather than its product (Marcum 57). Kuhn believed his new image of science as contradictory to traditional views of science and its purpose. Marcum analyzes how Kuhn defied traditionalist views of science:

According to the traditionalist view, science is a repository of accumulated facts, discovered by individuals at specific points in history. One of the central tasks of the historian, given this traditional view of science, is to answer questions about who discovered what, where, and when [...] Many historians found it difficult and doubted whether these are the right questions to ask concerning historical record. [...] This revolution changed the sorts of questions historians ask by revising the underlying assumptions concerning the approach to reading the historical record. (Marcum 57-58)

Furthermore, Marcum observes, “the historiographic revolution in the study of science’s record had implications for how science is viewed and understood philosophically” (58). Kuhn’s work affected academic dialogue in the scientific community, particularly in his understanding of science as multi-disciplinary and fluid. Art has also experienced many revolutions and shifts throughout its history.

Art invites interpretation, criticism, and discussion. The artistic method, like the scientific method, is a *process*. The scientist and artist likely want the same outcome: meaning. These two individuals, the artist and scientist, may define meaning differently, and therefore their process may differ. Just as the scientist may seek meaning through measurable finite means and methods, the artist may seek spiritual or emotional meaning from their artistic process. Both the scientist and the artist seek to understand their existence in their own terms.

Memoir is one literary form that strongly supports this phenomenon: human beings seek to interpret, create, and revise their existence. Memoir is the recollection of one’s personal life story, featuring personal events, both public and private, from the author’s life. The process of writing a memoir and engaging with one’s own memories across time and space, suggests a need for reconciliation of their experiences into meaningful

form. The author of the memoir may feel a need to justify their actions or may want to apologize for negative consequences they created. He or she may believe that their life story may offer important lessons to others or serve as an opportunity to commiserate with their reader. These individual personal narratives merge into a mega-narrative intent on explaining the human condition and experience.

The human condition often involves an acknowledgement of one's own mortality. This acknowledgment and understanding may manifest through scientific inquiry or artistic creation. The scientist may seek to understand the origins of humankind through biology, DNA, and archeology. Medical research has made great strides in prolonging human life and managing physical human suffering. Science seeks to simultaneously understand our biological origins, and the prolongment of human life through medicine and medical technology. Respirators and life-support equipment are some examples of medical tools used to prevent immediate death. For all of the scientific advances in the medical field, Death remains undefeated.

Art may also signify and be a response to, one's own mortality. The manifestation of this struggle or response may appear very different than that of a scientist in his laboratory, but the need for meaning is still present. In an attempt to create meaning out of an uncertain existence, human beings are called to respond in whatever manner that resonates with their person. Human beings grapple with the possibility or impossibility of an afterlife. This spiritual purgatory, that is, the uncertainty of one's cosmic purpose, cannot be easily suppressed in one's conscious or subconscious mind. Human beings create myth, ritual, and religion to address these struggles, anxieties, and philosophical musings. The reason for *being* has been a question and struggle throughout human history. Consider the design of human beings from an evolutionary perspective. Is the chief purpose of mankind merely to procreate and pass on their DNA to future generations? The suffering and despair that plagues our consciousness forces us to confront our fears and insecurities. Why do we suffer, and what is at the end of our suffering? Art is one method which seeks to address this dilemma.

Karen Armstrong's *A Short History of Myth* demonstrates how and why myth is quintessential to the human experience. Beginning with the Neanderthals, myth provided "a counternarrative that enabled them to come to terms with [their own mortality]" (1). Armstrong uses the example of Neanderthal graves to explain the five essential elements of myth; it is rooted in the experience of death and fear of extinction, animal sacrifice often accompanies burial, myth is recalled by the grave at the limit of life, dictates how one should behave, and finally, the fetal position of the corpse suggests rebirth (3-4). Armstrong observes:

The most powerful myths are about extremity, they force us to go beyond our experience. There are moments when we all, in one way or another, have to go to a place that we have never seen, and do what we have never done before. Myth is about the unknown; it is about that for which initially we have no words. Myth therefore looks into the heart of great silence. (3-4)

Regardless of one's language, country, or customs, the one commonality all beings share is death. This passage suggests that to engage in ritualistic experience, one must create the physical and emotional space for transcendence to thrive. Ritual requires certain elements, just as the Neanderthals required animal sacrifice, bones, and weapons, to be buried in the grave. Engaging in the ritual process allows an individual to address death directly. Ritual calls an individual to reflect upon the life lost and ponder his or her own future death. The grieving process is two-fold: it is in part for the deceased, but it is also for oneself. The grieving survivor must continue living without the deceased. In these difficult periods, the individual may reconsider their priorities, life choices, and path they are taking. In a similar way, an artist's nostalgic spirit longs for the past, for former comforts, places, events, and images. Ritual provides comfort and stability because the process is predictable. The Neanderthals had a set ritual, featuring an animal sacrifice and a formal burial. The conscious act to bury their dead in a fetal position suggests the cyclical nature of their beliefs. One enters and departs from the world in endless cycle. Ritual recalls what it is lost, while reigniting hope of new life.

Religion is one ritual form which seeks to provide a spiritual foundation to its followers. The major world religions— Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism —share a common belief in the afterlife. Birth, marriage, and funerals have particular rites and forms in each of these religions. These rituals are employed in both celebratory and tragic periods. Religion seeks to explain the origins of our existence, the current reason for our suffering, and a possible future trajectory. Religion and mythology offer some intriguing parallels. Armstrong argues that ancient mythological gods were employed to express complex human emotions:

When people spoke of the divine, they were usually talking about an aspect of the mundane. The very existence of the gods was inseparable from that of a storm, a sea, a river, or from those powerful human emotions— love, rage, or sexual passion— that seemed momentarily to lift men and women onto a different plan of existence so that they saw the world with new eyes. Mythology was therefore designed to help us to

cope with the problematic human predicament.
(Armstrong 5-6)

The human predicament stems from the elusive nature of our origin story and the uncertainty of our future. Myth, Armstrong argues, is an attempt to explain the origins and future of that existence. She suggests that in the absence of records lost “in the mists of prehistory [myths were created about our forefathers to help] explain current attitudes about our environment, neighbours, and customs” (Armstrong 5). Armstrong also makes an important distinction regarding transcendence, which she refers to as “those sublime moments, when we seem to be transported beyond our ordinary concerns. The gods helped to explain the experience of transcendence. The perennial philosophy expresses our innate sense that there is more to human beings and to the material world than meets the eye” (Armstrong 6).

The *transportation* from ordinary concerns, perhaps *transcendence*, is necessary for the human condition. Why is transcendence upheld as the chief achievement and aim of every human being? In Buddhism, enlightenment involves a spiritual awakening, known as *Buddhabood*. Buddhist practitioners view personal ego as illusion, and that a collective consciousness is shared among human beings. In this ideology, enlightenment occurs when we are awakened to this illusion, by departing from material goods, and focusing on one’s positive unlimited potential. The Hindu religion suggests that the process of enlightenment occurs through reincarnation cycles culminating into the final cycle, *moksa*. In Judaism and Christianity, enlightenment is often termed as *revelation* or *conversion*. Both monotheistic and polytheistic religions possess deities believed to be worth imitation, particularly for their qualities of compassion, humility, strength, and mercy. Just as there are ideal entities, there are also devils, demons, and sinners. Heroes and villains are present in myth and religion to provide greater insight into how to conduct one’s life. More importantly, these figures encourage human beings to strive for transcendence, and seek a greater connection with themselves and the universe they occupy. For the purposes of this research, transcendence refers to an introspective process by which an individual achieves greater simultaneous awareness of their individual and communal selves. Transcendence is not a fixed point in time, or universal experience. Often transcendence is viewed as transitory and temporal. However, transcendence remains a worthwhile and eternal pursuit across religious and philosophical contexts. Transcendence and enlightenment are therefore terms which can be used interchangeably. Whether or not one can achieve enlightenment on this earth, or whether it can only be obtained in the afterlife, is worth contemplation. It is impossible to answer this.

Some scholars might argue that transcendence illustrates a need to escape this mortal coil, while others may view transcendence as an opportunity for social change. In a morally complex society, we create heroes who defy the odds, temptation, and even death. We maintain hope that the hero, mortal and fallible as he or she may be, may one day enter into a transcendental divine realm of peace and fulfillment. The need for cosmic significance is one important aspect of the human condition – if there is no meaning, we often create it.

Many diverging interpretations exist for how an individual might pursue transcendence, and thus it would be remiss to claim a standard methodology. However, transcendence as a conceptual term and experience can be aided by an evolutionary and multi-disciplinary examination. Ernest Becker, Albert Camus, and Han-Georg Gadamer offer three unique perspectives and a compelling lens in which to view the existential journey.

Ernest Becker: The Rise and Fall of the Hero

Myth explores man's finite existence. This philosophical exploration is often evidenced through the literary use of a *quest*, or hero's journey. Despite human faults and failings, the hero confronts their mortality and endures the burdens of worldly suffering. The hero, therefore, must be relatable to humanity and simultaneously demonstrate heroic virtue in the face of adversity. The hero is not exempt from the human condition. A hero may encounter physical obstacles in his or her quest, and such obstacles serve as a metaphorical representation of the struggle to survive, overcome, and triumph. Whether literally or figuratively speaking, the hero's journey or quest often features a confrontation with Death. This intense encounter is often considered the climax of any particularly mythology. The reader or listener of this mythological tale is emotionally invested in how the hero will respond to this force and experience. One defines heroic action in how individuals respond to crises, challenges, and seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Heroic figures often share one particular attribute: courage.

In literature and in life, there is no guarantee the hero will survive. The hero may deny or accept this Fate (Death). Whether the hero accepts or eludes Death, the demonstration of their *free will* is important. Heroism is a choice, and that is why heroes are respected and upheld as the prime examples of humanity. Heroes are immortalized in history, literature, and memory because they serve as a reminder of what any person can achieve. Free will is what may enable a previously ordinary person to transcend into heroic or even divine status. This portrayal of heroes as selfless and courageous beings certainly serves to inspire and motivate humanity. However, there are other perspectives of heroism worth contemplation.

Ernest Becker offers a more controversial and complex narrative of the purpose of heroism.

Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* provides a compelling argument for why human beings often demand a hero: their selfishness. Becker cites Freud's psychological concepts on narcissism, of which one of the meaner aspects include "[feeling] that practically everyone is expendable except ourselves" (2). Becker posits an interesting dilemma:

We should feel prepared, as Emerson once put it, to recreate the whole world out of ourselves even if no one else existed. The thought frightens us; we don't know how we could do it without others—yet at bottom the basic resource is there: we could suffice it alone if need be [...] This narcissism is what keeps men marching into point-blank fire in wars: at heart one doesn't feel *he* will die, he only feels sorry for the man next to him. Freud's explanation for this was that the unconscious does not know death or time: in man's physicochemical, inner organic recesses he feels immortal. None of these observations implies human guile. Man does not seem able to 'help' his selfishness, it seems to come from his animal nature. Through countless ages of evolution the organism has had to protect its own integrity, it had its own physicochemical identity and was dedicated to preserving it. (2)

Becker argues that self-esteem and self-worth are inseparable from narcissism (2). Children are direct in their needs and wants, whereas adults learn coping mechanisms to disguise such needs (Becker 3-4). Masking the desire to be heroic or acquiring meaning and self-worth is problematic for society. Stories need heroes, just as human beings desire to be the hero of their own story:

Society is and always has been [a] symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules for behavior, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism. [...] It doesn't matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. [People serve a mythical hero-system] in order to earn a feeling of [...] cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakeable meaning [...] by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and

meaning, that they will outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. (Becker 5)

Becker does not fail to counter with the admirable attributes of heroism, such as a soldier throwing himself on a grenade to spare his comrades. Becker notes that such individuals are capable of the highest generosity and self-sacrifice, but only when the individual feels and believes what they are doing is truly heroic, timeless, and supremely meaningful (6). Although his work was written in 1973, Becker's explanation for the predicament of contemporary society retains its validity and applicability:

The crisis of modern society is precisely that the youth no longer feel heroic in the plan for action that their culture has set up. They don't believe it is empirically true to the problems of their lives and times. We are living a crisis of heroism that reaches into every aspect of social life: the dropouts of university heroism, of business and career heroics, of political-action heroism, the rise of anti-heroes, those who would be heroic each in his own way of like Charles Manson with his special 'family', those whose tormented heroics lash out at the system that itself has ceased to represent agreed heroism. The great perplexity of our time, the churning of the age, is that the youth have sensed—for better or for worse—a great social-historical truth: that just as there are useless self-sacrifices in unjust wars, so too is there an ignoble heroics of whole societies: it can be the viciously destructive heroics of Hitler's Germany or the plain debasing and silly heroics of the acquisition and display of consumer goods [...] And the crisis of society is, of course, the crisis of organized religion too: religion is no longer valid as a hero system, and so the youth scorn it. (7)

The generations Becker alluded to, whom have eschewed religion, politics, and extensively, popular media, have responded in unexpected and surprising ways.

An exploration of Albert Camus' *The Rebel* seems prudent at this juncture. In his section, "Rebellion and Art", Camus posits art as a form of rebellion, and suggests that art often "rejects the world on account of what it lacks and in the name of what it sometimes is" (249). Art seeks to reconcile the reality of what the world is with what the world could be.

Camus: The Art of Illusion and Revolt as Corrective Force

If one is to believe that modern society has become disillusioned with a failed hero system as Becker suggests, Camus offers a solution with his

notions of revolt. Man's response to existential crises is evidenced in the creation and interpretation of art. Camus notes, "In every rebellion is to be found the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of capturing it, and the construction of a substitute universe. Rebellion, from this point of view, is a fabricator of universes. This also defines art [...] The artist reconstructs the world to his plan" (254). This reconstruction has a deliberate, evolving aesthetic process and narrative form. One potential reason for revolt is dissatisfaction with society. Therefore, the artist's response may be to invent heroes, or to discredit false ones, in an attempt to comment and challenge reality. Sculpture, painting, and the novel are forms in which artists seek to rebel and demonstrate either what the world is or what it could be. Sculpture and the novel are two relevant artistic forms in this study.

As this examination involves the use of Playback theatre, of which narrative and sculpture has a place, Camus' observations are particularly relevant. Camus' observations regarding sculpture and the novel provides greater context and focus to the study of Playback theatre. Camus examines and responds to Hegel's assertion of sculpture as the supreme art:

The greatest and most ambitious of all the arts, sculpture, is bent on capturing, in three dimensions, the figurative figure of man, and on restoring the unity of great style to the general disorder of gestures. Sculpture does not reject resemblance, of which, indeed, it has need. But resemblance is not its first aim. What it is looking for, in its periods of greatness, is the feature, the expression, or the empty stare which will sum up all other features and all the stares in the world. Its purpose is not to imitate, but to style and to imprison in one significant expression the fleeting ecstasy of the body and the infinite variety of human attitudes. (254)

Despite what sculpture strives to achieve, Camus argues that the novel is most significant of all art forms in that it most accurately depicts humanity's central problem of straddling disappointment with reality while entertaining possibilities of a better existence. Camus observes:

Man rejects the world as it is, without accepting the necessity of escaping it. In fact, men cling to the world and by far the majority do not want to abandon it. Far from always wanting to forget it, they suffer, on the contrary, from not being able to possess it completely enough, estranged citizens of the world, exiled from their own country. Except for vivid moments of fulfillment, all reality for them is incomplete. (260)

These vivid moments of fulfillment may result in a transcendental experience. Camus aptly terms this transformation as *living transcendence* (258). The concept implies how fleeting that experience may be. Transcendence is not guaranteed or even eternal. In contrast to the staying power of oral history and great myth, transcendence is elusive and unpredictable. Thus, living transcendence is inherently subjective and varies in every experience. Revelation, inner truth, enlightenment, or whatever the term one chooses to use, reunification seems to be the ultimate goal.

Man's selfishness, or inability to escape their individual mind, can prevent connection with greater humanity. Distraction, whether self-imposed or obligatory, inhibits reunification. When an individual is reunified, the confined self is temporarily released from its conscious limitations. Transcendence serves as a release of the *self* into the greater communal *we*. Reunification diminishes selfishness and prejudice, as the transcendental experience serves to equalize and balance the collective unconsciousness. Transcendence is liberating because it is a release—from time and the mind. Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now* contends that an individual is not his or her mind, refuting Descartes' idea that "I think, therefore I am" (12). He argues that *presence* is critical to one's happiness and to achieving enlightenment. Living transcendence is achievable and needed in a technological and busy society that lacks the time to substantially connect. Reunification brings hope and positive change. Camus might argue that this illusion is sufficient enough to sustain a person in its attempts to seek unity and reconciliation with the whole. Playback theatre perpetuates this illusion to the benefit of the participants and audience.

Playback Theatre and Reunification

Playback theatre is a unique theatre form which offers the possibility of reunification. Reunification entails an individual's realization of their spiritual and emotional connection to the people around them. An individual trapped inside their own consciousness and isolated existence can find solidarity and comfort in reconnecting with greater humanity. This connection, and often reconnection, occurs through verbal dialogue and physical contact. Playback is adeptly capable of achieving this in its structure, ritualistic elements, and ability to present a range of possibilities.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's argues in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* that harmony between reality and illusion is *possible*, remarking "The essence of the beautiful does not lie in some realm simply opposed to reality [...] The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real" (15). When these two aspects conjoin, we unexpectedly encounter beauty and receive "an assurance that the truth

does not lie far off and inaccessible to us, but can be encountered in the disorder of reality with its imperfections, evils, errors, extremes, and fateful confusions” (15). Playback theatre transforms the human imperfections Gadamer mentions into aesthetic art.

Dr. Steven A. Burr’s *Finite Transcendence: Existential Exile and the Myth of Home* expounds upon the converging views of Gadamer and Camus:

Yet whereas Gadamer’s conception of the ‘truth’ of art seems to depend upon the presumption that a harmony between the ideal and real must be possible, Camus’ account rests on the declaration that even if such a harmony is presented as a fabrication, the meaning of that account is not thereby undermined. For Camus, art thus acknowledges the meaning that is absent in the world, while depicting the world in a new way which, though not necessarily a present or future reality, still stands as a real and meaningful possibility. Thus the unity that art is intended to portray, while not presented as a Truth, is no less meaningful by being ‘merely’ a possibility. (236)

Dr. Burr interprets Camus’ view of art as needing to “depict such a reconciliation as a meaningful human possibility; rather than depict an essential reality (Truth) of human existence, literature is meant to present a search for meaning and a possible path toward reunion and redemption” (238). Therefore:

Camus’ conception of *art as a corrective force* imposed upon human reality is consistent with, and ultimately an extension of, his theory of revolt as the only appropriate response to the absurdity of existence [...] Literature thus becomes, for Camus, more than merely an account of the world as it is experienced and understood in human existence. Rather, literature offers a narrative that allows for a *re-engagement with the world*, generating possibilities and meanings that might not otherwise present themselves to immediate human experience. (238-239)

For Camus, the importance of art seems to reside in the creative *process*, and the possibilities which sustain an absurd existence. Playback theatre, being an improvisational theatrical form, is an imperfect process and imperfect performance. The interplay between the audience and actors, and way in which the actors perform together spontaneously, is a dialoguing process. Playback theatre’s attempt to engage with, and address reconciliation makes the theatrical form all the more important. Playback

re-engages with the past in the present moment, generating new meanings and interpretations.

The fabrication Playback theatre creates, in its manipulation of time and space, does not detract from its beauty or inherent worth. Recognizing the world for what it is, while simultaneously offering a rebellious response of what it has the potential to become, is an enriching and challenging perspective. Camus' philosophy is one fascinating lens in which to examine Playback theatre, particularly in assessing its redeeming qualities and practical applications. Camus offers a pragmatic view of art: the primary goal being to serve as a corrective force striving for unity and reunification with the whole, a unification which is inherently fabrication. Playback theatre is one unique art form which fabricates this unification and presents a possibility for reconciliation. Playback is the embodiment of the constant pursuit of reunification. The play and spontaneity of the Playback form demonstrates the fact that the fabrication is fluid and imperfect, just like the human condition.

Gadamer's contentions regarding art and philosophy may seem too idealistic for some. Those skeptical of his views should at least consider the valuable contributions he has offered to art criticism. One supposes Gadamer would contend that universal consensus does not exist for what constitutes great art. There are those who prefer classical art and sculpture, while other art aficionados prefer modern, avant-garde styles. Gadamer makes an astute observation regarding why art is viewed as a relic of our time in popular culture and dismisses the idea that great art can only be found on museum walls and in concert halls. He offers valuable insight into the long-running debate of what makes great art, and why some art forms are considered superior to others. Gadamer offers incredible insight into why classical art and music are often held in higher esteem than contemporary art and music. He illustrates this problem through the example of a classical concert hall. Classical music programs often feature modern music in the middle of their programs to prevent spectators from leaving. Gadamer points out that this attitude is not a new phenomenon. His example of Tacitus' *Dialogue of Oratory* in the Roman Empire demonstrates that the discussion and assessment of powerful art has retained an important function in society. Gadamer observes:

For although modern art is opposed to traditional art, it is also true that it has been stimulated and nourished by it. We must first presuppose that both are really forms of art and that they do belong together. It is not simply that no contemporary artists could have possibly developed his own daring innovations without being familiar with the traditional language of art. Nor is it simply a matter of saying that we who experience art constantly face the coexistence of past and present.

This is not simply the situation in which we find ourselves when we pass from one room to another in a museum or when we are confronted, perhaps reluctantly, with modern music on a concert program or with modern plays in the theatre or even with modern reproductions of Classical art. We are always in this position. In our daily life we proceed constantly though the coexistence of past and future. The essence of what is called spirit lies in the ability to move within the horizon of an open future and an unrepeatable past. (9-10)

One interpretation of Gadamer's assessment is that revolutionary art resides on an uneasy cusp of past and present, of ritualistic tradition and rebellious modernity, and transition and permanence. At one point or another, a now "masterpiece" was once considered modern and perhaps even a bastardization or affront to previous traditions. This is worth keeping in mind as one enters the practice of Playback theatre. Playback theatre exists across time and space, by addressing the unrepeatable past in the present moment, and offering hopeful potential in the future.

Playback theatre is an ambitious and experimental art form. Playback theatre is Camus' corrective force and living transcendence, and simultaneously Gadamer's harmonious portrayal of ideal and real. The Playback form evolves from the tradition of oral storytelling—the same traditions present in centuries-old myths and epics of the Far East (see a deeper explication in Mircea Eliade's *Myth and Reality*). Playback possesses ritualistic form, sculpture, music, and novelistic narrative. It is a synthesis of many powerful artistic forms. At times, the stories offered contain iterations of the hero's journey, and other times, the anti-hero. Playback theatre is an introspective form which seeks to create meaning out of absurdity. Fabrication or harmony achieved? Playback is as refreshing as it is confounding. The spontaneous and mutable performance of enactment may render it as the eternal novel's fragile cousin. As with most contemporary arts, there will be critics. If there's anything to be learned from Gadamer, it is that one should not disregard contemporary art for the sake of preserving the past. In that spirit, one can now be properly introduced to the world of Playback theatre.

Playback Theatre: Origins, Methods, Ritual, and Performance

The Origins of Playback Theatre

Playback theatre is a theatrical form which emerged from J.L. Moreno's psychodrama, oral storytelling, and improvisational theatre. Jacob Moreno (1889-1974) was a Romanian-born psychiatrist, psychosociologist, and educator. Adam Blatner's *Interactive and Improvisational Drama: Varieties of Applied Theatre and Performance*, describes the origins of psychodrama in chapter fifteen:

[Moreno] was one of the pioneers of role theory, improvisational theatre, social psychology, and group psychotherapy, as well as writing about the role of creativity in philosophy, theology, and culture. One of Moreno's main insights is that the most useful way to cultivate creativity is through spontaneity. Another important related idea is that in general the setting needs to be experienced as safe for spontaneity and improvisation to emerge, because it is a subtle operation in the nervous system that is inhibited in states of anxiety. Therefore, activities that lower anxiety, such as the context of play and the development of trust in a group supports improvisation, which increases the likelihood of the discovery of more creative solutions to problems. (153-154)

Blatner argues that Moreno's psychodrama is an effective therapeutic technique, as "Psychodrama focuses on the particulars of the individual, who is a complex of specific roles and relationships" (155). Through the use of role-play and an overseeing therapist, psychodrama fosters creativity and productive reflection. Sociodrama and Playback have stemmed from Moreno's work and techniques.

In 1975, Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas created a new improvisational form combining storytelling, music, movement, and acting. As self-proclaimed activists, Fox and Salas desired to create an open environment for sharing stories. Audience members volunteer personal stories to a group of actors or musicians, who respond spontaneously with a reenactment. Playback can be found in schools, prisons, mental health facilities, retirement centers, and festivals around the world. The success of the form in fostering community building has resulted in Playback centers all over the world—the United States, Australia, Germany, Japan, India, Hong Kong, Israel, Hungary, Brazil, among others. Playback has experienced important success in the conflicted Middle East, and even

domestically in inner cities throughout America. Playback continually serves immigrant and low-income populations. Often these individuals believe they are voiceless and with nothing important to contribute. However, Playback re-establishes and reaffirms their human dignity. Playback is a catalyst for social change and civil discourse and continues to grow with the changing political and social tensions of each community it serves. More importantly, Playback engages the participants to think critically, experience mutual empathy, and unite their cause and personal experiences to others.

The strength of Playback theatre is in its ability to meditate conflict and enhance dialogue. The personal stories volunteered from the audience *dialogue* with each other without criticism or judgment. Stories may contradict one another, or may run parallel to one another, or change courses completely throughout the performance. Playback prevents the audience from unnecessary commentary between the stories so that the audience must always share from a place of *I*, rather than an accusatory *you*. The audience members are not given the opportunity to say, after an enactment for example, “*Your story* was wrong” only that, “Here is what I experienced in *my story*.” These constraints are special controls which prevent and limit unproductive chatter which has the potential to aggravate tensions. This is why Playback has demonstrated repeated success in conflicted areas. Playback’s ability to facilitate dialogue is also in part due to its spontaneity.

Playback’s improvisation and *play* makes the theatrical form more of a living, breathing entity compared to more rehearsed forms of theatre. There is an *immediacy* to the form, with no wiggle room for second guesses or overthinking the subject matter. The audience members feel inspired and called to share their experiences, and the actors must respond without delay. Dialogue often is spontaneous, surging from one’s mind and heart to communicate and connect with another human being. These stories inform, influence, and contemplate a more complex narrative of the greater human experience. There is a vulnerability to the Playback form: the actors are unsure what stories they will receive, and the audience is unsure how the actors will receive and recreate their personal story. The mutual vulnerability of actor and recipient strengthens the empathetic exchange and connection because both parties utilize free will. Progress can only be achieved when both parties are willing to share and engage one another.

Playback theatre is a powerful and emotionally evocative theatrical form, which synthesizes the aesthetic with the sensitive mindfulness of psychodrama. Other theatrical forms, such as Theatre of the Oppressed, Theatre in Education, Theatre in Development, Political Theatre, Prison Theatre, and Sociodrama, are some other important examples of the therapeutic benefits of Applied Theatre to marginalized or diverse

communities. These branches, among various other developing forms, also enhance dialogue and strengthen empathy in diverse contexts. Playback is by no means the only theatrical form which may foster transcendence. However, this study seeks to substantiate how Playback specifically enhances transcendence and mutual empathy through its mechanics and ritualistic elements. Playback's regimented structure creates greater potential for objectivity in a judgment-free zone. The combination of first person sharing (the individual telling the story) and third person sharing (the re-enactment of what the actors understood from the storyteller) is important for two reasons. First, the enactment provides a distancing effect for the storyteller: they watch their personal experience through others' eyes. The actors simultaneously share of themselves by drawing on what resonates with them. This reciprocal mutuality builds trust and intimacy.

Objective distance and emotional connection reinforce empathy and productivity. The recipients of Playback, be they actors or participants, often experience intense emotions during the enactment. The emotional responses may be positive or negative ones. Regardless of the nature of the response, the revelation of the story often results in some kind of emotional release. Whether or not catharsis plays a role or has importance in Playback theatre is still debated among Playback practitioners. The lack of consensus in the Playback community may have multiple contributing factors. A primary factor is likely the fact that Playback is practiced among amateurs and licensed practitioners alike, resulting in some disparity regarding what Playback intends and requires. Obtaining a license requires education and training at an accredited school, such as the Centre for Playback in New York City. Playback practitioners may possess backgrounds in acting, drama therapy, psychology, social work, teaching, or another field altogether. For this reason, Playback literature features a plethora of diverse reasons as to what Playback's main point or goal is. Playback is a combination of art, therapy, and civil discourse. This combination is what makes Playback an effective agent for change. The deconstruction of Playback mechanics provides valuable insight as to why the method is effective in creating respectful discourse, and how empathy is a central force in the Playback experience.

Playback Mechanics

Playback cannot function without a story to tell, and, as Jo Salas herself remarked, "Everyone has a story" (Ted Talk). The individual who volunteers a story is known as the "Teller". The Teller is, for performance purposes, a member of the audience. The Teller's need for a story to be shared or re-enacted is a spontaneous one, just as the actors experience a spontaneous response to the story in kind. In Playback theatre, vulnerability features reciprocity. The Teller shares from a place of

intimacy, just as the actors/musicians offer themselves as a vulnerable instrument. This atmosphere engenders a kind of mutual dependency and trust: the Teller depends on the actors/musicians to faithfully listen to his or her experience, and the actors depend on the Teller to be willing to share. The art could not be created otherwise.

The challenge of transmitting a story from Teller to performer is mediated through the role of “Conductor.” The role of the Conductor is important because he or she interviews the Teller. The Conductor is responsible for clarifying the Teller’s intentions and narrative to the actors and audience, and also a post-enactment interview with the Teller regarding his or her experience watching. The Conductor is not to judge the Teller’s experiences and reactions, but to inquire whether or not the enactment accurately portrayed his or her experience. If the enactment did not accurately portray what the Teller experienced, the Conductor provides the opportunity for a correction. This opportunity is an important one for the Teller, so that he or she ultimately chooses the progression of the story. There are also opportunities in which the Conductor may offer the Teller the chance to change the ending of their story, a sort of alternate reality. This alternate reality can often provide great healing and forgiveness for the Teller. The role of conductor is challenging as it requires discretion and intuition. Playback fails when it lacks an attuned conductor, for an attuned conductor is both impartial, articulate, discerning, and respectful to the Teller’s wishes.

Following the Teller and Conductor, there are, of course, the actors and musicians. The actors and musicians may or may not be classically trained, and thus the finesse of the performances varies. Ideally, the actors and musicians seek not to make a spectacle of themselves, or “play to the audience,” but rather, heartfully and with careful consideration, respond to the Teller’s story. The actors and musicians are what transforms Playback from a therapeutic dialogue to a legitimate art form. The spontaneity is important: the performance is not carefully crafted or scripted. The performance is raw and unpolished, in a way some might regard as primitive. However, as argued in “Universal Connection through Art,” art should not be termed primitive. To call art primitive is to suggest inferiority. In fact, there are many theatrical schools which may consider Playback inferior, lowbrow art. However, Playback theatre is, at heart, a *productive* art in a mechanically controlled environment. Each participant has a specific role and function, the enactment and the subsequent discussion with the Teller provides purpose and drive to the form.

The Ritual Circle

Playback features ritual, not only in the roles that the participants serve, but also the physical space as well. Despite the fact that the venue may

differ, a classroom, a stage, or even outside, the Playback form retains certain requirements. There must be the two chairs, boxes, or some kind of seating for the Teller and Conductor, and an area of the performance space must be dedicated to music, with space for the musicians and their instruments. Often the Playback performance space features a scarf tree, with colorful scarves hung from a ladder, a sculpture, or other prop. These are the traditional requirements, although some Playback practitioners have evolved from the mainstream.

Playback also possesses ritual in progression of forms. It usually opens with a form of sharing, progressing from static and fluid sculpture, to pairs and tableau, and always culminating into full stories. Those familiar with Playback performance expect to see these forms and usually in this particular order. Another important aspect to Playback's ritual is the structure and safeties in place for the performers. When Playback practices or performances end, the actors and musicians can expect to process their experiences in a sharing circle. These open forums allow for the actors to support one another, discuss challenges, and engage one another. Usually the performers have one last sharing while standing in a circle, sometimes grabbing one another's thumbs to form a larger circle. This reaffirms the bonds of the players and strengthens their circle of trust.

The Traditional Forms: Sculpture, Pairs, Tableau, and Story

Sculpture, pairs, tableau, and story are some characteristic examples of Playback forms, but is by no means an exhaustive list. These forms specifically demonstrate Playback theatre as both sculptural and narrative art. Sculpture takes two forms in Playback theatre, *static* and *fluid*. Static and fluid sculptures are created with a human body or bodies to reflect a feeling or experience provided by the Teller. Fluid sculptures, unlike static sculptures, feature motion and sound. Fluid and static sculptures can encompass as many or as few actors as the situation dictates, all while striving to capture the complexity of gesture and emotion that Teller provides. Pairs is another form which employs motion and sound to depict the Teller's feelings. In this case, the pairs form demonstrates contrasting feelings that the Teller may be experiencing (for example, simultaneous excitement and fear of change). Two actors wrestle to express this form, such as one actor demonstrating fear and the other actor excitement. The pushing and pulling of these two forces, which illustrate a powerful emotional dichotomy, is an effective method of illustrating the Teller's predicament. The more advanced forms, tableau and full story, incorporate elements of movement, sound, poetry, dance, music, and traditional theatrical scenes. Tableau features short vignettes in a series of abbreviated scenes as the story arc is created by the Conductor.

Full stories are just as one would imagine, complete and comprehensive enactments of a Teller's detailed personal sharing. However, the Conductor does not give as much direction for full stories as one would in Tableau. Full stories rely on the actors and musicians to work together, sometimes enacting the story in more abstract and nonlinear ways. It requires intimate trust among the performers, and a Conductor's keen insight into the heart of the matter for the Teller.

The Playback Performance

Playback performances may be used to address a particular problem in a community, such as tension between police and minority citizens. The company may also choose to remain open to the general concerns and feelings of the audience of that particular performance. In these open performances, the microcosm of stories sometimes results in a greater macrocosm of themes and concerns. Playback is equally invested in the experiences of the individual as it is with communal experiences. How the emerging narrative is handled by the Playback company is paramount to its success or failure of the performance.

A Personal Investigation and Case Study

My introduction to Playback occurred during my undergraduate studies at McDaniel College in Westminster, Maryland, under the direction of two expert practitioners, Ronald Miller and Joel Plotkin. Ronald Miller studied playback theatre, drama therapy, and psychodrama at the California Institute for Integral Studies in San Francisco and subsequently studied Playback theatre with Jonathan Fox in New Orleans and Havana. Miller participated in an academic conference in Windsor, Canada, and the International Playback theatre conference in Frankfurt, Germany, and served as the Associate professor of Theatre Arts and Director of the Interactive Theatre program at McDaniel College. Miller directed both McDaniel Playback and the professional Maryland Playback Ensemble Company.

In contrast, Joel Plotkin first encountered Playback at a Drama Therapy conference in Pittsburgh, and subsequently created the Applied and Interactive Theatre Guide in 1995 to provide a forum for dialogue and mutual awareness among drama therapists, psychodramatists, Theater of the Oppressed practitioners, community educators, and workplace trainers. Joel Plotkin continued to devote his time and talents to the Playback cause, receiving both beginner and intermediate Playback training with Jo Salas. He attended subsequent Playback conferences in Arizona, New Jersey, and Montreal, and has also worked with Synergy Playback in Silver Spring, Maryland Playback Ensemble, and with the

River Crossing Playback in York/Lancaster Pennsylvania. Plotkin also taught a variety of theatre history courses and interactive theatre courses at McDaniel College.

I received a rare opportunity to study with these two practitioners as mentors. This opportunity extended after college when I was invited to join their professional company, Maryland Playback Ensemble. Formed in 2006, the Maryland Playback Ensemble offered performances for schools, rehabilitation facilities, mental health facilities, and other nonprofit organizations. During my five-year involvement with the company, my understanding and passion for Playback grew. Most Playback practitioners would argue that the form is chiefly used to advance dialogue in empathetic terms. I contend that I am in the minority of practitioners who believe Playback is also about introspection and fostering hope in a better society. The form is as much about empathy and mutual respect as it is about inspiring social change. What sparked this project was my hope in spreading the power of Playback to Loyola University Maryland and the greater Baltimore community.

The Case Study

*There is no greater agony than bearing
an untold story inside you. —Maya Angelou*

In an attempt to examine Playback theatre's effectiveness in increasing empathy, this case study is designed with scientific and artistic principles in mind. This case study synthesizes scientific method and structure with humanistic analysis. Humanities and sciences strengthen one another when used together. This project employs neuroscientific and philosophical lenses to study empathy as a construct and experience. The transcendental gift of empathy can be achieved in many forms. Playback is one theatre form uniquely equipped to foster engagement and dialogue.

This case study explores Playback theatre as an effective agent for transcendence and social change through the use of Playback workshops and surveys. A Playback workshop series was designed by the primary investigator, and a public performance was held for the Loyola University Maryland community at the Baltimore campus in April 2018. Baltimore's racial and cultural diversity served for ideal testing of this examination, as Playback flourishes in places in need of respectful dialogue and healing. The primary investigator believed that the Baltimore community would greatly benefit from this performance. The primary investigator utilized particular caution in how the project progressed to ensure the emotional well-being of participants. The content of the performance featured intimate and controversial subject matter, which had the potential to aggravate discussion. However, this case study demonstrates how Playback mechanically and consciously diffuses tension and elevates dialogue. This project was in accordance with Loyola IRB and NIH mandates for Human Subjects Testing. The primary investigator completed the certificate in the Human Subjects course prior to beginning the study. The safety and well-being of students, faculty, and performers was of paramount importance.

Statement of the Problem

The primary question of this study is whether or not Playback increases mutual empathy, and if Playback is an effective tool in facilitating dialogue among diverse populations. To address this question, it is necessary to examine how Playback theatre affects both the actors and the audience members. The case study is designed to measure how Playback theatre affects personal empathy for both the participants (the actors) and the observers (the audience). The actors will hereby be referred to as Group

A and the audience as Group B. Measurement and assessment of this data will be challenging in that it is based on subjective responses.

Hypothesis

Based on current literature, and Playback's applicability in a variety of contexts (social, professional, and educational), an increase in empathy is hypothesized for those who observe and participate in Playback theatre. Neuroscientific research on mirror neurons suggests empathetic connections between human beings, while the creation of art is beneficial to one's social and emotional well-being. The physical positive human contact between actors during enactments likely has neurochemical and biological benefits. Playback theatre may activate specific areas of the brain found in the empathetic circuit, although that question will not be answered in this particular study.

Method

Participants

A recruitment document was distributed to multiple organizations within Loyola University Maryland for those interested in participating in the study. Some organizations invited to participate in the study and/or attend the public performance include: the ALANA diversity office (to include Black Students Association, Asian Cultural Alliance, Association for Latin American and Spanish Students, Caribbean Students Union, Mosaic: Women of Color, Middle East Relief Initiative), Center for Community Service and Justice (CCSJ), the Loyola Philosophy and Psychology Departments, Active Minds (Mental Health), Council for Change, Inclusion, and Equity (CICE), Spectrum (LGBTQIA), Catholic Campus Ministry, Interservice Christian Fellowship, Muslim Student Association, Graduate Student Association, and several collegiate theatrical clubs. Graduate and undergraduate university students were eligible to apply. Ensuring anonymity was critical to this study. The makeup of Group A, such as name, age, gender, race or ethnicity was not recorded. Therefore, the findings will not feature any identifying information about the students who chose to participate. The identities and demographical makeup of Group B were also not recorded for this study. This public performance was advertised to Loyola University Maryland community.

Materials

Simon Baron-Cohen's Empathy Quotient exam was selected as an objective and measurable tool to analyze changes in personal empathy. Information regarding psychometric analysis of the EQ quotient itself is

found in in “Psychometric analysis of the Empathy Quotient (EQ)” (Allison, et al.). The EQ quotient exam and informed consent form given to Group A. A survey question was dispersed anonymously to the audience (Group B) as follows:

How has the performance that you observed affected your capacity for, or desire to understand and relate to the challenges, experiences, and identity of others?

The combination of these three primary materials were employed in attempts to measure subjective and objective experiences for those engaging in Playback theatre in both Group A and Group B. The project sought to have objective measurable data through the EQ questionnaire for the participants, and more subjective data through audience response. The informed consent form (Appendix E) was distributed to students at the first workshop session. In addition to these tools, the formalized lesson plan for the open workshops was used as a supplemental tool for those learning Playback theatre (Appendices F and G).

Procedures

Four open Playback theatre workshops were offered to the general Loyola University Maryland community, regardless whether or not they agreed to participate in the case study. The devised four session workshop lesson plan features specific objectives in learning the Playback form and facilitating respectful dialogue among the Playback actors. Each 90-minute Playback workshop session was open to the public and was designed to build upon the previous session. Static and fluid sculptures, pairs, three-part story, and full story were among some Playback forms used throughout the course of the workshop series. The lesson plans were designed to address personal differences and perspectives, as well as responding to empathy and connection. Despite a stringent practice regiment, the sessions retained spontaneity and flexibility with the changing needs and abilities of the actors.

In each session, the actors were invited to share personal experiences which were recreated by other actors in the company. The confidences shared served as an important foundation of trust built on mutual respect and understanding, which would later prove important for the performance. The improvisational nature of Playback theatre entails that the actors must trust in one another, and readily accept the theatrical offers that they bring to the enactment. The Playback company ideally elevates the contributions of every individual in the company. They become keenly aware of each actor's strengths and weaknesses and rely on each other in the uncertainty that may surface during the course of a performance.

The positive physical contact demonstrated between actors serves as an important foundation for emotional trust, and any exercise was always

prefaced with the actors' comfort in mind. In static and fluid sculptures, actors used their bodies to connect with one another. These exercises were implemented slowly over the course of the sessions, as trust increased. The physical connection, even during a theatrical exercise, positively influenced the group dynamic.

During the first workshop session, the informed consent form was distributed and completed by three Loyola University students. A pre-test of Simon-Baron Cohen's EQ test was also distributed and completed by the students. In accordance with NIH mandates, an opportunity was given for students to ask questions regarding the consent form or express any concerns. The primary investigator left the room for ten minutes while the students completed the EQ form. The students were instructed not to write their name or any sort of identifying information on the questionnaire itself, but to remember their numeric code in upper right-hand corner of the EQ quotient until the completion of the study.

This numeric code had a specific purpose: to simultaneously retain anonymity and measure empathetic changes in the same anonymous participant. For example, 1a would designate first subject, pre-test, and 1b would designate first subject post-test. It was intended that the post-test would be distributed after the conclusion of the performance. As the investigator was not present when the students extracted the EQ form from the envelope, it would be impossible for the investigator to determine which student selected which number. Additionally, this ensured that students would not feel pressured or influenced by the presence of the primary investigator.

It was determined by the researcher that this method of numeric coding was preferable to the average mean of the sample. This strategy retained anonymity, but allowed for measurement of empathetic shifts in specific individuals. Due to the small subject pool, this method minimized the potential for outliers to skew the sample. With a sample of just three students, outliers could skew results. Had more participants volunteered for the study, other methods may have been considered. Both the EQ pre and post-test featured the same questions in same numeric order. The only variation was whether it was coded as pre or post-test.

For Group B, the anonymous survey question was implemented into the informational performance brochure. The survey question was designed with a writing space for the audience member to reflect upon their experiences after watching the performance. It was intended that there would be both subjective and objective measurement, a space for subjective reflection, and measurable responses ("Positive Effect", "Negative Effect," and "No Effect").

Results

After the first open Playback workshop session, two of the three student participants dropped for the remainder of the study. With only one student volunteer left in the study, it was determined that this individual's identity would be compromised should s/he complete the EQ post-test. As a result, the EQ quotient was not calculated. This student volunteer did complete the entirety of the workshop sessions as well as the performance.

This case study project was intended to have a combination of both subjective and objective data. The EQ exam was selected in hopes to substantiate, in specific, measurable scientific and psychological terms, what occurred for the actors during the course of the workshop sessions and performance. The combination of a measurable questionnaire (EQ) with a high psychometric success rate for actors and a subjective survey question for audience members would have served to better support the theoretical claims of this research study. However, the scholarly and psychological aims of the project were derailed by students dropping from the study. Students informed the primary researcher that other opportunities took precedence over the study, and/or that they were simply too busy to commit. It is worth re-emphasizing how "busyness" was cited as the main reason for leaving the study. Busyness inhibited an opportunity to connect and engage with others in their community. Without the EQ results, a significant amount of data which could further support or refute the hypothesis of this study was lost. This could not have been predicted or controlled by the researcher. Due to the performance deadline, it was determined that the researcher would seek out non-student professional Playback actors so that the performance could continue.

These spontaneous changes resulted in considerable alterations of the project goals, particularly regarding the audience survey question. Initially the survey question was designed with measurable responses to the survey question, "Positive Effect," "Negative Effect" and "No Effect." With the omission of any EQ data, it became apparent that the scientific backing the researcher sought would not come to fruition in this particular study. The formatting of the survey question therefore changed to reflect more subjective responses. This decision altered the project's intent to have both measurable data and subjective data simultaneously.

This unpredicted change of course does not negate the important findings of the survey question. Possibilities for future experiments are worth inclusion. In future replication of this or a similar experiment, it is advisable that one procures a larger sample pool of actors. This is to ensure sufficient collectable data from pre and post EQ test. Having both

objective and subjective response opportunities in the audience survey question would also be ideal.

The subjective feedback from the audience was positive (Appendix H). Using only subjective data from the post-performance reflections, a word cloud was created to highlight prominent words (Appendix I). Highlighted responses are as follows:

Audience Member A: “It is important to take time to acknowledge people and listen to their stories. Small acts of listening to others may make all the difference to them. Not often do you take time to listen to strangers’ stories, so having an opportunity has been very humbling.”

Audience Member B: “It actually makes me want to take the other people’s thoughts and life into my thoughts [...] Their lives are as important as my own.”

Audience Member C: “Though not everything was relatable [...] you could find things that pertain to you. All around an amazing experience.”

Audience Member D: “We each have our own special story. These stories intersect with others’ stories and influence and affect the lives of those around us. We each need to listen to those stories and let them unfold without judgment or criticism.”

Audience Member E: “Much of what we see and hear in society appears to be a partial reality and lacks connection. Witnessing and hearing one’s stories today brought the reality of hardship [...] to life. It humanized their experiences and evoked a more shared emotional experience. Despite differing backgrounds and realities, I could empathize [with] those from vastly different backgrounds.”

Audience Member F: “The opportunity for open dialogue in the context of understanding and acceptance made for an open and connected experience. Before stories were even told, we communally accepted that all experiences are human experiences and therefore are part of us. Demonstrating that actively and visually made that understanding and connection more concrete.”

Audience Member G: “It gave me an understanding of ‘the other shoe.’ Typically, I am not empathetic to anything, but this show has changed my view.”

Analysis of the Playback Performance

The above comments illustrate a variety of viewpoints. From a pool of fifteen members who were eligible to participate in the study, thirteen chose to respond in the survey. Although these results do not represent any measurable data, the overall audience consensus suggests that this unique theatre form did successfully facilitate dialogue. The survey responses demonstrate a considerable amount of thought and reflection, suggesting that the audience participants found Playback worthwhile and important. The highlighted responses illustrate an increase in understanding and a deeper appreciation in our common humanity. Audience Member E suggested that Playback “evoked a more shared human experience,” and that “Despite differing backgrounds [...] I could empathize with those from vastly different backgrounds.” Playback enables the audience to consider the dignity of every human person, such as Audience Member B’s realization that “Their lives are as important as my own.” Finally, Audience Member G contended that he or she was not an empathetic person, yet “*This show changed my view.*” This is a powerful assertion and strong supportive evidence of Playback ability to increase empathy, even in those who are less so.

The overall themes that emerged from a group of relative strangers are worth noting. In order to protect the individuals who shared their experiences, special care was taken in this analysis to avoid specifics or anything that might suggest the identity of respondents. The performance was advertised as an opportunity to discuss racism, sexism, prejudice, mental health, and indifference to the suffering of others. Specific organizations were selected by the investigator due to the belief that these diverse racial, cultural, and religious groups would benefit from Playback. This conscious decision may suggest a kind of agenda in which the Playback performance was designed and aimed to recruit specific individuals for a desired effect. However, it should be noted that those individuals who came to the performance were volunteers, and that any personal story shared was of a person’s own volition. Therefore, the degree to which the selected groups affected the outcome of the performance cannot be adequately addressed in this study.

Although not every shared story fell under a categorical theme, many advertised themes were addressed throughout the performance. The diversification of the audience in age, race, and culture allowed for critical dialogue and mutual understanding. It is understandable then why racial identity, gender identity, and sexual identity served as an overarching umbrella for the performance. Contemplating other important roles, such

as parenthood or young adulthood, were other key additions to the performance. Powerful, and indeed personal, stories were shared as if among friends and close confidantes. The openness and vulnerability of the audience is not guaranteed in Playback performances. This kind of environment fosters the greatest potential of positive growth between diverse groups.

As demonstrated repeatedly in this project research, empathy must be engaged in by two parties. Trust has to be established, and thus a ritual space and special controls were carefully crafted into the structure of the Playback performance itself. The opening and closing sequences were designed to maximize openness, trust, and mutual respect. The opening sequence featured the actors revealing a “personal share” in which they contemplated their own identity. Each actor revealed an aspect of their identity, be it their sexual orientation/identity, their professional identity, their spiritual identity, or even uncertainty in their identity. This revelation was the first act of the performance and was deliberate and intentional. It is worth noting Audience Member F’s comment: “Before stories were even told, we communally accepted that all experiences are human experiences and therefore are part of us.” The opening sequence likely facilitated this particular response. This is due to the performance design, which made clear in the first few minutes of the actors’ personal sharing that diversity of thought, identity, and belief would be respected and welcomed. Audience Member F’s comment reflects a considerable degree of reassurance and comfort in the performance’s conscious design to accept diverse perspectives. This was the desired effect and judging from this member’s comment, it was successful. The actors’ vulnerability and personal revelation to a room of strangers was the critical first step in fostering productive dialogue. To create connection, one party must first be willing to be vulnerable, open, and receptive to change, controversy, fear, and the *other*. The audience members see firsthand the sometimes-awkward transitions of scenes, the nervousness of actors chosen to play the Teller, and the delicate awareness that comes as a result of playing often emotionally charged content. The audience is perhaps inspired by the vulnerability the actors exude and are thus more willing to share personal stories as a result. In the closing sequence, the actors recalled in a sentence or two a story revealed by the audience. Here is a constructed example to better illustrate the mechanics, “Once upon a time there was a man who contemplated his multi-ethnic identity.” The purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate to the audience that their story is respected, remembered, and intrinsically important. Their vulnerability was not in vain. The progress made begins in the theatre and extends to the world.

As Playback theatre is completely improvisational, anxiety and receptivity to impulse and changing conditions are common for the actors. The pressure to faithfully honor the story can sometimes be

overwhelming. What the Teller will reveal, and how the Actors will respond to the story, are uncertain from the beginning. Both the Teller and Actors explore this uncertainty together. There is, in fact, a dialogue created between them in real time. Furthermore, the stories dialogue with each other on a grander scale. Playback is not merely recreating the story again. New subtleties and revelations are infused into that story. Something old becomes something new. This beautiful creation transcends time and realities. It shows what is and what could be.

The Teller always has a deeper purpose (whether consciously or not) in choosing the actor to play himself or herself. This implicit trust between the Teller and Teller's Actor, and among the acting company, motivates and informs the performance. The Teller trusts the Actor with his or her personal story, and provides the Actor with an incredible gift. In response, the Actor, keenly aware of the risk and uncertainty the enactment may entail, responds to this gift openly and generously using their own physical and spiritual being to exist in that space.

After the conclusion of the performance, several audience members felt compelled to give further feedback in addition to the survey. Some individuals shook the hands of every actor while expressing sincere thanks. Many declared a necessity for more Playback theatre in the campus community. Other audience members requested that the troupe return to perform for other diversity organizations on campus. This feedback suggests that those who experience Playback feel that it is worth sharing with other communities.

In addition to this anecdote, the reflections of the actors are worth brief mention. Although these individuals are experienced in Playback performance, new emotional and intellectual revelations often emerge. Most of the individuals were part of a professional troupe that had been defunct for several years, as other professional and personal obligations prevented the troupe from making Playback a full-time commitment. With little more than one week notice of a performance, the actors prioritized Playback into their schedule for this one-time performance. The reunion of members evoked tears and laughter. After years of not practicing Playback actively, the trust between actors was still profound. Despite the entire Playback group only practicing one hour before the performance, the actors felt invigorated and inspired. One actor even remarked that the reunion of members was "serendipity." Another divulged, "This performance could not have come at a better time in my life. Work has been difficult and I feel unheard. Playback reminds me that there is a world out there—I like reconnecting with humanity."

Playback is as rewarding for those participating as those observing. It can be a form of relaxation and meditation, as it is a powerful tool for social and communal change. For the few individuals gathered in that theatre, diverse voices were heard without criticism and judgment.

Playback reminds us of our humanity and our duty to create positive respectful dialogue whenever we can. Although the case study was unable to fulfill all of its aims of scientific backing of Playback's viability and usefulness as an educational and social resource, this elementary exploration will hopefully lay the foundation for further inquiry.

Conclusion: A Need for Further Investigation

*I think we all have empathy.
We may not have enough courage to display it. –Maya Angelou*

The concept of empathy has been explored in this study through the realms of science and humanities. Playback theatre is just one forum in which a community can engage in a transcendental empathetic exchange between diverse perspectives. Playback theatre lays the framework for empathy building, through its careful crafting of structure and procedures, its insistence on mutual respect and constructive dialogue, and its open and vulnerable environment for both actors and observers. Science and art, methodical planning and impulsive improvisation, can work hand in hand.

Perhaps future experiments may measure empathetic changes for Playback participants and observers through neural imaging. These proposed neural images, in addition to Empathy Quotient exams and survey questions, may present a richer picture of Playback theatre's exceptional ability to create empathy. Mirror neurons may indeed have a role to play in the exchange between the two parties, particularly between the Teller and Teller's Actor. What connects the actors and audience in these stories may transcend even scientific reason.

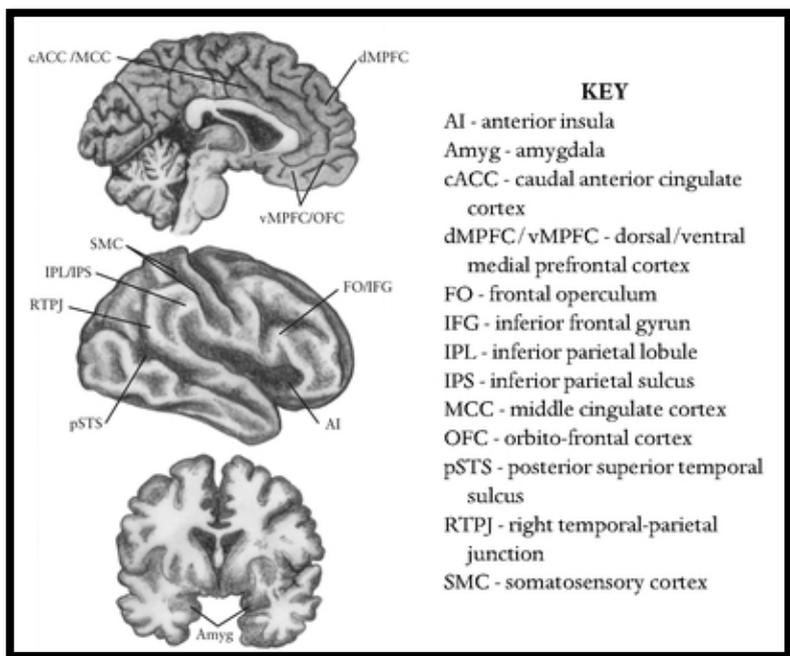
How empathy is studied, and under what kinds of methods, is ultimately of no consequence. The fact that humankind inherently realizes and accepts empathy's inherent importance to society suffices. Empathy creates mercy, and a more merciful society is a better society. As one sees in Playback enactments, to engage in empathy requires risk. Yet this risk more often than not yields positive results. Interpersonal relationships require work, and empathy is the fruit of that labor. Thirty campus organizations were contacted over the course of four months regarding this study and performance. Only one campus organization was present for the actual performance. The numbers are telling.

The social media hashtag movements of #metoo and #blacklivesmatter are indicative of the widespread power and solidarity of sharing one's personal experience with others. It would be remiss to omit this counterpoint: something very special is lost behind technological screens. When we don't look into the eyes of the person sharing their story, we cheat ourselves of a transformative experience. An inability to embrace the physical and spiritual being of a person in mourning, or the inability to laugh together, deprives us of the important biological and neurochemical benefits of human touch. In short, we are not actualizing our potential as human beings for substantial connection that sustains us and makes life meaningful. It is not enough to say that we understand

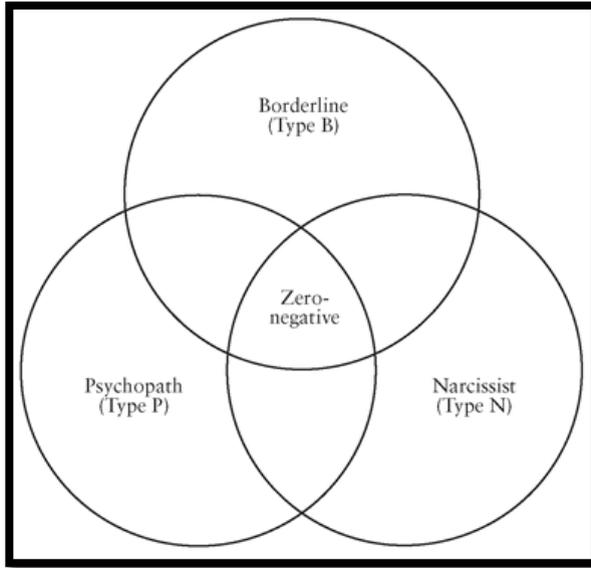
through textual words and campaign hashtags. We must be present at that pinnacle moment together, in real time, when our physical and spiritual consciousness transcends and we realize our greater connection to each other. For all the advantages of technology, humanity deserves better than the cheap imitation of a transcendental experience that technology provides.

The tremendous impact the Playback performance made on the Loyola University Maryland campus cannot be measured here. One cannot do justice to the surreal feeling in an intimate theatre on a Sunday afternoon. To experience love and empathy, mercy and justice, are among the highest forms of action and emotion humankind may aspire to. Society must keep seeking the highest good, seeking empathy and compassion in every circumstance, and most importantly, listening to someone who may or may not share your view. Constructive dialogue, one that demonstrates mutual respect and understanding, is critical toward healing divisions in society. In our encounters with empathy, we catch a glimpse of society at its most dignified. We witness firsthand empathy's transformative power through the actions of our heroes, role-models, and saints. Empathy is a gift we must continue to give to others and to receive in times we have need. Transcendence and unification are possible— if we have the courage to take the first step.

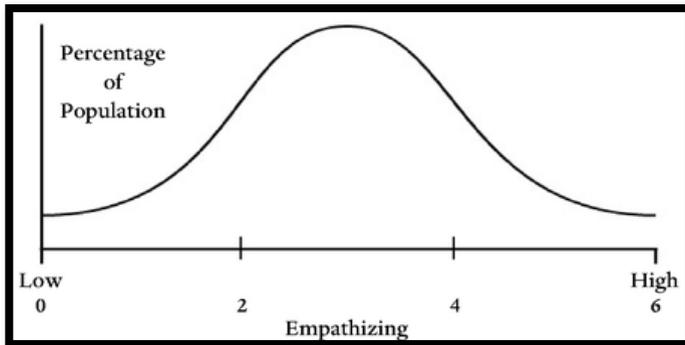
Appendix A
Diagram of Empathetic Circuit



Appendix B
Zero Degrees of Empathy Venn Diagram
(From Simon Baron-Cohen's *The Science of Evil*)



Appendix C
The Empathy Bell Curve
(From Simon Baron-Cohen's *The Science of Evil*)



Appendix D Empathy Quotient

ALL INFORMATION REMAINS STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

How to fill out the questionnaire

Below are a list of statements. Please read each statement very carefully and rate how strongly you agree or disagree with it by circling your answer. There are no right or wrong answers, or trick questions.

IN ORDER FOR THE SCALE TO BE VALID, YOU MUST ANSWER EVERY QUESTION.

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1. I can easily tell if someone else wants to enter a conversation. | strongly agree | slightly agree | slightly disagree | strongly disagree |
| 2. I find it difficult to explain to others things that I understand easily, when they don't understand it first time. | strongly agree | slightly agree | slightly disagree | strongly disagree |
| 3. I really enjoy caring for other people. | strongly agree | slightly agree | slightly disagree | strongly disagree |
| 4. I find it hard to know what to do in a social situation. | strongly agree | slightly agree | slightly disagree | strongly disagree |
| 5. People often tell me that I went too far in driving my point home in a discussion. | strongly agree | slightly agree | slightly disagree | strongly disagree |
| 6. It doesn't bother me too much if I am late meeting a friend. | strongly agree | slightly agree | slightly disagree | strongly disagree |
| 7. Friendships and relationships are just too difficult, so I tend not to bother with them. | strongly agree | slightly agree | slightly disagree | strongly disagree |
| 8. I often find it difficult to judge if something is rude or polite. | strongly agree | slightly agree | slightly disagree | strongly disagree |
| 9. In a conversation, I tend to focus on my own thoughts rather than | strongly agree | slightly agree | slightly disagree | strongly disagree |

	on what my listener might be thinking.				
10.	When I was a child, I enjoyed cutting up worms to see what would happen.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
11.	I can pick up quickly if someone says one thing but means another.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
12.	It is hard for me to see why some things upset people so much.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
13.	I find it easy to put myself in somebody else's shoes.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
14.	I am good at predicting how someone will feel.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
15.	I am quick to spot when someone in a group is feeling awkward or uncomfortable.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
16.	If I say something that someone else is offended by, I think that that's their problem, not mine.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
17.	If anyone asked me if I liked their haircut, I would reply truthfully, even if I didn't like it.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
18.	I can't always see why someone should have felt offended by a remark.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
19.	Seeing people cry doesn't really upset me.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
20.	I am very blunt, which some people take to be rudeness, even though this is unintentional.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
21.	I don't tend to find social situations confusing.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree

22. Other people tell me I am good at understanding how they are feeling and what they are thinking.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
23. When I talk to people, I tend to talk about their experiences rather than my own.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
24. It upsets me to see an animal in pain.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
25. I am able to make decisions without being influenced by people's feelings.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
26. I can easily tell if someone else is interested or bored with what I am saying.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
27. I get upset if I see people suffering on news programmes.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
28. Friends usually talk to me about their problems as they say that I am very understanding.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
29. I can sense if I am intruding, even if the other person doesn't tell me.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
30. People sometimes tell me that I have gone too far with teasing.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
31. Other people often say that I am insensitive, though I don't always see why.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
32. If I see a stranger in a group, I think that it is up to them to make an effort to join in.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
33. I usually stay emotionally detached when watching a film.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree

34. I can tune into how someone else feels rapidly and intuitively.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
35. I can easily work out what another person might want to talk about.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
36. I can tell if someone is masking their true emotion.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
37. I don't consciously work out the rules of social situations.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
38. I am good at predicting what someone will do.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
39. I tend to get emotionally involved with a friend's problems.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree
40. I can usually appreciate the other person's viewpoint, even if I don't agree with it.	strongly agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	strongly disagree

Appendix E Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: *Playback and the Transcendental Gift of Empathy*
Primary Investigator: *Katalin Szoboszlai Navarro*
Faculty Sponsor: *Dr. Steven A. Burr*

THIS PROTOCOL HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY THE LOYOLA UNIVERSITY MARYLAND INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD.

Purpose and Procedures:

This graduate research study intends to examine the nature of empathy as it pertains to Playback Theatre. In this study, you will be asked to participate in three Playback workshop sessions (90 minutes each) which will later culminate in a 90-minute Playback performance for the Loyola University Community. In addition to these four sessions, you will be asked to complete two questionnaires. The first will be administered during the first Playback workshop session, and the second will be administered directly after the performance. These paper questionnaires will be administered anonymously, and there will be no manner in which your answers can be identified as your own.

The purpose of this research study is to determine whether a particular kind of theater performance, Playback Theater, is effective at fostering a greater capacity and desire for empathy on the part of individual participants and audience members.

Risks:

The risks associated with participation in this study are no greater than those encountered in daily life or during usual theater practices/performances.

Benefits:

By participating in this study you will have the opportunity to explore Playback Theater under the direction of trained Playback practitioners. Additionally, we hope that your participation in this study may reveal new ways in which theater performance may increase our capacity to empathize with another.

Confidentiality/Anonymity:

Data collection will entail completion of the 40-item Empathy Quotient test, both at the beginning and the end of the study period. Each survey

Appendix F Playback Terminology

Teller: The individual who wishes to tell their story

Conductor: The individual who serves as the conduit between the audience and performers, or the Teller and company. This individual should be experienced in Playback theatre, able to effectively communicate the needs of the Teller to the company, select the forms which would best illustrate the Teller's needs, and able to ask poignant questions of the Teller's experience

Teller's Actor: The individual whom the Teller spontaneously selects to portray themselves in their personal story

Lighting Rounds: A warm-up exercise in which the actors stand in a circle, and one actor begins a gesture which is "caught" by the next actor and passed around the circle. Spontaneity and group attunement is key here.

Machines: An improvisational warm-up exercise where an individual begins a sound and movement, and another actor creates a gesture which "harmonizes" with the first. The machine builds as one actor follows another adding to the previous gesture. Visually the group is "clumped" facing all directions and levels.

Static Sculpture: Sculpture without sound and music

Fluid Sculpture: Sculpture which features sound and movement

Pairs: Two actors to express simultaneous opposing feelings (ex: fear and excitement)

Tableaux: A series of vignettes used when illustrating a short (often linear) story

Three Part Story: Three actors each perform one part of the story dictated by the conductor. Each actor gives a solo performance and freezes. The next actor continues the next part, and so on.

Full story: A complete enactment containing sound, movement, sculpture, music, poetry, etc.

Appendix G Playback Workshop Lesson Plan

Session One: Working as a Team (90 minutes)

Introduction to Playback (5 minutes)

Personal Introduction (5 minutes)

- What is your name?
- What makes you unique? (your culture, religion, second language, secret talent, etc.)
- Why have you chosen to be involved on this project?

Sharing Jam Circle (10 minutes) and Lightning Rounds (15 minutes)

Silent Sculpture Machines and Sound Sculpture Machines (15 minutes)

Pairs (10 minutes) and Fluid Sculptures and Transforming fluids (20 minutes)

Culminating Experience: Group Fluid Sculpture “Fear of Otherness”

Processing/Reflections/thumb circle (15 minutes)

Session Two: Building Rapport and Trust (90 minutes)

Lightning Rounds (5 minutes) and Machines with Sound and Cloth (10 minutes)

Pairs, Fluid, Transforming, Tableaux (30 minutes)

Three Part Story/Three Sentence Story (20 minutes)

Introduction to Full Stories (20 minutes, one example)

Culminating Experience: Group Fluid Sculpture “The Beginnings of Connection”

Processing/Reflections/Thumb Circle (5 minutes)

Session Three: Acceptance and Internal Performance (90 minutes)

Lightning Rounds (5 minutes)

Fluid Sculptures and Tableaux (one example each, 20 minutes)

Three sentence story or three part story (10 minutes)

Full Stories (four examples, 45 minutes)

Culminating Experience: Sound Sculpture created from “The Embrace of Diversity”

Processing and Thumbs (10 minutes)

PERFORMANCE: (95 minutes, including intermission)

Exploratory Themes:

- *Indifference*
- *Prejudice, Community Issues, Personal Struggles/Observations*
- *Stories of Empathy and Healing*

Culminating Experience: Fluid Sculpture featuring *The Gift of Empathy*

Appendix H

Full Text of Audience Responses

Audience Member A: “Each person you meet has their own story, some good (positive), some not positive. It is important to take time to acknowledge people and listen to their stories. Small acts of listening to others may make all the difference to them. Not often do you take time to listen to strangers’ stories, so having an opportunity has been very humbling.”

Audience Member B: “It actually makes me want to take the other people’s thoughts and life into my thoughts before I say anything. Their lives are as important as my own.”

Audience Member C: “Though not everything was relatable, even other people’s stories being portrayed, you could find things that pertain to you. All around an amazing experience.”

Audience Member D: “We each have our own special story. These stories intersect with others’ stories and influence and affect the lives of those around us. We each need to listen to those stories and let them unfold without judgment or criticism.”

Audience Member E: “Much of what we see and hear in society appears to be a partial reality and lacks connection. Witnessing and hearing one’s stories today brought the reality of hardship and [illegible] to life. It humanized their experiences and evoked a more shared emotional experience. Despite differing backgrounds and realities, I could empathize those from vastly different backgrounds.”

Audience Member F: “The opportunity for open dialogue in the context of understanding and acceptance made for an open and connected experience. Before stories were even told, we communally accepted that all experiences are human experiences and therefore are part of us. Demonstrating that actively and visually made that understanding and connection more concrete.”

Audience Member G: “It gave me an understanding of ‘the other shoe.’ Typically I am not empathetic to anything, but this show has changed my view. Liked the concept and listening, and telling each unique story. The audience loved the show.”

Audience Member H: “The breakdown of ideas into its component parts made each part more relatable. Each component had a link that shared something with an experience outside of the story. As a result, even something I knew and felt nothing about was relatable.”

Audience Member I: “I need this brought this to the Midwest. It is amazing at showing that everyone goes through similar internal struggles.”

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