

**Being in Relation:
Achieving Mutuality in Moments of Play**

by

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DEDICATION

For my wife and kids,
who help me keep life playful

and

For the late Michael Cohen,
who showed me what it means to be a true scholar

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is especially fitting that for a dissertation on high quality connections, I acknowledge some of the many sources of high quality connections that buoyed me up in this long journey.

I have to first acknowledge and express my enormous appreciation for my wife, who has unwaveringly supported me on this journey. She has carried way more than her fair share of the work to keep our family functioning, especially parenting our two amazing children. I spent too many days and nights away from home on trips, leaving her alone with the kids, and she complained much less than she ought to have. I am most grateful for her willingness to bring two kids into our family during the PhD, by far my happiest accomplishment of the past few years.

Next, I want to thank my amazing advisors, Gretchen and Lance, who have been constant sources of encouragement and inspiration. Since my first year in the program, Gretchen has had a way of always making me feel good about myself and my work. She has exemplified a capacity for balancing her intense dedication to work, students, and family, and has likewise encouraged me keep my priorities straight and not get overwhelmed with work. Since my second year, Lance has been an incredibly thoughtful and insightful guide in my research. Our weekly conversations challenged me to think about my research and the world more deeply. For those who know Lance's work, his influence can be seen all throughout this dissertation. I am honored to count them as friends, and I could not imagine a better pair of advisors.

Thank you also to my other committee members, Samantha Meyer Keppler, Alaina Lemon, and Jeffery Thompson. For much of the dissertation process, I met regularly with Sam, who always made me feel comfortable expressing my struggles, and helped me through places

where I was stuck. I took my first and only Anthropology course from Alaina, which illuminated the depths of learning that can be found in observing people in action, and inspired me to look at natural phenomena more deeply. She was also among the first to see my lacrosse study, and gave me confidence that it was worth pursuing. Jeff was instrumental in starting me on this journey when I was just an undergrad at BYU. He also opened the door for me to study the Hale Center Theatre, and his insights as an actor continue to guide my understanding of the data in that study. My committee members are truly the type of scholars I aspire to be like.

Outside of my committee, the M&O community at Michigan has been just that, a community, providing a sense of belonging and social support that enriched my entire PhD experience. Thank you to my incredible course instructors, Dave Mayer, Sue Ashford, Jerry Davis, and Wayne Baker. Wayne's field methods class was especially influential, as it launched my lacrosse study, which set the trajectory of my dissertation. Many other faculty supported me along the way. Thank you to the amazing M&O doctoral student family that welcomed, guided, and encouraged me, including past and present students, especially my cohort mates, Cassandra and Ashley, and my office buddy, Gareth. The student and department culture at Michigan has been the highlight of my PhD experience, and enabled me to truly enjoy the journey.

I've been blessed with excellent research collaborators, starting with Curtis LeBaron, my undergraduate mentor and coauthor, who introduced me to this path and shepherded me into my first research project with our handoff team, Michael Cohen, Marlys Christiansen, and Roy Ilan. This team was an ideal collaboration for a budding young scholar to learn the research process, respectfully and patiently treating me like a colleague despite my inexperience. Pete Bacevice has been an amazing and enthusiastic collaborator with me and Gretchen, introducing us to the coworking phenomenon, which became a huge part of my research stream. I have also been

enriched by collaborations with Richard Wolfe and Ulrich Leicht-Deobald, and look forward to working more with them. I had an exceptional undergraduate RA, Andrew Killian, who helped me make sense of my lacrosse data. I am also grateful to the coaches and players on the U of M lacrosse team, and the directors, staff, and actors in each theatre show that I studied, for their kindness and generosity in allowing me to learn from them, and for making me feel like part of the group and not just an awkward observer.

In addition to an amazing Michigan community and amazing research collaborators, I have been lucky to be part of several other communities that have supported me. The Center for Positive Organizations has been an inspirational and resourceful community for me. I have loved being in two microcommunities, the May Meaning Meeting and the Positive Relationships at Work microcommunity, where I found close friends, friendly reviewers, and formed two writing groups with other young scholars who were always willing to read my work and provide thoughtful feedback. My church community in Ann Arbor became like an extended family for me and my wife, providing constant support and meaningful connections, especially when we had our two children. I should also mention my singing group friends, who gave me a creative outlet and stress-release during the first few years of the program, which always rejuvenated me.

Certainly not least, I express my gratitude and love for my parents, who instilled in me a value of education, a strong work ethic, self-confidence, and most importantly my faith in Jesus Christ, who is my truest source of light and strength, and to whom I attribute all good things I have accomplished and received. It is my privilege to get to recognize many (though certainly not all) of the people who have propelled me on my PhD journey, and who have filled my life with meaning. To anyone I have omitted here, please accept my humblest apology and know that I truly appreciate your advice, guidance, and support.

PROLOGUE

During my first year at Michigan, my doctoral cohort went through an exercise guided by Bob Quinn that was designed to help students craft a meaningful research identity by connecting their research interests to their core stories, or significant life experiences that fundamentally shaped who they have become. In this reflective process, as my cohort sat in a circle tearfully sharing our core stories with each other, I came to the realization that what I considered my most meaningful experiences were moments when I felt a strong, intimate sense of connection or belonging with others, whether it be with a sports team, a theatre cast, my family, or even my cohort. As I related this to my research identity, it became evident that what I wanted to explore in my research was these moments of connection experienced between people, and how interpersonal connection was influenced by various practices and conditions. I also had the important insight that the reason I favor qualitative methods is that qualitative data always contains glimpses into human connection and inter-relating behaviors. Being in the field among the people I am studying also affords myself opportunities to experience connections with fascinating individuals in interesting contexts. As an ethnographer, I can both witness moments of connection occurring in real time and also experience them myself when interviewing and hearing the stories of my research subjects, just as I did with my cohort during the exercise.

My budding research identity was affirmed during my first study at the University of Michigan in collaboration with Gretchen Spreitzer and Pete Bacevice—a qualitative study of coworking spaces. I became a member of a coworking space to explore whether/how these

spaces enabled independent workers to experience thriving in their work. I was immediately drawn to the sense of community that members experienced, and that I came to experience with them. By interviewing the members, I learned that the relationships they experienced with each other were unique compared to typical coworker relationships in traditional work environments. Members felt that they could be more fully themselves in this space, and as a result experienced more meaningful relationships than they had in past jobs. This intrigued me, and became the basis of a research agenda that led to this dissertation—namely, understanding what it is about the organizational context that hinders genuine interpersonal connection, and how organizations can develop conditions or practices to enable more meaningful connections to occur.

The concept of play was not one that I had researched or even thought about in regards to organizational life, although it has strong personal resonance as an important part of my family heritage. One of my great-grandfathers left his wife and 16 children for a nine-month contract to work as an engineer on Wake Island to pay off their family farm. When Wake Island was attacked, he was taken as a prisoner of war for four years. During that time, his wife suffered severe emotional breakdowns, and the family was falling apart. As the story goes, she was praying one day for help and received the distinct impression that she needed to play with her kids, so that's what she did. They started playing games together every night, and during the day, they would turn their work into play. The family grew very close, and became very successful in their industrial pursuits, such that by the time the father came home, he found a close-knit family operating several successful businesses, with their debts not only paid off, but with several additions on the house. To this day, play is an important part of our family culture and traditions. Family gatherings are filled with nearly non-stop card games and board games (we even have our own family card game with our own specially printed cards).

Growing up, I had an unusual set of interests. All through high school, I was on the lacrosse team and the ballroom dance team (with one year of musical theatre as well). I found myself straddling the athletic types and the artistic types. Both activities provided me with deep fulfilment in much the same way, which related to the intense connections I experienced with my teammates and castmates. I never dreamed that I would someday do a dissertation on lacrosse and theatre. This journey has been much longer than just the past five years, and I could not have written a better story for myself. This has been and will continue to be a labor of love.

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ABSTRACT

Human connection is an innate human need. More than that, it is a rich source of life satisfaction, the purest expression of our humanity, and only in moments of human connection do we fully come into being. Such moments of connection are acutely familiar and recognizable, and yet profoundly mysterious and inarticulable.

Increasingly, organizational scholars are recognizing the benefits associated with human connection. Jane Dutton and colleagues developed a conceptualization of moments of human connection, termed high quality connections (HQCs), which are characterized by the experience of positive regard, vitality, and mutuality. As research increasingly demonstrates the value of HQCs at work, my aims are twofold: 1) understanding the conditions and practices that cultivate HQCs, and 2) gain a deeper understanding of the nature of human connection, examining and perhaps refining the HQC depiction of human connection.

To achieve this, I conducted two inductive, qualitative studies of a university lacrosse team and a set of six community theatre productions. I chose sports and theatre because in those contexts moments of human connection are prevalent, intense, and central to the purpose of the activity. I draw on ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews to observe and hear accounts of moments of human connection.

In Chapter 1, I start by describing the importance of human connection. I adopt the HQC conceptualization as a theoretical starting point, and review the literature on the value of HQCs at work. I then describe some of the challenges organizations face in cultivating HQCs, such as

competitive dynamics and depersonalizing role structures. This theoretically and practically motivates my overarching research question: how do people achieve HQCs?

In Chapter 2, I present my study of the lacrosse team. In this study, I observe how competition among teammates is a source of HQCs on the team. I identify mutuality as the central mechanism by which moments of competition become HQCs, which fosters positive regard. I also present conditions that enable players to achieve mutuality in competition. From these findings, I develop a view of competition as a form of mutuality-inducing play. I draw on philosophy of sport to conceptualize competition as a cooperative relational process.

In Chapter 3, I present my study of six community theatre productions. Because study 1 revealed mutuality as the driving mechanism for HQC in competition, I turn my focus to how mutuality is achieved. I specifically examine the influence of roles, which have long been thought to inhibit human connection in organizations. I find instead that roles enable authenticity and responsiveness, which lead to mutuality. I also find, as in the lacrosse paper, that moments of play are when mutuality is achieved.

After two studies pointed me toward play, Chapter 4 examines more deeply the concept of play—what it is, why it is central to sports and theatre, and whether it can similarly be integrated with work. Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation by developing a theoretical model of mutuality that connects mutuality to several related concepts in other fields. My primary conclusions are that mutuality is the driving mechanism of moments of human connection (the other two aspects of HQC are outpourings from mutuality), and that play enables mutuality. Bringing the focus to mutuality provides a clearer understanding of the nature of these moments of connection, as well as how they can be cultivated.

CHAPTER 1

Human Connection in Organizations

Humans have an innate need for experiencing social connection. Most people spend a large portion of their adult lives at work, and especially as boundaries between work and non-work identities become increasingly blurred (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013), workplace interactions are an important source of human connection in people's lives. Experiencing moments human connection at work has a profound impact on people's well-being, work engagement, and work performance (Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016). Work is inherently relational, and people's experience of their work is influenced by their connections with others (Blustein, 2011). As Kahn (2007) noted, coworkers "shape how people think, how they feel, and what they do" (p. 189). Moments of human connection breathe life and humanity into the workplace, which promotes both individual and organizational flourishing.

However, the organizational context presents unique challenges to experiencing human connection at work. Most of our associations with people in a work context exist for some objective purpose, designated by overlapping and interdependent roles in the organization, which tends to subordinate genuine concern or interest as the reason people interact (e.g., Durkheim, 1933; Tönnies, 1957; Weber, 1984/1920). The impersonal nature of organizations and role structures, reinforced by norms of professionalism, can promote a sense of artificiality in workplace interactions, wherein colleagues see each other more as the roles they hold than as fellow human beings (e.g., Sanchez-Burks, 2002). Organizations can also foster competitive

political climates, and a focus on extrinsically-motivated objectives, which further inhibits people from being fully present with each other, displaying vulnerability and genuine concern for each other. But workers are increasingly seeking a more meaningful work experience, and workplace interactions that can satisfy their need for human connection.

In this dissertation, I explore the question: How can organizations cultivate genuine and energizing moments of human connection? I address this question by looking outside of traditional work organizations, to two contexts that have for centuries been important sources of social connection in society: sports and theatre. The specific contexts of my studies are a university men's lacrosse team and a set of six different community theatre productions. I selected these contexts because sports and theatre are recognized (generally and from my own experience) as contexts where participants experience intense moments of connection with each other, and where these moments of connection are both critical to successful group functioning, and are in fact one of the purposes of the activity. These contexts also feature prominent and complex organizational characteristics. In team sports, like in most organizations, there is a sense of hierarchy on the basis of who gets more playing time, and there is near-constant competition among players who play the same position trying to win the starting spot on the team. In theatre, also like in most organizations, actors perform specific roles (including scripted dialogue and choreographed movement), which calls for a high degree of precision and coordination. In each context, we see organizational characteristics which have been identified as reasons for a lack of deep connections at work, and yet in sports and theatre, these qualities do not seem to inhibit the quality of connections that participants experience.

In these two empirical studies, I draw on in-depth observations and interviews to qualitatively unpack 1) the nature of the moments of connection experienced among sports

teammates and cast members, 2) the underlying mechanisms, and 3) the conditions and practices that cultivate such moments of connection. After exploring the distinctive relational practices of both contexts, I develop additional insights by unpacking the commonalities that both contexts shared. Specifically, I find that the common core of moments of connection in both contexts is mutuality, which is achieved through different forms of play. By comparing the two contexts, I am able to arrive at more general propositions regarding the nature of human connection.

The structure of the dissertation will proceed as follows. In this chapter, I give a broad overview of research on human connection in organizations, including the value and the challenges of human connection in traditional organizations. In chapter two, I present the study of the men's lacrosse team, which first uncovers mutuality as a source of connection in moments of competition. Chapter three presents the study of community theatre, which further explores mutuality among actors performing their roles onstage. In chapter four, I draw on insights from both studies and related literatures to develop a framework and a set of theoretical propositions on mutuality. Finally, chapter five concludes the dissertation with a discussion of some theoretical and practical implications.

Conceptualizing Human Connection

Before we can explore how organizations can cultivate moments of human connection, we must think about what human connection is. The nature of human connection has been surprisingly elusive in organizational studies. This lack of clarity has been echoed across many fields that use relationships as a central concept, including public relations, family relations, interpersonal communication, and psychotherapy. What each field has in common is “the absence of a precise and widely used definition of relationships, as well as a paucity of systematic theory construction based on a commonly accepted definition of relationships”

(Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997: 7). Different fields vary even on the most fundamental definitional aspects of relationships, such as whether relationships are a subjective reality (e.g. reciprocal feelings and attitudes), an objective reality (e.g. patterns of exchange or interaction), or a combination of both. They also vary in terms of whether relationships are a process (e.g. feelings/ attitudes that result from recurrent patterns of events), a state (e.g. feelings/attitudes that produce a patterns of interaction), or both.

Despite the vast extant literature on relationships at work, there are clear divides in how scholars study relational phenomena, including the assumptions scholars employ and the dimensions of relationships they stress (Ferris et al., 2009). In an attempt to make relationships more concrete and understandable, many relational scholars focus on the feelings that relationships include and/or produce. Domains involved in this work include positive relationships at work in general (Dutton & Ragins, 2007), and the flourishing literature on trust in particular (e.g., Rousseau et al., 1998), which consider relationships as the feeling shared by individuals toward another. Also, a vast body of research on LMX looks specifically at leader-subordinate relationships as how they induce positive or negative affect between managers and subordinates (e.g., Sparrowe & Liden, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Others (e.g., network scholars) take a less affective stance, focusing instead on what relationships do for people, or what people do in relationships, by analyzing instrumental, task-based ties (Ferris et al., 2009) or developmental networks (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Murphy & Kram, 2014). This approach typically defines relationships as “patterns of exchanges between two interacting members or partners...typically directed at the accomplishment of some common objectives or goals” (Ferris et al., 2009: 1379). Commenting on the diversity of perspectives, Kahn noted, “concepts involving work relationships are generally scattered across different literatures” (2007: 189).

In organizational scholarship, most research has focused on specific types of work relationships, such as mentoring relationships (e.g., Kram, 1988) and leader–follower relationships (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), and how to make those relationships more positive. To get at the core of positive relationships in general, the domain of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) has given rise to a focus not on the enduring or functional qualities of particular relationships, but on the lived experience of moments of connection (or connections). This view considers connection as “the dynamic, living tissue (Berscheid & Lopes, 1997) that exists between two people when there is some contact between them involving mutual awareness and social interaction” (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003: 264). Connections are momentary, emotionally rich, dyadic interactions. Dutton and colleagues (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Stephens et al., 2011) introduced the concept high quality connections (HQCs) to refer to connections that produce feelings of vitality (Quinn & Dutton, 2005), positive other regard (Rogers, 1951), and mutuality (Miller & Stiver, 1997). This is the framework that I adopted to begin my exploration of how organizations can cultivate such moments of connection.

Compared to a view of relationships as patterns of interaction, the fundamentally shorter term, mutual, and emotional nature of connections sharpens the resolution of our understanding of social life. I argue that moments of connection are the foundation of positive interrelating, the building blocks of relationships, and the “ground zero” for creating a more enlivening human experience of work. I agree with Collins (2004), who states that “local, situational encounters have explanatory priority because they are the foundation of social life and human experience” (p. 259). As I consider the relational experience of athletes and actors in their respective contexts, having dyadic interactions as the unit of analysis draws my attention to the small, everyday moments of interrelating that have an impact on people’s human experience at work.

Why are High Quality Connections at Work Important?

In the past decade, a growing body of research has demonstrated an array of both individual and organizational benefits associated with HQCs. Scholars observe that HQCs can be a “source of enrichment, vitality, and learning that helps individuals, groups, and organizations grow, thrive, and flourish” (Dutton & Ragins, 2007: 3). Most proximally, HQCs are theorized to have three structural capacities: 1) greater emotional carrying capacity, 2) tensility, or the connection’s capacity to withstand strain, and 3) connectivity, referring to a level of openness to new ideas and influences (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). These features promote individual functioning and well-being both psychologically and physiologically. For example, experimental studies suggest that small amounts of interaction with others can improve cognitive performance in terms of speed of processing and working memory performance (Ybarra et al., 2008). HQCs can also foster mutual inquiry, psychological safety, and create moments of learning (Kolb & Williams, 2003; Putnam, 2004; Creed & Scully, 2000), which contribute to well-being and an upward spiral of functioning at work (Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009; Fredrickson, 2001). HQCs are important means by which individuals develop and grow (Ragins & Verbos, 2007)

Physiological functioning is also affected. In their review of medical evidence, Heaphy and Dutton (2008) show how HQCs can have strengthening effects on individuals through affecting the cardiovascular, neuroendocrine, and immune systems (see also Heaphy, 2007) Barb Fredrickson (2013) refers to such moments of connection as moments of love, and finds that the positive emotional response to the connection creates a type of positivity resonance that leaves both people in the connection healthier in the moment. Research also suggests that HQCs facilitate adaptation and recovery from set-backs, such as when employees suffer from loss or illness (e.g., Lilius, Worline, Maitlis, Kanov, Dutton, & Frost, 2008), undergo transitions in their

careers or jobs (e.g., Ibarra, 2003) or need task-related help (Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007). The adaptive capability brought on by HQCs comes from both the impact of positive emotions on resilience (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Fredrickson et al., 2003), as well as the expanded cognitive capacity afforded by HQCs (Ybarra et al., 2008).

HQCs can also have more direct effects on the experience of work and work-related performance. For example, HQCs in organizational units are associated with greater levels of psychological safety and trust, which contribute to greater group learning (Carmeli et al., 2009; Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). Relatedly, Vinarski-Peretz, Binyamin and Carmeli (2011) found that HQCs contributed to enhancing engagement in innovative behaviors at work. HQCs are also associated with improving organizational coordination (e.g., Gittell, 2003). Finally, HQCs infuse work with meaning (Grant & Parker, 2009; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003), and promote the formation of attachments to work organizations or to communities (e.g., Blatt & Camden, 2007; Meyerson, 2001). In his view of positive relationships, Kahn (2007) proposed that positive coworker relationships can be understood in terms of the “strands” or connections they create between individuals, which forms the basis of organizational embeddedness, thus influencing employee retention (Mitchell et al., 2001; Yao et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2004).

Beyond the individual and organizational benefits of moments of HQC, the extent to which HQCs lead to the formation of longer-term relationships links HQCs to a multitude of benefits associated with positive relationships, which have been examined across various disciplines for decades (see Appendix A for a brief summary of some benefits of positive relationships). There is no over-emphasizing the importance and value of high quality connections and positive relationships. Indeed, both inside and outside of work, interpersonal relationships “are the foundation and theme of life” (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000: 844). I

agree with Claudia Peus (2011), who argues that organization scholars should be “asked to contribute to the question of how the organizations can alleviate human suffering and promote the greater good” (p. 955). The study of HQCs directly relates to the broader aim of Positive Organizational Scholarship, which is “the study of that which is positive, flourishing, and life-giving in organizations” (Cameron & Caza, 2004: 731).

Barriers to Human Connection in Organizations

Despite the increasing attention being paid to relationships at work, organizations are not typically domains characterized by genuine interpersonal connections. Traditional views of organizations see them as a nexus of contracts (e.g., Coase, 1937), a coordination of stakeholder interests (e.g., Freeman & Liedtka, 1991), or a network of nodes and ties (e.g., Barnes, 1972), rather than as a “community of persons” (Melé, 2012). The rational-legal bureaucratic form that has characterized the modern corporation since its advent over a century ago, especially in the Western world, promotes a depersonalized social structure, accompanied by a boundary between work and non-work life, that emphasizes efficiency and fragmentation over personal connections. Max Weber describes this bureaucratic form as being achieved by “eliminating from official business love, hatred and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements” (1946/1958: 216), and the bureaucratic manager’s relationship to employees as “personally detached and strictly objective,” not “moved by personal sympathies” (1968: 975). Although recognizing the potential value in this form of organizing, Weber (1904/1958) worried that the inherent depersonalization and deliberate prevention of emotional connection would produce alienation and a crippling of the human spirit. By positioning competence in opposition to caring, and rules in opposition to relationships, bureaucracy can extinguish relational work practices (e.g., Fletcher, 1999; Stone, 2000).

This relational climate has led social scientists for decades to describe a dichotomy between the genuine feelings of community/friendship as one might see in a club or church, and the more structured, impersonal relationships commonly found in work organizations. Tönnies (1957) argued that with the rise of the modern organization there was a gradual, yet distinct, shift in human social relations from *Gemeinschaft* (referring to the more genuine, organic connections in community) to *Gesellschaft* (referring to the more mechanical connections in organizations). *Gemeinschaft* is characterized as a living organism, with interpersonal connections based on emotional depth, personal intimacy, and involving the whole person—Tönnies writes that “everything real is organic” (Ibid., 35). In contrast, *Gesellschaft* is characterized as ‘mechanical’ because it is seen as artificial fictions operating under logic and rationality that reduce the living to the dead (Ibid., 36). Tönnies paints a bleak picture of *Gesellschaft* where people are dominated by artificial constructions and reduced to mere commodities, without any human connections:

“[I]n the *Gesellschaft* they [humans] are essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors... [E]verybody is by himself and isolated, and there exists a condition of tension against all others. Their spheres of activity and power are sharply separated, so that everybody refuses to everyone else contact with and admittance to his sphere; i.e., intrusions are regarded as hostile acts” (Ibid., 65).

Drawing from this perspective, the unity in many corporations may be a divisive one, where people exist in a collective but see each other as means to economic ends, not unlike material objects. Durkheim (1933) similarly warned of the potential for the “the anomic division of labor” in organizations to cause a breakdown in the connections between people, leading to a lack of sensitivity and moral regard for each other’s needs. People stand in coercion to one another, seeking to further their personal gain, which is corrosive to unifying human themes such as trust. Things that are organic and internal in *Gemeinschaft*, such as interpersonal trust, must be mutated into something mechanical and external in *Gesellschaft*, such as rigid contracts.

Indeed, strong biases toward self-interest, the pursuit of instrumental goals, and conforming to norms of professionalism that discourage emotionality pervade most work organizations and much of organizational scholarship. Sanchez-Burks (2002) traces the belief that affective and relational concerns are inappropriate in work settings back to the beliefs and practices of the founding communities of the United States, namely the Protestants, and labels this belief the Protestant Relational Ideology. Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1993) describe the premise of Protestant Relational Ideology (PRI), which is that “No intimacy, affection, brotherhood, or rootedness is supposed to sully the world of work” (p. 133). This belief resulted in a culturally unique relational work style in America (Lenski, 1961), and over time these beliefs about maintaining impersonal and emotionally detached work settings were secularized and incorporated into contemporary corporate culture (Fischer, 1989).

Though this depiction of work as mechanical and unemotional was introduced many years ago, its relevance seems to be growing in recent years as Americans are reportedly forming fewer non-transactional relationships at work (Pfeffer, 2006; Cappelli, 1998), and the number of Americans who see work as a place to make friends is declining (Grant, 2015; Kacperczyk et al., 2013). As Pfeffer (2006) states, “We are not only ‘bowling alone,’ we are increasingly ‘working alone’” (p. 5). This is part of a broader “human connection” problem in society. As technology is facilitating connection with more people more of the time, the quality of interpersonal connections is becoming more impersonal. We all desire and need to experience human connection for our well-being, although its significance seems to be easily drowned out by the diverse interests that compete for attention in organizational interactions, such as incentives, impression management, maintaining or changing the status quo, and career advancement (see Sayer, 2007). In short, we go to work to be efficient, not to experience genuine connections.

Research Question

The driving questions in this dissertation are how do people come to experience moments of high quality connection, and how can the social context cultivate high quality connections. The current research on HQCs has focused, and rightly so, on exploring the individual and organizational benefits of HQCs, with little attention given to how HQCs are cultivated (Stephens et al., 2011). With a rising appreciation for the individual and organizational benefits of HQC at work, my interest in these two studies is to identify insights on HQC from unique contexts in which moments of connection are intense and prevalent. I examine the relational experiences of athletes and actors, paying particular attention to how the organizational (or work-like) aspects of sports teams and theatre casts influence participants' ability to experience HQCs with each other. I hope to shed further light on the nature of human relating, and expand our view of the potential for HQCs at work.

Further, as HQCs become incorporated as a key independent variable in myriad empirical studies, the concept seems to be getting psychologized, or reduced to just another variable used to characterize a dyadic relationship or interaction. We are drifting away from what may have been the driving force motivating this perspective—namely, the inarticulable mystery and power of human connection. Understandably, as organizational scholars our first priority with a new construct was to demonstrate that it is worth studying by linking it to valuable outcomes. Now that we have established the importance of HQCs, it is time to deepen our understanding of the lived experience of human connection, including how it is achieved, not as a static product of a set of antecedent variables, but as a dynamic process that flows between people. I aim to make not only a theoretical contribution, but also generate insights that could inform practice and promote a more humanizing and fulfilling work experience.

Research approach

Because my goal is to develop theory on moments of high quality connection, which are especially difficult to measure or capture in any quantitative way, I conducted an inductive, qualitative study following principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Qualitative methods are especially appropriate for studying dynamic processes as they are experienced and interpreted, with sensitivity to the influence of the context on the unfolding actions (Pettigrew, 1997). My data collection was guided by the principles of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which focuses on how people behave when absorbed in real life experiences. In both studies I collected data primarily from two sources, ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews.

In accordance with the goal of theory development, I sought contexts that would provide a relatively clear view of the dynamics of theoretical interest (Yin, 2009). As previously described, sports and theatre are both contexts in which high quality connections are frequent and even central to the activity. The ease of visibility of human connection in these contexts allowed me to “[tap into] phenomena that are uniquely or most easily observed in nonbusiness or nonmanagerial settings but nonetheless have critical implications for management theory” (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010: 668). They also display organizational characteristics that strengthen the generalizability of insights gained from these contexts. Sports teams are increasingly being recognized as an enticing research context where complex organizational issues are prominent and simplified (Day, Gordon, & Fink, 2012). Sport has been described as a microcosm of larger society (Wolfe et al., 2005). Similar to sports, there is a long tradition of research conceptually exploring the relationships between theatre and organizations, especially in terms of roles and role performance, although there have been much fewer empirical studies of the theatre context.

Theatre is often used as a metaphor for organizations (most deeply explored by Mangham and Overington's (1987) book, *Organizations as Theatre*). Theatre mirrors human social life and blurs the distinction between role-play and reality (Frost & Yarrow 1990).

Following principles of grounded theorizing (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), my analytical process in both studies iterated between data collection and sampling, data reduction and representation, and conclusion and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I went into the contexts looking for anything and everything that might be relevant to the experience of high quality connections. As certain aspects of the practices or rehearsals stood out as obviously noteworthy, I would go to the literature to see how my observations compared to what was described in extant research. My data collection gradually became focused on practices that seemed both phenomenologically and theoretically interesting.

The first step of the analysis involved identifying emergent themes. Each week I was in the field I would write memos to explicate themes that emerged. Some of these themes prompted a return to the literature to make sense of what I was observing. The initial insights from this process guided the creation of a semi-structured interview guide, which I used to gain deeper insights on the emergent themes. To analyze the interview and field note data, I used open-coding, or in-vivo coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) using NVivo. From this coding emerged an initial set of first-order codes. I continued going to the literature to look for interesting connections between the emerging themes and existing theories. I then looked for relationships among the codes and created higher-order categories, going back and forth between the data and the literature to identify categories that reflected the data but were abstracted from the particular context (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013).

The second step was to organize these categories into a coherent theoretical model that captured the relationships across these categories. I used frequent memo-writing (Lempert, 2007) and discussion with colleagues not involved in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to explore and evaluate possible theoretical frameworks. I constantly revisited the data and attempted to articulate my theoretical understanding, causing me to amplify some ideas and abandon others. Eventually I arrived at a model that I felt accurately reflected the experience of the players. Even as this theorizing was underway, the fieldwork was still continuing, keeping me in the middle of the action (Latour, 2005). So as I developed my theoretical framework, I was able to look for disconfirming evidence in the field and revise my analysis accordingly. Also, as theoretically interesting episodes occurred in real time, I was able to grapple with them drawing on insights I had already gained.

After finishing the two studies, I engaged in a higher level analysis of the findings from both studies to determine common themes and develop an integrative model. My conclusions at the end of the dissertation are not a definitive set of causal relationships. Rather, I develop a set of propositions that uncover additional questions to be explored and verified. The next four chapters will present the two studies, and then my engagement with the relevant literatures as I build toward an integrative model summarizing the culmination of my thesis.

CHAPTER 2

With Me and Against Me: High Quality Connections in Competition

Introduction

“True competition involves striving together; it involves seeking excellence together.” (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009: 25)

One of the obstacles to high quality connections at work is that work organizations and teams are often plagued by internal competition resulting from individualized incentives. Competition is often encouraged as a means of motivating effort, but the performance benefits of competition are generally assumed to threaten relational climate. Competition has been studied by many disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, biology, and others. In the last century, it has been “one of the most carefully and thoroughly researched topics in all of the social sciences” (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009: 10). Alfie Kohn (1992), author of *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, which won a book award from the American Psychological Association, concluded after reviewing over 400 research studies on competition and cooperation that, “The ideal amount of competition... in any environment, the classroom, the workplace, the family, the playing field, is none...[Competition] is always destructive” (Kohn, 1991: 90). He argues that competition is not merely destructive in excess or when done in the wrong way, but that “competition by its very nature damages relationships,” and the phrase “healthy competition” is a contradiction of terms (ibid). His book presents a body of research that convincingly demonstrates that competition is psychologically damaging, interferes with

performance, and poisons relationships. Kohn goes as far as concluding that “Competition is the worst possible arrangement as far as relationship is concerned” (1992: 148). Supporting Kohn’s conclusions, Shields and Bredemeier (2009) more recently stated, “Though his book is now dated, Kohn summarized a century of research on competition well, and more recent research has added additional nuances but nothing substantially different” (p. 21; for more recent reviews, see Johnson, 2003; Rosenau, 2003). Indeed, the various disciplines that have examined the inner dynamics of competition have come to surprisingly consistent conclusions, that competition seems to unavoidably lead to hostility and prejudice.

However, most of us have experienced and witnessed instances of competition—whether in sports, board games, beauty pageants, etc—that did not poison the relationships of opponents, perhaps even resulting in closer relationships. Consider the iconic example of the rivalry between two of the best basketball players of all time—Larry Bird and Earvin “Magic” Johnson. Their rivalry began in college when each of them led their teams to the NCAA finals in 1979. For over a decade, Bird played for the Boston Celtics, and Johnson played for the Los Angeles Lakers, two teams that had long fostered a bitter East-West rivalry that was only fueled by the rivalry between the two stars. Johnson described, “When the new schedule would come out each year, I’d grab it and circle the Boston games. To me it was *The Two* and the other eighty” (Shenk, 2014: 154). Bird shared similar feelings: “The first thing I would do every morning was look at the box scores to see what Magic did. I didn’t care about anything else” (ibid). Despite the lost championships to each other, fan-bases that despised each other, and continued racial tension in the NBA, when Johnson was diagnosed with HIV, Bird was one of the first people he called before making the news public. And Bird’s reaction was, as he described, “one of the worst feelings you could ever imagine” (Bird, Johnson, & MacMullan, 2009).

The intense competition between Johnson and Bird, similar to countless other rivalries in the domain of sports, forged a bond of friendship between the players. Clifford and Feezell (1997: 30) highlight another example of female tennis star Chris Evert, who was asked shortly before her retirement to describe her favorite match. She pointed to a Wimbledon match against Martina Navratilova as a highlight of her career because, even though she lost, they were both playing in top form, pushing each other in an “upward spiral of heightened focus, emotion, and performance” (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009: 32). This example demonstrates that A) bonding from competition is not a uniquely male phenomenon, and more importantly, that B) bonding from competition is not only a function of long term, ongoing rivalries, but even isolated competitive incidents have potential to be intense moments of connection, win or lose.

The domain of sports is characterized by near-constant competition. As teams prepare to compete against other teams, they spend the vast majority of their time in competition among their own teammates. And yet, sports teams often experience a remarkable sense of closeness and team unity, which prompts a legitimate questioning of Kohn’s definitive accusations of competition being fundamentally and necessarily destructive to relationships. In Katz and Koenig’s (2001) explication of sports teams as a model for work teams, they specifically identify the capacity of many sports teams to promote healthy forms of competition and maintain team solidarity despite having teammates constantly competing against each other in practices.

Work teams are also susceptible to internal competition as members jockey for promotions, status, and recognition. Hogan and others posit that people face two conflicting motivations when working in teams: the desire to get along with other members of the group (cooperate) and to get ahead (compete) relative to others (Hogan, 1996; Hogan & Holland, 2003; Hogan, Jones, & Cheek, 1985). As innovation and knowledge work become increasingly

complex and specialized, the ability of team members to effectively cooperate is becoming increasingly critical for organizations (Wuchty, Jones, & Uzzi, 2007). Thus, understanding the effects of internal competition on team relationships has important organizational consequences.

In this study, I take a deep dive approach to examine how players on a university men's lacrosse team experience competition among teammates. I find that not only can competition be managed so as to avoid harming relationships, but competition when experienced as play has the capacity to produce HQCs, directly contradicting widely held assumptions that competition is fundamentally divisive. The main contribution of this study is a qualitative unpacking of intra-team competition as a source of HQC, demonstrating 1) the nature of the connections formed through competition, 2) the mechanisms by which these connections are formed, and 3) the conditions that enable the competition to produce HQCs. I begin by providing background on how competition is conceptualized in the literature. I review extant literature contributing to the negative views of competition, followed by a substantially smaller body of literature that makes a case for the potential for relationally constructive competition. Following the presentation of my findings, I connect my findings to research on play and high-quality connections to develop a view of competition as a form of play with potential to cultivate HQCs. This theoretical unpacking of the relational capacity of competition helps us more accurately understand the fundamental nature of competition.

Conceptualizing Competition

The negative connotations often attached to competition stem from a longtime conflation with the related concept of conflict. Efforts to disentangle competition from conflict in the social sciences trace back to at least the 1930s. Several inconsistent approaches have been taken to distinguish the concepts (see Fink, 1968 for an early review). Some viewed conflict as a subset

of competition (e.g., Lasswell, 1931), or only some competition is conflictful; others argued the opposite, claiming that “almost all social action may be analyzed in terms of conflict” (Loomis, 1967: 875), but only some of which is competitive. Others made the distinction that competition is regulated by accepted rules and social norms, while conflict is unregulated (e.g., Mack, 1965). A popular distinction considered competition to be parallel striving toward incompatible goals, while conflict was mutual interference with or blocking of each other’s incompatible goals (Seiler, 1963), analogous to the difference between two people in a race and two people in a fight (MacIver, 1937; Gross, 1966).

Deutsch (1949) introduced a social interdependence model which would eventually become the most widely accepted perspective of competition. The social interdependence model views competition as a situational variable where goals are negatively correlated, or structured in opposition to each other (Tjosvold, 1984; 1986; 1988; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Competition was positioned as dichotomous with cooperation, representing two extremes of a single dimension (Chen, 2008; Fülöp, 2004; Van de Vliert, 1999). Also emerging from this perspective came a resurgence in scholarly attention to conflict, when Deutsch (1973; 1980) revived a distinction between constructive and destructive conflict first suggested much earlier by Mary Parker Follett (Metcalf & Urwick, 2003). Deutsch proposed that the difference between constructive and destructive conflict corresponded with whether conflict was approached cooperatively or competitively. This sparked a wave of research demonstrating the positive benefits of conflict when approached cooperatively rather than competitively (e.g., Tjosvold, 1988). Competition became synonymous with a negative attitude toward conflict (e.g., Tjosvold, 2008), which gave rise to what Fülöp (2008) called the “Beauty and Beast” paradigm. Under this paradigm, researchers focused primarily on the benefits of cooperation, and the harm caused by

competition. This perspective limited our understanding of competition by relegating it to a unidimensional construct opposite of cooperation (Schneider et al., 2010).

In the 1990s, some scholars began to suggest a shift away from viewing competition and cooperation as dichotomous and mutually exclusive (e.g., Fülöp & Takacs, 2013), but rather to consider them as partners (Van de Vliert, 1999). Researchers began making a distinction between constructive and destructive competition, similar to what had been done in the conflict literature, and conducting studies to determine the variables that influence whether competition is constructive or destructive (e.g., Sheridan & Williams, 2011; Tjosvold et al., 2006; Tjosvold et al., 2003a). The focus of this research was on performance outcomes, considering competition to be constructive when it improves performance. Even with the emergence of research on constructive competition, the prospect of competition being relationally constructive, or a source of HQC, has scarcely been considered in organizational scholarship.

The Negative Relational Effects of Competition

Kohn's arguments against competition assume competition to be characterized, consistent with the social interdependence model, by mutually exclusive goal attainment, or as a zero-sum game in which the success of one requires the failure of the other (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). According to this perspective, the problem with competition is fundamentally structural, not attitudinal. Because of its zero-sum nature, Deutsch (1949) found that competition produces a "negative cathexis" (reduced liking) by interfering with the satisfaction of individual needs. Or as Kohn (1992) surmised: "A structural incentive to see other people lose cannot help but drive a wedge between us and invite hostility" (p. 9).

Beginning with the famous Robber's Cave experiment led by Muzaver Sherif (1954), which demonstrated how competition can lead to hostility and aggression, numerous studies

have supported that “competition causes anxiety, selfishness, self-doubt, poor communication, aggression, and poisons relationships” (Johnson & Johnson, 1989: 30). Having opposing goals in competition discourages people from working together and helping each other (e.g., Zhang et al., 2011), such as sharing their knowledge with teammates (He, Baruch, & Lin; 2014; Zarraga & Bonache, 2003). Research building on this tradition has concluded that cooperation promotes interpersonal liking within groups more than competition, and that competition reduces group cohesion (Johnson et al., 1983; Johnson et al., 1981) and causes relationship dissatisfaction among friends (Sapadin, 1988; Singleton Jr. & Vacca, 2007).

In addition to the effects of goal incongruence, another explanation for the harmful relational effects of competition comes from Tesser’s self-evaluation maintenance model (Campbell & Tesser, 1985; Tesser, 1988), which posits that people are motivated to maintain a positive self-image. Especially in competition, we tend to seek not just a positive self-image, but to judge ourselves as better than others (Festinger, 1954), which in sport risks causing alienation from others when we play (Hyland, 1978). As philosopher Steven Luper (1996) describes, “Such comparative desires—desires that call for our possessing features that cannot be possessed by everyone—can be called competitive desires since they tend to lead us to regard others as threats” (p. 67). Competition especially threatens self-image between two individuals who are psychologically close (Campbell & Tesser, 1985: 112-113), suggesting that competition among teammates could be even more detrimental to connections than with outside competitors. Internal rivals could pose a greater threat to one’s status and perceived competence because of this heightened social comparison (Menon, Thompson, & Choi, 2006).

Finally, intra-team competition also has the potential for causing divisions on the team along group “fault lines” (Lau & Murnighan, 1998). As competition encourages team members

to “choose sides,” they may come to identify with their subgroups over the primary groups. Blau (1977) identifies this tendency as the most destructive force affecting groups and organizations (see also Akerlof & Kranton, 2010; O’Leary & Mortensen, 2010). In summary, the dominant paradigm reinforced from multiple perspectives holds that intra-team competition is thought to inhibit positive connections by pitting people’s objectives against each other, elevating concerns about self-image and judgmental perceptions of others, and causing identity divisions.

Admittedly, some competition scholars do not take the extreme stance that Kohn takes, that competition is unavoidably harmful, but instead have identified elements that can lessen the relationally destructive nature of competition. For example, Johnson and Johnson (1989) write, “Competition becomes destructive when participants are poor winners or losers, do not enjoy the competition, or when they overgeneralize the results; they lack appropriate competitive skills” (p. 33). From the networks literature we see that often competitors become cooperative partners (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996), and that competition and cooperation emerge from the same structural conditions and relationships (Ingram & Yue, 2008) —“rivals are also roommates” (Barnett, 2006: 1753). For example, Furseth (2005) found that competing managers in Norwegian clothing stores considered each other friends, resulting in reduced price competition. Ingram and Roberts (2000) also found that many competitors forego exploitative opportunities to help a competitor friend. However, this research falls short of considering the connection forged from the competitive, rather than cooperative, aspect of these relationships, or how introducing competition into a cooperative relational structure, such as a team, can strengthen connections.

Making a Case for Relationally Constructive Competition

Although relationally constructive competition has received much less research attention, the notion has found support from a variety of places. The Epic of Gilgamesh, often regarded as

the earliest surviving literary work, recounts a ferocious wrestling match some 5000 years ago between Gilgamesh and Enkidu to test each other's strength, at the end of which the two became best of friends. This account illustrates a view of competition held by the ancient Greeks, who esteemed competition as the outlet for all virtues, such as loyalty and trustworthiness (Lendon, 2005). As described by Bronson and Merryman (2013):

“Competition brought out the best and taught athletes to be their absolute best. It was a chance to show honor and valor among rivals...The ancient Greeks did not fear that competition bred immoral behavior. They believed that competition taught moral behavior ... [T]hey learned to fight fair, with honor and mutual respect for opponents” (p. 19).

Building on this heritage, the founder of the modern Olympics, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, expressed the values of sport as follows: “The importance of these Olympiads is not so much to win as to take part...The important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have won but to have fought well” (Widlund, 1994: 11). Reflecting this philosophy, rule 1 of the Olympic Charter states: “The aim of the Olympic Movement is to educate young people through sport in a spirit of better mutual understanding and of friendship, thereby helping to build a better and more peaceful world” (International Olympic Committee, 1976: 5). This presumes a potential for mutual understanding and connection in competition.

German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in several of his writings, championed the idea that, “In a friend one should have one's best enemy. You should be closest to him with your heart when you resist him” (1954: 168). For Nietzsche, people should have a certain reverence or respect toward their enemies, and “such reverence is a bridge to love” (1969: 39). This reverence develops as people come to view enemies as a source of personal growth. Enemies provide resistance that allows us to learn and improve, which should make us grateful to them. A true friend according to Nietzsche is not someone who wants you to face no resistance, but rather someone willing to provide opposition in order to make you stronger.

More recently, philosophers of sport have taken a similar position regarding the value and ethics of competition in sport, and the potential for sport to provide deep human connection (e.g., Hyland, 1978; Drewe, 1998; Jones, 2001). As articulated by Eleanor Metheny (1977), “competition in sport is, in essence, an expression of friendship, mutuality, goodwill, in which we pay each other the high compliment of offering each other our best opposition to provide for ourselves and the other the satisfaction found in striving to do one’s best” (p. 71). In his article on competition and friendship, Drew Hyland (1978) acknowledges the potential for competition in sports to lead to conflict or alienation, but also recognizes an apparent relationship between competition and friendship. He points out that we are often “at our most competitive while playing against a close friend,” and argues that “this greater intensity enhances rather than diminishes the positive strength of the relationship” (p. 27).

The major shortcoming in the social interdependence arguments that competitive structures are harmful to relationships is that they try to predict human behavior by looking only at the external structure, ignoring how people perceive or approach the competition. These arguments center on two assumptions: that competition is a zero-sum game and that it is driven by an objective to maximize personal benefit. The first assumption ignores the benefits that result for both parties, regardless of the outcome of the competition. As competition encourages people to work harder than they would otherwise (e.g., Crawford & LePine, 2012), the added growth may allow a loss to be reframed as a gain. “The psychological goals of the participants are not mutually exclusive, even though winning and losing are. It is possible for both (or all) competitors to simultaneously improve and experience the exhilaration of the contest, regardless of the outcome” (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009: 33). The second assumption can be problematic with members of a group who may be more interested in a collective goal than their personal

gain (Chen & Kanfer, 2006; Tjosvold et al., 2004). People working on the same team can compete with each other to achieve personal gain while simultaneously striving to enhance the other person's performance for the good of the team (e.g., Tjosvold et al., 2003b).

Upon challenging these assumptions about competition, a handful of social psychology scholars have acknowledged, in agreement with the sports philosophers, that competition can in fact contribute to social support, positive relationships, team enjoyment, and an increased desire to work with competitors in the future (Fülöp, 2009; Janssen et al., 1999; Tjosvold et al., 2003a). For example, in an early study of college football teams, Rees and Segal (1984) found that when starting spots were perceived to be allocated fairly, teammates vying for the same position liked and respected each other more than players who were not competing for the same position. Even Johnson and Johnson (1989), in their book on social interdependence, which primarily focuses on the benefits of cooperation and costs of competition, briefly acknowledge this potential:

“Competitive activities may result in increased personal attraction in two ways. First, competition is first and foremost a cooperative activity. Competitors have to cooperate on the nature of the contest...When it does not matter who wins and who loses, such as when playing tennis with a friend, the cooperative goal of enjoying each other's company while obtaining exercise dominates. The shared experience then produces interpersonal attraction. Second, within competitive situations, individuals who excel may be liked on the basis of admiration and respect, especially if one did not personally participate in the competition” (p. 125).

Although they stipulate two major caveats—“when it does not matter who wins and who loses” and “especially if one did not personally participate in the competition”—they recognize that competition is fundamentally cooperative, with the potential for shared enjoyment. However, they do not further develop this idea, which seems to have been left behind by those who have advanced this area of research, and “the conditions under which competition produces interpersonal attraction [still] have not been researched” (Johnson & Johnson, 1989: 126).

Although this body of literature is small and diversely assembled, and seems counterintuitive against the backdrop of the current research paradigm in organizational scholarship, these perspectives give credence to the potential of HQCs through competition. In this study, I qualitatively explore the experience of competition in sports to shed light on how and under what conditions competition might cultivate HQCs.

Research Site: Midwest University Men's Lacrosse Team

The context for this study was the Midwest University (pseudonym) Men's Varsity Lacrosse team during the 2013-2014 season. This team is one of the oldest collegiate lacrosse programs, and was formerly one of the most successful collegiate club teams in the United States. In May 2011, the team announced that they would be transitioning from club to varsity-status, joining the NCAA to compete against other varsity teams. This transition meant that they could begin offering lacrosse scholarships and recruiting at a much higher level. And, of course, it also meant a sharp increase in the talent-level of their competition.

After announcing the transition, the team was too late to secure many varsity recruits for the following season. That fall, the returning players and a handful of walk-ons enjoyed the excitement of becoming the first varsity lacrosse team at Midwest University. The team struggled to compete at the higher level, winning only one game all season. During that first season, the coaches began attending varsity recruiting events and securing commitments from top-tier recruits. Even with a large recruiting class in the second year, the team again managed to win only one game. My study began at the beginning of the third varsity season.

That year there were 48 players on the team (see Table 1 for the breakdown across class and position). There are four main positions: attack (offense), defense, midfield ("midis," split into offense, defense, and face-off), and goalie. During practices, the players would often split

into four groups, offense, defense, face-off midis, and goalies, to work with one of the coaches on position-specific skills. Then they would come together to practice what they worked on against each other in simulated game situations and scrimmages.

Table 2.1: Players by class and position (players interviewed)

| | Offense | Defense | Goalie | Face-off | Total |
|-----------|---------|---------|--------|----------|---------|
| Freshman | 5 (1) | 7 (2) | 1 | 2 | 15 (3) |
| Sophomore | 7 (1) | 6 (2) | 2 (1) | 1 | 16 (4) |
| Junior | 5 (3) | 3 (2) | 0 | 1 | 9 (5) |
| Senior | 3 (2) | 4 (3) | 1 | 0 | 8 (5) |
| Total | 19 | 19 | 4 | 4 | 48 (17) |

I selected the lacrosse team for several reasons. First, this context was theoretically ideal (Eisenhardt, 1989). In the world of collegiate sports, competition is a daily and intense aspect of team practices—perhaps the most pervasive aspect of team dynamics—making it an extreme case in which the experience of competition would be “transparently observable” (Eisenhardt, 1989: 537). Day and colleagues (Day, Gordon, & Fink, 2012) identified sports as a fruitful domain for exploring team dynamics central to organizational life, including competition. Wolfe et al. (2005) likewise identify the interplay between competition and cooperation in sports as an opportunity to gain organizational insights. The recent transition on this team to varsity status also made the team ripe for intra-team competition as the incoming varsity recruits (receiving athletics scholarships) would compete with the upperclassmen (returning club players, not recruited and not on scholarship) for their starting spots.

Additionally, as a former lacrosse player, my prior background and familiarity with the rules, positions, and norms enabled me to leverage some of the benefits of insider/outsider research in conversations with players and coaches, and broadened the interpretative frame I was able to bring to my theorizing (Bartunek & Louis, 1996). Lastly, my passion for lacrosse gave

me intrinsic interest in observing this team. Dutton (2004) recommends we select contexts that are enjoyable, as positive emotions experienced in conducting research can result in broadening our scopes of attention and cognition, making our thinking more flexible and creative (Frederickson, 2001).

Data Collection

During seven months of fieldwork (September 2013 through March 2014), beginning with the first week of team practices, I observed the team in a variety of contexts, including practices, lift sessions, team meetings, and games. Except for a single exhibition game in October, the team did not start competing against other teams until February, so their teammates were their only competitors during most of this period. Throughout this time, I took detailed notes of my observations and preliminary interpretations. My focus was on moments of interaction, verbal and non-verbal, among players and coaches. Given the nature of team activities—very fast-paced, constantly moving—I was not always in position to capture the details of team interactions in real time, so I obtained permission from the team to audio record parts of practice when I anticipated a significant amount of audible dialogue. I then transcribed the audio recordings to produce a verbatim record of many team interactions.

As a complement to the field data, I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with players (19) and coaches (3). The players I interviewed ranged across position and class (see Table 2). As my initial interests were in relationship development more broadly, my interview questions revolved around the teammate relationships—how and why they developed. I asked about specific elements of team practices that I had observed, including competition, and how they were experienced. As players shared experiences that revealed theoretically intriguing insights about competition, my interview questions changed to delve deeper into their experiences

(Charmaz, 2006). These interviews supported my observations by providing insights into how the players made sense of their experiences (Boje, 2001). Interviews ranged from 32 to 84 minutes with an average of 51 minutes, and each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Table 2.2: Interviewee characteristics

| Player Number | Class | Position |
|---------------|-----------|----------|
| P-1 | Junior | Attack |
| P-2 | Sophomore | D-midi |
| P-3 | Freshman | D-midi |
| P-4 | Sophomore | O-midi |
| P-5 | Junior | Attack |
| P-6 | Senior | O-midi |
| P-7 | Junior | Defense |
| P-8 | Freshman | Defense |
| P-9 | Senior | Defense |
| P-10 | Senior | Defense |
| P-11 | Sophomore | Defense |
| P-12 | Sophomore | Goalie |
| P-13 | Junior | Attack |
| P-14 | Freshman | O-midi |
| P-15 | Senior | O-midi |
| P-16 | Junior | D-midi |
| P-17 | Senior | D-midi |
| P-18 | Freshman | Defense |
| P-19 | Sophomore | Defense |

Findings

There were two main forms of intra-team competition: the face to face competition in drills/scrimmages, and the turn by turn competition for rank on the depth chart. In every practice, players competed in drills and scrimmages. These competitive exercises were not merely light-hearted, friendly competition, but physically and emotionally strenuous ordeals. Players who lost in drills and scrimmages often received harsh criticism from the coaches both in the moment, and later in film sessions where they would revisit recorded moments of practice. In drills and

scrimmages involving offense versus defense, or one half of the team versus the other half, the losing teams often had to run extra sprints or do push-ups, which added to the immense fatigue in practice. In addition to the risk of embarrassment or shame from losing in a drill, and the risk of punishment for losing, the physicality of lacrosse adds a constant risk of physical injury. The intensity of these drills was apparent when players would erupt into fights or displays of anger “in the heat of the moment.”

The second type of internal competition involved players competing against those who played the same position to earn a higher spot on the depth chart, which determined how much playing time they would receive during games. This competition was rarely the face-to-face competition in drills just described, but instead taking turns in drills, and trying to outperform each other in front of the coaches. Considering that a primary motivation for players to be on the team was a passion for playing the game, earning playing time was extremely important to them. Competing for playing time on this team had an added layer of intensity because of the recent transition from club to varsity. Near the end of the first season as a varsity team, the coaches made it clear that the returning players might lose their starting spots the following year with the influx of the first class of varsity recruits. So the senior players on the team, many of whom had worked hard to earn a starting spot on the team, were at risk of losing their starting spots to highly recruited younger players who were offered scholarships to be on the team.

Surprisingly, even as upperclassmen were indeed losing starting spots to the new recruits, the players on the team consistently reported feeling very close to each other within a couple months into the season. With the addition of a second recruiting class during the year of this study, the players reported feeling no class division, despite the increased competitiveness for playing time. In fact, player 15 (P-15), one of the senior captains, stated, “*I think that our team*

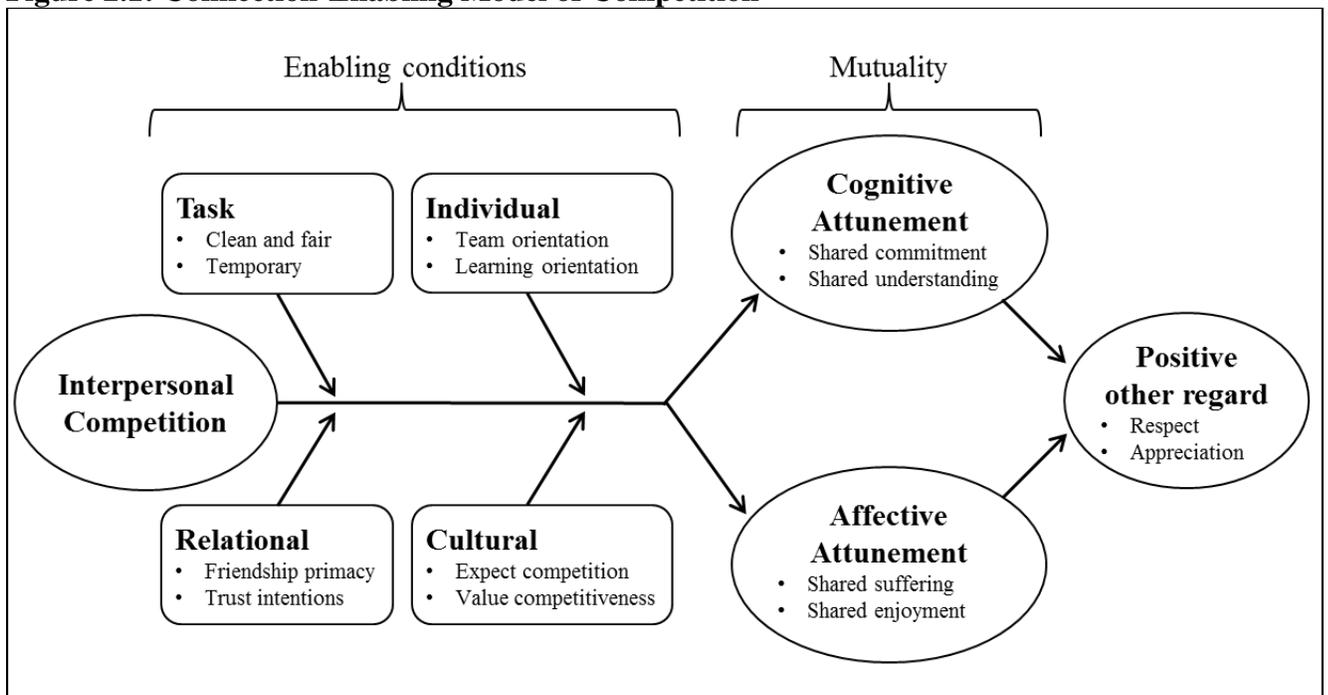
was closer by the end of last year and is closer this year than any club team I was on.” Almost every player described their teammates as their best friends or like brothers. As P-7 put it, “The best friends I’ve ever had are here. It’s just a bond that, it’s hard to put into words just because we’ve been through so much together both on and off the field... It’s just like a really rare bond that I formed. It’s not like anything I ever had in high school.” The players described their teammate relationships as being more meaningful than friendships outside of the team. P-11 even discussed how the friend label felt too cheap to use when referring to his teammates: “I wouldn’t introduce them as just, like, ‘Yeah, these are my friends from college.’ I feel like that implies something so inferior and so, like, I don’t even know how to explain it.... It’s more of like a frickin, I ride and die with these kids.”

So despite the potential for division on the team, players formed bonds that transcended simple friendships. But more than understanding the quality of relationships that formed on the team, my interest is examining the moments of connection that provided the building blocks for these deep bonds. Many of the players suggested the closeness on the team was a product of working hard together. A closer look revealed a counterintuitive trend—that many of the players felt closest to those with whom they were the most competitive. In fact, competition was typically the stimulus for moments of intense hard work that seemed to bring players together. The coaches described that the players were competing for playing time at a higher level than in past years, but instead of seeing an increase in tension, the players were closer for it. The players also recognized moments of competition as an important part of what created the bonds with their teammates, and what set apart their teammate relationships from outside friendships. P-9, another senior captain, in response to a question about the kinds of moments that bring the team together, pointed out moments of competition:

“A time that brings us together would be during practice, like the more that there’s joking rifts on the team... and the more smack talk there is. Or like the more you’re really beating each other up without crossing the line. I think like the closer you get to that line where you’re working hard, you’re smack talking, you’re smiling at the same time, you’re getting after it... where there’s competition, but not to the point where it’s like angry. Yeah so those are the types of times that really bring us together.”

In the next few sections, I will expound on how competition served as a source of high quality connections (HQCs) among the players. Analyzing the interviews and field notes showed that moments of competition produced positive other regard, one of the three components of a HQC, by creating mutual respect and appreciation. Positive other regard resulted from the capacity of competition to cultivate mutuality (another component of HQC) between competing teammates, which had two inter-related aspects: cognitive and affective attunement. Finally, I identify four categories of enabling conditions (Cheng & Novick, 1991) that allow mutuality and positive other regard to occur in competition (see figure 2.1 for the complete model).

Figure 2.1: Connection-Enabling Model of Competition



Positive Other Regard

Two themes emerged as the primary relational outcomes of moments of competition, which were consistent with Nietzsche's descriptions mentioned previously of what we should feel toward our enemies: respect and appreciation. These themes are also consistent with the concept of positive other regard (Rogers, 1951) emphasized as an aspect of HQC.

Respect. The most common description of the feeling between players resulting from moments of competition was a sense of mutual respect. P-15, a midfielder, described how competition brought him closer to the defensemen because *"...at the end of the day, you have a respect for them in how hard they worked and how they competed; and you're able to leave practice knowing that they put up a good fight; we had a great competitive battle."* The respect that develops in competition was often embodied at the end of a moment of competition with a high five or a handshake. P-6 described, *"He beats me sometimes, I beat him sometimes. But every time we like give each other high five like 'Good job' sort of thing. And I think there's some sort of respect that goes in to it, like even if I'm getting beat or they're getting beat."* I often observed players approaching their competitors after a drill and complimenting them on a good shot or a good hit (I saw the same between players competing for playing time). By shaking hands or exchanging high fives after a competition, the players mutually display a sense of respect resulting from the shared experience.

Mutual respect also developed from competing for playing time, especially demonstrated by players' willingness to accept the outcome of the competition without resenting the player who beat them. By having players directly competing by going through the same drills in sequence, it became clear who deserved the starting spot. One of the senior captains, P-9, said of losing his starting spot to a freshman for the team's fall scrimmage against Notre Dame, *"I think*

that he's working hard. Obviously I'm not gonna be like happy for him, but I would never fault him for that. Where the tension comes is when a coach starts someone else and it isn't clear why." In the moment of competition, they could see and feel the other player's effort and commitment. Increasing the amount of direct competition among players reduces the ambiguity in the outcome (who earns the starting spot) that might otherwise cause for perceptions of unfair treatment. Players reported no hard feelings against other players for losing playing time, recognizing when the other deserved the starting spot. For example, *"If I'm giving 110 percent all the time, and he's still playing over me then that means that he's playing better than me. You know I'm not gonna dilute my game because of him by any means, but at the same time I'm not gonna let it affect our relationship"* (P-13). This is consistent with Rees and Segal's (1984) finding that perceiving the outcome of a contest as equitable can result in a deeper sense of closeness between competitors, as competition helps them more deeply respect each other.

Appreciation. The second aspect of positive other regard resulting from competition was appreciation. Players appreciated the personal and collective growth that directly resulted from how hard their teammates were willing to compete against them in drills or battling for a starting spot. One player described how he always liked to run next to the same person, who was faster than him, because it pushed him to run faster. P-10 described the value of competition as follows: *"The purpose of practice is to get better, and if you're exposing something I need to work on, then that's awesome. ...there's definitely potential for competition to build a relationship in that respect."* P-8 described how he likes to have competition in all his friendships for the same reason.

"For me I feel like the competitiveness is always going to be there for my personal friendships and my teammate relationships, so there always has to be some level of drive, competition, motivation, inspiration from somebody. Because if there is no need to make each other better, then it just kind of gets boring for me in a way."

We appreciate people who make us better, and in competition, the growth is reciprocal. Competitors mutually and simultaneously benefit each other, and they each know from their own efforts how much constructive resistance their competitor is giving. The appreciation is further enhanced among players on the same team, as it extends to benefits of team growth. Players are grateful to tough competitors for making them better individually and for making the team better.

Cognitive Attunement

The core mechanism explaining how competition created positive regard among players was that competition cultivated mutuality, or a mutual awareness and understanding of each other. This mutuality had two interrelated aspects, which I label cognitive and affective attunement. I will first describe cognitive attunement, which refers to a sense of mutual awareness and understanding of each other's cognitive state in competition, or being mentally "on the same page" through their engagement in the shared experience. In competition, players attend to each other's every move, similar to a dance, granting them a front row seat to observe the other player's effort and commitment, being both the instigator and recipient of the opponent's actions. In a scrimmage, for example, nobody knows how hard an attackman is working than the defender guarding him, and vice versa. Cognitive attunement occurs as players come to see and understand each other not just as competitors, but as persons with common goals fueling their engagement. Cognitive attunement manifested in two ways that contributed to positive other regard: first, it invoked a shared commitment to each other and the team, and second, it invoked a shared understanding of each other and their relationships with each other.

Shared commitment. The first manifestation of cognitive attunement was players uniting in their commitment to the common pursuit of excellence, evidenced by their effort in

competition. Players worked hard at practice not just in pursuit of individual excellence, but for team excellence, and competition allowed players to demonstrate to each other this shared commitment. P-12 described:

“If I’m competing against somebody and they don’t fight back, it’s just like what am I doing here if they’re not trying. Whereas if they’re fighting back as hard as they can, they care as much, they’re as invested as I am, it’s more work to beat them...so it just makes everything more interesting, and you wanna be competing with them more.”

Without the competitive aspects of practice, teammates could work in parallel toward a common goal, but without really seeing each other. Competition situates the players in position to directly push each other to work harder and witness each other’s efforts. Working side-by-side, their efforts would be less salient and visible than when their efforts are aimed against each other in competition. As players respond to each other’s actions in competition, they attune to each other’s commitment, and can better respect and appreciate this shared commitment.

Shared understanding. The second aspect of cognitive attunement is developing a shared understanding of each other and their relationships with each other. Competition serves to break down barriers between players by, because in competition, social categories are forgotten, facades are let down, and players are able to just be with each other. P-3 described,

“I think when the shit’s hitting the fan, people show their true side. For example, you see what people really are thinking when things aren’t going well. So the way people react or they don’t react, you learn a lot about someone by the way they face competition. I think that’s where you develop the strong bond. ...I think when you get deeper into someone’s head, that’s something that really develops into this trust or the bond.”

Competing together allowed players to connect in an intimately personal and profoundly human way. In competition, the only thing that matters is the competition, and efforts to put on a certain persona fall away.

Personal “walls” can also disguise the quality of relationships by covering up one’s true feelings toward another. Removing such barriers reveals the true nature of their relationships,

exposing whether players were simply pretending to get along. In this way competition acts as a test of the strength of the relationship between players, which, when passed through, gives players increased confidence in their relationships. This quote by P-15 captures the effect:

“I know that the kids on the team that I’ve played with in the past will always be the kids that I’ll be closest with ...because you know that if your relationship has been tested and you’ve gone through these hard times and you can still be friends with them, that’s going to mean more than just being friends with someone strictly because of your similar personalities and you like to do similar things.”

I observed many instances in practices where players would get upset with each other in heated moments of competition, but then leave practice together with smiles on their faces. Without testing the relationship, it is difficult to know how strong it is. But when players are put in competitive situations—situations likely to cause tension or division in unstable relationships—and they are still able to maintain their friendship, it validates the strength of their relationships. I also observed players praising a teammate who beat them for a starting spot, which praise carries added significance in the context of being competitors. They realize as they try to beat each other, and still cooperate to maintain friendship, that their relationship is genuine.

Affective Attunement

Affective attunement refers to an empathic process of experiencing a shared feeling-state. The process by which competition produces affective attunement is similar to the process underlying cognitive attunement. Just as being in competition puts players in the best position to recognize, understand, and appreciate another player’s commitment to the team, it likewise puts players in a position to feel what another player is feeling. Affective attunement differs conceptually from empathy in that it stems from a joint behavioral experience rather than perspective taking in response to a narrative account. Sandelands and Boudens (2000) contend that feeling is inseparably connected to one’s embodied involvement in a group: “Feeling comes

not by evaluation or thinking, but directly and unmediated through the body. In these instances, the person becomes one with the work and one with the group” (p. 54). Linking feeling and doing as “coexistent, coterminous, and coordinate” (Sandelands, 1988: 439) suggests that as competitors share in a coordinated competitive experience, they will experience a perceptual capacity to empathize, or feel as the other is feeling, based on their embodied engagement. Empathy typically focuses on experiencing the suffering of another, but empathy can also present as sharing another’s joy or excitement. As competition is sometimes felt as suffering and other times as enjoyment, both sides of affective attunement were experienced in competition.

Shared suffering. The notion that moments of shared adversity can be bonding experiences is widely known, and players often pointed to times of adversity in practices as moments of connection with teammates. For example, P-6 stated, *“I think the practices where we’ve most come together are the practices that we face the most turmoil together.”* P-3 similarly recounted moments of connection in adversity: *“With a friend that isn’t on the team, they’re not gonna know what it’s like to get up at 5:00 in the morning, or run sprints until you wanna pass out and stuff like that. So I think naturally that kind of brings you closer to people who have shared that similar experience.”* What seems almost forgotten is that the players themselves are in many ways responsible for making practices adversarial, and adding to each other’s adversity in practice, as their adversity is generally driven by competition.

For example, one form of competitive “adversity” on the team mentioned above by P-3 was running sprints at the end of a hard practice. Each practice, the players who lost the end-of-practice scrimmage had to run extra sprints. While they ran, the remaining players stood on the sideline offering encouragement, often in the form of challenging runners to catch up and beat another player not far ahead. Making sprints competitive pushed players to run harder, and

reinforced a sense that each player was pushing his hardest, such that they each experienced the same level of difficulty. If they all just ran the same speed, the faster players would experience less pain than the slower players. The more explicit the competition is, such as when two players single each other out before the sprints and taunt each other, the more togetherness they would feel in their suffering together. Competition reinforces that they are in it together, and that the suffering of physical and mental exertion is a shared, not just a personal, experience.

Shared enjoyment. Competition is not always experienced as adversity, but is often fun for the players. One way that players frequently made competition more fun was by exchanging “smack talk,” or taunting. Smack talk was usually reciprocated and almost always accompanied by laughter from one or both sides of the interaction. P-1 explained that smack talk is the reason he liked competing against one particular player: *“Mac (pseudonym), who lives in my house, we always like to go one-on-one against each other ‘cause if we win we’ll just talk smack to each other. It makes practice a lot more fun just being able to ease the tension after plays and stuff.”* P-2 specified that he liked both giving and receiving smack talk: *“If I win, very often I’ll talk trash during practice, and I think that makes us closer, ‘cause then I’m joking around with them afterwards. If I lose I like hearing it from them too.”* Smack talk, which in other contexts might be used to add tension to a competition by making the other person angry, seemed to reflect shared enjoyment and dissipate any potential tension stirred up by the competition. Smack talk demonstrated how competition could be fun in a contagious way, regardless of the outcome of the competition, as suggested by P-4: *“I think people enjoy sharing a bond between going at each other as long as it doesn’t become angry. I think they have fun joking around with each other, and they have fun when they win or when they lose.”*

As further evidence of their enjoyment of competition, players often turned things that were not inherently competition into a competition to make them more fun. This was the case when I observed weight lifting sessions, where players did sets of lifting exercises in groups of four. P-13 described lift sessions with his teammates (referred to as his rack) as follows:

“Everything is a competition. So with my rack, Gordy and Dave (the players he lifts with), I lift five pounds more than Dave, but then Dave will one rep be like ‘Oh no don’t take it off, leave it on.’ And then I’ll have to put on five more after him because I wanna do five more than him. In the end it’s better ‘cause we’re lifting more weight ... it’s just a friendly competition – it’s almost making the weight room more fun as a competition or social thing.”

As with the suffering, competition added to the shared togetherness of each other’s enjoyment, making their enjoyment more visible than if they were enjoying an activity side by side. And when players were visibly having fun, their enjoyment contagiously spread as a result of their mutual engagement in the competition.

Enabling Conditions

To recap the findings to this point, moments of competition promote respect and appreciation between competing teammates because competition has the capacity to cultivate mutuality in the moment of joint engagement. Of course competition does not always lead to positive other regard; indeed, internal competition in work contexts is typically a cause of tension. In the following sections I discuss the conditions that promoted or enabled mutuality to result from competition. By observing and hearing accounts of positive and negative experiences of competition, we can begin to identify contextual patterns associated with mutuality and positive other regard. The themes that emerged fell into four levels: task characteristics, individual orientations, relational factors, and cultural norms.

Task characteristics. In this first category, we look at characteristics that make some instances of competition less conducive to relational bonding than others. The most prominent theme in this category is demonstrated in the following quote: *“I think if you do a dirty play or something like that, then that would definitely make me bitter. It’s kind of like, ‘What the ____? Like you don’t need to do that here.’ Like, yeah, we’re playing hard, but at the same time, we’re on a team together. There’s no need for it”* (P-14). When a player does something in competition that is seen as a “cheap shot” or a “dirty play,” usually illegal or unnecessarily rough contact to gain an advantage, it calls into question the other player’s intentions. *“If it’s dirty, then you question what’s this guy doing. Is this really getting us better. Is this guy just selfish if he’s going out there to hurt you or something like that”* (P-1). Perceived intentionality was the primary differentiator between a hard hit and a cheap shot. P-12 described how an illegal hit, specifically a slash to the helmet, *“can be totally unintentional and you just play through it.”* When the competitor is perceived as self-centered, it disrupts the potential for mutuality by removing the sense of togetherness from the competition. I observed several instances of what could be described as “dirty play” during practices, which caused temporary rifts between players. In some instances they were able to overcome these rifts as they came to understand each other’s personalities and could re-interpret the player’s intentions as not being dirty or self-centered.

In addition to the competition being clean, it was also important that it be close to evenly matched, or at least that either side felt they had a chance at winning. When I asked P-15 to describe moments that caused the team to feel less close, he replied:

“I think whenever one side completely outplays the other and it’s very lopsided. Like we’ve had some scrimmages where in a ten-minute window, we’ve scored ten goals on the defense. And they hate us... For the day, the defense doesn’t really want to talk to us, we don’t really want to talk to them... I think that the days we aren’t as close are whenever we’re just not playing well and people are getting frustrated, or whenever there’s some really lopsided competition that kind of creates a weird tension.”

His response does not make it clear why the lopsided competition creates a weird tension, but it clearly did not produce HQCs. I observed this myself in several scrimmages at the end of practices where one team would do significantly better than the other. The team that was doing especially poorly would usually have a disheartened demeanor at the end of practice, and would grab their things and leave without being sociable. There were fewer handshakes or high fives and less smack talk after what was clearly not a good game. In any competition, one side will inevitably outperform the other, but if the competition is not close, it disrupts the potential for mutuality, which relies on the players feeling like they are engaged in a shared experience together, regardless of the outcome.

Another condition relating to the task characteristics is that the outcomes of the competition were not permanent. P-10 explains how this differentiates sports competition from competition at work:

“We’re competing with each other in practice, and we’re competing for a depth chart spot that can change one week to the next. But in your job, you’re competing with your friends at the office for a promotion. If you get the promotion, it’s not like in practice—our coaches never come in and say, ‘Thomas, you’re starting this week and you’re starting your next four years.’”

This is not to suggest that the outcomes are inconsequential. Similar to what Lok and De Rond (2013) describe in their ethnography of the Cambridge University Boat Crew, the lacrosse team “dominates the lives of its members” (p. 189), and earning a starting spot on the team was very important to the players (for a similar example, see Adler & Adler, 1988). Nevertheless, it is not evident that there are any concrete, long term outcomes tied to their performance. The obvious exception is when playing at a professional level after college is a viable prospect. For the lacrosse team, this was not perceived to be the case. The players I interviewed expressed that lacrosse was not in their future aspirations. An important point from the above quote is that the

depth chart was constantly in flux, getting re-posted each week, so if a player lost his starting spot one week, he had the possibility of getting it back. Competition among players, whether for a starting spot or just in drills during practice, was not a one-time event, but a recurring part of their relationship, which shaped how it was experienced in the moment: *“I think if it’s good hard clean competition, then there’s no way to really feel too bitter after practice, because it’s like maybe some guy kicked my ___ today, I’ll kick your ___ the next day.”* (P-3). The ability to come back after a loss and try to win the next day helped reduce the potential bitterness of a loss.

Individual orientations. At the individual level, two primary orientations emerged that enabled competition to cultivate mutuality and positive regard. The first was having a learning orientation. If players cared more about beating their teammates than self-improvement, they may not feel the closeness that comes from respecting and appreciating the other player’s efforts, because they lack a shared purpose. Many of the players in their interviews, when I asked about different forms of competition, said that they did not really see practices as competition against other players, but as competition against themselves. For example, P-1 described, *“We’re not trying to bring each other down more than just bring yourself up. So it’s never really competing against him. We are, in fact, but we’re more competing against ourselves to get better.”* With this orientation, the other player, rather than being seen as a competitor, was seen as a way to gauge one’s personal improvement. This does not actually remove the competition, but it reframes it in a more cooperative lens. Having a learning orientation is especially salient on sports teams because most intra-team competition occurs during practices, which have the explicit purpose of learning and improving.

The second condition was having a team orientation rather than an individual orientation. Most of the players described having a greater interest in the team’s success than their personal

success. P-6 said it clearly: *“Scoring a goal doesn’t really mean anything unless you win. So ultimately my personal goals are the team goals. I value the team over my own personal goals.”*

P-4 likewise said, *“I’d rather win a game than score ten goals.”* This team-first mentality translated into players striving to help each other improve, even those they were trying to beat for a starting spot. P-8 described this as follows, *“If he does something wrong in practice, I’ll be like ‘I think you should do this,’ and he’ll do the same to me, so we’ll help each other, but at the same time I want his spot and he wants mine.”* This can even cause a player to want someone else to get more playing time if it would be better for the team. When asked about how losing a starting spot to another player influenced his relationship with that player, P-5 explained,

“So there’s cases where I think someone should be playing over me. ...if it’s going to help the team win, then that’s something that I will easily understand... Anything that’s going to let us win is going to make me so much happier than if I score a goal and we lose by six. The bigger aspect of, winning is something that lessens the inner competition between the team.”

The team’s struggles created a feeling among players that they would do anything to help the team be successful, and a recognition that the team needed their best efforts to be successful. Research has supported this finding, showing that team-oriented individuals view competition as a positive means to increasing their efforts and achieving group goals (e.g., Chen, Xie, & Chang, 2011, Karau & Williams, 1997). Both of these orientations reinforced the cooperative nature of the teammate relationship, which contributed to achieving mutuality.

Relational factors. Many of the lacrosse players pointed to their already close relationships as a reason why competition was a bonding experience. A common theme in the interviews was that players valued their relationships more than lacrosse. As P-7 explained, *“You don’t want it to get so competitive that you can’t talk to the person ever, and that it ruins the whole relationship that you had with them... Shaking hands with somebody after the game is a*

realization of the bigger picture, that there's more to it than just lacrosse." Many of them explained that competition did not disrupt their relationships because they realized this bigger picture. For example, *"There is so much more outside of lacrosse, and I don't want this little thing, which is definitely a big part of my life now, to affect these guys that I want to stay in touch with for the rest of my life"* (P-8). The new players quickly developed a concern for their relationships with their teammates such that they would value those relationships more than their success in lacrosse, or they naturally situated relationships at a higher level of importance than competition, even before knowing their teammates very well.

Another way this relationship primacy was accomplished on this team was through the team's core values emphasized by the coaches, which placed their relationships with each other as a "family" as the most important team value. The players were told from day one that they should always look out for each other and support each other. It was not clear whether this relationship primacy curbed the level of competitiveness from getting too intense, or whether it simply reframed the competition such that it was not experienced as harmful to the relationships no matter how hard they fought against each other. This closeness seemed to contribute to the capacity and desire to achieve mutuality in competition.

Another important aspect of their relationships was that as players were able to get to know each other on an interpersonal level before they began competing against each other, they could build trust in their teammates' intentions with regards to competition. With the varsity recruiting process, recruits would visit campus on the same weekend, which had a central purpose of social bonding. The freshmen and sophomores frequently mentioned this first visit weekend as a time when they very quickly formed friendships with their classmates. Also, the team spent the first week of the semester in orientation, which included social events and team

meetings, but no competitive activities. These relationships helped players trust each other in situations like getting injured by another player:

“My sophomore year I messed up my knee and I was kind of trying to come back, but like go easy on it. And during a one-on-one, some kid tripped me up; I ended up falling and made it worse. But my thought process wasn’t to just blame the kid; it was kind of just an unfortunate situation. Like he wasn’t trying to injure me. It just kind of happened” (P-6).

P-6 was able to see the injury as an unfortunate event because he knew the player responsible was not trying to hurt him. In a sport like lacrosse, which is very physical, it is important to be able to trust that your teammates are competing hard not just for selfish reasons, and especially not to cause pain to the other players. I observed one instance where a player charged into another player in a three-on-three drill, and the other player broke his ankle. Talking with the injured player afterwards, he expressed no hard feelings, but actually a great amount of respect toward the player that hurt him. Several other players experienced significant injuries during the duration of the study, and the attitudes expressed by the injured players remained consistently positive toward their teammates. P-14 qualified that this was sometimes difficult for the freshman because they did not have that level of trust with many of the upperclassmen at first, but as trust grew, they came to appreciate each other’s competitiveness.

Most of the players lived with several of their teammates, and they spent a lot of time together off the field. The multiplexity of their relationships created a richness in their relationships that helped them better understand and appreciate their competitiveness on the field (e.g., Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998). If the relationships only existed in the domain of lacrosse, it may have been more difficult to separate any negative feelings of competition from the quality of their relationship. This is a challenge for relationships across competing teams, as described by P-8: *“When I’m just competing against somebody like from Ohio State, we don’t have the friendship when we are competing, so when it’s over, all I know is that he is my enemy,*

or he is who I have to get through to get to the championship or something like that.” And so having a personal relationship on and off the field facilitated mutuality.

Cultural factors. Lastly, there are aspects of the general sports culture that enabled competition to produce HQCs, namely that competition is expected and valued. Players expect to compete with each other on a sports team. Having this explicit expectation allows players to draw boundaries around the competition. A phrase often used on the team was that competition stays “on the field,” meaning they do not let the heat of competition influence their relationships off the field. *“On the field you compete. I’m gonna try to beat him out. He’s gonna try to beat me. When you’re not on the field anymore, none of that matters. You’re friends again – would be my best way to explain it”* (P-3). This is only possible because the competition is expected on the field, so players can separate on the field behavior from off the field relationships. *“I think it’s important to remember that it’s lacrosse related and not indicative of them as an individual outside of lacrosse, and that a big thing with the competition is to just keep it separated from everything else”* (P-7). Players recognized that aggressive behavior on the field is part of the game, and not necessarily an indication of what the player is like off the field.

Because competition was expected on the field, the field was a safe space to release any pent up tension through competition. The Head coach described the importance of allowing players to compete as a way of expressing their emotions in an acceptable way. If players do harbor negative feelings toward their teammates, they can express those feelings through their competition, and the competition allows them to leave those negative feelings on the field.

“I think we have a lot of very competitive people by nature anyway, and I think you know that’s (competition is) how they express themselves, that’s how they express their emotions. It gives them a vehicle to do that, and I think it’s really important for guys who maybe aren’t as good as expressing themselves because here’s an opportunity for them to do it in a comfortable way.”

Bradley and colleagues (2012) reported a related finding that task conflict has a more positive impact on groups with high levels of psychological safety, where it is safe to make conflict explicit, so they can “avoid taking task disagreements personally” (p. 152). When I pressed one of the assistant coaches to think of instances when competition went too far and caused problems on the team, he responded that even the most heated competition can still produce a HQC:

“For instance, some of the best moments in my sports life are when you wanted to kill someone, you got in a fight, and you went to the locker room afterwards, and it was like, ‘You know what? That was awesome. I got a lot of release out of that, and I hope you did, too’ and you’re best of the friends. A lot of those fighting scenarios turn into probably your most bonding moments.”

Lastly, competition is not only expected, but competitiveness is a valued trait on sports teams, which is reinforced by the coaches. Another assistant coach, when asked how he responds to situations where competition appears to be getting “toxic” between two players, responded, *“Unfortunately, it doesn’t happen enough in our team – we actually need more of it... We need more mixing it up a little bit because they’re so invested in what they’re doing that they get in a little tussle here or there.”* Each of the coaches I interviewed shared the view that this particular team would benefit from more competitiveness among the players. Because competitiveness is valued and expected, it is viewed as almost synonymous with passion and commitment, rather than with the more negative aspects of competitiveness such as anger or selfishness. P-8 shared a view that, *“When things like that happen (referring to fights on the field), it usually means you’re trying extremely hard... And everyone understands that, that you’re playing your best for your side of the field.”* When competition is not explicitly encouraged or expected, as is the case in many work settings, the more subtle forms of competition that naturally emerge may be interpreted as a negative reflection of an individual’s character, rather than a positive one.

Summary

In summary, I propose that competition between teammates was source of HQC for these players as indicated by the positive regard that came out of moments of competition.

Competition has the capacity to cultivate mutuality by engaging the players in an intense shared experience, where players are closely attending to and responding to each other. I identified a variety of conditions, relating to the nature of the competition, individual orientations, relationship quality, and cultural norms, that promote a sense of togetherness that enables players to achieve mutuality.

Discussion

This study has addressed how competition can generate HQCs among players on a lacrosse team. I identify a set of mechanisms and contextual conditions as starting points for further exploration of the relational effects of competition. In this section, I propose some connections with existing literatures, implications for organizational research and practice, and address the question of generalizability and using sports as a context to study team dynamics.

Unpacking Competition as a Form of Play

To further explicate how these findings relate to more abstract organizational constructs, I went to the literature with the question, what is this phenomenon an instance of? A particularly generative lens that sheds light on the findings from this study is viewing competition as a form of play. Commenting on what makes sport such a significant part of society, sport philosopher Fezell (2004) noted, “The most plausible interpretation of sport involves the notion of play” (p. 21). Huizinga (1955), father of contemporary play theory¹, depicts sport as play, where “in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality

¹ I engage in a deeper discussion on what is play in Chapter 5. Here I focus on the characteristics of play that help explain the findings from this study.

of play” (p. 13). Clifford and Feezell (1997) describe the “heart of sport” as a “delicate balance of playfulness and seriousness” (p. 11). Later they explain: “[Sport] demands that we compete as hard and as fairly as we can, yet that we do this while realizing that sport is play, a set of captivating and intrinsically valuable activities that do not matter in the larger scheme of things” (p. 66). Here I explain how this play quality of competition relates to the findings from the study.

A common form of play is what Huizinga calls “cooperative agonism,” referring to the dynamic of players moving together to oppose, or cooperating in contest with each other. Play often involves striving for some prize, which creates an element of tension that adds to the importance of the game. Cooperative agonism fosters an essential aspect of play, referred to by Rodriguez (2006) as a “moment of otherness,” which he describes as follows:

“Playing consists in a trans-individual process of action and reaction, which often takes on a to-and-fro quality reminiscent of dance. It is the pattern of this movement, rather than the psychological make-up of the individual participant, which fundamentally characterizes the experience of play... In [philosopher Hans Georg] Gadamer’s [1989: 97] view, the fascination of play lies in the way this structured movement ‘draws’ players into its arena and ‘fills’ them with its distinctive spirit” (para. 8).

This to-and-fro quality of play explains the heightened responsiveness and resulting mutuality in competition. Contributing to mutuality cultivated through play in competitive sports is the inherent pain, risk, and danger involved in many sports. “This shared pain and danger bring their own special kind of intimacy and dispose us to friendship” (Jones, 2001: 131-132). Competition always involves a risk of defeat:

“It is this shared awareness of a common vulnerability, where each is aware of a common frailty, a ‘mutual exposure’ (Kretchmar, 1998: 29) that is ritually embodied in handshakes, embraces and congratulations after a hard-fought contest... This shared awareness of a common vulnerability... brings even the most alienated competitors emotionally close and may in turn dispose them to friendship” (Jones, 2001: 132).

There is a vulnerability not just in shared pain or risk of defeat, but also in shared experiences of joy. As psychiatrist George Vaillant observed, negative emotions are natural defense

mechanisms insulating us against the risk of rejection or ridicule (Shenk, 2009). However, when people play together, they open themselves up to each other, and experience an authentic presence together (Shenk, 2014).

A risk in play is that “its antagonistic aspect may be sundered from its cooperative aspect and then taken seriously outside the play (when players depart company not as good sports but as embittered foes)” (Sandelands, 2010: 81). To preserve the balance of cooperative agonsim, play is typically enclosed within a spatiotemporal frame, referred to by Huizinga as the “magic circle.” The boundaries of play are often literal physical precincts: field, stadium, arena, game board, etc. This was evident among the players as they described leaving the competition on the field, keeping it separate from their off-the-field relationships. There are also temporal boundaries that mark when play begins and ends, and ordinary life is temporarily suspended. This magic circle demarcates play from the seriousness of ordinary life by designating a sort of artificial reality with rules and conventions that hold only within the circle. These rules are to neutralize potential sources of unfairness and keep potentially destructive instincts in check. If these rules and conventions are violated, play is ended (Duflo, 1997). Caillois (1961) insists on the vital importance of the magic circle, suggesting that subverting the boundaries of the magic circle would cause play to degenerate into a source of compulsion and anxiety.

Within the magic circle, a different set of rules and norms apply than in the outside world, primarily the rules of the game. When players violate these rules, such as to gain an unfair advantage, the activity ceases to be play. There are also conventions in sports, particularly around the value of competition and competitiveness, which are recognized on the field, but could be detrimental if allowed to move beyond the magic circle. For example, athletes on a sports team recognize that it is important that each player work their hardest to try to beat their

teammates in drills at practice. Competitiveness is seen as a desirable trait on the field. That same level of competitiveness off the field could be viewed as mean-spirited or self-centered.

This perspective suggests that competition may result in mutuality and positive regard under conditions that preserve or reinforce the play element of competition. And conversely, as Hyland (1978) claimed, “all competitive play which fails to obtain this highest possibility, that of friendship, must be understood as a ‘deficient mode’ of play” (p. 35). Each enabling condition that emerged in the study served to reinforce a magic circle in which play could be sustained. The task characteristics (clean and fair) set the bounds of the game that must be preserved for the competition to be playful. The individual orientations (learning orientation and team orientation) and relational factors (trust and relationship primacy) lessen the perceived seriousness of the outcomes, so players focus on the intrinsic value of the experience rather than adopting a “winning is everything” mentality. And the cultural factors establish a set of norms that separate the play arena from the “real world.” Thus, this study contributes to the growing literature on the value of play in organizations by demonstrating competition as a form of play, and unpacking its capacity for high quality connection, which is discussed in the next section.

Unpacking the Experience of High-Quality Connections

The relational outcomes of competition from this study have obvious resonance with the notion of high quality connections. Most of the research on HQCs has been exploring the positive effects of HQCs. However, in a recent handbook chapter, Stephens and colleagues (2011) began to theorize a set of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms that lead to the formation of HQCs. One of the cognitive mechanisms proposed was perspective-taking, or “mentally representing the other’s experience as one’s own (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004)” (p. 389), which can foster a sense of care for another. The emotional

mechanisms included the affective counterpart of perspective-taking, empathy, which is described as “the basis of human connection” and “an essential component of creating a relationship that can create a feeling of interpersonal support (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Rogers, 1951)” (p. 390). Finally, one of the proposed behavioral mechanisms was, perhaps not surprisingly, play. The authors described the capacity of play to enable HQCs by “taking people outside their normal roles and behaviors, ...allowing others to know each other differently” (p. 391), and providing an opportunity for people to be “fully engaged with others in the rules that set play apart from the ‘real world’ (Czikszentmihalyi, 1975)” (p. 391).

These three mechanisms directly correspond with the three relational processes identified in this study—namely competition as play, cognitive attunement as perspective-taking, and affective attunement as empathy—which affirms HQCs as an appropriate framing and theoretical touchpoint for the proposed model. This is the first qualitative study that I am aware of that examines and expounds on the mechanisms for building HQCs, as proposed in the handbook chapter, answering a call that: “Future research should address how these mechanisms relate to one another” (Stephens et al., 2011: 394). This study not only illuminates competition as a form of play that can generate HQCs, but also demonstrates the central role of mutuality in fostering positive regard. The HQC concept situates mutuality and positive regard as two parallel indicators of HQC (along with vitality, which did not explicitly emerge as theme in my data, but was likely still experienced). The model I develop from my findings suggests that mutuality is achieved in the moment of competition, and positive regard is an outcome of mutuality.

A Refined Perspective on Competition as a Relational Process

One of the major implications of this study regards the conceptualization of competition. Intra-team competition on this team did not fit the dominant view of competition proposed by the

social interdependence model. To formulate a conceptualization of competition that corresponds with these findings, I turn to the sport philosophy literature, which holds competition to be a subset of cooperation: “Good competition presupposes a cooperative effort by competitors to generate the best possible challenge to each other” (Simon, Torres, & Hager, 2014: 46). In fact, the word competition itself, originating from the Latin *competere*, originally meant “to come together, agree, to be qualified,” and later “to strive together” (etymonline.com). As described by sport philosophers Shields and Bredemeier (2009) in their book, *True Competition*:

“True competition involves striving together; it involves seeking excellence together (for similar perspectives, see Clifford & Feezell, 1997; Fraleigh, 1984; Hyland, 1978; Nelson, 1998). In true competition, the competitors think about the contest as an opportunity for enjoying a quest after personal (and, perhaps, team) excellence (Hyland, 1984). In true competition, each party pursues excellence by trying to meet the challenge presented by the opponent’s best effort” (p. 25).

Arnold (1989) points out that trying to win might be an inherent aspect of competition, but it is not necessarily the reason for competing, which may have more to do with fun, friendship, fitness, or the pursuit of excellence. This is why people often seek out superior opponents, “since to play against a better side is usually more exciting and worthwhile, and tends to raise one’s own game” (Dunlop, 1975: 154). Even in defeat, or perhaps especially in defeat, participants gain from the experience of engaging in the contest (Weiss, 1969; Ross, 1988).

Kohn’s critique of competition mistakenly conflates contest with competition, assuming that the presence of a contest will necessarily lead people to strive against each other, although in some contests opponents strive with each other. “In true competition, the focus is on excellence and the enjoyment that comes from striving for it. In competition’s twin, the focus is on conquest. The contest is reduced to a site for self-aggrandizement” (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009: 25). Shields and Bredemeier even suggest that we need a new word, *decompetition*, to represent this striving against, which they view as the opposite of true competition. This distinction relates

to Simon and colleagues' (2014) distinction between a zero-sum approach and mutualist approach. "True competitors think about the contest... as an opportunity for self-improvement, for feeling camaraderie with others, for enjoying the thrill of a challenge, and related goals. For those involved in decompetition...the contest is viewed as an opportunity to flaunt personal superiority, to reap the shallow pleasures of conquest, and to steal whatever rewards come with victory" (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009: 28). In contrast to Kohn's accusation of competition as fundamentally immoral, Simon and colleagues (2014) propose that competition is ethically defensible when approached as "a mutually acceptable quest for excellence" (p. 48).

Whether a contest leads to true competition or so-called decompetition depends on how the opponents frame the contest in their minds, and whether opponents cooperate on the rules of the game. To explain the relationship between competition and cooperation, Drewe (1998) draws a parallel to Searle's (1995) distinction between regulative and constitutive rules:

"[Some] rules... create the very possibility of certain activities, e.g. the rules of chess do not regulate 'people pushing bits of wood around on boards in order to prevent them from bumping into each other', but rather 'the rules are constitutive of chess in the sense that playing chess is constituted in part by acting in accord with the rules' (Searle, 1995: 27-28). I would argue that 'striving together' is constitutive of participating in a competitive activity and if regulative rules such as 'not intentionally injuring an opponent' are broken, the potential 'striving together' which constitutes competitive activity is destroyed."

Indeed, one of the ways competition has been distinguished from conflict is that competition is regulated by accepted rules and social norms, while conflict is unregulated (e.g., Mack, 1965). With this perspective, if cooperation, or striving together, is somehow violated, competition erodes into a different process entirely, guided by a different way of understanding and valuing the contest, just as when the implicit rules of play are violated, the play is over.

An alternative support for competition and cooperation being related comes from recent neurological studies by Decety and colleagues (2004), which found that in the brain, competition

and cooperation both activate the same area of the medial prefrontal cortex region, a region that plays a role in mentalizing, or attributing mental states and intentions of others. They conclude that, “Both cooperative and competitive interactions necessitate self–other monitoring, that is, the ability to guide thought and action in accord with both internal intentions and those of others” (p. 745; see also Decety & Sommerville, 2003). As people’s bodies move together in joint action, their minds also move together in synchrony (Sebanz, Bekkering, & Knoblich, 2006), which has been referred to as “kinesthetic empathy” (Reynolds & Reason, 2012). Joint action allows “the understanding of the actions of others from the inside” (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2010: 271), as mirror neurons activate shared affective neural networks resulting in shared affective states (e.g., Preston et al., 2007; Gallese, 2001, 2003). This suggests a neurological explanation for the attunement effects of competition on the lacrosse team.

In summary, while social interdependence theory positions cooperation and competition as opposing manifestations of interdependence, this study supports the idea that competition is fundamentally cooperative rather than conflictful—a striving together that can strengthen competitor relationships. However, if competition deteriorates from a cooperative form of play to a striving against, through a misalignment along the various enabling conditions, competition (or rather decompetition) will likely indeed cause tension and drive a wedge between competitors. Similar to exercising a muscle, competition seems to break down barriers between people—barriers caused by personality differences, roles, or pressure to be emotionless and impersonal at work—giving them with an opportunity to connect on a deeper level. But also similar to exercising a muscle, if done the wrong way, it may cause long-lasting damage to a relationship, hindering it from growing back to full strength. Sometimes we fear competition because of the

potential corrosive effects, preferring the impersonal yet safe relationships provided us at work. This study provides insights for making competition a useful relationship-building exercise.

Boundary Conditions

As with qualitative research in general, this study may raise questions of generalizability. The insights from this study are most readily applicable to team settings that resemble the dynamics experienced on the lacrosse team. But these insights can still be informative to more typical organizational contexts as they are appropriately theorized.

While some may view sports as trivial and for entertainment purposes only, in some ways sport has evolved to become more like work than play (Frey & Eitzen, 1991). Even at the collegiate level, many players depend on their performance in athletics to provide opportunities for an advanced education. It has also been said that “game structures parallel work structures” (Keidel, 1987: 591), with jointly understood rules, distinctive roles, and clear winners and losers. Of course there are limitations in the extent to which results from sports teams can be applied to work teams (for a review of boundary conditions that differentiate sports teams and work teams, see Cannon-Bowers & Bowers, 2006).

The first and perhaps most obvious aspect of this team that differs from most work contexts is that it is an all-male group. Research has suggested that females are less competitive than males (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Goodwin, 1980), and that females are more prone to use tactics to diffuse or avoid competition in order to maintain harmony (e.g., Miller, Danaher, & Forbes, 1986). More recent work has also found that men enjoy and seek after competition more than women (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007), so experiencing competition as a positive thing might be an especially masculine tendency. Future research should explore the extent to which these positive effects of competition similarly occur in female or mixed gender groups. Additionally,

athletes are people who have self-selected into an especially competitive hobby. A preference for competition is an individual difference that might shape the relational effects of competition.

Other potentially relevant aspects of sports generally that may not be found in work teams include being an activity that is especially high in intrinsic enjoyment for each player and very low in extrinsic motivation. It is an activity that only takes a few hours each day, giving players a lot of time to socialize together and to have distance from each other when they need a break. These factors may not be inherent to organizations, but the essence of these factors— intrinsic motivation, socializing, distance—can be fostered in organizations. Other contextual factors, primarily those presented in the findings which directly relate to the effects of competition, similarly can be fostered in organizations in varying degrees.

As a single-case study, my theorization is inherently incomplete (Garud, Jain, & Tuertscher, 2008), and future research should explore how these findings apply in other settings. With a single case, the objective of this study was not to develop a comprehensive account of the conditions under which competition results in relational bonding, nor can I claim that under the conditions outlined in the model competition will always have a bonding effect. Other relational factors on the lacrosse team contributed to the bonds among the players, and this study is unable to determine the necessity or sufficiency of the different conditions presented in the model.

Implications for organizational practice

Creating internal competition to boost employee motivation and performance is not a new idea. In the 1920s, Alfred Sloan of General Motors deliberately designed the divisions within the company such that there would be internal competition across divisions in order to increase productivity. Proctor and Gamble similarly created a system of internal brand versus brand competition starting in the 1930s. Also common but less explicit in organizational functioning is

creating a sense of competition within a single team or unit. This often occurs covertly rather than overtly as a natural consequence of people working together. As conflict research has shown, perhaps making competition more explicit would allow organizations to direct competition in more constructive ways and avoid relational problems.

The possibility of competition as play positions competition as a potential instrument to foster community and social life within organizations. As Kane (2004) argues, “playing together, instead of working together, [would] be a saner, more fruitful way for highly capable ‘knowledge employees’ to find a liveable life within companies and institutions” (p. 257). The question remains whether it is possible for organizations to functionalize competition, as the lacrosse team does, without losing the communal quality of play. Huizinga depicted play as susceptible to perversion if attempted to accomplish an explicit function, but this view has been criticized as ambiguous and non-descriptive (Bogost, 2006), giving rise to a conceptualization of serious play (e.g., Rodriguez, 2006) that acknowledges forms of play that have serve extrinsic functions such as productivity and improvement.

This study provides several specific suggestions that managers can apply in order to reap the productivity benefits of competition while simultaneously strengthening team relationships. For example, competition between team members should be structured to allow different winners each day or week. When more long-term decisions are made, such as for a promotion, those seeking the promotion may benefit from experiencing some form of direct competition that includes metrics to clearly designate the winner so they can see for themselves who deserves the promotion. Competition should be challenging and demonstrate significant amount of effort, and the effort from both sides should be visible to each other, so they can earn each other’s respect and experience personal improvement as a result of the competition. The primary message to

managers is that while popular opinions are rampant about reducing competition within teams, the sports context demonstrates the possibility of positive relational effects of competition, and we may want to replicate some of the features of sports in organizations.

Conclusion

This study, which began with an interest in how sports teammates become so tightly bonded despite competing so frequently and intensely with each other, revealed that competition was not an obstacle to teammates' relationships that was successfully being hurdled, but an integral source of the bonds they experienced. Competition, as a cooperative endeavor, has the capacity to build high quality connections (manifest as positive regard) by allowing players to achieve mutuality (manifest as affective and cognitive attunement) through their coordinated actions. Mutuality emerged as the driving mechanism of the high quality connections among players. Further, it is the play in competition that helps foster the mutuality in competition. In the next chapter, I explore another context where mutuality is prevalent and critical to group performance, in order to further unpack the process of achieving mutuality.

CHAPTER 3

Actors at Play: Building Capacity for Mutuality in Role Performance

Introduction

Study 1 illustrated that high quality connections experienced by teammates on the lacrosse team were driven by the mutuality fostered in moments of competition. This suggests that mutuality, referring to a sense of joining together in full engagement “born from mutual vulnerability and mutual responsiveness” (Stephens et al., 2011), may reside in a more central position in the HQCs topology relative to the other two components, vitality and positive regard. Moments of mutuality in which we are seeing, listening, and understanding another, as well as feeling seen, known, and understood, are vitally important to most people’s psychological well-being (e.g., Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan et al., 1991; Jordan, 1986; Surrey, 1985; Genero et al., 1992). People experience pleasure when they can respond to another person’s feelings with feelings of their own, regardless of what the feelings themselves are. However, mutuality is the least understood of the three components of HQCs. Positive regard and vitality are easier to measure and conceptualize, have been more explicitly addressed in psychological and organizational theories, and seem more intuitively relevant to organizational contexts, leading to mutuality receiving limited attention. We still know very little about how HQCs are achieved, which certainly does not necessitate competition. Seeing mutuality as a core mechanism of HQC, this study turns the focus on deepening our understanding of mutuality and how it is achieved.

Traditionally, most work settings are not structured to attend to, let alone foster, mutuality (Jordan, 1986). Rather, there is a strong emphasis on achieving efficiency and productivity through mechanical and reliable role performance. The basic premise of organization design theory sees efficiency as enhanced by highly developed role systems, which coordinate efforts and provide incentives to individual achievement (e.g., March & Simon, 1958). However, role systems can also create imbalances in mutuality by limiting the extent to which organizational actors are authentic and vulnerable with each other (Kahn, 1990). With expectations to perform specific roles in organizations, organizational actors often suspend personal, non-role related aspects of themselves to engage in behavior that conforms to delimited scripts (Leana & Van Buren, 1999: 545). This restricts the way they present themselves, as well as their ability to understand and genuinely respond to the thoughts and feelings of others.

In recognizing the centrality of mutuality in experiencing HQCs, as well as the challenges posed by organizational roles, this study seeks to understand how people can achieve mutuality in the performance of their roles. As we know little about mutuality, I took a qualitative, theory-building approach drawing on ethnographic observations and interviews. I selected the context of community theatre as one where roles are prominent, and where actors work to achieve mutuality in their role performance. I find that the actors' roles play an important part in enabling the actors to be more fully present and authentic with each other. I also find that to achieve mutuality in role performance, actors engage in three different forms of play—diversionary play, serious play, and absorptive play—which progressively build capacity for mutuality into their role performance. I will first review existing perspectives on mutuality, and the influence of roles on social connection, after which I will present my findings and the corresponding model followed by a discussion of my theoretical contributions to existing literatures.

Conceptualizing Mutuality

The term mutuality has been used in a variety of ways in organizational scholarship (see Appendix C for a review of the evolution of the mutuality concept). The HQC framework adopted an understanding of mutuality from outside of organizational scholarship, drawing on the influence of relational therapy (e.g., Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan et al., 1991; Jordan, 1986). Miller and Stiver (1997) describe mutuality simply as “a way of relating, a shared activity in which each (or all) of the people involved are participating as fully as possible” (p. 43). Related to the identity perspective, mutuality involves affecting and being affected by the other, extending oneself out to the other and also being receptive to the impact of the other. “There is openness to influence, emotional availability, and a constantly changing pattern of responding to and affecting the other’s state” (Jordan, 1986: 82). In contrast to the identity perspective, this view does not see mutuality as something that builds over time in a close relationship, as with identity mutuality. “Felt mutuality” (Stephens et al., 2011: 386) is not seen as a relationship quality, but as a quality of being in the moment with another.

Crucial to achieving a sense of mutuality is an appreciation of the wholeness and distinctiveness of the other person. On this point, the relational therapy perspective builds on the concepts of mutual intersubjectivity and empathic attunement. Mutual intersubjectivity refers to an interest in, attunement to, and responsiveness to the other at both a cognitive and affective level (Schafer, 1959). Trevarthen (1979) has suggested that there is a “primary intersubjectivity” that is innate in humans. The primary channel for this mutual intersubjectivity is empathic attunement, the capacity to share in and comprehend the momentary psychological state of another person. To make an analogy of a computer system, empathic attunement is the hardware and intersubjectivity is the software. Intersubjectivity is a relational frame that carries an interest

in and attention to understanding another's meaning system, which gives meaning and expression to feelings and cognition experienced through our human capacity for empathic attunement, which Miller and Stiver describe as "the great unsung human gift" (1997: 29).

Mutuality is achieved when two people relate to each other in a context of interest in the other, emotional availability, and responsiveness. It is the feeling of "seeing and being seen" (Kark, 2011: 424). We experience pleasure in this feeling of being in the flow of human connection, when each person feels her differentness or uniqueness being accepted. It is not simply a static mirroring process, but an expansive growth process for both. In the excitement of exploring and getting to know one another—who are you? who am I? who are we?—there is the opportunity for new self-definition, which can lead to outcomes such as self-awareness, self-esteem, new skills, zest, well-being, and a desire for more connection (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Fletcher & Ragins, 2007).

Roles and Mutuality

Despite mutuality being an inherent human capacity critical to human development (Decety & Lamm, 2006; Decety & Jackson, 2004), work identities tend to be entrained toward a mode of relating that disrupts mutuality. As described in chapter one, the bureaucratic organizational form is designed with an emphasis on achieving efficiency and productivity through mechanical role performance. Efficiency is enhanced by segmenting participants into areas of functional roles, shaping their communication and even their thought processes into highly developed role systems (Weber, 1984/1920). The role, not the person, constitutes the fundamental element of bureaucratic organizing.

In some ways, roles have a capacity of bringing people together, fostering interdependence, coordinated action, and even an opportunity for self-expression. The roles that

individuals occupy in a social system offer varying incentives and room for them to bring in different dimensions of their personal selves. Especially when roles are organized in ways that demand collaboration and communication among organization members (e.g., autonomous work teams, task forces, etc.), the organization provides an arena for members to bring their thoughts and feelings as well as their physical labor to role performances (Hackman, 1986; Lawler, 1988). Such structures seek to expand the space for organization members to invest more of themselves in their roles and give them more room for their own voices (Weisbord, 1987), allowing members to break down the internal partitions separating their personal selves from their work roles and become more psychologically present in their roles.

Despite the potential for roles to foster some degree of psychological presence and personal engagement, which would be conducive to experiencing mutuality, roles have historically been seen primarily as inhibiting human connection in organizations. From research on the bureaucratic organizational form, roles can be seen as interfering with the ability to attain mutuality in at least three ways.

First, one of bureaucracy's fundamental flaws is its disruption of the intersubjective process through which workers gain an understanding of the social context and their ability to respond holistically to it (Piore, 1993: 16). Put more simply, it fragments the parts from the whole, thereby fostering inattentiveness to the experiences, needs, and goals of others. According to Weber, "Bureaucratic apparatus... rests upon expert training, a functional specialization of work, and an attitude set of habitual virtuosity in the mastery of single yet methodically integrated functions" (1984/1920: 988). This structural segmentation minimizes extra-role interactions, such that most associations in an organizational context exist for an objective purpose designated by overlapping and interdependent roles. Function trumps genuine interest as

the impetus for interactions (e.g., Tönnies, 1957; Weber, 1984/1920), which causes colleagues see each other more by their roles than as fellow human beings (e.g., Sanchez-Burks, 2002).

Second, in addition to structural segmentation, one of the features of bureaucracy is a norm of professionalism that reinforces emotional detachment, which Sanchez-Burks (2002) referred to as Protestant Relational Ideology (PRI). This norm was first identified by Weber (1904/1958), who argued that cultural norms in the U.S. regarding minimizing the personal while in the workplace can be traced to the beliefs and practices of early Calvinist Protestant communities. The original impetus for PRI was a believed need to put aside personal concerns to devote full attention to one's work so as to fulfill one's moral and spiritual calling. Research on PRI has found that people from the U.S. are less likely than people of other cultures less influenced by Calvinist Protestantism (e.g., Mexico, Korea, India) to attend to and accurately recall relationship-relevant information from a work meeting (Sanchez-Burks, 2002), choose to join work teams whose members discuss personal matters (Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett, & Ybarra, 2000), prefer bosses that simultaneously focus on task and social emotional concerns (Kool & Saksena, 1988; Sinha, 1980), and form emotionally deep friendships with their co-workers (Kacperczyk, Sanchez-Burks, & Baker, 2013). Davies described that the formality and distance in Weber's ideal "are seen as the only route to a rational decision" (1995: 25), thereby excluding emotion or individual circumstances as an element of decision making. Impersonality provides the psychological distance necessary for managers to make "hard choices." Weber saw bureaucracy as a way to eliminate unjustifiable differences in how people are treated, yet these differences from a human perspective form the basis of relational work (Barley & Kunda, 2001). Robert Jackall (1988) describes how such social insulation "permits and encourages a lofty

viewpoint that, on its face, respects the dignity of workers, but seems devoid of the feel of the texture of workers' lives and of the gut-level empathy that such knowledge can bring" (p. 133).

Third, role systems and norms of professionalism not only shape how we perceive and relate to others in the organization, they also shape how workers present themselves to others. Roles can create imbalances in mutuality by limiting the extent to which organizational actors are authentic and vulnerable with each other (Kahn, 1990). With expectations to perform specific roles, organization members often segregate their personal beliefs and interests from their work, regarding their labor as an interchangeable and inanimate commodity that "acts" a specific and narrowly defined role (Leana & Van Buren, 1999). Members do not participate in organizations as "whole persons," rather in patterns of scripted action that can be dissociated from the distinctive mode of being of every person. Roles are often beset with demands (internally and externally) for members to absent parts of themselves that do not fit the unconscious roles in which they are cast; they are discouraged from acting spontaneously in ways that do not fit those roles. Members may find that the roles they are asked to assume coincide with how they see themselves, making it easier to be more fully present in their roles. Conversely, they may find that their roles call for behaviors that feel inappropriate to their self-images. If so they are likely to distance themselves from their roles by being more psychologically absent rather than present in role performance (Goffman, 1961). As a result, role systems can create imbalances in mutuality by promoting "boundary rigidity," referring to discomfort with self-disclosure and difficulty allowing another to have an emotional impact (Jordan, 1991), causing organization members to be "walled off," inaccessible, or disconnected. When caught in such dynamics it is difficult for organization members to fully attend to or connect with others while also attending to their roles: they are pigeonholed and reinforced to think, feel, and behave in circumscribed

ways that maintain systemic “plays” (Kahn, 1990). Kahn uses the theatrical image suggestively to indicate that when organization members are asked to assume particular “characters” to perform their work roles, their “stage directions” call for them to push aside parts of their selves that do not conform to those characters.

Granted, some organizations perpetuate norms that reward members when they are attentive, connected, integrated, and expressing their thoughts and feelings in the service of the work (Pastin, 1986). Other systems perpetuate norms that punish such presence and activity, creating and reinforcing cultures of fear, boredom, anxiety, bureaucracy, or survivalism (Miller, 1986; Shorris, 1981). Organizational behavior research (Hochschild, 1983; Sutton, 1991) has focused on how organizations establish norms that members should only express certain emotions (e.g., frustration, gladness) in the service of particular roles (e.g., airline steward).

Victor Turner (1979: 43) describes this as follows:

“In different types of social situations [people] have been conditioned to play specific social roles... So far this has been almost the entire subject matter of the social sciences: people playing roles and maintaining or achieving status. Admittedly this does cover a very great deal of what human beings are up to and what quantitatively takes up a great deal of their available time, both in work and leisure. And, to some extent, the authentic human essence gets involved here, for every role-definition takes into account some basic human attribute or capacity, and willy-nilly, human beings play their roles in human ways. But full human capacity is locked out of these somewhat narrow, stuffy rooms.”

By focusing on role performance, organizations relegate people to occupying only part of their being, hindering their ability to be mutually attuned to another’s authentic thoughts and feelings.

Role-Playing and Theatre

Perhaps in no work context are roles more prevalent than the theatre. As Bauman & May (1990: 47) note, role is a word drawn from the language of the theatre where actors are cast to play a specific role in a show. The concept of theatre allows researchers to reflect on the nature

of role enactment, and to come to terms with the repetitive and coordinated, yet improvisational quality of organizational life (Mangham & Overington 1987: 3). Mechanistic and system metaphors that preceded the theatre metaphor for organizational life were unable to adequately portray the dramaturgical quality of role enactment. Paradoxically, the performance of a role in a theatre production is perhaps more rigid, certainly more scripted, than the performance of roles in traditional organizations, and yet staged performance in theatre has “a rhythm, flow, and ‘naturalness’ not unlike social life as we experience it in ‘real time’” (Mangham & Overington 1987: 91). The experiences of actors on stage, though in the context of acting as fictional characters, are nonetheless real interpersonal experiences.

In theatre, precise and reliable role performance is important to the safety and quality of the production. For the actors, the potential to be cast in prominent roles in future shows depends on how well they perform in the current show. Actors also face significant social pressure from their fellow castmates, who rely on each other to make each other look good. If someone makes a mistake in a performance, forgetting a line or missing a cue, it can ruin a critical scene. Also contributing to the importance of taking their roles seriously is the risk that when doing complex choreography, including lifts, sword fights, jumping on and off set pieces, and many bodies moving very quickly in a crowded space, mistakes can cause serious injury. Actors must be able to trust that their castmates will be in the right places at the right time for their own safety.

However, a good performance needs more than precise and reliable role performance. Good performance in theatre is emotional and believable, with what is colloquially described as “chemistry” among the actors. This level of role performance calls for authenticity in the delivery. In the face of pressure to perform their roles precisely and reliably, actors also must find moments of authentic connection onstage to breathe life into the scenes they perform. The

most widely accepted view of acting in theatre comes from theatre theoretician Sanford Meisner (1987), who defined good acting as “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances.” Similarly, theatre coach Bill Esper (2008) teaches that “if in fact the actors are skilled, what we are watching isn’t pretend. It is an actual event.” There is an inherent beauty in truthful performance which has attracted actors and audience members to take part in this artistic form for centuries.²

In order to achieve this kind of presence and authentic connection onstage, the roles and scenes actors are given to play should serve as a medium through which they strive to create genuine human moments. Actors must find a balance between following a script and remaining flexible enough to follow their natural instincts and respond truthfully to each other. Theatre professor and director, Anne Bogart (2001), describes the paradoxical relationship between precision and freedom in acting:

“In rehearsal an actor searches for shapes that can be repeated. Actors and directors together are constructing a framework that will allow for endlessly new currents of vital life-force, emotional vicissitudes and connection with other actors. I like to think of staging, or blocking, as a vehicle in which the actors can move and grow. Paradoxically, it is the restrictions, the precision, the exactitude, that allows for the possibility of freedom. The form becomes a container in which the actor can find endless variations and interpretive freedom” (p. 46).

She goes on to describe how great performances include both exactness and a powerful sense of freedom. This freedom to create truthful moments onstage seems to rely on having certain limitations, such as a memorized script or position on the stage, or even complex choreography. Having these limitations almost acts as an invitation for the actor to push against the limitations, or perhaps transcend them, in the pursuit of truthful expression and genuine connection. In this way, roles may not inhibit mutuality, but could in fact be a device that enables mutuality.

² Similar to an audience responding positively to authentic emotion onstage, emotions travel between workers and customers (Pugh, 2001), and customers rate service quality higher when emotion displays are viewed as authentic (Grandey, 2003; Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005; Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006)

In fact, this paradoxical relationship between structure and freedom, serious and playful, fiction and truth, is the premise of all art. Picasso is attributed as describing art as a lie that makes us realize the truth. The word theatre comes from the Greek, *theatron*, meaning a place for seeing, referring to the power of theatre to reveal truths of our social reality that are only graspable through fictional appearances (Barranger, 2014). “To recreate the world in a ‘world’ of theatrical imagination makes us aware of the conditions of the world’s being and meaningfulness that had before lain in the obscurity of the ‘taken for granted’” (Wilshire, 1982: 91). In fact, this is precisely what theatre is for, as Roger Grainger (2014) described, “The secret of theatre’s integrity is the intention to make contact, to show human reality. The deception is a means to an end rather than an end in itself” (p. 15). The aim of theatre is to put us in touch with the essence of what really happens in human relationships (Wilshire, 1982: 103).

The truth revealed in theatre is not just from the actors to the audience, but to the actors themselves and to each other. Turner (1979) writes that leisure activity, including art, “provides a propitious setting for the development of these direct, immediate, and total confrontations of human identities... [where] experiencing one’s fellows can be portrayed, grasped, and sometimes realized” (p. 43). For actors, the stage, as an escape from “real life,” generates a powerful life of its own, which is no less real than the world outside; perhaps even more real. Actors live on the stage during rehearsal and performance in a way which eludes them in “the real world.” “The lighted space involves them in a depth and reality of being which is denied them outside its limits” (Grainger, 2014: 16). Being in this fictional, yet real, world can open up actors to explore and express themselves more truthfully than offstage. Peter Brook states: “The actor does not hesitate to show himself exactly as he is, for he realises that the secret of his role demands his opening himself up, disclosing his own secrets” (1968: 60). Acting provides a way

of accepting into our conscious awareness things about ourselves that have been intentionally or unintentionally forgotten. Theatre protects as well as exposes our vulnerability by offering such personal insights within a world of shared imagination, where we find the courage to contemplate what would otherwise have to be deflected or disguised. This is the source of theatre's deepest and most lasting attraction, what Aristotle referred to as its "purgative effect" (Kuritz, 1988: 19). This action of opening up to others, a key component of mutuality, can be experienced as a special kind of sharing, not a reduction but an enhancement of being.

Research Question: Mutuality in role performance

So we have two images of role playing—in bureaucratic organizations and in theatre—the one a reduction and the other an enhancement of being and mutuality. The challenge in theatre is to create an environment and structure where actors will work to achieve a high level of precision in certain aspects (dance routines, music notes and rhythm, and spacing on the floor), while allowing and encouraging a sense of freedom and vulnerability in rehearsals and in the performance. This means rehearsing dance numbers over and over until the actors get the steps and timing exactly right, but still encouraging them to have fun with it, and find moments that they can make their own and bring their character to life. It means the actors have to memorize their lines perfectly, but then still explore different possible intentions driving the lines, and physicality accompanying the lines.

In the literatures on roles, little is known about how to navigate the tensions between precision and flexibility, productivity and fun, seriousness and play—essentially the tension between performing a role and "living truthfully" in such a way that fosters mutuality.

Organizational role theories have long claimed parallels to theatre acting, and assumed actors and theatre to exhibit similar role dynamics with little idea of what actually occurs when artists

play roles onstage (Wilshire, 1982). Examining up close the work of theatre actors may lend more depth and strength to the theatre/role metaphor than organizational scholars have hitherto leveraged. In this study, I qualitatively explore the unique experience of role-playing in theatre, and the processes involved in creating an environment conducive to actors achieving mutuality while sufficiently attending to the demands of their roles.

Research Site: Community Theatre

For this study, I observed six different theatre productions at three different non-profit community theatre companies. The theatre companies included were non-equity theatre companies (not associated with the Actors Equity Union), meaning they hold open auditions for anyone in the community who wants to audition for a show. It also means that the actors who do shows with these companies are typically not full-time actors, but they are students or have other jobs during the day and do theatre more as a hobby than as a source of income. I sought shows that had at least 12 people in the cast in order to be able to observe group dynamics comparable to a sports team, rather than what I would likely see in a show with only four to six actors. I also deliberately selected for variety in the types of shows I observed, including different genres, musicals and non-musicals, with paid and unpaid actors.

I observed four shows from the Ann Arbor Civic Theatre (AACT), the largest and most active community theatre company in Ann Arbor, Michigan. None of the actors in AACT shows are paid. Rehearsals are generally 7-10 PM Sunday through Thursday. They rehearse shows for eight to nine weeks, and then perform the shows four times in one weekend. Rehearsals took place primarily in a large rehearsal room in the AACT studio, until the week before the performances when they would move into the theatre where they would perform. I observed one show at The Encore Musical Theatre Company (Encore), a semi-professional theatre company in

Dexter, Michigan. Encore is “semi-professional” because the actors are all paid, but they do not typically hire “professional,” Actors Equity Union actors (they might hire one or two Equity actors for major roles in a show). Their rehearsal schedule is typically 6-10 PM Tuesday-Friday, 12-6 PM Saturday, and 12-5 PM Sunday. Being a more professional group, and putting in more hours each week, they only rehearse a show four to five weeks, and then perform the show five times a week for five or six weeks. The Encore owns its own stage, and so most of the rehearsal process, aside from learning music, took place on the stage where the show would be performed. The last show I observed was in another semi-professional community theatre, The Hale Centre Theatre (The Hale) in West Valley, Utah, which is one of the most successful regional theatres in the country. These actors were also paid, and rehearsed 6-10 PM Monday through Friday and 9 AM – 1 PM on Saturdays for two months. A major difference with the Hale theatre is that they perform the show eight to twelve times each week for about two months. Because of the number of performances each week, they double cast each role, so one cast performs Mon/Wed/Fri, and the other cast performs Tue/Thu/Sat, although they all rehearse together and frequently substitute for their counterparts in the other cast when there are scheduling conflicts. Next I briefly describe the six shows included in the study (summarized in Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Production characteristics

| Show | Philadelphia Story | Rent | Into the Woods | Julius Caesar | Christmas Caroled | Pirate Queen |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Theatre | AA Civic | AA Civic | Encore - \$ | AA Civic | AA Civic | Hale - \$ |
| Genre | 1940s romance comedy | 1990s edgy rock musical | Farcical fantasy musical | Shakespeare tragedy | Holiday 60s TV special | Epic musical |
| Cast size | 15 | 15 | 14 | 13 | 12 | 26x2 |
| Unique aspects | romance and family relationships | intense thematic elements | paid cast, equity actors, no ensemble | Old English language, fighting | 3-week workshop, self in cast | new show, double casting |

Philadelphia Story, AACT. The Philadelphia Story is a romance comedy play (not a musical) from the 1940s. The cast had 15 people in it, plus a director and assistant director³. The actors ranged in age from early twenties to sixties, with the majority in the late twenties to early thirties. The story centers around the lead female, her family, and three male suitors. 11 of the 15 characters in the cast would be considered principal roles, although the remaining four, who played servants, were on stage a significant amount of time and were involved in scene transitions. The director referred to herself as an “actor’s director,” being an actor herself, and took a relatively hands-off approach, allowing the actors to explore different character choices, including movement and spacing, giving very little specific direction. Instead, her focus was on helping the actors understand the characters, the story, and the intentions behind each scene. Typical rehearsals involved the actors and directors discussing the thoughts and feelings of the different characters in a particular scene, then the actors walking through the scene multiple times playing with different ideas as the director pointed out things that were not working, such as spacing issues, and challenged them to try new approaches.

Rent, AACT. Rent is an iconic and provocative rock musical from the 1990s covering intense themes such as drug addiction, sex and sexually-transmitted disease, violence, and homosexuality. The cast included 15 actors (eight principal characters and seven ensemble members), a director, assistant director, music director, choreographer, and stage manager. Musicals require much more complex coordination with the music and dancing elements. The first two weeks of rehearsal focused on learning the music, with the music director leading the

³ My focus in this project was on the actors, directors, and stage managers (those who would attend most rehearsals as well as the performances), so when I refer to the cast, I am not including the production team, which includes the technicians and designers responsible for the set, props, costumes, lighting, and sound. The production team is an extremely important part of the process, especially during the performances, but was largely absent from the rehearsals, and did not participate much in the “play” part of the theatre experience.

rehearsals. Once the music was learned, they began blocking the scenes, or setting the entrances, exits, spacing, and movement during the scene. The director had pre-determined most of the blocking for each scene, although there was a lot of adjusting that happened as some ideas did not work onstage as the director had envisioned. For the blocking rehearsals, the director would set the structure of the scene, and then encourage actors to find moments where they could make strong acting choices to personalize their characters. The more comfortable they became with the blocking, the more adventurous they became with their characters. For the dance numbers, led by the choreographer, the choreographer took a more organic approach to setting the movement. She would come to dance rehearsals with no pre-determined choreography, and let the actors explore different possibilities, often following her suggestions, until they found moves they really liked. The directors strongly emphasized the importance of the ensemble, and generally the ensemble characters were onstage in every scene, either as homeless people, a group of friends, an audience to a show, or whatever other characters they needed to fill in a scene.

Into The Woods, Encore. Into the Woods is another musical, this one a comedy, and without an ensemble like Rent had. The cast had 14 actors, most of whom had what could be considered principal roles, a director, a music director (who happened to be the same music director from Rent), and a choreographer who was also one of the 14 actors. The director was a professional Broadway actor who founded the Encore theatre company and occasionally decides to direct some of the shows himself. His wife, who is also a Broadway actor, was one of the lead characters in the show. This was the first production I observed where the actors were paid. Rehearsals felt more professional, as they needed to cover a lot of material each day in order to learn the show in only four weeks, less than half the time the other shows had. They followed a similar schedule as Rent, learning music first, and then setting the blocking and choreography.

Because it was not an ensemble-heavy show like *Rent*, most of the scenes only involved several of the actors, so many of the rehearsals involved only the actors in the scenes being worked on. With the AACT shows, during rehearsals those not involved in the scene mainly had to stay quiet, as they were all together in the same room, whereas at *Encore*, actors could go backstage or leave the room when not working on a scene, because they had the whole building to use.

Julius Caesar, AACT. *Julius Caesar* is one of Shakespeare's most well-known tragedies, loosely based on real historical figures. The cast included 13 actors, the director (who was also the choreographer for *Rent*), assistant director, stage manager, and fight choreographer. Each actor was on the stage almost the entire show, some as a principal character, and others playing three to seven different minor characters. Before beginning rehearsals, the director led an all-day workshop in which she introduced various acting techniques based on Ann Bogart's "Viewpoints" technique of improvisation. This approach provides a set of different viewpoints to consider and play with when acting, including spatial relationships, architecture, tempo, shape, and kinesthetic response. Having established and practiced these different viewpoints, the director could then use this shared language to encourage the actors to think more deeply about different aspects of their acting in the moment without telling them exactly what they should be doing. Similar to how musical productions first focus on learning the music, the *Julius Caesar* cast spent much of their time in the first couple weeks focusing on learning and becoming familiar with the language. The director took the same approach as she did with dance numbers in *Rent*, letting the blocking emerge organically as actors played with different ideas. The director would deliberately challenge the actors to keep trying new things in order to reach greater depth with their characters. She would have them do the same scene, or more often the same few lines, over and over and over as she pushed them to get the right amount of intensity

and authenticity in each moment, all the while refraining from telling them exactly what they should be doing, instead trying to let them find the right acting choices on their own.

Christmas Caroled, AACT. Christmas Caroled was a unique project, being a staged workshop of a new musical rather than a complete production. Christmas Caroled was written by the man who directed Into the Woods, and they wanted to get some audience feedback on the script before selling it to other theatre companies. The AACT offered their studio space for one weekend so Christmas Caroled could be performed in an intimate setting for audience members who would be invited to stay after and give feedback. The cast included 12 actors, the director, and a music director. This was the first and only time in this study when I was part of the cast I was observing. The show focuses on two main characters, with the rest of the cast primarily playing backup singers and other minor characters. The focus was to be on the script, and so rehearsals only lasted three weeks, which was primarily used to learn the music, with almost no blocking or choreography. The writers observed the rehearsal process and made changes to the script as they felt like certain scenes were not sounding right, or the storyline was not compelling enough. Because the script was constantly evolving, we did not memorize our lines, but rather read them with the books in-hand during the performances. The process was interesting as cast members were able to participate in the creation of this new story, and then tell the story without the pressure of memorizing lines and blocking.

The Pirate Queen, Hale. I selected this final show because the Hale Centre Theatre offered some interesting dynamics compared to the other shows I observed. The cast was significantly larger than any of the previous groups, with two actors for each role to form two complete casts, and had significantly more performances than any of the past groups. I thought these elements would potentially make the production feel more like work than the smaller

community theatre shows. The Pirate Queen was an epic musical based written by the same writers who wrote Les Miserables, and was performed on Broadway in 2008, but was closed after receiving bad reviews. The producing agency that owns the rights to the show learned about the Hale Centre Theatre and its incredible success and decided to give The Pirate Queen one more chance by inviting the Hale to perform it. The full cast included 52 actors, 26 in each performing cast (most of whom were ensemble characters playing multiple roles), a director, music director, choreographer, fight choreographer, and a huge team of technicians dealing with the technical aspects of the production. In addition, two cast members were designated the fight captains, and two cast members were designated the dance captains, and their responsibility was to help teach and give notes to improve the fighting and dancing. This show included very technical Irish dancing and sword fighting, which required precise movement and timing. But even within the precise blocking, with so many people in the group numbers, there were countless opportunities for actors to find moments to play with their fellow actors and develop different character relationships and personalities. In the less technical scenes, such as those including only a few principal characters singing, the director allowed the actors to have more autonomy in playing with different ways to block the scene. The ensemble characters were kept busy as different characters in a large number of scenes and changing costumes between scenes.

Data Collection

For each show except The Pirate Queen, my observations began with the auditions and continued until the final performance (Pirate Queen observations began on the first day of rehearsal). The bulk of my observations were of rehearsals, where I would sit off to the side and take notes on my laptop. Occasionally actors would come talk to me, but for the most part I felt that my presence did not disrupt the setting. I attended every rehearsal except when I had

scheduling conflicts, typically arriving early to observe the actors' interactions as they arrived before rehearsal started (eventually I will construct a table that lists how many hours of observations, and the types of observations, for each show). During the performances, I would primarily stay in the green room—the name for the lounge area where actors congregate before each show, and where the actors can gather when they are not on stage. In the green room, I could watch and listen to the on-stage performance on a monitor that displayed a live feed, and I could also see how the actors interacted in between scenes, including their commentary on how the show was going and unrelated small-talk. In addition to rehearsals and performances, I would also join the cast when they would go out for social gatherings after rehearsals or performances. As with the lacrosse team, my focus was on moments of interaction among the actors and directors. Being on my laptop, I was able to capture many of their interactions verbatim. I also paid attention to social configurations, or who tended to sit or talk together, and any other indicators of the quality of relationships among the actors.

As a complement to the field data, I conducted 70 semi-structured interviews with actors (64) and directors (6). After the final performance, I sent an email to the casts thanking them for allowing me to observe the process and inviting them to schedule a time when I could interview them about their experience. With the exception of *Christmas Caroled*⁴, I was able to interview a majority of each cast that I observed. The interviews started with questions about their motivation for being in theatre, and for being in this show specifically, and then about their overall experience with the show. The interviews would gradually become more focused on their relationships with their fellow cast members and identifying moments of connection. I asked

⁴ My experience in the *Christmas Caroled* cast was very informative, and helped me gain a deeper understanding of what I was observing and hearing in the interviews. However, I did not take as many field notes from that show (largely because I was busy rehearsing), and I chose not to interview my fellow cast members in that show. As a result, *Christmas Caroled* does not appear prominently in the findings, although it did influence my analysis.

about specific elements of the theatre process that I had observed, including auditions, their roles, the director's style of directing, and previous relationships (see Appendix B for my initial interview guide). Interviews ranged from 35 to 115 minutes with an average of 55 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Findings

As described previously, the focal phenomenon of interest is moments of mutuality among actors in role performance. Although the actors never used the word mutuality, the concept of mutuality captures the deep connection they described as being truthful, authentic, present, responsive, generous, or attuned onstage, which enlivened the performance and satisfied the purpose many of the actors had for doing theatre. Many of the actors in this study tried with some difficulty to articulate these moments of deep connection with their castmates onstage. For example, one actor explained:

*"I can go to rehearsal and meet somebody because we got cast in a show, and we don't spend a ton of time chatting because there isn't a ton of time to chat... I don't even know that much stuff about his or her life, and it's really bizarre, ... but **there are people outside of theater that I feel like I can know for years and never connect with the way that I did, surprise, in some scene, and it's really, really, really strange.**"*

Similarly, another actor described the connection with her castmates, *"I felt like I understood them really deeply because we understood each other onstage and as characters. And like creating something with them was really powerful, and it's like – it's hard to describe though."*

A Julius Caesar (JC) actor described a moment onstage with two other actors that was *"so intense and so bizarre... I felt so close to the two of them that I felt I had to go talk to my boyfriend about it because I get uncomfortable when I feel closer to people who aren't him."* An actor from Rent described it as *"literally like family onstage. Like when we were singing, 'No*

day but today, I can't live without you,' we were literally saying that to each other, crying in each other's eyes and telling each other that."

These onstage moments of connection did not necessarily produce enduring relationships. In fact, most of the relationships among castmates did not continue in any observable way after the show ended (despite frequent talk during the show about planning to stay in contact). And friendships that did continue after the show were largely formed offstage, and were surprisingly unrelated to the moments of deep connection experienced onstage. Friendships formed as they might in any context, as actors engaged in small talk during breaks or outside of the theatre, because *"In rehearsal, we're just in rehearsal mode... outside of rehearsal we're more relaxed."* Offstage social interactions led to identifying commonalities such that the relationship had some basis that transcended the context of the show. Outside of rehearsal, you can *"explore people in a more full way than just the theatre stuff."* For many of the actors, their closest relationships in the cast had little to do with who they were with onstage, but who they happened to share a dressing room with, or who they sat next to at a restaurant one night after rehearsal.

Some actors described how relationship forming can be initiated by moments onstage. For example, *"You'll have moments onstage, but then you go talk about them offstage, and that's really where you have fun and you laugh about it and you laugh about all those funny things Steven says when he doesn't know his lines. You're going to have moments onstage, but as far as bonding, that's going to happen offstage."* Conversely, other actors described how offstage relationships facilitated moments of connection onstage. One actor deliberately *"made it a point to get to know"* the actor playing her mother in the show by having coffee together, because she *"wanted to form that relationship so that when it's on stage, it felt more real."* But mutuality did not necessitate forming lasting friendship, nor was friendship require to achieve mutuality.

I chose to focus on moments of connection rather than relationship forming for two reasons. People forming friendships when they spend time with each other outside of work is not a novel or interesting aspect of the experience of the cast (e.g., Sias 2009). What is more interesting is the moments of doing of the work, in this case in the performing of their roles. And second, friendship relationships in the cast were only minimally related to their ability to achieve mutuality onstage. As one actor described, *“You can perform with someone and even be like totally in the scene with them, but then also like not have a relationship outside of the show at all.”* For the sake of the performance, regardless of relationships or friendships that form offstage, what is important and unique in the theatre context is the capacity for actors to experience mutuality onstage when performing their roles. Likewise, in a work setting, cultivating the capacity to achieve mutuality in the doing of their work may be more desirable than fostering friendships among colleagues (in fact, some research has found risks and complications associated with having friends at work, referenced in Appendix A).

The goal of the theatre process, from rehearsals through the performance run, could be described as developing and maintaining the capacity for mutuality among actors in their role performance, allowing them to present a truthful and beautiful display of social life onstage. Both the actors and directors seemed to recognize the importance of being connected onstage. *“If the show doesn’t really do well, it is because of the cast not really bonding or being connected in the ways that they need to... When the cast isn’t bonded as well, that affects the show dramatically.”* Before the final dress rehearsal of *Pirate Queen* (PQ), the director instructed: *“Nobody cares how well you are dancing unless you are dancing WITH each other, and there is a reason for you to be doing it. So start now to dance WITH each other, not just focusing on your own steps.”* This concept of being “with each other” applies not just to the dancing, but to every

aspect of the role performance, and it reflects in subtle ways in the performance. The Rent assistant director described how connection shows in subtle ways that the audience can perceive,

“I think there are lots of little body language cues... so they can tell if people are working together, or if they are not supporting each other... I think audiences respond to that a lot. Audiences can tell. They can tell when you don’t like what you are doing, they can tell when you are uncomfortable, and they call it out every time.”

To achieve these moments of connection, actors develop a capacity for mutuality with their co-actors, not focused on worrying about their own performance, but open and responsive to what is happening onstage:

“You could memorize your lines, and go and say them, but if you want any kind of meaningful performance – I’ve watched performances, and I don’t really know why, but I’m feeling things – it’s because the people on stage are there WITH their people on stage. It’s not just, some big performance. And I think to be able to do that – and I’m not that good at it – you really have to be there in the space with someone, and know that you might mess up, and you’re trusting them that if something does go wrong, that hopefully you could help them, or they could help you.”

When actors in the interviews described or evaluated the performance of their castmates, they rarely discussed the quality of their singing, dancing, or line delivery. Instead, actors were either praised for being “generous” onstage and easy to connect with, or criticized for being overly introspective and difficult to connect with onstage. One actor explained:

“Ability is one thing, but – you’ll hear the term ‘generous actor.’ You want to share the stage with an actor who is two things: one you can trust, and one who’s generous. Almost everyone in the Julius Caesar cast was generous. And the ones who weren’t as generous... they were thinking more about their personal performance, and how they were looking, and how they were being shown in the best light.”

Another actor compared two of his castmates along similar lines: “[John] was so loving and caring and always looking out for people. And on stage, that really shows. He’s really attentive onstage in finding new things and doing stuff like that. And [Richard] is a brilliant actor, does his job very well, sings beautifully, but I didn’t feel a connection with him as much.” Actors who

were introspective, or focused on their own performance, were difficult to connect with. For example, a lead actor in one of the shows was described as:

“[Mandy] is very, very introspective on stage, and very focused on what she is doing. And so it’s a little more difficult to connect with her at times because she just goes right inside of herself... And being able to connect outwards is very important, so if you’re just doing your own scene by yourself and the actors are all around you, they’re not going to feel nearly as connected.”

When actors were not generous onstage or were too internal, this caused frustration: *“It’s very frustrating to work with somebody who’s either not generous on stage, who wants to take all of the attention for themselves, or somebody who is too internal and doesn’t give you anything to work with.”* The Into the Woods (ITW) director described how actors often get lost in their roles, to the point that they *“aren’t even speaking to each other anymore.”* Actors used the term “dead eyes” to refer to moments when actors were so focused on their own performance that their eyes would gloss over. *“Some people kind of gloss over onstage and it’s hard to catch their eye, so it’s really cool when you do have those ‘yeah, we’re together and we feel this together’ moments.”*

My findings suggest that mutuality has two essential components—authenticity and responsiveness. In short, mutuality requires opening oneself to another while also being responsive to the other.

Authenticity

First, to experience the seeing and being seen that characterizes mutuality, the actors must allow themselves to be seen by being authentic in their characters. The PQ director frequently expressed the idea that *“No character that you think you can create can be more honest and real and endearing than who you already are.”* Each of the directors continually encouraged the actors, no matter their role, to be *“honest, and dimensional, and have a life*

onstage, and... not just show up and go through the motions.” This required the actors to go beyond acting as pretending to be some fictional character, and to instead find ways to “live truthfully” through their roles. Only by being truthful in their acting could actors feel that it is their own persons being seen and not just the fictional character. When actors are authentic, you can come to know the person playing the character by how they enact the character. For example, one actor described, *“My understanding of who Danny was as a person came from things he did onstage, ...just watching the way he fathered the clan was incredibly endearing, and knowing I was a part of that made me much more confident to approach him as a person.”*

The process of letting their walls down together provided a shared experience of vulnerability. When I asked actors to compare the connections they experienced in theatre to connections among work colleagues, the common response had to do with vulnerability:

“There’s something different about doing theatre because you’re baring so much more of your heart and soul than you do in a normal job... You’re sharing so much more of yourself on stage and opening up and breaking down walls like you never believed, just to try and connect with somebody on stage. And you don’t do that in a normal job. In a normal job, you keep the walls up... But in theatre, it’s just all of you, bare, right there onstage, and you’re just connecting with one another, and you’re all going through that experience together.”

In addition to being important for achieving mutuality, many actors expressed that the opportunity to be authentic was a favorite aspect of theatre, coming second to social connection as the most frequently mentioned reason why actors loved doing theatre. *“It’s the ability to be authentic, and to be different people but it allows you to be your inner self... that’s what I love about theatre. It allows you to be a different person, but you find yourself in trying to portray that character.”* The authenticity experienced in character was not achieved by bringing in aspects of one’s personal identity into the character performance, nor was it trying to be consistent with some sense of self. Rather, it was simply being. The roles seemed to relieve the

actors from the pretense of a personal identity, and allow them an opportunity to explore, discover, and then express truths about their real being. The “*magic in theatre*” is that it gives actors an opportunity to “*explore parts of their personality that they don’t otherwise have an outlet for,*” and allows actors to “*feel more alive and human having that opportunity to be creative and express myself.*”

Responsiveness

But mutuality in the performance calls for more than actors trying to be truthful in their individual performances; rather, mutuality is achieved in relation, or as a quality of connection with the others onstage. Actors had to listen and respond to each other. “*You have to be attuned to them in a way when you’re onstage with them, you have to be able to respond. And you have to trust them to respond.*” When onstage, actors had to attend to their own roles and those around them, “*so they are not just taking care of themselves on stage, but they are thinking about how to make different choices onstage and how to support each other.*” In a sense, acting can only be living truthfully if it is alive in the moment, where they adapt, reflect, adjust, and respond to each other’s authenticity.

Because roles in theatre are largely scripted, with most aspects of the performance that need to be performed the same every night, listening and attunement was demonstrated in subtle ways. “*When we’re onstage, we respect each other enough that we’re paying attention to the subtle things we’re doing, and we show that we’re paying attention by responding to the subtle things. You can feel the playing off of each other.*” The idea of “playing off of each other” captures the essence of seeing, accepting, and responding to another. Actors admired and appreciated those who were responsive in this way. For example, one actor said, “*It was always wonderful to be across the stage and just change my eyebrow slightly and see Cindy respond to*

it exactly how I think she should. And just that trust that we built over [time] ... it makes me love and appreciate her so much.” Of course, such subtle responses would only be noticed if the actor being responded to was also paying close attention. Another actor similarly described:

That was something really cool working with Tommy, is I could feel like every inflection of my face even, he could take and interpret, and I could see him reacting to what I did. If I switched up anything on a given night, if I said something slightly different, he would react slightly different. It was cool to just feel like I’m really making you think, and I’m making you really listen to what I’m saying. That is a good actor.”

Being attuned to each other in this way, actors develop an awareness of each other’s presence and physicality. As one actor described, *“I think it just makes me more aware of some people’s physicality and the way they show emotion, just because I have to know what other people are doing and how they’re feeling and what they’re likely to do and where they’re likely to move. I was so focused on that that I felt very familiar with them even when we weren’t acting, because I was used to their presence.”* Through this awareness, they develop a sense of knowing each other, even without knowing much about each other’s lives outside of theatre. Having this level of responsiveness, like authenticity, also comes with heightened vulnerability and trust, as actors make themselves willing to at times deviate from the security of the known, pre-determined performance routine and respond to the moment. And in doing so, they experience moments of mutuality with each other that the audience can sense.

Building Capacity for Mutuality

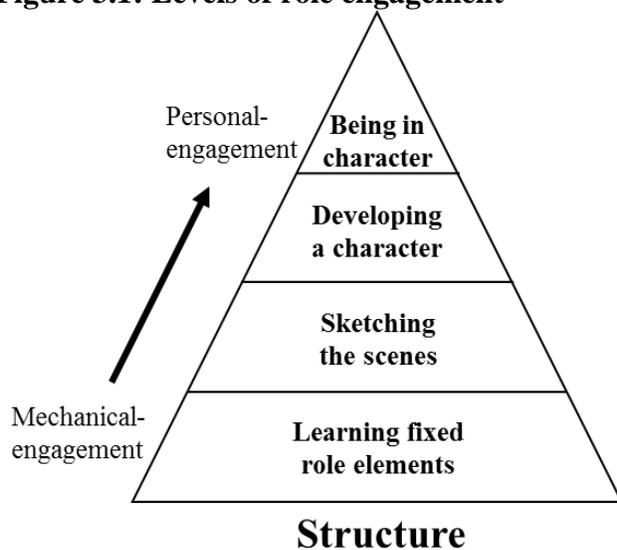
Despite the recognized importance of and desire for achieving mutuality, it was not an automatic accomplishment. My findings demonstrate how actors “set the stage” for moments of mutuality onstage through two intertwining facets of the theatre experience—structure and play. The structural element consisted of actors moving from the relatively mechanical process of learning their roles toward developing truthful characters. Learning their roles and developing

their characters was accompanied by three forms of play, which both potentiated and were potentiated by the process of character development. As the actors work, and play, together within the role structures they co-construct, they build their capacity to be authentic while playing a fictional character, and to be responsive to each other while still executing their roles. In the following sections, I will first discuss the different levels of structure and play, followed by a discussion of how structure and play interact to build the actors' capacity for mutuality.

Structure: Learning their roles and developing their characters

The relational structure in theatre performance consists of roles/characters embedded in scenes. I make an important distinction between role and character. The actor's role entails what is largely pre-determined, and must be learned and performed precisely and reliably. This includes the text (i.e., lines, cues, pacing, music) and aspects of the blocking (movement, entrances and exits, positioning, choreography). The role is similar to how we typically think of roles in organizations, as providing a script or prescribed set of behaviors. Each role has certain elements that are fixed, and would be the same no matter which actor is playing the role. Within the fixed elements of each role and scene, actors and directors have some latitude to develop characters that are personalized and unique to each actor playing a given role, as shaped by the decided intentions of each character in each scene. The character consists of the personality, emotions, and most importantly the intentions that motivate the words and actions. It is only by moving from mechanical engagement to personally engaging with the role and developing a truthful character that actors can achieve mutuality onstage. A useful metaphor is to think about the role as scaffolding within which the actors are able to develop a character and build a more organic and truthful relational structure. In this section, I discuss four stages through which actors come into being more authentic and responsive in character (see figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: Levels of role engagement



Learning fixed role elements

Throughout the rehearsal process, but especially in the early stages, much of what needs to be accomplished is a tedious, mechanical work of learning the text, music, and choreography. The director of *Julius Caesar* (JC) compared this process to learning the rules of a game like football: “*There are lines on a page just like you have to stay within the football field when you play football. Can’t go out of bounds, right? It’s just a rule, you follow the script.*” Much of this process is prescriptive and calls for strict focus, because much of what is entailed in each role is rigidly predetermined—in the sense that actors have little flexibility to alter the text or certain aspects of the blocking—and must be performed precisely. There are two main components of theatre roles that can be and are often fixed: text and blocking (movement).

Text and music: The foundation of any role in theatre is the text, which is either spoken or sung as in musicals. Learning the text involves more than simply memorizing the words, but also knowing their cues (the line just before their turn to speak), the tempo, and the notes in music. In all four musicals I observed, the first several rehearsals focused entirely on learning the music, which involved sitting around a piano with the music director playing through each part

so the actors could learn the notes and rhythm. In Julius Caesar, they spent several days working with a Shakespeare expert to make sense of the text and how to say their lines before starting rehearsals. Only the JC director insisted that the actors learn their lines before rehearsal for any scene they would be working on that night, recognizing the difficulty of developing characters while holding their script books. In the other shows, actors spent much of the rehearsal process holding their script books as they worked on scenes.

As actors worked on learning the text, although they were speaking or singing their lines sequentially, they struggled to listen and fully respond to each other. They had to listen just enough to hear their cues, but they were focused more on preparing for their own lines. In one of the early rehearsals, the ITW director reminded the cast to *“really take in each other and what each person is saying.”* This is especially difficult before they have memorized their lines. Several actors described how, *“You want to get off book (referring to having the lines memorized) because that’s when the fun begins. That’s when you really can do character stuff. When you’re holding that book, it’s just – it feels very mechanical.”* Even in JC, where the actors were supposed to come to rehearsal off book, the first several times they worked on a scene, the actors struggled to respond to each other with their acting choices as they were focused on their lines. The director tried to help them get past this barrier by often starting rehearsals with a blitz run through of the scene they would be working on, where the actors would speak their lines as quickly as possible. Occasionally, she would have the actors walk around the stage while doing this so they could get comfortable paying attention to what the other actors are doing while speaking their lines.

Blocking and choreography: Blocking is the next major facet of their roles. Blocking refers to everything involving physical movement and positioning onstage. Some of the

blocking, especially subtle actions, are character choices that actors can make and change in the moment, and thus are not part of the fixed role. However, much of the blocking needed to be fixed and coordinated, especially entrances/exits, choreography, and stage positions. *Rent*, *ITW*, and *PQ* had arguably the most complex blocking because they had large choreographed dance numbers and fight scenes that had to be and learned exactly right, with risk of collision, injury, or major disruption if the choreography was not followed precisely. One actor mentioned performing in a show several years prior “*where a guy who I had to work with refused to hit his marks, refused to learn the fight choreography. He just wanted to win. I was in the hospital four times that summer because he was always in the wrong place.*” *Julius Caesar* also had some fight choreography, and had a trained fight choreographer come work with the actors on those scenes.

Although *Philadelphia Story* (*PS*) had no dance numbers or fight scenes (aside from some fun choreography worked into the scene changes), the positioning of the actors onstage was still surprisingly complex in scenes involving most of the cast together in a small space. Positioning was a major focus for each director because, as the *ITW* director described, “*You have to have space between each other so you can send the energy back and forth between you.*” They were also concerned about positioning for reasons of visibility and balance. Three of the shows were performed on a stage where the audience would be sitting on three or all four sides of the stage, and so the directors had to be attentive to the view of the scene from each side where the audience would be sitting.

Rehearsals focusing on choreography, like music rehearsals, were often tedious and mechanical, as they worked to lock in a step-by-step understanding of where the actors needed to be and when. In fact, acting was sometimes even discouraged as they learned their steps. For example, when they were choreographing the death of *Julius Caesar*, the fight choreographer

frequently reminded the actor playing Caesar to stop acting and just focus on what each part of his body should be doing, like learning a dance. In this process, the directors asked for strict focus. Learning the roles exactly was important for ensuring safety, coordination, and reliability in producing a high-quality show in a short amount of time. Given the short timeframe in which they must put together the show, there is little room for wasting time as a result of actors being unprepared or unfocused. After a music rehearsal in which the cast was particularly unfocused, the Rent music director emailed the cast saying the following:

“There were a lot of conversations going on last night. It makes it very difficult to teach parts when there’s so much extraneous chatter. I understand how tedious this part of the process is. Believe me. And I want us to have fun together, but we have to earn that by doing the work. Please come to rehearsal focused and prepared to do just that. I need good energy and commitment from each of you for as long as I’ve got you each night.”

The fight choreographer of PQ, when teaching the cast how to use stage swords, explained the rules of how to hold and carry the sword to make sure everyone and the swords are safe. One point he emphasized was maximizing control of the sword, instructing that *“The firmer you grip the sword, the more flexibility and mobility you will have.”* In similar fashion, the more firmly the actors learned the text and choreography, the more flexibility and mobility they would have with their character, while staying safe and coordinated. But as they are learning the mechanics, their capacity for authenticity and responsiveness is low.

Sketching the scene

The next step in character development is sketching the scenes. If the text and choreography are like the rules of a game, sketching the scene is like making a game plan. A large portion of the rehearsals, typically after learning the music and choreography, are referred to as blocking rehearsals, where they go through scenes one by one and begin to explore how they want to approach each scene. They sometimes referred to this process as creating the

“shape,” or the “skeleton,” of the scene, recognizing the need to avoid overly pre-determining all of the movement to keep room for the actors to make acting choices in the moment.

Although much of the blocking needs to become fixed for reasons described previously, it differs from the text in that it is co-constructed by the actors and directors. With the exception of the Rent director, who predetermined most of the blocking beforehand, the directors typically approached blocking a scene *“with the idea of jumping in and playing, just wanting to get a shape of the scene for now, and we’ll build from there.”* Even the Rent director, although pre-planning much of the blocking, deliberately left room for the actors to make their own blocking choices. Each of the directors described their directing style as *“not puppeteering,”* but *“open to experimentation,”* and *“trying to help them create something that’s coming from them.”* And the actors appreciated being given the trust and freedom to make acting choices.

The directors would start by establishing certain “rules” for the scene, such as when and from where actors would be entering, considerations of the set design (e.g., where the couch and table will be located), props that would be used, and stage directions that were necessary to the storyline or for their lines to make sense. The director would also explain his/her vision for the scene and how it fits into the story. The PQ director explained that his most important role as director is to *“get the story as clear as possible.”* The directors have the clearest sense of the story they are trying to tell, and so as they sketch the scenes, the director provides the vision that leads them through the story. Then the director has them, as the ITW director instructed, *“Just fill it, jump in, make bold choices, use the text and make sense of it.”*

However, due to the complexity of finding good positioning, attempts to let the actors play with the blocking and see what they come up with frequently led to the directors taking over and giving specific directions. The exception to this was the JC director, who was also the

choreographer for the dance numbers in *Rent*. Having a dance background, she felt strongly that all movement should be character driven, and would insist on letting the actors make their own blocking choices. This process involved much trial and error as she pushed the actors to experiment with different acting choices until finding choices that worked. The objective of blocking rehearsals was not to determine all acting choices, but just get a rough structure for each scene, within which the actors could more fully develop their characters. At this point capacity for authenticity and responsiveness is still low, but the scaffolding is in place for them to begin engaging with each other more truthfully.

Developing the character

At the end of the final blocking rehearsal of Act 1 in PQ, the director congratulated the cast on finishing putting together Act 1. After the cast finished cheering he told them that there is a good base structure, but then added:

“I’m begging you, please go back through every moment of the show and think logically about how you would be in each moment. I’m so much more interested in seeing 3-dimensional, real characters in every single one of you, and not just generic soldiers or generic clansmen. I want to see real people in each of you... The next step we need to take is that individual ownership.”

Sketching the scenes around the fixed role elements is an initial and insufficient step toward living truthfully in their roles. Indeed, there is an inherent and obvious untruthfulness in the mechanics of pre-determined text and blocking. Although the actors cannot change the script, and have limited autonomy over the blocking, there is another layer surrounding these role elements that they can develop and personalize, which I am labelling the character. The character consists of the personality, thoughts, and emotions that actors bring to the role. For example, in PS there were four servants, who had only a small number of lines (i.e., minimal fixed role elements) and almost no information about their characters in the text, but were frequently

present during important moments in the show. In one scene involving the servants, the director reminded them that, *“This is all character stuff, so you each need to think about your personalities and how you are feeling during all of this. You could be annoyed, think it was funny, be flirtatious, tired of doing this every day, whatever you decide.”* So although their roles were similar, they each developed distinct characters, which added interesting dimensions to their scenes. Similarly in PQ, actors playing the same role in opposite casts formed very distinct characters as their doubles. Even those playing lead roles found ways to make their characters distinct from their counterparts in the other cast.

As actors learn the text and blocking, they also engage in a process of “character work,” in which they craft a truthful delivery of the role. Character work is where authenticity begins to enter into the acting, the goal being to develop a character that reflects the truthful reactions of the actor in the imaginary circumstances. Although the focus in the early rehearsals is primarily on establishing the structure of each scene, even as they are learning the music and choreography and sketching the scenes, the director is constantly asking the actors to think about developing the character. However, character work is difficult in the early stages because *“shows are a lot of work; there’s not just the acting – there’s the singing, there’s the dancing. So... characterization tends to fall by the wayside. You’re more focused on getting everything right, and if your character’s a little flat, then that might just have to be a necessary sacrifice if you wanna sound good and move well.”* As the actors become more comfortable with their role, the character work becomes more effortful and efficacious, as they can focus more attention on this deeper level.

Character work consists of two primary elements: 1) identifying intentions to motivate the fixed role elements and shape how they are performed, and 2) finding moments to fill in the skeleton of each scene with truthful reactions driven by the intentions.

Identifying intentions: Just as the text is the foundation of a role in theatre, the intentions provide the foundation for the character. The layer of intentions underlying the text and blocking should be different for every actor playing a given role. In *Rent*, where most of the blocking was pre-determined, the director encouraged the actors to determine the intentions of their characters.

“I think with the blocking at large, there was a tendency for me to say, ‘I’d like you to cross to her here.’ But they have a choice at how they play their motivation in that cross. They have the choice how they relate to the other person in that cross. So they have the structure to work in, and that’s established, but they have a complete autonomy on the intentions.”

The intentions should drive all acting choices. A specific example of this in *Rent* was in a song called Christmas Bells which takes place outside in a marketplace and involves the entire cast moving around the stage in complex choreography. Throughout the song, there is a line that is repeated at the end of each verse, “And it’s beginning to snow.” The director told the cast that each time they sang that line, they should think about what that line means to their characters. Are they excited about the snow because they have been stuck inside, or because it is adding to the romance, or are they terrified of the snow because they are homeless, or because they are trying to sell t-shirts on the street. In this case, because of the choreography, the actors had minimal freedom in what they did in those moments, but they could determine the intentions of the character, which would reflect in subtle but significant ways in their acting, making the characters feel more authentic to the actors and to the audience.

Identifying intentions is both an individual and collaborative process. Sometimes the directors led or encouraged discussions, or invited the actors to discuss with their scene partners, about their characters and their character relationships. For example, a couple weeks into the rehearsal process, the PS director spent the first hour of a rehearsal with the cast sitting in a circle discussing their characters’ stories, thoughts, and feelings. She had them think about what their

childhood was like, how long their characters have known each other and how they met, what is the nature of their relationships, and why they do what they do in the story. The director shared some insights, but she largely let the cast discuss their thoughts, which resulted in a more humanized and dimensional understanding of their characters.

In *Pirate Queen*, there was a moment when they were working on a large musical number toward the end of the show, and the lead actor asked the director what she was trying to accomplish with this song. Rather than answering, the director opened it up to the group, and different cast members took turns sharing their thoughts on the significance of the scene. Being in Utah, most of the cast belonged to the dominant religion in the area, and one cast member related the experience of this song to a moment in the religion's history that most of the actors could relate to. At the end of the discussion, when the director concluded "so that is the message of the song," the cast spontaneously burst into applause, having experienced this cool moment of finding a deeper meaning of the song that they could relate to in their own ways. When I talked to the director after rehearsal about this moment, he explained,

"Those moments are so important, because it is so hard to get the actors to be fully invested in those scenes unless they can relate to it in their core, which is hard in a country where we have so much privilege and have never gone through anything like this, but at least most of the group can connect to the experience of the Mormon pioneers."

Other directors prompted similar discussions, often in the working of a scene, and encouraged the actors to spend time on their own making sense of the intentions of each of their lines.

As with sketching the scenes, there was a deliberate effort by the directors to help the actors sketch their own intentions. Often, the directors would propose specific intentions or feelings that the characters might have in a specific moment, but generally the directors encouraged the actors, as the ITW director instructed, to *"Just listen to each other. Listen to what everyone says about you and your character, and what your character says about you, and*

pick up clues left by Stephen Sondheim about your character.” As they started to think more about their intentions, they started attending to the other characters more, rather than simply focusing on what they themselves were doing in their roles. They looked to the other characters for cues that might inform their intentions.

When working on a scene, the directors frequently stopped and asked the actors what they were thinking or feeling about a specific line. They tried to help the actors recognize ways to relate to their characters. To get more emotion out of the actor playing Little Red in ITW, the director went up onto the stage to show her how excited Little Red should be about getting sticky buns at the bakery, shouting, *“they’re sticky buns for Gosh sake!”* In Rent, there is a moment when a friend of two broke roommates enters the apartment with some food that he tosses to the roommates. After sketching the scene and going through it several times, the choreographer stopped them and asked,

“Guys, have any of you ever been cold or hungry before? You two are starving, and you have no money, and he is bringing groceries to you. As a poor college student you should understand how exciting that is. Alright, let’s try that again, and let’s get excited when he throws you food... this is the best day ever...have any of you found \$100 on the floor before? Wouldn’t that be awesome? That’s kind of like what today is for you.”

As they started to think more about their intentions, they started attending to the other characters more, looking for clues to inform their intentions, rather than simply focusing on what they themselves were doing in their roles.

The directors were careful to not constrain the actors in the character work process, making them feel like they had to act a certain way, while still helping them realize how their characters would be if this were real life. Some of the directors would give a lot of acting suggestions, but constantly encourage the actors to fight them on the suggestions, and bring some of their own suggestions. Others were resistant to even providing acting suggestions, insisting

that the actors find what works for them. The Rent assistant director put it simply, *“I think that any time that the cast is engaged and has more personal agency in the process that leads to a better show.”* The ITW director would often explain what his intentions would be for a specific line, and then demonstrate how he would act out the part. But then when he had the actors try to do it the same way, he often told them that it did not feel truthful for them. The character intentions had to be something the actors could relate to, to provide a basis from which they could begin to explore more authentic responses.

Finding moments: Character intentions are largely relational, involving other characters in the scene (one director even said that intentions should always be about wanting to get someone to do something). So developing intentions increased listening and responding. As actors often get carried away focusing on the text, being firmly grounded in specific intentions reminds them to keep acting in between the lines, and not *“blow over the moments.”* One director described, *“Often when one person starts singing, the other person stops. The trick to keeping it alive and fun is continuing to act, so the conversation continues.”* For example, while reviewing the choreography for a dance number, the PQ director instructed, *“During the 8 counts before starting to spin, stay alive, go talk to your partner or something. No zombies.”* In doing so, actors would find nuanced moments with each other, adding authenticity and depth to their characters. The concept of “finding moments” was pervasive in each show, demonstrating an implicit awareness of the fleeting nature of these moments of connection.

The final two weeks of rehearsal is generally spent repeatedly reviewing and running through entire acts or the full show. This repetition serves to solidify the lines and blocking in the actors’ memory. But it also gives the actors an opportunity to discover and develop character moments, and gives the directors an opportunity to point out spaces in each scene for them to

find moments. One actor said to me that *“this is the best part of the rehearsal process, where they get to goof around adding little things. This is where the magic happens. (PS)”* Whenever they would do a full run through of the show, the directors would encourage them to continue to find new moments. Just before the final dress rehearsal before opening night, the JC director reminded, *“I am always, always, always ok with you trying something new.”*

Actors described with pride particular moments that they discovered. An actor in *Pirate Queen* described one moment that she was particularly proud of:

*“[The director] let us be good actors on the stage, which is something that I really loved. Like one moment in particular, this is my one claim to fame with [the director], it was the night that we were blocking *Boys will be Boys*, and Keith came over, you know ‘have you ever broken a mare,’ and he like gets in my face, and I got up and kind of got in his face, and [the director] was like ‘yes let’s roll with that.’ ... I was like I’m just going to react, like this is how I would react if a guy got in my face and called me horse, and I was like a dirty barmaid in the mid 1500’s, like I’d get in his face because I’m not afraid of that, you know. The women don’t know their place in Ireland. I would even do that now, like if it was somebody that I knew, like the way that my character relationship was with Donal, absolutely I would get in his face and chase after him, like totally. (PQ)”*

Some of these moments were discovered spontaneously, while others were pre-planned in discussion among scene partners. For example:

“I had a really great moment with Alan at the wedding scene where we’re all saying goodbye. He came up and talked to me and was like, ‘I really don’t want to give you a hug. I feel like it’s too generic.’ I felt the same way. And he was like, ‘I really feel like Grace and I would have fought, like maybe rough house together. Can I do some kind of fight with you?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, that’s cool.’ It was one of my favorite moments onstage of the whole show. It was so cool.”

My field notes and interview transcripts are full of these types of moments, which actors often described as their favor parts of the show. Making character choices and finding moments helped the actors *“feel like we had an ownership over it, so that made us excited about it, that what we were doing mattered, and what WE created was what people were excited for. (R)”* These moments marked the entering of mutuality into the role performance, and provided important

touchpoints for the actors to connect with each other each time they performed a scene. As the JC director put simply, *“Any time you have new moments, it is because you are listening to each other. That is when I know it is working.”*

Being in Character

“Often you’ll hear directors saying quit playing a character, play you in the situation (PQ).” The importance of identifying character intentions that the actors can relate to is that it allows them to bring themselves into the character. They can react in a scene not as they imagine the fictional character would, but as they would given the same intentions. Being in character is when actors stop pretending to be someone else, and start being themselves in the character—in other words, they themselves inhabit the fictional setting. They remember to *“be human and interact with each other (PQ),”* and *“just really react to each other in a way that fits the text, so it isn’t just cheap acting, but honest responses (ITW).”* Being in character is being authentic and responsive; being in character together opens the door to mutuality in their role performance.

In a rehearsal working on a scene where Cinderella is singing a solo alone onstage, the actor was having trouble delivering a convincing performance. The ITW director told her that one of the problems might be that she was not putting enough of herself into the character:

“You’re not bringing yourself along... When you start acting, you have an idea of who this character is, which is prim and proper. I want you to be you, which is your wacky and crazy self. You are a lot of fun. Bring that in... Forget everything you’ve thought about this character before. Tell this story as yourself with 4 or 5 drinks as an exercise to see how wacky you can be.”

In a different scene with the actor playing the witch singing a song about how much she loves her daughter, the director instructed her to draw on her real feelings as a mother: *“This isn’t acting, this should be drawing on your real feelings that you have with Gavin. Take it to an almost tearful place.”* By relating to their character’s intentions and bringing their real emotions

into the scene, actors can, in a very real way, “live truthfully under imaginary circumstances.” A Pirate Queen actor compared his experience playing the same role in *Big Fish* in two different theatres, with two different actors, Jim and Steve, playing the role of a doctor:

“Steve is one of those character actors. He loves to play goofy characters, so sometimes there’s not a lot of honesty behind it... Whenever Jim would come out, all he would have to do is look at me and all of a sudden my heart would break... It was just that he was so open and so loving in that moment, ... and just in a look, he would break me. But when Steve would come out, he kind of was just dead. There was nothing behind it. He wasn’t putting himself into it. And so I didn’t get to know Steve on a deeper level, whereas I did get to know Jim, and what kind of man he is... [T]here’s so much of ourselves that we put into these characters in trying to be honest and open and connecting.”

Being in character is also being responsive to what is happening onstage, or being alive in the moment. The performance is not constrained to pre-determined acting choices, nor is it even planned in the moment, as people often do in conversation. The JC director described the tendency for people to stop listening and start to plan their next move:

“Sometimes what happens, which is very human, is like in a class when someone else is talking and you’re thinking about how you’re going to respond, so you’re not clear as to what they’re saying. Sometimes an actor, what they’ll do is they stop, they take in a piece of information, and cut off what was happening next to think about what cool thing they’re going to do, and then they put that forward. But that moment wasn’t right as opposed to it just happening in the moment.”

When actors are fully being in character, they are not thinking about what they should do next. They are not trying to determine what their character would do, or even what they themselves would do. They listen and respond honestly, connecting with their inner being. When actors can be in character, they can be with each other in a deeply personal way, with authenticity stemming from the absence of intentional characterization.

Summary

In summary, as actors increase their level of personal engagement with their roles, they are able to develop a truthful character within the role that allows them to be more authentic and

responsive. In the early stages, the roles constrain their authenticity and responsiveness, as they must focus on learning the mechanics of the role. But those same mechanics in turn provide a structure in which actors are able to more freely explore and express themselves than they would absent some protective structure. As their focus shifts from performing the role to simply being in character, they become more responsive to their fellow scene partners, actually responding to them and not just repeating lines on cue.

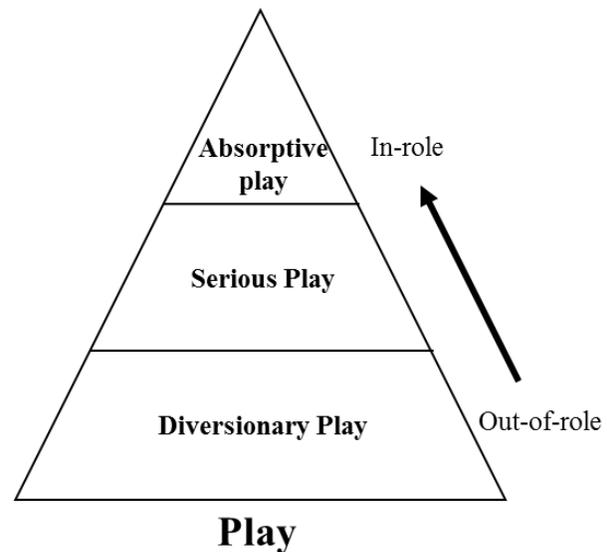
Admittedly, developing this capacity to be in character, especially given the intricacies of their roles, is not a simple accomplishment. Actors must be able to free themselves from the confines of the role structure in order to develop their character and ultimately to be in character onstage. To achieve this calls for the second and equally essential facet of building capacity for mutuality, which is play. In the next section, I discuss how play in the rehearsal and performance process facilitates the actors' progression toward being character.

Play: Removing the constraints that hinder mutuality

As actors work to learn their roles and develop their characters, they are driven to increase their authenticity and responsiveness, stemming both from their motivation for doing theatre and their desire to produce a quality performance. Their drive to cultivate authenticity and responsiveness manifests in the ways they play with each other. Play facilitates the process of moving from mechanical role performance to authentic and responsive being in character. From the beginning of the rehearsal process through the final performance, play abounds in the cast. The data revealed three different forms of play—diversionary play, serious play, and absorptive play—which emerged in conjunction with the process of character development (see figure 3.2). In the beginning, play was largely in breaking out of their roles (diversionary play). As they moved from learning the roles to developing the characters, they started integrating

playful exercises as part of the character work (serious play). As they became able to be in character onstage, the actual role performance became a form of play (absorptive play).

Figure 3.2: Levels of play



Diversiónary play

Diversiónary play, a term adopted from Mainemelis and Ronson (2006), often sprung out of the more mechanical parts of the rehearsal process, such as learning the text and blocking. Diversiónary play refers to moments when the actors would break out of, or divert from, the structure of their roles, not for some deliberately productive purpose (e.g., to ask a question), but for their own or others' amusement. During the more mechanical rehearsals early in the process, diversiónary play served as an important way for actors to connect with each other and humanize an otherwise mechanical process. Although diversiónary play is not directly productive in the sense of improving the work, and in fact may actually detract from the productivity of the group, it indirectly benefits the performance by reinforcing a play mentality that shapes the eventual role performance. One of the actors described the importance of allowing such moments:

"In order to find excellent moments, actors have to be in a creative mood, and often that means they're focused on what's at hand, but they're thinking of lots of things. Sometimes

that leads to a joke that has nothing to do with the show, and people laugh, and then go right back to work. But they have to be willing to break focus for those moments, because if somebody clamps down too hard on that, it hurts the entire creative mindset.”

Because of the difficulty, complexity, and often the awkwardness of the rehearsal process, such moments of playful diversion from the work were also important to help actors develop a level of comfort with each other. In order to achieve truthful performance, actors need to be sufficiently comfortable with each other that they can be authentic and open themselves up through their characters. I observed four main types of diversionary play among the actors: laughing after mistakes, silly improvising, joking about their characters, and offstage socializing.

Laughing after mistakes: A frequent site of diversionary play was when a scene was interrupted by actors making mistakes. Mistakes—such as skipping a line, prematurely entering a scene, missing a cue, or pronouncing a word incorrectly—provided opportunities for actors to laugh at their own and each other’s performance. Laughing after mistakes never seemed offensive, or taken personally, because there was nothing personal about the mistakes that they were making. They were not laughing at personal acting choices, but laughing together at the inevitable mistakes resulting from the complexity of their roles. The content and obvious fictionality of their roles further added to the humor of mistakes. For example, in *Rent* there is a duet called “Light my Candle,” which involved climbing on a table, some flirty physical contact, and an electric candle that was to be turned on and off throughout the number, which was all further complicated by the need to hold their scripts as they learned the blocking. Naturally, they made a lot of mistakes with “lighting” the candle, climbing on the table, and other parts of the blocking. They tried doing it very slowly, but the slow pace made it even more humorous by lengthening the mistakes and awkwardness of the scene. The frequent laughter helped relieve the tension and discomfort from the difficulty and often awkwardness of the process.

Seeing others make mistakes “loosens up boundaries” among the actors. “You see them trying. You see them experimenting. You see them shooting blindly into the dark if they don’t know what to do... it helps people to see that nobody is perfect.” The lead actress in PS was very quick to learn her lines, and “everybody was just blown away... that her lines were so perfect right away.” But then “that first time she messed up on a line, everybody was like, ‘Wow, it’s not just us.’ We loved the fact that she could learn her lines so quickly, but there is that connection that everybody does screw up now and again.” As one actor described,

“You think that this person is such an amazing actor, never does anything wrong, always hits the right note. So when you’re in scenes with that person, you don’t want to be seen unfavorably in comparison. And then you’re afraid to really go for things that might be a mistake. And then when you see that person do something that you or somebody else or even the director is like “no, don’t do that, don’t do that at all,” it makes them more human.”

Seeing how the others in the cast responded to mistakes also demonstrated a quality of forgiveness and support in the group, which lightened the performance pressure for the actors, helping them be more comfortable with the risk of making future mistakes. As a result, actors became increasingly willing to take risks and play with their roles. They were not constrained by the fear of making mistakes, but instead were able to be more present and in the moment.

Silly improvising: A related way that diversionary play manifest during the learning process was in playful improvising, often prompted when actors reached moments of uncertainty, either from forgetting a line or arriving at the end of a rehearsed segment and not knowing what came next. This improvising is different from the more constructive improvising to explore new ways to perform a role which I will later describe. As diversionary play, improvising was just a playful escape from the rigidity of the roles. In the early rehearsals, the actors would often make up some funny dialogue at the end of the segments they were rehearsing. In PS, a character says the word propinquity in one of his lines, which the actors

thought was a funny word. So it became a running joke that when actors would forget a line or not know what comes next, they would improvise some dialogue around the word propinquity.

This kind of silly improvising was especially frequent in the early stages, but continued even during the performance run, when actors were comfortable enough with their lines and blocking that they could sneak in playful jokes during the performance without the audience seeing. For example, there is a scene in PQ where the ensemble, playing an Irish clan, is packing up their things to prepare for a long journey. Two of the actors, playing husband and wife, developed a running joke where she would give him a hard time about only packing potatoes for their journey. Then for one performance, he thought it would be funny to sneak a real potato onstage and hand it to her at that point in the scene, which caused her to stop singing to suppress a laugh. This led to other cast members sneaking various objects into the scene. Actors enjoyed finding ways to play with each other during the rehearsals and the performance as a way to keep things playful and create inside jokes in the group. These momentary diversions reinforced a sense that what they were doing was playing together.

Joking about their characters: A third type of diversionary play was using lines or other elements of their roles in a joking way outside of the scenes. Actors would frequently quote lines from the show out of context, and make jokes about their characters. For example, when an actor was late for a rehearsal, the others joked that he must have been drinking too much, because his character likes to drink. In *Rent*, when the actor playing the antagonist had a birthday on the day of a rehearsal, the cast sang Happy Birthday to him. Then at the end of the song, a cast member jokingly shouted, “*You’re such a jerk, Benny (the character’s name).*” Because PS takes place in the early 1900s, there were a lot of phrases that were unique to the period, which the cast started using in their offstage conversations, such as “*it’s all very rooty-tooty all right,*” “*what’s amiss,*

what's afoot?” and *“holy cats.”* When I complimented one of the women in the show on her costume, she without hesitation said, *“I’m going for the pale pastel shades now,”* a line said by one of the male characters in the show who was formerly an alcoholic, referring to pastel shades of drinks (milk, orange juice, etc). Often offstage they would playfully have multi-line, back and forth exchanges quoted straight out of the text, even when neither of the actors quoting the lines played the corresponding characters in the show.

The text and blocking provided much fodder for playful moments offstage. Appropriating lines, dance steps, or other actions from the show in a humorous way offstage, thereby attaching humorous connotations to those actions, infused new life into the actions when repeated onstage. In other words, when someone said a line for the hundredth time onstage during rehearsal or during a performance, the line still carried humor into the scene because of how it was used offstage. Every time an actor said “holy cats” in PS, the others had to genuinely hold back a laugh because the humor of the phrase was regularly reinforced offstage. So diversionary play could re-energize the cast around specific role elements used as objects of play.

Offstage socializing: Lastly, a fourth type of diversionary play worth mentioning was the socializing that happened generally outside of rehearsal. Whereas the other types of diversionary play were momentary diversions during a rehearsal or performance, actors would also divert from their roles by spending time with each other outside of rehearsal or performance time. In every cast, the actors would sometimes go out for drinks after rehearsals, or get together for other types of social activities (e.g., karaoke nights, shopping, going to see other shows, game nights, even friendly sleepovers). Sometimes social activities were brought to the theatre space. For example, during the performance run of PQ, one of the actors organized a game for his cast to play after the show one night, where they sprayed shaving cream on several actors’ faces, and a

partner would try to throw as many Cheetos onto the shaving cream as possible. Some of these forms of social activity became ritualized in the cast. For example, one of the PQ casts developed a tradition of crowding into one of the dressing rooms every night before the show started and having a 3-minute dance party. Or the ITW cast had a weekly “fun pants Friday.”

These social activities, whether happening at the theatre or outside, were important for developing a sense of closeness in the cast. As described previously, most of the friendships that formed in a cast resulted from some kind of offstage socializing. While it is true that friendships can help create a safe, comfortable environment where actors are willing to be vulnerable with each other onstage, the other types of diversionary play seem to provide a shortcut to a similar comfort level, without relying on becoming friends outside of the show.

Summary: Throughout the rehearsal and performance process, but especially in the early stages, actors frequently took time to divert from their roles to play with each other. Because roles in theatre are so rigidly scripted, and the blocking so detailed and complex, the process of learning the roles in the beginning was very mechanical and required strict focus. This mechanical process did not impede diversionary play, but rather potentiated it. The roles provided opportunities and fodder for play in the group. Mistakes were plainly evident and impossible to ignore, and moments of uncertainty were stark and inevitable. Because the learning process required much of their attention to be on themselves and their own roles, the impulse to be authentic and responsive with each other required breaking from the roles to see each other anew. But the goal is to bring the authenticity and responsiveness into the role performance.

Serious play

As the attention shifted from learning the role mechanics to engaging in character work, the process became less mechanical and more exploratory. The challenge with character work is

developing truthful intentions for the lines and blocking. Actors must resist the tendency to develop fictional intentions, or to imagine why the fictional character would be saying or doing certain things, and instead think about why they themselves would say and do those things in the given circumstances. The challenge of trying to determine what would be truthful under the given circumstances is that the mechanics of the role can obstruct the actors' view of themselves.

In this process, a second form of play emerged—serious play. To develop a truthful character, the directors implemented a variety of playful practices and exercises to pull the focus away from the mechanics and toward their truthful instincts. Distinct from diversionary play, in which actors seek connection by escaping their roles, serious play represents their deliberate efforts to be authentic and responsive within their roles. Serious play blurs the boundary between work and play, as the work itself becomes a kind of play. Serious play is set up with a deliberate intention to improve work tasks, in this case the performance. By incorporating playful practices into the character work, actors are able to work through the artificiality of the roles—see the scaffolding as scaffolding—in order to uncover authentic moments. As with diversionary play, there were many manifestations of exploratory play, a few of which I describe here.

Exploratory improvisation: The most basic form of serious play, implemented by each of the directors in various degrees, occurred when the director would have the actors come onstage and play with a scene with only minimal directions (e.g., when and from where to enter the stage, and an overarching vision for the scene). Different than the silly improvising of diversionary play, exploratory improvising is trying to find ways to improve the performance. Often from the first time they start to sketch a scene, the actors would come onstage with their books and read through the scene while trying to improvise some basic blocking.

To make this process playful, the directors encouraged the actors to follow their instincts, make bold choices, and not worry about making mistakes. In the second week of JC rehearsals, the director told the cast to just “*have a play*” through the scene, and not worry about doing well, being only the 2nd week of rehearsal. “*Don’t worry so much about where you need to go, but who you need to talk to and what you need to accomplish.*” To reduce the performance pressure and encourage the actors to stay in play onstage, the ITW director told the cast after working on a scene, “*I love you, and you are doing great, but no more ‘I’m sorry’s.’ It takes away your power. If you make a mistake, just respond to it in character. If you forget your line, say ‘I forgot my line,’ but say it in character, in a way that fits the moment.*” And the directors were very careful to not be overly critical of acting choices. One actor described “*Directors, if they don’t like your first choice, they might be like, ‘That didn’t work. I know you have something else, so I’m going to try to get that out of you instead of what you just did.’ It wasn’t, ‘Wow, you suck.’ It was just more of, ‘Let’s try something else.’*” Similarly, when I asked the director of PQ how he responds when actors make acting choices that really don’t work, he said, “*You ask them about it. You say, ‘Tell me about that choice you made. Tell me why.’ And a lot of times if they can justify it, I’ll go, ‘Oh, let’s explore that a little bit and see if we can shape those choices to get where we need to go.’ But if they don’t work, I’ll just say, ‘Well, make another choice.’*”

Several of the directors pushed this process further by repeating a scene or moment over and over and telling the actors they had to make new and different acting choices each time. The directors varied in the extent to which they pushed continuous experimentation, but they all wanted the actors to know that it was always ok to try something new. The JC director would often do this. In one scene, she told them she would clap three times during the scene, and each time she clapped she wanted them to find a new place on the stage, just to play with different

possible stage formations. Then she would tell them which ones seemed to work the best. This process helped the actors feel free to explore and make bold choices, knowing that they were not expected to get it right the first time. Encouraging the actors to constantly try out different character choices also facilitated the discovery of “magical” moments where the character came to life and felt authentic. It also prompted the actors to look to each other and respond to each other more, as they were compelled to find new ways of performing a scene.

Playing with the text: As directors encouraged the actors to play through a scene, it was difficult for the actors to follow their instincts while doing something so unnatural. The directors had various strategies to help the actors open up and follow their instincts. The director of ITW often had the actors rephrase the script into their own words so they could more easily connect with the feeling and intentions of the lines. For example, in one scene a father was essentially telling his son to “man up,” but the actor playing the father was having difficulty connecting with the lines. So the director told the actor to start shouting at the actor playing the son to man up using his own words. The director kept pushing him to yell louder and be more intense. Then as soon as the actor had reached a sufficiently escalated level of emotion, the director told him to immediately switch to the text of the show. That way he could associate the feelings generated by using his own words with the given text. This director would often demonstrate how he would perform a line, which necessarily involved making up his own words for the given line.

In one particular example, the director was trying to generate more authenticity between the actors playing a mother and son in a scene. He felt that they were “*acting a state,*” in this case pretending to be frustrated, instead of “*acting the intention,*” or trying to get the son to listen to her. He told the mother to “*just release the energy you are directing toward acting the state, which is taking you to an artificial register, and put the energy into putting the boy in his*

place.” To achieve this, he had the actors do an exercise where she would repeatedly shout at him “listen to me,” and he would shout back “I’m listening.” Then he had them start the scene immediately after playing this game for a few minutes, wanting them to come in as if the conversation has been going on for a while. Using their own words and removing the constraints of the text enabled the actors to more easily develop truthful responses to each other.

Playing with the physicality: The director of JC took a similar strategy, but rather than using the actor’s own words to generate authentic emotion, she would use physicality. For example, when choreographing for *Rent*, they were working on a particularly intense scene where the lead actor is singing a song, *Out Tonight*, in which she is spiraling into depression and trying to escape the depression. At one point in the song she leaves a crowded bar to be alone. The choreographer felt that the emotion in the actress’s voice was not sounding authentic. To help the actress reflect in her voice the weight of the moment, she first had the actress sing the song while the director physically pressed down on her shoulders, so she could feel what it was like to sing with a heavy weight on her shoulders. Then she had the male scene partner physically chase her around the room yelling at her to stop for 20 seconds, after which the director called for the actress to do 10 pushups, then chased some more, then 25 jumping jacks. Then with the actress still breathing heavily, they jumped right into singing the song. They did this several times to try to physically generate an authentic feeling of the intentions of the scene, so the actress could feel what it was like in her body and in her voice to sing with that level of energy. Other times, she would have the actors step outside of the rehearsal room and then storm in through the door before saying their line to generate a sense of urgency. She often used the actors not involved in a scene to help generate the emotion in the scene. For example, in *Julius Caesar*, during scenes where an actor would be speaking lines to himself on stage, she would

have the others sit in front of the speaker and respond to the lines so the actor could feel the intention of speaking to someone. Or she would have a few actors follow the speaker around and whisper things during the monologue to generate emotion. In each case, she was implementing physical devices that were foreign to the mechanics of the show, and that were not intended to be part of the actual performance, to help the actors access a more authentic experience.

In one example, the director was working on a scene that involved most of the cast, but spent 20 minutes working on a few lines of one of the female actors. The director was trying different ways to get the actor to stop “acting” and to make it more natural, telling her to not use *“that made up voice.”* They go through her lines over and over and over, the director constantly interrupting. Finally, the director told the actor to walk out the door, then after a minute come back in, run around the space five times, and then say her lines. She told the actor she was thinking too much. When the actor came through the door and started running around the room, the cast cheered for her. Then they immediately jumped into the scene, while the actor was still out of breath. Afterward, the director asked the actor if she felt the change in energy. The actor said she felt the difference, and that it felt less acted, which was the objective.

In a famous scene where Mark Antony delivers a monologue to rally the citizens against Brutus, the director did an exercise where five actors stood in a line with five others standing in front of them, all but the female actor playing Antony, who was standing in front. While Antony was giving the speech, the first five actors should be trying to get to her, doing whatever it takes to get to her while the other five actors try to stop them. But if Antony started to convince them, they could stop chasing her. The director instructed, *“I want Antony to be terrified that he could actually die if he doesn’t convince you. If she starts losing, then you go after her. I give you full permission, and if she needs to run away, she will run away.”* Playing with the physicality of the

scene in this way, deviating from what would be the actual blocking, helped generate authentic emotion and responsiveness in the same way as playing with the text.

Reframing the scene: The PS director took a different strategy, introducing playful frames to a scene to uncover new elements to add to the performance. For example, during one rehearsal she noticed that the actors were having a hard time achieving the level of properness that the characters should have given their social status, so she told them to try doing the scene with over-exaggerated British accents. She admitted “*this might not help, but it will be funny.*” When they started, some of the actors had decent British accents, but one of them had a terrible British accent, which made everyone laugh, including the actor who was struggling. Eventually, the director told him to stop with the accent and instead pretend to be a toy soldier. After doing the scene, she told them that although they would obviously not really be doing the scene that way, she liked how their posture improved. In another scene, where two characters were having a private conversation, the director tried having the actors whisper their scene and act as if they were terrified of others overhearing. She again told them to exaggerate. There was a lot of laughter as they obviously exaggerated the whispering and fear of being heard, but in doing so they were able to discover some new elements to keep in the performance. In other rehearsals, this director told an actress to pretend like she was on drugs, another to pretend like she was Lucille Ball, another to pretend like she was Shirley Temple. Each of these playful frames were obvious exaggerations, but led to uncovering some new elements to enhance the performance.

A similar strategy used by several of the directors during the final week of rehearsals, was to do a “fun run.” The JC director described it as “*just drop everything we’re doing. Forget it. We’re just going to run Julius Caesar in 40 minutes and do it as soap opera, right? Or switch up all the roles. We do something like that. It breaks the tension, it helps them relax a little bit*”

more.” These fun runs helped keep the performance playful and fresh, so the actors would not fall into a stale routine where they are no longer being responsive to each other.

Summary: Serious play facilitates the process of bringing authenticity and truthfulness into the character work. By encouraging the actors to play with different role elements, exploratory play helps them see their role not as constraining, but enabling authenticity and responsiveness. Although contrived using director-led exercises, the capacity for mutuality in their role performance grows as actors develop more truthful characters and practice being more responsive to each other. But similar to diversionary play, serious play still often involves some amount of deviating from the role to develop the character. The next step is to be able to be in character, within the fixed role elements, and remain authentic and responsive.

Absorptive play

As actors move from rehearsals into tech week, the process intensifies, and the focus shifts from exploration to refinement and precision with the introduction of the technical elements of the show (lights, sound, costume, set, etc). This process was described as *“kind of scary, because everything is so new being in that space.”* The approaching of opening night brings a heightened sense of stress and anxiety: *“Once you come into the theater, all of a sudden it becomes, ‘Oh, jeez, this is real. There’s actually going to be people sitting out in those seats. Can we do this?’ There’s always anxiety.”* But even though there was increased stress and anxiety associated with tech week, it also became more fun: *“It’s sort of like, okay, we’ve reached the point where we’re in the theater, it’s gonna be more fun; like, we’re getting to the performances.”*

The first couple days of tech week are typically spent going meticulously through each scene to figure out the lighting and sound cues, scene transitions, costume changes, prop

placement, and other technical details to be added (a lot of diversionary play happened during this process). They try to get through the technical work as quickly as possible so the cast can do several full dress rehearsals before the first official performance. They want to run through the show as many times, and as smoothly as possible, so the actors are comfortable with all the new elements. The hope for tech week, as with the rehearsal process overall, is to achieve a level of comfort with the material and with each other such that the actors can be authentic and responsive onstage. To this end, the directors would no longer interrupt to provide directing notes, except to fix a technical issue, but instead took detailed notes of specific and minor refinements, which they would give to the actors after the run through. While providing specific notes on things to change, the directors tried to communicate to the actors that they were doing very well, seeming to recognize a value in the actors feeling comfortable and confident onstage. After the final dress rehearsal before opening night, each of the directors give a similar speech to their cast, about how great the show looked, about trusting themselves and each other, and about just having fun with it.

The challenge is that through this process, the performance risks growing repetitive and stale. The performance needs to be precise and consistent, but it also needs to feel fresh and spontaneous. The PQ director said, *“It’s dangerous when a cast gets so comfortable that they stop listening and they stop making choices. It just becomes automatic onstage, so if anything is slightly off, they don’t know what to do.”* Not only does the performance become stale and lifeless, but they also increase the risk of mistakes when they stop listening and responding to each other. But instead of growing stale in the repetition, what I observed was a third form of play: absorptive play. Mastering the content of their roles did not constrain the performance to

monotony, but instead enabled the actors to play more deeply with each other, and thereby experience and display authenticity in their performance.

Absorptive play occurred in moments of truthful responsiveness when they were fully immersed in their characters. Having established patterns of playing with each other, and having developed truthful characters that they could inhabit, the actors were finally able to begin living truthfully under the imaginary circumstances. In absorptive play, they stopped thinking about what they should be doing, and they started being fully present with each other. The PQ stage manager discussed the importance of the actors being playful onstage: *“the one thing that I always, always, always notice in the show is if the actors are enjoying themselves on stage, not where they’re there acting for themselves, because that’s an entirely different thing, but when they are playing onstage, it’s just a vast difference.”*

The actors were not always engaging in absorptive play onstage (in fact, it was important for them to be focused on technical precision much of the time), but in principle they would try to play with each other as much as they were able. Most of the time in a performance, it might not be evident to each other onstage whether they were playing, or simply performing their roles, unless a moment draws attention to their responsiveness. There were certain types of moments that triggered absorptive play for the actors, which moments served to enliven their performance.

Truthful improvisation: When an actor does something different, such as slightly modifying a gesture, it becomes apparent how fully a scene partner is being responsive versus simply going through the motions. This improvising is distinct from the playful out-of-character improvising of diversionary play and the exploratory improvising of exploratory play. Truthful improvising is changing one’s performance (usually in very subtle ways) in truthful reaction to

what others are doing onstage. Such improvising shows that *“this person not only is listening to me but they’re accepting it and going with it.”* One actor described:

“We had to be willing to play with each other on stage. If you are a present actor, you are listening to whoever you’re on stage with, honestly listening, and that can change everything from one line delivery... I’m actively giving you my attention, and I’m paying enough attention that if something is slightly different or off, it’s going to affect the way I’m doing whatever I do, which is going to in turn affect what you’re doing, if you were listening to me.”

One catalyst for improvisation that was unique to Pirate Queen was when actors would switch casts and perform with a group of actors with whom they were not accustomed to performing. Despite rehearsing the show together and setting the same blocking, the two casts were quite different, and became increasingly different over the course of the performance run as the actors would develop unique moments and character relationships with their castmates. Most of the actors enjoyed when they had a chance to perform with the opposite cast, because *“it made it more fun and exciting.”* As one actor described:

“I actually really liked filling in for my double because the other cast was different. There were different relationships. There were different reactions to different things, and it made my reactions more genuine. I was like, I’m just going to react to whatever happens, and that just makes it more like real life.”

Especially given that Pirate Queen had a seven-week performance run with 8-10 performances each week, changing casts was *“refreshing,”* and helped them *“discover new moments that worked a lot better, or things that were clunky that you can laugh about later.”* Changing casts made the actors *“ultra-responsive... [because] you don’t know what they’ve changed.”* By actively listening and truthfully responding on stage, actors were able to continue finding new moments that added authenticity to their character relationships.

Building up character moments: In the character work process, actors find moments of connection with others. During the performance run, they continue to find new moments onstage.

Furthermore, these moments often grow and evolve into something bigger night after night.

Although repetitive and less surprising each time, these moments did not seem to “get old,” but seemed to become more meaningful with time—they became ritualized. Here is an example:

“Riley and I have this one moment onstage during the wedding, but we built it up, like it was awesome. It started after we all spin around with each other. There was one night when I just looked at him and was like, ‘I’m not dancing with you,’ and I ran away from him. And so it just developed into this thing where he would come up and sit next to me when the guys were all turning around before we do our two lines, and he’d be like, ‘you need to dance with a real dancer,’ and I’m like, ‘I’m not dancing with you Jamie. I’m not going to do it... Go get in line,’ and it just developed into this thing.”

These moments often emerge from truthful improvising, but the meaningfulness of these moments is not from the novelty of the moments, but from the repetition that builds the moments into something special that the actors share. Seeing these moments build over time is evidence that the actors were not simply delivering rote repetitions of their performances each night, but were continuing to play with each other. One actor from PQ, where this was especially pertinent given the length of the performance run, talked about how their reactions onstage “*got bigger and bigger as the show went on.*” Referring to one of her favorite lines in the show given by one of the leads, she described how “*We were squealing by the end [of the performance run]. We were so enraptured in this scene because we ended up getting so invested in the scene.*” Even in the absence of specific lines or blocking to play, actors found ways to play with each other by continuing to be present onstage and building up small moments.

Mistakes: Another way that absorptive play was triggered, and the most frequently observed and discussed bonding moments that happened onstage, were surprisingly when something went wrong or someone made a mistake. Mistakes heightened everyone’s level of attentiveness and forced them to respond to (play with) each other. The actors generally enjoyed moments when something unexpected happened onstage, even when that was caused by a

mistake. In fact, one actor even claimed: *“You ask any theatre person to name their top five theatre stories, it will all be errors.”* Different from the diversionary playful responses to mistakes in the rehearsal process, in performances they had to try to react in character, which added a level of excitement. One actor recounted such an experience from a prior show:

“My favorite moments from any production were things that went wrong. I remember I did a production of Dracula where I forgot [to bring] a knife onstage, and Dracula is supposed to grab the knife and use it to cut the tube, and he has a line that says, ‘Oh thank you for the use of your knife,’ and it was like, what are you going to do? I have a bond with Cal forever because of that, because he just like pushed me to the ground, and I fainted. Those little things are what you live for in theatre.”

Even mistakes that could not be covered up still provided memorable bonding moments. During an ITW performance, one of the actors very loudly shouted out a completely wrong line at the start of the introductory number of Act 2 (she accidentally said the line from the similar number in Act 1). As the actors came offstage at the end of the number, they were laughing uncontrollably, including the one who made the mistake. They talked about how they each were struggling to refrain from laughing onstage, and they could sense each other trying not to laugh, which made it even more difficult. The actor who made the mistake joked that she did it on purpose because *“I think we needed that today.”* Another actor kept thanking her for making him laugh harder than he had in a long time. Mistakes created a sense of attunement and togetherness onstage more quickly than perhaps anything else, instantly generating a sense of absorptive play.

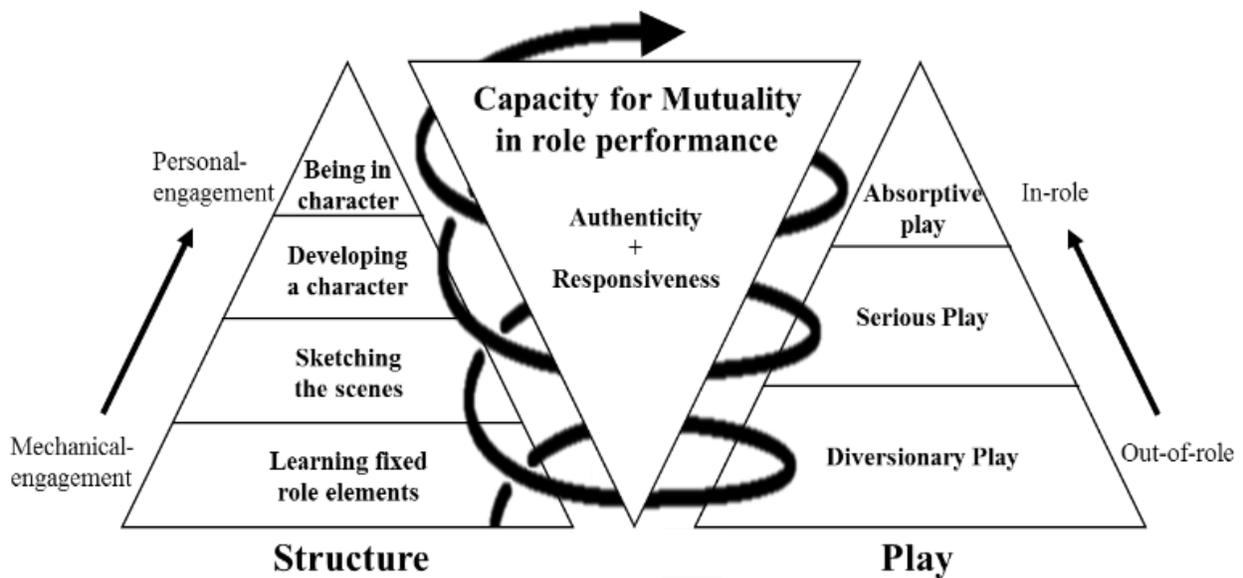
Summary: Absorptive play is not playing to escape their roles, or playing to create their characters, but playing in character. It is the culmination of the actors’ work to develop the capacity to authentically respond to each other in their characters. The actors use their characters as a vehicle to be in the moment with each other. Absorptive play did not necessarily have to be triggered by some improvisation or mistake. Even without noticeable deviations from the routine performance, being in character with others at any time could feel like play, although it may be

less evident whether others are “playing along.” The quality of engagement that characterizes absorptive play offers high potential for moments of mutuality. Although even in absorptive play, mutuality is not a guaranteed, as it is impossible to fully anticipate when actors will make eye contact with another, as they do every night, and experience a moment of felt mutuality.

Integrating Structure and Play

In summary, both the structure and play facets of the theatre process contribute to building the capacity for actors to achieve mutuality in their role performance (see figure 3.3). The process of learning their roles and developing their characters provides a structure in which actors are able to increasingly open themselves up to each other and respond to each other. A widely held view expressed in my interviews was the seeming paradox that characters make it easier for actors to be more fully themselves. Like author and playwright Oscar Wilde famously claimed, “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” Some of the actors I interviewed similarly explained, “*You get to explore*

Figure 3.3: Building Capacity for Mutuality in Role Performance



different sides of who you are through those characters sometimes, and that gives you a little more freedom to be more of yourself almost.” One of the lead actors in PQ referred to a moment in one scene where her character tells her father she loves him. She felt that in those moments, she, the actor, was genuinely telling the person playing her father that she loved him, in a way that she would not necessarily have been comfortable expressing out of character. *“I feel like sometimes it’s harder to express yourself as yourself. So when you’re onstage actually having those moments, sometimes you’re able to say things easier as your characters even though you’re saying the dialogue.”* In this way, the structure of the roles, though seemingly impersonal and constraining, provides a vehicle toward more authentically being with each other.

Play provides the lubricant that facilitates the process of actors opening themselves up and responding to each other. Play moves the actors beyond a focus on the mechanics of their roles, whether by breaking out of the roles completely (as in diversionary play), by playing with the different role elements in pursuit of truthful character development (as in exploratory play), or by leveraging the role as a platform for fully engaging with fellow actors (as in absorptive play). Infusing play into the process offers the benefits of increasing creativity, energy, and emotional vulnerability in the performance. Given the risk of embarrassment when making acting choices, play provides safety to explore and be open and responsive, precisely because it is just play. Altogether, play helps breathe life into the rehearsal and performance process, enabling actors to bring more truthful engagement to their roles.

The two facets of structure and play, when appropriately balanced, worked together to mutually potentiate moments of mutuality onstage. Structure did not impede or constrain play, nor did play undermine structure. Roles provided the opportunity and fodder for play, while play animated the roles. Both facets were important; the capacity for mutuality grew as roles became

more playful, and as play became more embedded within roles. Ultimately, the objective was for actors to be truthful in character with each other, engaged in absorptive play, where the structure and play became fully integrated. But this integration took time to achieve.

From the beginning of the rehearsal process, actors are presented with two seemingly opposing messages. On the one hand, actors are given strict expectations of professionalism, precision, and reliability, including the need to arrive on time, come prepared, take detailed notes, and stay focused (i.e., structure). On the other hand, they are told that they should have fun, feel free to make bold acting choices, and try out different ways of approaching their characters (i.e., play). The PQ director described the balance between structure and play, *“I want to create a safe place. I want to empower you to make choices. But at the same time, I’m holding you accountable for a lot of stuff. You have to come prepared,”* referring to knowing their lines and blocking so they do not disrupt the rest of the group in rehearsal.

The early rehearsals focusing on learning music, choreography, or setting the shape of the scenes felt more structural than playful, and mutuality was inhibited in much the same way as it is inhibited in work organizations. As the actors focused on learning their roles and getting their lines and blocking right, they had limited capacity to develop their characters, which constrained their ability to be authentic with each other in their role performance. The roles did compel some level of attention and responsiveness to each other, but their ability to respond to each other genuinely was likewise limited.

The work done in the early rehearsals, capacity for mutuality was low, had at least two important consequences for building the capacity for mutuality. First, the actors needed to sufficiently learn their roles in order to have the attention capacity to be authentic and responsive to each other. Second, the mechanical process of learning the roles frequently led to moments of

diversionary play. By frequently interjecting moments of diversionary play in this process, the actors demonstrated that they were not only there to work, but to play with each other. The socio-cultural position of the theatre institution as a place for play suggests that what happens inside the walls of the theatre should be seen as play. However, given the complex work involved, this latent play frame (Bateson, 1972) must be continually reinforced. Diversionary play pulls actors out of their self-focus and performance focus as they learn the roles, reminding them of their higher purpose of being with each other.

From the moments of diversionary play, actors became increasingly comfortable with being playful in the process. As the focus shifted to character work, actors needed to, and felt able to, bring playful engagement into the work in order to develop a truthful character. Over the course of the rehearsal process, playful engagement was increasingly infused into the actual role performance, until actors were able to fully be in their characters and experience the performance as absorptive play. When the performance was play, and not rote repetition or individualistic role delivery, the actors and the audience could feel the connections happening onstage. Actors felt together, authentic with each other, responsive to each other, and mutuality was achieved.

Discussion

In this study, I find that actors develop the capacity for mutuality in role performance by infusing the work of learning and performing their roles with play. Play is the mechanism through which actors transcend the rigid mechanics of their roles and experience a sense of freedom to personally engage with their roles and with each other. Historically, play and work have long been considered antithetical domains of life. However, I find that in theatre the work of learning and performing the role is tightly coupled with the experience of play—in a sense work and play are answering to one another, potentiating each other. Counterintuitively, as the

actors become more immersed in the work, their experience of play becomes more profound. My findings lay out the process through which the work and play of the role performance evolve together, with the actors moving from mechanical, role-based engagement with each other to more authentic, more responsive, and more truthful engagement with each other.

Mutuality and High Quality Connection

Theoretically, this study contributes to our understanding of the nature of HQCs. Of the three elements of HQCs—vitality, positive regard, and mutuality—mutuality has been the least examined and understood. This study joins study 1 in suggesting that mutuality holds a central position in the phenomenon of HQCs. Although vitality and positive regard were not explicitly discussed here, both resulted from the moments of connection experienced onstage, which moments typified HQCs. But mutuality seems to be the source of connection from which emerged the other two components. In other words, mutuality seems to be the substance of a HQC, whereas vitality and positive regard are outcomes of a HQC.

Furthermore, this study joins study one in adding to our understand of how to cultivate HQCs. This study reveals mutuality to have two components: authenticity and responsiveness. The mechanisms for building HQCs that were compiled in the POS handbook chapter focus primarily on the responsiveness aspect of mutuality, or coming to “see,” understand, and appreciate the other (e.g., perspective-taking, empathy, respectful engagement). What seems neglected in our current understanding, and equally important, is the vulnerability aspect associated with being authentic (i.e., living truthfully) in the moment, or allowing oneself to be “seen.” I argue that if people try to engage with another, but do so in an inauthentic or invulnerable way, they will fail to achieve mutuality.

Competition on the lacrosse team facilitated both responsiveness and authenticity. In theatre we see an additional pathway to mutuality, also a form of play, which is role-playing. In the next two sections, I situate my findings in the literatures on roles and play.

The Role of Roles and Personal Engagement

Historically, roles were considered devices to promote coordination and efficiency in organizations, with the effect of constraining one's behavior to a limited script. Roles have also been thought to depersonalize workplace associations. More recently in the organizational behavior literature, Kahn and others have moved the discussion of roles toward the notion of personal engagement (1990; 1992), which he defines as "the channeling of personal energies into physical, cognitive, and emotional labors" (1990). Kahn theorizes a set of conditions that foster personal engagement, including safety, meaningfulness, and psychological availability. This study builds on and extends the notion of personal engagement as an essential element of achieving HQCs, by moving from an understanding of personal engagement as a static outcome of a set of antecedent variables, to a more dynamic relational process.

Our understanding of the ways in which people channel their personal energies into their roles is limited, particularly where roles are rigidly structured. In this study, I identify two interrelated facets of theatre roles, the role and the character. The role, especially the text, is predetermined, structured, and impersonal; any actor could do the same role. The character is what is underlying the role, which includes the intentions, meanings, and personality behind the role. Through the process of developing a personalized character, actors can channel their personal energies into their roles, which reflects in subtle ways in the role performance, without dramatically altering the role, and makes them more present and connected with their fellow actors onstage. Making the distinction between role and character helps us see how roles do not

necessarily hinder authenticity, but rather can provide a scaffolding that enables actors to be more fully authentic. I also lay out a pathway to personal engagement through different forms of play, bringing a new understanding of the term role-playing in organizations.

The Role of Play

The final area of contribution is to our understanding of play, and the potential for play (and mutuality) in organizations. Theatre and play are inseparably connected. Nachmanovitch (1990) describes the familial relationship between play and art, that *“Play is the taproot from which original art springs; it is the raw stuff that the artist channels and organizes with all his learning and technique”* (p. 42). Playing,” both onstage and in the rehearsal room, is central to what performance art is. This study extends our view of play beyond the diversionary play of Roy’s banana time, and the serious play of gamification, to instead seeing the potential for absorptive play in performing a role.

In this study, I identify three forms of play with differential integration with the work. Diversionary play allowed actors to break out of, and “make light” of the work they were doing. Diversionary play, like banana time or a foosball table in the break room, served to “break the ice” among the actors, helping develop a sense of comfort with each other and, perhaps more importantly, reinforcing an ethos of play. As Bateson (1972) would describe, diversionary play signals a play frame over the group, and a shared sense that they are there to play.

As the actors moved into the later stages of rehearsal, the work itself began to be more playful, initially in the form of exploratory play. Exploratory play resembles the organizational concept of “serious play,” or play that is set up with the deliberate intention to improve work tasks (Schrage, 2013). Often exploratory play occurred through improvised experimentation (usually director-led) during the scene work, as actors were pushed to think about how they

would really respond as their character in each moment. Although director-led, exploratory play in theatre seemed to avoid the negative reactions often produced by “mandatory fun” (Mollick & Rothbard, 2014), as seen in the gamification trend. In exploratory play, actors became more responsive to each other on stage, and allowed more vulnerability by showing more of themselves in their characters.

The third form of play, which I term “absorptive play,” resembles the conceptualizations of play developed in philosophy and anthropology (e.g., Huizinga, 1955), which argue that play is pursued with seriousness, absorption and intensity. Huizinga describes play as “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ordinary life...but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly” (p. 13). This play occurred when actors onstage experienced profound moments of togetherness in which they were no longer merely performing their roles, but they were genuinely “being” with each other and responding to each other. These moments are what breathe life into the show, and are widely recognized as vital to the success of the performance. In moments of absorptive play, actors experience HQCs by achieving the dual experience of vulnerability/authenticity and responsiveness.

These three forms of play in theatre demonstrate how play can cultivate mutuality in the work of learning and performing roles. By providing a more nuanced look at how play manifests in a context where integrating play and work is vital, we shed light on how play and work might be fruitfully integrated in other role-based organizations, answering calls for further exploration of the connection between work and play (Butler et al., 2011; Mainemelis & Dionysiou, 2015).

Boundary conditions

Similar to the lacrosse study, and all qualitative research, this study also has limitations in its potential generalizability to the work context. As Lincoln and Guba (2002) suggest,

transferability of findings from the theatre to the work organization is appropriate “if [the work organization] is sufficiently like [the theatre] on those elements or factors or circumstances that the [theatre] inquiry found to be significant” (p. 207). In this case, the important point of connection is the role dynamics, and so we should consider the extent to which roles and role performance in theatre are similar to roles in work organizations. For example, these findings may be most readily applicable to organizations where roles similarly balance structure and freedom within the structure, or where roles are not overly undefined and sufficiently personalizable, promoting authenticity. Also, roles in theatre are highly interdependent, promoting responsiveness in role performance, so mutuality may be more easily achievable in contexts where roles are similarly interdependent. Lastly, and perhaps most difficult to replicate in organizations, theatre roles exhibit a separation from extrinsic outcomes, allowing the role performance to be playful. Organizations might consider using roles in a similar way by dissociating role performance from specific extrinsic outcomes.

There are certain features of roles in theatre that set them apart from traditional organizational roles and limit the generalizability of this study. The most stark difference that makes theatre unique is that the content of roles in theatre is often emotional, and therefore more conducive to intimate moments. Relatedly, theatre roles often entail a degree of physical contact that organizational roles would not, which also facilitates more personal connecting. I observed a variety of genres to deliberately explore whether the emotional tone of the show (or the physicality or any aspects of the show content) influenced mutuality, but the experiences of the actors were consistent across each show. Whether in an epic romance or a light-hearted comedy, actors found moments of mutuality, and the roles all had a layer of emotionality. Future research

is needed to examine the extent to which mutuality in moments of play can occur absent the deliberate emotionality and physicality in theatre.

Another unique feature of theatre, is that actors are often seen as people who are particularly open with others, emotionally expressive, responsive, or at least who love role-playing (I discussed a similar boundary condition with the lacrosse study regarding competition). I was surprised to hear many of the actors describe themselves as introverts, but who see theatre as an outlet for them to open themselves up to others and to themselves. So theatre actors are certainly not all outgoing. Also, being amateur community theatre, actors came from a wide variety of backgrounds and professions. Nonetheless, there could be individual characteristics that attract actors to doing theatre which also make them more willing and able to achieve mutuality. Perhaps most importantly is their past experience doing theatre, which prepares them to find mutuality in each subsequent show.

Future research should explore how these findings apply in other settings. The model presents an interaction of role structure and play that cultivates authenticity and responsiveness. But the types of roles and the forms of play needed to cultivate mutuality will likely vary across contexts. Notably absent from the model are the contextual factors that enabled this process to unfold. There are certainly aspects of the relational climate in theatre that facilitate playfulness. The collective culture, the role of the directors and leaders within the cast, the audience participation, and even the physical space of the theatre all play a role in shaping moments of mutuality, which I was not able to address in this study.

Organizational implications

As organizations increasingly strive to create a more humanized work experience, and cultivate meaningful connections in the workplace, play is naturally seeping in. Managers using

play in organizations is not a particularly new phenomenon. For example, consultants have been incorporating play into industrial settings at least since Moreno's psychodrama, a theatrical technique used in therapeutic work, was imported into industrial settings (French Jr., 1945; Lippitt, 1943). More recently, there has been a surge of interest in managers facilitating diversionary play and/or leveraging gamification to make work and the workplace more playful. However, managers' efforts to encourage play at work are often seen as inauthentic or contrived, as devices to improve worker performance, perhaps because that is precisely the intent.

The successful integration of play in theatre performance offers several insights for practice. First, role performance in theatre can be playful because play is what they are there for—the play is for its own sake, not for some external objective. The spirit of play is reinforced by the moments of diversionary play, and is infused into the work by director led techniques of serious play. The actors did not resist the serious play involved in character work because although it was contrived, the purpose of the serious play was consistent with their own purpose.

Also, the play was not simply imposed on some menial task. The roles had the latitude for personal engagement and adaptation, and so playing with the roles had the possibility of increasing authenticity and responsiveness. If the task was overly mechanical, trying to make it playful might not contribute to increasing authenticity and responsiveness, without which it would not feel like play. Because the purpose of play is to more fully come into being and achieve mutuality with another, as demonstrated in theatre, the activity must be able to accommodate and support that purpose in order for it to be experienced as play.

Conclusion

In summary, this study exhibits how actors achieve moments of mutuality—initially by breaking out of their roles, and then ultimately by immersing themselves into their characters—

through the humanizing experience of play. Mutuality, which results from actors being authentic and responsive to each other, is achieved as actors develop personalized, truthful characters, which process is facilitated by playing with and in their roles. I observe that structure and play are not opposed to each other, but are interdependent and potentiate each other. Moments of mutuality onstage, when actors feel deeply human and deeply connected to each other, realize the purpose of theatre, both for the actors involved and for the audience they are performing to.

CHAPTER 4

Bringing Play and Mutuality into the Workplace

In both studies seeking to unpack moments of high quality connection, mutuality emerged as the driving mechanism, and play emerged as an important pathway to cultivating mutuality. It is perhaps no coincidence that these two contexts of sport and theatre, which both produce frequent and intense instances of mutuality, share a common “stance of play” (Hyland, 1990: 115). It is perhaps also no coincidence that in work organizations, where mutuality is often inhibited, play has historically been discouraged either explicitly or normatively. In this chapter, before returning to HQC where I began, true to inductive form I go where the dissertation has taken me, which is to consider the concept of play and its potential as a source of mutuality in work organizations. I first expound on sports and theatre as forms of play, identifying commonalities between the two studies. I then move to a higher abstraction to consider how to conceptualize play based on the two studies. Finally, I move to a discussion on the potential for integrating play and work, as well as the potential for mutuality at work through play.

Sport and Theatre as Forms of Play

Since the ancient Greeks, who are credited for creating both drama and organized sport under the same play-spirit, sports and theatre have long captivated a significant space within the socio-cultural sphere. We do not know exactly when sports or theatre were conceived, but throughout their extensive history the link to play appears undeniable. Sports and theatre are two

of the most readily identifiable forms of play known to our society. From the two studies, I see three primary commonalities that unite sports and theatre as forms of play. First, they seem to share a common purpose, which is simply to play, and to play as well as possible, and by so doing come into a higher state of being. Second, in service of this purpose, they both involve a separation from ordinary life, reinforced through physical and temporal demarcation as well as distinct rules and norms. Third, resulting from this separation, both have an absorptive quality, which produces similar moments of connection in sports and theatre, driven by mutuality.

The purpose of sport and theatre

The first commonality between lacrosse and theatre is that participants in both contexts were passionate about lacrosse or theatre, and did not participate for extrinsic benefit. Despite the fact that sport and theatre are not intended to add any functional utility to society, they continue to be cherished as institutions in their own right for their enjoyment and aesthetically pleasing quality. In the preface of his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde (1891) noted that “all art is quite useless,” acknowledging that his work fundamentally opposes the Marxist notion that “nothing can be of value without being an object of utility” (2004: 131). Hegel (1959) argues that sports represent a “higher seriousness” (p. 55). Indeed, theatre and sports are not purposeful in the way that a bridge or a machine is. But to say that sporting events and theatrical performances lack purpose is not to say that they lack meaning; rather, they are meaningful ends in themselves (Morgan, 2007). By escaping from the hegemony of purposiveness, theatre and sports promote the development of more playful sensibility (Huizinga, 1955; Guardini, 1997).

This higher seriousness or sensibility that makes sport and art analogous phenomena is manifest in the similar resonance experienced by athletes and actors, which is an aesthetic resonance. Frayssinet (1968) contends that sport is an art, because the *raison-d’être* lies in the

effort to achieve beauty. The origin of this idea lies in the aesthetic value the Greeks acknowledged both in the arts and sports. Huizinga contends that if the arts lost the play essence which is their purpose, they would lose their beauty, sacredness, and magic. In lacrosse, the players' ultimate goal was not personal victory of the other, but to play the best game they could, or to achieve excellence. Similarly in theatre, actors did not strive to steal the spotlight for personal gain (lest the play should erode into something less beautiful and truthful). Lacrosse players and actors share a common striving toward creating something beautiful together. What they love about playing is the person they can become in play, and the connections they can experience in play. This aesthetic beauty perceived and experienced in sport and theatre speaks to an existential component of play that connects us all as fellow humans and players.

Separation of sport and theatre from ordinary life

The higher seriousness of play is reinforced by a separation of play from ordinary life, which is “marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course” (Huizinga, 1955: 10). Play resides in a sort of fantasy, or “make-believe,” world, referred to by Huizinga as a magic circle. Goffman (1974) explains make-believe as a frame that people can share when they are willingly “transformed into collaborators in unreality” (p. 136). In this fantasy world there must be some form of tension or uncertainty, creating a suspense that fuels that fantasy. In lacrosse and in theatre, this separation demands that the players fully commit to the “rules of the game” to keep the play alive. The lacrosse players only achieved mutuality as they played within the bounds of acceptable play. The theater even more clearly illustrates such separation: “The transition between realities is marked by the rising and falling of the curtain. As the curtain rises, the spectator is ‘transported to another world,’ with its own meanings and an order that may or may not have much to do with the order of everyday life”

(Berger & Luckmann, 1967: 25). Actors only achieved mutuality as they fully embraced and entered into their roles onstage. And within the rules and structure of the play, there was sufficient tension and uncertainty among the players to keep them fully engaged and committed to the play, which leads to my final commonality.

Absorptive quality of sport and theatre

Third, both lacrosse and theatre share a common absorptive quality, wherein moments of mutuality emerged. Play requires an active, alert mind. Players' attention is wrapped up in the ideas, rules, and actions of the game, and is relatively impervious to outside distractions, creating a reduced consciousness of self and time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). And because play enters into a sort of fantasy world, where the outcomes do not have immediate consequences in the real world, the person at play is relatively free from pressure or stress. Huizinga (1955) states that play "is a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own. It is only pretending, only for fun. Nevertheless...(this) does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion" (p. 8). Goffman (1974) similarly relates that "make-believe" activities are deeply engrossing (i.e., absorbing and directing attention to a projected alternate realm), which makes these worlds seem real (p. 347). Bateson (1972) describes this as entering a "play frame," in which we treat the activities as real, but at the same time know that they are not "real," or "the paradox of play" (p. 162). Although in lacrosse and theatre there may be no external consequence to what happens onstage or on the field, within their delimited spheres it still felt like the most real and important thing in the world. Whether in competition or in role playing, when players are "caught up in or carried away by" the play, the outside world seems to fade into irrelevance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981). This

dynamic in play both demands and frees players to be fully present, vulnerable, attuned, and responsive to each other.

Summary

In summary, although in modern times athletes and actors might appear (and endeavor) to belong in very distinct social spheres (actors especially often remark on how unlike athletes they are), they both experience play in similar ways. Both groups have an appreciation for play, and work to create, nurture, and intensify play. Looking at the commonalities between these seemingly very different groups of people engaged in very different activities illuminates certain core characteristics of play, which I discuss in the next section.

Conceptualizing Play

Having inductively identified a set of commonalities between lacrosse and theatre, I now turn to the play literature to compare what I learned to how play is currently conceptualized. Contemporary play theory was introduced by Huizinga (1955) in his seminal book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture*, in which he sought to position play as elementary to the human condition and a fundamental activity in social and cultural life. Everybody is familiar with the experience of play, and yet it is difficult to articulate. Nachmanovitch (2009) even says, “Play is easy to recognize but impossible to define. We may try to define it, but our definitions will be clumsy, inadequate, and circular” (p. 15). Play is a multifaceted construct that has been examined across various social science disciplines focusing on different aspects of its nature, purpose, and manifestation. Despite the diverse attempts at conceptualizing play, we still lack a concrete understanding of what play is.

Central to how play is currently conceptualized, different perspectives generally agree that play is not a specific type of activity, but is a behavioral orientation (Huizinga, 1955), a state

(Csikszentmihalyi & Bennett, 1971), or a mental frame (Bateson, 1972), meaning any activity can be play if it meets the above characteristics. Beyond this, most definitions of play are limited to listing characteristics of play, or often what play is not—akin to defining fire as something hot, red orange, that makes smoke, and that goes out when you pour water on it. Huizinga (1955) laid out an initial set of characteristics of play, and subsequent conceptualizations, most prominently by sociologist Roger Caillois (1961) and most recently by organizational scholar Babis Mainemelis (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006), have largely agreed with or only slightly modified Huizinga’s foundation (Appendix E includes a table listing the characteristics of play according to Huizinga, Caillois, and Mainemelis). The four most agreed upon characteristics seem to be: 1) play is self-chosen, or freely entered into, 2) play is intrinsically motivated—the means (the experience of play itself) are valued more than the ends, 3) play is guided by agreed upon rules, but leaves room for uncertainty and creativity, 4) play is imaginative, involving some distancing from the present, “real world.”

Where Caillois differs from Huizinga is primarily regarding the forms in which play can appear. Huizinga emphasized competition or contest as a form of play (i.e. cooperative agonism). Caillois (1961) presented four forms of play—competition, chance (e.g., playing a slot machine), role-playing, and “ilinx” (Greek for “whirlpool;” e.g., riding a roller coaster). Bridging play theory and organizational theory, Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) emphasize play as a behavioral orientation that can be applied to almost any activity, including work. Work and play do not necessarily represent different activities, but different ways of approaching alike activities (see also Glynn, 1994). Huizinga and Caillois agree that play is a behavioral orientation, although they are more skeptical regarding the possibility of work being play.

The characteristics of play identified in the literature are present in lacrosse and theatre, but they do not fully capture what makes sports and theatre play. These characteristics describe *what* play is—what it looks like, how it is structured—but not *why* play is or *how* it is experienced. The *what* characteristics correspond with the separation from ordinary life described previously. Most of the characteristics used to define play relate to this separation, including spatio-temporal bounding, freedom and uncertainty within a set of rules, and some imaginative or “fantasy world” distinction. The forms play takes varies, as we see in the rules of lacrosse and the roles in theatre, but the important factor seems to be maintaining a separation from ordinary life through order and some element of suspense.

Considering what play is for, or its telos, can give us a deeper understanding of what play is. Both Huizinga and Caillois depicted play as susceptible to perversion if attempted to accomplish an explicit function. As Klaus Meier (1980) describes, “Play is not a means to external ends or purposes; it does not further survival, sustenance, pragmatic, or materialistic interests. It is process rather than product oriented. The interest in play is the pursuit of internal values and ends; the reward is in the act. Thus, the prize of play is play itself” (p. 25). That is not to suggest that play will not still have functional utility, but that utility is not what the play is for.

Most play scholars agree that play is done for its own sake, but what is “its own sake”? If not for some extrinsic reward, what is the intrinsic reward of play? Looking at sport and theatre provides some insight on this question. As described above, lacrosse players and actors loved playing together because they loved the experience of being in play—the intensity, the connectedness, the vulnerability. In short, sport and theatre seem to be for bringing players into a higher state of being—real being that produces mutuality. The absorptive quality is play is what the players strived to create and maintain. That is what play is for.

Building on this telos, I propose that the mode of engagement that defines play can be summarized as being fully present, vulnerable, responsive, not concerned about the outside world or external objectives, just being with each other, playing off of each other. Rather than defining play by a list of characteristics, which lend themselves to a wide variety of forms, we could think of play more simply as a mode of more fully being with each other facilitated by a separation from ordinary life. Sport and theatre exemplify this orientation.

In the next section, I use sports and theatre as models as I consider the potential for play in work organizations. Having established the play qualities of sport and theatre, these activities still have characteristics that resemble work organizations. Gehlen (1965: 28) sees in sport a “modified copy of real and serious situations and of working life,” because sport has an “inner similarity of structure” in which features of the world of work are present in the form of rules, disciplinary regulations, and special morals. The same could be said of theatre. Magnane (1964) describes this parallelism with the formula: “work as play and play as work” (p. 121). The similarities between sport/theatre and work may open the door for integrating play and work.

Integrating Play and Work

Huizinga depicts play as a core aspect of human nature that, although not always recognized as such, is in fact unavoidable in organizational life. It can be constrained or enabled within organizations, but the need or desire to play is ever present (Roy, 1959). Given the centrality of play in human nature, it is notable that still “play as a topic of inquiry is among the least studied and least understood organizational behaviors” (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 82).⁵

⁵ There are related concepts, fun and games or gamification, that have received more research attention in the management literature, and which are more easily defined. In Appendix E I provide a detailed comparison play to fun and gamification as they have been discussed in the literature.

Work and play share some common features, namely the distinct rules and role structures, the main distinction being that the primary driver of play is enjoyment rather than objective goals and efficiency (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). With organizations seeking to optimize performance and efficiency, play has typically been seen as a deterrent to positive firm outcomes (Mainemelis & Altman, 2010; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). As Henry Ford famously stated, which was later adopted as the Ford philosophy and prominently displayed on the shop floor: “When we are at work, we ought to be at work. When we are at play we ought to be at play. There is no use trying to mix the two. When the work is done, then the play can come, but not before” (as cited in Collinson, 2002: 276). Reflecting this perspective, neoclassical labor economic theories limit play to activities exclusively engaged in *outside of work*—i.e., in one’s “free” time (Becker, 1965; Jett & George, 2003). The rational, bureaucratic paradigm of modern capitalism, which emerged from the values of a Protestant work ethic, relegated play to be seen as merely a frivolous, mindless, and unproductive activity with no purpose other than having fun, taking a break from work, and being with friends (Statler, Roos, & Victor, 2009). Max Weber (1904/1958) argued that the prerational frivolity (or “higher seriousness”) of play and the rational efficiency of bureaucracy are ultimately incommensurable.

For a long time, organizational scholars largely followed suit, assuming a rigidly straightforward position that work and play are at odds with each other. In the 1980s, the trend toward creating cultures conducive to fun, humor, and play became prominent (e.g., Peters & Waterman, 1982; Deal & Kennedy, 1982). There was a growing aim to change the stereotype of work as a boring, serious activity. But the emergence of informal dress codes, office parties, and work games faced persistent employee cynicism around play at work, which begs the question

whether some kind of dissonance will inevitably result from attempts to incorporate play into rationalized work systems. Fleming (2005: 298) explains this cynicism as follows:

“Outside of work, when employees genuinely have fun and engage in various activities associated with joyful experiences, their sense of volition is undoubtedly high. They do it because they choose to—or perceive that they choose to... But when these experiences are transferred into the workplace, history cannot be so easily erased from the collective memory of workers. Just as before, the locus of control is still with the company.”

It is not surprising that much past research has demonstrated how some of the most playful workplaces are ones that workers created themselves, independent of and often against management. For example, the classic ethnographic accounts of life on the shop floor by Roy (1959) and Burawoy (1979) demonstrate the organic nature of play and the heightened sense of bonding that develops. When play is self-initiated in this way, however, managers may find it in opposition to their authority, even though it may actually lead to higher productivity, as Gouldner (1955) discovered in relation to “indulgency patterns.” Play is often viewed as a feeble and even dangerous behavior in the workplace (March, 1976; Roy, 1959; Sandelands, 1988). Fleming (2005) suggested that play may not only be incongruous with managerial control, but gain its very inspiration from being against authority. Others have noted that self-initiated play at work may be interpreted as seditiousness simply because it has not been officially sanctioned (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Fleming & Sewell, 2002).

It is also not surprising that many of the emerging playful practices being incorporated in organizations focus on making the overall work experience more enjoyable, but not necessarily making the work itself more enjoyable. This distinction parallels the distinction that Pratt and Ashforth (2003) make between ‘meaning in’ and ‘meaning at’ work, the former referring to the nature of the task and the latter referring to the broader experience of being in the organization. Incorporating play around the work, but not in the work itself, acknowledges that a task is not

inherently rewarding or engaging, and then seeks to hide the non-motivating nature of the task under a layer of fun games – a process sometimes referred to in the literature on gamification as “chocolate covered broccoli” (Bruckman, 1999). For example, Roy’s (1959) “Banana Time” was a game that had no relation to the work itself, but it made the employees’ experience at work more enjoyable. The same could be said of having putting greens and ping pong tables at work.

Research examining the complicated relationship between play and work has traditionally adopted a view of play as an “extra” behavior that might complement the execution of work in organizations. The focus has been on utilizing play to promote the organization’s objectives, or the instrumental potential of play. However, this narrow view of play at work is being expanded by those pushing for a humanizing of the corporate domain, arguing that more important than the organizational purposes of play is that play can humanize work and workplace interactions.

Organizational life is no longer narrowly defined as being just about work; the scope of organizational life has become more holistic. The notion of organizational life now represents “a site for the search for ‘personal wellness’, a place and time where ‘well-being’ is defined and self-expression actively encouraged, where ‘happiness’ is sought through a proliferation of techniques celebrating the self” (Costea, Crump, & Holm, 2005: 141). As a result, the use of play in relation to management and organizational settings has received increasing interest, for instance, by relating play to ‘wellness’ (Costea et al. 2005; Butler et al., 2011).

As interest in play at work becomes less instrumental and more intrinsic, and the telos of work and play align, the potential for making work playful is unlocked. A prime example is found in Lundin and colleagues’ (2000) popular book on the Pike Place fishmongers in Seattle, which describes a close-knit community of employees experiencing their work as play. At Pike Place, a personal, intimate, and nonhierarchical system of management generated a sense of

playfulness and enthusiastic “fooling around.” This culture was reinforced by institutional rituals, and features such as a sign that read, “This is a playground—watch out for adult children” (p. 88). A central tenet of what is now being commercialized as the Fish! Philosophy is the perhaps clichéd notion that you may not be able to choose what work you do, but you can choose how you do it. The fictional manager and heroine of the book, Mary Jane Ramirez, described: “This is a real business which is run to make a profit. This business pays a lot of salaries, and we take the business seriously, but we discovered we could be serious about business and still have fun with the way we conducted business.”

This example illustrates the separation from ordinary life that creates the basis for play, as well as the interest in playing just to play. Work organizations have at their disposal a wealth of devices to promote a particular culture or purpose, including rituals and artifacts. By establishing a purpose like having fun at Pike Place, structures and practices in the organization can be repurposed from tools of efficiency to part of the play. For example, when the express purpose is to play with each other, rather than trying to hide or subdue any competition among employees, organizations might embrace the competition and make it more explicit as part of the play. Rather than minimizing roles, roles could be vehicles of play.

As organizations increasingly embrace the integration of play and the doing of work, play has been gaining traction in organizational scholarship as scholars explore the relevance, value, and meaning of play in organizations, especially as a stimulant of well-being, creativity, and sociability in organizations (Mainemelis and Dionysiou, 2015; Mainemelis & Altman, 2010; Sandelands, 2010; Statler, Heracleous, & Jacobs, 2011; Statler, Roos, & Victor, 2009).⁶

⁶ See Appendix F for a detailed literature review of the reported benefits of play and fun in organizational research, including the effects of play on group cohesion, communication, creativity, learning, job satisfaction, and other individual and organizational outcomes.

Returning to the examples of lacrosse and theatre, play contributes both to intrinsic enjoyment and to the “work” performance in lacrosse and theatre. The shared moments of play in competition enabled lacrosse players to push each other to greater levels of performance without feeling animosity toward those trying to beat them in competition. Play heightens engagement, which likely increases effort and learning during practices. Play in theatre helped actors be willing be vulnerable with each other, not afraid of making mistakes or looking silly, and comfortable tapping into and expressing emotions appropriate for the scenes. Being at play frees the actors to be fully present in the scene, knowing that if they make a mistake or play with a new idea, their scene partners are right there with them ready to playfully respond to whatever happens. Moments of play benefit the individual and group performance in the moment, but also build capacity for enhanced performance after the moment of play by providing building blocks for positive relationships. In short, play is a central facet of the work accomplished in both domains. Of course, too much focus on the work benefits of play risks shifting the purpose of the play toward these extrinsic benefits, which would corrupt the play.

The more central finding from these studies is that the potential for work to be playful may be directly connected to the potential for mutuality in organizations. As discussed in each of the previous chapters, organizations have characteristics that seem to inhibit mutuality. But when those same characteristics were used in play (competition in lacrosse and roles in theatre), they cultivated mutuality. In the final chapter, I develop a model of mutuality in which I more fully explore the relationship between play and mutuality.

Potential Dark Sides of Play at Work

Admittedly, I have painted a very rosy image of the potential for play at work. As with seemingly all good things, there may be potential dark sides to incorporating play at work. Most

obviously, play could be leveraged as a device to manipulate worker performance. This has been the major criticism of the gamification trend, although as an imposed counterfeit of “play,” which the workers resist, it is not actually play.

Because play involves a set of rules that do not apply outside in ordinary life, play, by its very nature, is somewhat anarchic—stepping outside of normal life and breaking normal patterns. Whoever sets the rules of play has a lot of influence in the group. Stuart Brown (2009) described, “Some people use this quality of play as cover for sadistic or cruel treatment of others. ‘Hey,’ they might say if others object, ‘you can’t take a little playful hassling’ What’s wrong with you?’ This is not a dark side of play, because it is not play. It’s an attack under a false flag” (p. 193). But in normal play people can still cause harm when they bend the social rules too far, for example by making a joke that is too personal. But when the intentions are genuinely playful, not cruel or manipulative, such harm should be corrected and avoided in the future.

Another potential dark side of play is that its absorptive and seductive qualities can cause people to get carried away in the play. In lacrosse, this might translate as players failing classes because they become obsessed with lacrosse. In theatre, I observed people engaging in behaviors with castmates that might be destructive to their family relationships at home. The deep, momentary connections experienced in play may get confounded with having a strong, close relationship, which is revealed to not actually exist once the show is over. But taking play too far is no more a dark side of play than obesity is a dark side of food. It is not the fault of the play, but of ourselves, and such tendencies may be indicators of deeper psychological struggles.

Conclusion

Given the recent trends toward making work more playful, and the growing empirical support for the individual and organizational benefits of play, it is not surprising that

organizational research is beginning to consider an important and timely question: How can the world of work tolerate, stimulate, nurture, and/or institutionalize play (Mainemelis & Dionysiou, 2015)? This dissertation sheds some light on this question. From the lacrosse study we learn how competitive environments can nurture play, or keep the competition playful. From the theatre study, we learn how organizations with rigid roles can nurture play in role performance.

The objective of this dissertation was not to explore how to cultivate play at work, but how to cultivate high quality connections. Upon twice discovering the role of play in cultivating HQCs, I feel drawn, with Mainemelis & Stierand (2016), to contemplate the questions: What if play were the core motive of work? What if play was not an adornment of work but the very reason that much good, beautiful and meaningful work comes into being? What if work were meaningless without play? For sport philosopher Michael Novak (1993), “Play, not work, is the end of life” (p. 40). I might replace the word play with “being,” but the two seem profoundly connected. Play is a meaningful objective that counters the depersonalization often experienced in organizations (Mirvis, 1994). Kane (2004) states that, “playing together, instead of working together, [would] be a saner, more fruitful way... to find a liveable life within companies and institutions” (p. 257). Stuart Brown (2009) says it well:

“When we play, we are engaged in the purest expression of our humanity, the truest expression of our individuality. Is it any wonder that often the times we feel most alive, those that make up our best memories, are moments of play?... Remembering what play is all about and making it part of our daily lives are probably the most important factors in being a fulfilled human being. We don’t need to play all the time to be fulfilled, just have moments of play that act as catalysts and influence our work and home relationships and innovative capacities... We were designed to find fulfillment through play” (p. 5).

This perspective shifts our focus from considering how people can play in a way that benefits work, to how they can work in a way that promotes play and being in relation. On this basis we should redesign our organizations “so that we can follow this playful human nature—

rather than constantly shave the blade against, across and through it” (Kane, 2004: 12). The two studies in this dissertation illustrate how people can engage in competition and role performance in a way that promotes being in relation. These studies suggest that work and play are not mutually opposed to each other, they are mutually supportive. It is precisely the work characteristics of competition and role structure that enabled the play in both contexts. Work and play answer to each other; they potentiate each other. Work structure provides a scaffolding in which people are invited to engage with each other. Play provides an architecture for engaging on a more personal, emotional, and intrinsically meaningful basis, superimposing organic personal relationships upon mechanistic work relationships (Locke, 1989). Barsoux (1993) argues that such activities are an essential part of humanizing organizations. In a society where work is increasingly individualistic, and opportunities to experience high quality connections outside of work are growing more scarce, play offers the potential to enliven workplace connections, inviting participants to come into being in relation.

CHAPTER 5:

Being in Relation: Toward a Theory of Mutuality

Introduction and Motivation

Having begun this dissertation with an interest in exploring HQCs, and then shifting my focus to mutuality, the most basic question remains: How do we explain these moments of human connection? What is happening between people in these moments that causes such deep feelings of connection? Does the HQC construct adequately capture these moments of human connection? Or should the concept of mutuality, or being in relation, be forefronted as the driving force of human connection (I use human connection and HQC roughly synonymously, with HQC being a construct representation of the phenomenon of human connection)?

Bringing mutuality to the focus has not only an inductive, but theoretical justification. For organizational researchers, we typically seek to understand social life in organizations using cognitive, affective, and behavioral explanations. Likewise, high quality connections have been conceptualized by a set of experiential indicators, which leaves unclear the core essence of the connection. Defining HQCs by its indicators has resulted in high intercorrelations with other positive relational constructs, such as trust and respect, which are also presumably byproducts of connection with others. However, in defense of this approach, as philosophers have for centuries discussed and struggled to understand the mystery of human connection, perhaps defining it by its indicators, and acknowledging doing so, is a pragmatic way to bring the study of human connection into organizational science and practice.

The creators of the HQC concept defined the foundational concept of connection (not “high quality,” just connection), as cited in Chapter 1, as “the dynamic, living tissue (Berscheid & Lopes, 1997) that exists between two people when there is some contact between them involving mutual awareness and social interaction” (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003: 264). This emphasizes certain characteristics of connection, but remains unclear what this “living tissue” is. Human connection is extraordinarily complex, touching many emotions, feelings, structures, and actions. I propose that the concept of mutuality brings us closer to the heart of this living tissue. Mutuality is the escalation from dyadic interaction to unified being in relation. Focusing on mutuality as a living process of being in relation, which necessarily involves an interplay between two subjects, moves us toward a view of connection as a dynamic capacity, rather than as a subjective experience. Furthermore, the mutuality concept captures a core principle underlying a diverse set of approaches to understanding moments of human connection, and therefore facilitates a bridging of HQC to other disciplines that articulate the phenomenon in similar and distinct ways.

To this end, this chapter presents a theory of mutuality, integrating findings from both studies, and adding theoretical rigor by drawing on four established disciplines underpinning organizational behavior. I first establish a conceptual foundation for the concept of mutuality by introducing four related perspectives from philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. I then generate a set of propositions regarding how mutuality is cultivated in organizations, addressing the call by Stephens and colleagues (2011) to “broaden and refine the picture of how people initiate and skillfully cultivate high-quality connections.” An understanding of mutuality in organizations requires explicit attention to how the organizational context shapes the emergence and functions of mutuality. Organizations are not simply extensions of everyday

social interactions. Rather, the organizational context introduces a unique set of constraints and affordances that influence how individuals relate to each other. These propositions create the foundation for a model of mutuality, laying the groundwork for new research questions and uncovering theoretical and practical insights about the cultivation of mutuality.

Starting Assumptions

My quest to deepen understanding about human connection builds on three core assumptions. First, as touched on in Chapter 1, I use the terms connection and relationship to refer to specific types of social interactions. A connection is the micro-unit of a relationship. It is a dyadic⁷ construct that occurs when two people have interacted and are mutually aware of the interaction. Connections vary in length, lasting one moment or many, and they may be recurring (Berscheid & Lopes, 1997). When connections between two people recur, they are often called relationships (e.g., Gutek, 1995). As such, mutuality is best thought of as something that we can achieve for a moment, rather than something that we experience on an ongoing basis (Anderson & Cissna, 1998). Having the situation or moment as the unit of analysis, connections are useful mechanisms in both micro and macro organizational theories.

Second, humans are born with an innate capacity to connect with each other. So building the capacity for mutuality is not a process of developing a particular quality of relationship; rather, it involves providing opportunity and removing barriers that inhibit mutuality. Relatedly, I describe mutuality in strictly positive terms, recognizing that enduring relationships and relational dynamics (e.g., friendships at work) that may emerge from moments of mutuality may complicate the effects of mutuality in a given context. For my purposes I focus on the positive experience in the moment, without regard for whether such moments form into relationships.

⁷ Mutuality can be achieved in a group, but as a cluster of dyadic pairs. Feelings produced in moments of mutuality with another may be transposed over an entire group, creating a sense of solidarity, or collective effervescence.

Third, I acknowledge that human connection is fundamentally a mystery that cannot be fully captured or articulated. We have all experienced mutuality, and are very familiar with it experientially, and yet it remains difficult to describe. It is not by chance or by lack of scientific rigor that those who have endeavored to study human connection from various disciplines often find themselves resorting to stripping the phenomenon down to measurable indicators. It is important to recognize human connection not just in terms of empirically observable attributes or causal events (i.e. feelings or actions associated with the relationship), but in terms of mystery and wonder (e.g., Sandelands & Worline, 2011). Part of the mystery of mutuality is that it cannot be willed or deliberately accomplished. Whether mutuality emerges is seemingly determined by grace, or as Kramer (2003) describes, the “spirit of the between that arises from, generates, and supports genuine, interhuman meetings” (p. 203). Given its mysterious nature, the knowledge and understanding of human connection is not just an empirical induction or a logical deduction, but an intuition or inclination (Sandelands & Worline, 2011) that rises to the level of conscious awareness by abduction (Pierce, 1955; Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008). As I theorize the qualities and mechanisms of mutuality, I do so with a recognition that there is no formula or prescription for determining mutuality; rather, we can simply explore conditions that increase the capacity for mutuality to occur.

Conceptual Foundations

The scholarly history of human connection is extensive, spanning disciplines as diverse as theology and biology, sociology and psychology. Given this diverse history, it is perhaps not surprising to find that scholars have likewise conceptualized human connection in many different ways. That said, the concept of mutuality has resonance across several of these disciplines. In this section, I introduce four perspectives on human connection—from philosophy,

anthropology, sociology, and psychology—which illuminate different understandings of mutuality. Each perspective represents that field’s approach to understanding moments or situations where individuals achieve mutuality.

The narrow and isolated focus in each field on their respective conceptual approaches to understanding human connection has obscured the central core principles that underlie the phenomenon. Highlighting the commonalities will help to organize these differentiated constructs in a conceptually parsimonious manner. Another benefit is that a deep understanding of commonalities across diverse literatures facilitates the generalization of knowledge and insights from one body of literature to another.

In Chapter 3, I reviewed the concept of mutuality as understood in organizational behavior (as adopted from the field of relational therapy). Below I introduce the four related theoretical perspectives, elaborate on their core assumptions, and illustrate each approach’s relevance to understanding mutuality (see Table 5.1 for a summary of each perspective).

Philosophy – I-Thou and Genuine Dialogue

Philosophy has long concerned itself with the nature of human connection. Martin Buber (1958), one of the most influential modern philosophers, developed a distinction between two fundamental modes of relating, which he labels I-It and I-Thou. I-It is the mode of relating we most frequently engage in with others, experiencing the other as an object with certain characteristics and capabilities, with some functional motivation driving the exchange. I-Thou relation “points to the quality of genuine relationship in which partners are mutually unique and whole” (Kramer, 2003: 15). This mode of being in relation is characterized by “mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity, and ineffability,” affirming the other not as an object, but as another subject that cannot be objectified or labeled.

Table 5.1: Summary of different perspectives on mutuality

| Construct | I-Thou relation | Communitas | Interaction ritual | Relational flow |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| Discipline | Philosophy | Anthropology | Sociology | Psychology |
| Source | Buber, 1958 | Turner, 1969 | Goffman, 1967 | Csikszentmihalyi, 1997 |
| Description | I-Thou relation refers to interactions that are marked by meeting the other person as a full human being; the pure encounter of one whole unique entity with another in such a way that the other is seen and known as a whole and unique subject | Communitas refers to relationships among people jointly entering some anti-structural realm in which they can experience an intense sense of intimacy and equality, or a “direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities” (Turner 1974: 169) | Interaction Ritual (IR) refers to moments of interaction in which a mutual focus of attention and rhythmic entrainment produce collective effervescence and feelings of emotional energy (a failed IR depletes emotional energy). | Flow is the experience people have when completely immersed in an activity for its own sake, stretching to their limit in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Relational flow is when the activity that induces flow is an interaction. |
| Distinctions within the construct | Monologue (I-It) Technical dialogue (I-It) Genuine dialogue (I-Thou) | Normative communitas Ideological communitas Spontaneous communitas | Forced ritual Formal ritual Natural ritual | Solitary flow Social/collective flow Relational flow |
| Enabling conditions/ antecedents | “Turning towards” (encompassing awareness and inclusion), bringing what is in their head, alternation between I-It and I-Thou | Liminality, or anti-structure, groups have common focus, arises spontaneously | Bodily co-presence, barrier to outsiders, mutual focus of attention, shared mood | Freely chosen activities, clear and specific goals, immediate and concrete performance feedback, and difficult challenges matching performer’s competence level |
| Outcomes | Each person is affirmed as a whole being | Recognition of an “essential and generic human bond,” attempts to formalize | Collective effervescence -- solidarity, emotional energy, interaction ritual chains | Enjoyment, timelessness, loss of self-consciousness, perception of being in control |

Buber argues that both I-It and I-Thou are important and necessary, and there should be an appropriate rhythm of alternation between the two. To this point, Bakhtin (1981) shares Buber’s emphasis on the need to alternate between distancing and entering into relation, which allows for a genuine turning to the other as an act of inclusion without giving up the “ground of one’s consciousness” or the ability to “see through one’s own eyes” (Friedman, 2002: 357). Kramer (2003: 159) explains this experience as “turning toward the other with unreserved spontaneity by opening to an indwelling presence between persons... turning away from a self-reflexive monologue consumed in self-enjoyment and towards the wordless depths of genuine I-

Thou.” One turns away therefore from a preoccupation with self, whilst turning towards the other as Thou in an invitation to genuine dialogue. As I meets Thou the connection is defined “in between” both, as self and other are reciprocal partners engaged in a “dynamic of elemental togetherness” (Kramer, 2003: 24).

But our culture has increasingly become absorbed into the world of It. Related to the I-It versus I-Thou distinction, Buber draws a distinction between being and seeming, or as Reitz (2015) describes, “[E]ach of us [is] busily engaged in attempting to ‘read’ the group and sensing how to respond to our perceptions in the right way” (p. 109). Buber (1965) alludes to our felt need for protection: “Each of us is encased in an armour... living means being addressed, we would need only to present ourselves and to perceive. But the risk is too dangerous for us, the soundless thunderings seem to threaten us with annihilation, and from generation to generation we perfect the defense apparatus... each of us is encased in an armour which we soon, out of familiarity, no longer notice” (p. 10). This “armour” we adopt results from deep-seated concerns about being accepted by others. As Friedman (2002: 99) explains, “The origin of the tendency toward seeming is found in the human need for confirmation. It is no easy thing to be confirmed by the other in one’s being; therefore one looks to appearance for aid.”

One of the most useful ways of conceptualizing the distinctions between I-It and I-Thou is by relating them, as Buber does, to monologue and dialogue. Buber (1965) distinguishes between three realms of communication: “genuine dialogue,” “technical dialogue,” and “monologue disguised as dialogue.”

1. Genuine dialogue: “Whether spoken or silent...each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.”

2. Technical dialogue: That communication which is “prompted solely by the need of objective understanding.”
3. Monologue disguised as dialogue: That situation in which “two or more men, meeting in space, speak each with himself in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways and yet imagine they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their own resources.”

Genuine dialogue corresponds most closely to Buber’s (1958) notion of the I-Thou relation. Genuine dialogue involves a turning toward the other, an openness to being addressed by the other, and a confirmation of the otherness of the other. This dynamic turning to the other enters people into dialogic connection with an “encompassing awareness” and “inclusion,” that does not compromise their individual sense of self or agency (Friedman, 2002: 356). For Buber, such genuine dialogue requires each respondent to bring what is really in his or her head to the dialogue, “without artifice, seeming, or pretense” (Cooper, 2003: 138). Dialogue becomes genuine when each of the participants is fully present to the other and willing to be nonjudgmental. Only in genuine dialogue do participants attain “the irrefragable genuineness of mutuality” (Buber, 1947: 72). Each of the forms of dialogue is appropriate at times; however, Buber claimed that one is not fully human unless one experiences others as Thou in genuine dialogue. Genuine dialogue, overcoming appearance, personal wholeness—these are all aspects of our birthright as human beings, for only through it can we attain authentic human existence.

Buber (1947) argues that the kind of dialogue in which people genuinely respond to each other is becomingly increasingly rare. Instead, much modern communication takes the form of “technical dialogue,” “which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding” (p. 37). This is utilitarian, goal-focused communication, where people begin to respond to each other, but the focus on trying to determine what they and others should be doing in each moment to

accomplish some objective. Dialogue becomes technical when the need to gain information for one's purposes at hand is the focal point of the exchange.

According to Buber, although technical dialogue is indeed common, it is the third realm of communication, "monologue disguised as dialogue" or "false dialogue," that is the most prevalent in the contemporary world. Monologue is a form of communication that has a semblance of interpersonal openness and receptivity, but "the participants do not really have each other in mind, or they have each other in mind only as general and abstracted opponents and not as particular beings," so that there "is no real turning to the other, no real desire to establish mutuality" (Friedman, 2002: 143). Monologue is essentially a turning towards, and concern with, oneself: a "reflexivity," rather than a reaching out to the other. Lacking real otherness, each individual's concerns are not with learning from the other, but with self-presentation and self-enhancement. Hence, in monologue, openness and responsiveness are replaced with artifice and manipulation. Buber (1965) provides the example of "speechifying", in which "people do not really speak to one another, but each, although turned to the other, really speaks to a fictitious court of appeal whose life consists of nothing but listening to him" (p. 69).

The qualities of turning toward, seeing, and understanding another as a whole person in I-Thou relation, or genuine dialogue, perfectly resemble the experience of mutuality observed in the two studies. Coincidentally, theatre was a powerful source of inspiration for Buber. In a short fragment, "Drama and Theater," Buber (2008) wrote that drama originates and is grounded in the elemental impulse to communicate across barriers through speaking—"to leap through transformation over the abyss between I and Thou that is bridged through speech" (p. 64). The starkness of the roles and scenes in theatre creates a tension among actors speaking their characters between openness and closedness. But this distance between reality and fantasy in

theatre permits “a degree of theatrical truth completely beyond the scope of the naturalistic performances [Buber] had witnessed in more realistic settings” (Grainger, 2014: x). Essentially this movement between I-It and I-Thou starkly illustrated in theatre provided Buber with some of the inspiration for this concept. So what I call mutuality and he calls I-Thou relation have a common heritage in moments of truthful connection in theatre.

Anthropology – Communitas

In the field of anthropology, Victor Turner (1969) wrote that there are “two major ‘models’ for human interrelatedness,” which he refers to generally as social structure and anti-structure, or *communitas*. The first mode of interrelating is “of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation” (p. 96). These are ties determined by class, positions, roles, in a social system. The second mode of interrelating, “*communitas*,” emerges where social structure is not. *Communitas* refers to a “relational quality of full, unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities, which arises spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations, and circumstances” (Turner & Turner, 1978: 250).

Turner’s *communitas* has striking similarities to Martin Buber’s I-Thou relation and mutuality. Individuals who engage with one another in the mode of *communitas* become totally absorbed into a single, synchronized, fluid event. When in *communitas*, we embrace personal honesty, openness, and lack of pretensions or pretentiousness. We feel that it is important to relate directly to other persons as they present themselves in the moment, to understand them in a sympathetic way, free from the culturally defined encumbrances of roles, status, reputation, class, or other structural niches.

Communitas results in the recognition of an essential and generic human bond, a sentiment of “humankindness,” that precedes social structure. When even two people experience communitas, all people are felt to be one by those two, even if only for a moment. The notion that there is a generic bond between humans is not indicative of some kind of herd instinct, but is a product of humans “in their wholeness wholly attending.” In this way, communitas differs from Durkheim’s “solidarity,” which depends upon an in-group/out-group contrast. To some extent, communitas is to solidarity as Bergson’s (1977) “open morality” is to his “closed morality.”

Along with this generalized human connection, in communitas people see, understand, and act towards one another in “an unmediated relationship between historical, idiosyncratic concrete individuals” (Turner, 1969). These individuals are not segmentalized into roles and statuses but confront one another rather in the manner of Buber’s “I and Thou” – a direct and total confrontation of human identities. Turner (1969) references Buber when describing communitas as “a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from I to Thou” (p. 127). This differs from Gurvitch’s (1941) notion of “communion,” which he describes as “when minds open out as widely as possible and the least accessible depths of the ‘I’ are integrated in this fusion” (p. 487). Communitas preserves individual distinctiveness while promoting union.

Communitas can never be adequately expressed in or determined by a structural form, but it may arise spontaneously at any time between human beings participating in some interaction. In contrast to the structural mode of interrelating, the spontaneity of communitas can seldom be maintained for very long. Communitas itself soon develops a protective social structure, in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between people in social roles. For this reason, Turner distinguished between existential or spontaneous communitas, normative communitas, and ideological communitas. Spontaneous

communitas, which is communitas in its purest existence, is as Turner describes, what William Blake might have called “the winged moment as it flies” (1969: 132). As communitas strives to preserve or replicate itself, it undergoes a “decline and fall” into structure. Normative communitas arises when communitas becomes institutionalized and develops a set of rules and role expectations for the purpose of social control. Ideological communitas is the label Turner applies to a Utopian model of societies based on existential communitas.

Like Buber, Turner also spent time studying theatre, and recognized that artists tend to be “liminal and marginal people, who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing and to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination” (1969: 128). He goes on to say that in artists’ productions, such as a theatre play, we may catch glimpses of the human potential for communitas that struggles to be externalized and fixed in structure. So again, what I recognized as mutuality in theatre, Turner saw as communitas. Both concepts share a common quality of engaging with another directly and authentically, not via some impersonal structure.

Sociology – Interaction Rituals

The concept of ritual is one of the most central concepts in sociology, particularly in micro-sociology. As conceptualized by Emile Durkheim and his most prolific follower, Erving Goffman, ritual is “a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership” (Collins, 2004: 7). Whereas anthropologists have tended to see ritual as a formal manifestation of the culture and values of society, merely reflecting macro-structure, Durkheim and Goffman depicted ritual as the chief form of micro-situational action, or the analytical starting point of explaining social structure. Durkheim’s focus was religious rituals, but Goffman

broadened the application of ritual by showing how interaction rituals are found throughout everyday life. He developed the view of interaction ritual as a causal mechanism through which mutual focus of attention and emotional entrainment foster collective effervescence, and generate feelings of solidarity and emotional energy.

Durkheim indicated two interrelated and mutually reinforcing mechanisms for achieving collective effervescence: 1) shared focus of attention, and 2) shared emotion (similar to the mechanisms found in the lacrosse study). Movements carried out in common operate to focus attention, to make participants aware of each other as doing the same thing and thus thinking the same thing. Collective movements are signals by which intersubjectivity is created. Collective attention enhances the expression of shared emotion; and in turn the shared emotion acts further to intensify collective movements and the sense of intersubjectivity. The mutual focus in interaction rituals resembles what Mead (1925) called taking the role of the other, which he proposed as the key to what makes human consciousness.

As participants become increasingly engrossed in mutual focus of attention and shared emotion, they move toward experiencing mutuality. Collins (2004: 65) gives the example of laughter to illustrate why people are attracted to interaction rituals: “perhaps the strongest human pleasures come from being fully and bodily absorbed in deeply synchronized social interaction (McClelland, 1985).” Shared laughter, like moments of play, is so pleasurable because it exemplifies the pattern of collective effervescence and corresponding feelings of mutuality.

Similar to Turner’s depiction of *communitas* having a tendency to become structured and formalized in an attempt to preserve itself, Collins (2004) describes how interaction rituals foster a sense of entrainment, wherein participants feel a desire to preserve, or reproduce, successful interaction rituals. Collins (p. 50) makes a distinction between “natural rituals” that build up

mutual focus and emotional entrainment without formally structured procedures, and “formal rituals” that are initiated by formal procedures. Natural rituals resemble Turner’s spontaneous *communitas*, but as the rituals become formalized, they resemble normative *communitas*. When the mutual entrainment has an element of external social pressure and self-consciousness rather than a natural flow, it can be emotionally draining, rather than the energizing experience of collective effervescence. As such, so-called natural rituals may be more ripe for experiencing mutuality than formal rituals. The characteristics of a successful ritual, including mutual focus and shared emotion, resemble mutuality, and so insights regarding the collective effervescence and emotional energy that emerge from successful interaction rituals may be informative to the outcomes of moments of mutuality.

Psychology – Relational Flow

The last domain I will discuss is psychology, which concerns itself less with the structures of social life, and more with the intrapsychic experience of social life. Few psychological theories have dealt explicitly with mutuality, but a concept that has some similarity is the concept of flow, which is one of the most popular concepts in positive psychology. Though the concept has certainly existed under different guises for centuries, flow was first described in psychology by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as an autotelic state that included unified action and awareness, focused attention, lost self-consciousness, and impression of having things under control. It is a sensation of involvement, focus, and enjoyment in some activity. Over time, the concept has evolved to mean, more simply, an enjoyable, not excessively arousing, trance-like state (Engeser & Schiepe-Tiska, 2012) that has the potential to occur virtually in all human activities that demand a higher than average amount of challenge and skill

(Graham, 2008): work, school, leisure, sports (Graham, 2008), religious experiences, music, arts (Engeser & Schiepe-Tiska, 2012), and socializing (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989).

Flow has traditionally been attached to the performance of some activity. Only more recently has the attention turned to studying flow as a relational experience. The concept of social flow refers to when flow spreads from one member of a group to others, becoming a collective experience (e.g., Walker, 2010). More closely related to mutuality is what I call relational flow, where social interactions are the activity in which participants become immersed in flow. This has been described as a form of social flow that is mutual and reciprocal, where people “serve as agents of flow for each other” in interdependent situations (Walker, 2010). Csikszentmihalyi (1997) himself speculated about the existence of flow in social situations, because “interactions in intimate relationships share many of the conditions of activities that provide flow, including focused attention, clear goals, immediate feedback, and potential for a balance of skill and challenge” (Dean, 2009: 24). Even the shortest social interactions have their own demands. Whether being involved in a two-second or a two-hour social interaction, individuals are challenged to practice interpersonal skills, focused attention, etc.

The concept of relational flow builds on both Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow and Paulo Fonda’s (2000) modes of relational experience. According to Fonda, there are three modes—or temporary, transient states—of relational experience: (1) fusion, during which there are no boundaries between two people and information can flow freely between them; (2) fragmentary separation, during which there are incomplete, semi-permeable boundaries; and (3) separateness, during which there are stable boundaries. Fonda (2000) describes relationships as comprised of interactions in these cycling modes, and individuals need to have all three modes available, and be flexible enough to shift between them, in order to maintain a relationship.

Relational flow is based on Fonda's (2000) concept, fusion, which involves a mode of relating with others that is characterized by lack of distinct boundaries, which allows for thoughts and feelings to move easily between people. As such, this state is thought to be an essential component of empathy, affection, and the ability to experience extreme closeness with another human being. In line with Fonda's (2000) theory, relational flow is defined as a state in which individual partners temporarily:

1. Submit to each other and feel there are no boundaries between them. Examples include feeling at one and open with the partner, feeling no separation between the partner and the self, experiencing an altered sense of time, being completely focused on the present.
2. Feel free to express what is on their minds and share to the fullest, feeling as if wearing heart on the sleeve, experiencing a positive emotional climate.
3. Do not feel anxiety about the other, and instead feel empathy, closeness, and other positive emotions, enjoying the moment and hoping it will continue, not worrying about what other people or the world thinks of them or how they are coming across.
4. Experience thoughts, feelings, memories, intentions, and fantasies circulating between each other: feeling in tune with what the partner is feeling/thinking

The process of dialectically attending to one's own subjectivity while valuing the subjectivity of another creates a mutual state of intersubjectivity, an empathic bond and sense of "we." Once a relationship has found the rhythmical, oscillating balance of mutual intersubjectivity, interpersonal dynamics begin to "flow." When engaged in relational flow, a sense of unity and connectivity emerges that resembles mutuality. This experience is often associated with play, including by Csikszentmihalyi himself (e.g., 1975).

Unpacking Mutuality

Whether describing it as genuine dialogue, *communitas*, mutual attunement in interaction rituals, or relational flow, each of these perspectives seem to speak to a common phenomenon of being in relation—what I term mutuality. These conceptually overlapping concepts differ in ways that reflect their respective disciplines, but by looking at the descriptions they have in common, we can illuminate a deeper understanding of what mutuality is and how it is achieved.

Having reviewed the use of mutuality in management scholarship, and related concepts in other disciplines, I propose the following definition of mutuality: a mode of relating in which participants are fully and authentically being with each other. This simple yet profound definition attempts to separate the core phenomenon of being in relation from the corresponding psychological or sociological indicators of being in relation, such as feeling energized and developing a sense of solidarity. The being in relation of mutuality encapsulates both cognitive and affective attunement as seen in the lacrosse study, and is not a characteristic of a relationship, but of a moment of interaction. Although it might result in particular feelings of closeness toward another, or build into a relationship, mutuality only exists in the moment.

Mutuality has two core components that recur across the literatures, and which were manifested in the theatre study. These two components are present in the term “being in relation,” which involves 1) *being* in relation, or being authentic and fully present, and 2) being *in relation*, or turning toward and being attuned/responsive to the other. We see these two components in Stephens and colleagues’ (2011) description of mutuality as being “born out of mutual vulnerability and responsiveness as both people experience full participation and engagement in the connection at the moment” (p. 386). Reis and Shaver (1988) described intimacy as having two very similar principal components: self-disclosure and partner

responsiveness. As mutuality is often described as an opening up to another, the opening up is both to let the self out and let the other in.

Being in Relation

Each of the perspectives I reviewed included some sense of being fully present or authentic in the moment. As Buber (1965) succinctly states, for mutuality to occur, “everyone who takes part in it must bring himself into it” (p. 85). Only by being authentically present can one experience being seen by the other. It is that authenticity – the expression of experienced feelings, thoughts, and beliefs – that allows a vibrant sense of connection (Argyris, 1982; Gibb, 1961). In management scholarship, it has been shown that when people are fully present that they are best able to create connections with one another that allow for difficult gaps to be bridged between people representing different ethical stances (Toffler, 1986), identity groups of gender, race, and ethnicity (Alderfer, 1983), and organizational groups.

The image here is not necessarily of bringing more and more dimensions of people’s selves into their organizations. As in theatre and sports, actors and athletes were not expected to bring much of their “outside” life into their interactions on the field or stage. Especially in the case of the actors, they often knew very little about each other’s lives outside of the theatre; and yet, in moments of mutuality they felt a deep and personal sense of knowing each other. Authenticity was simply being truthful in the moment, not putting up a façade or pretending to be a certain way. Inherent in such authenticity is a shared sense of vulnerability, as we bring ourselves more fully into the interaction. There is a sense of being safe enough to move toward connection with others (Jordan, 2008). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1999) said, “Making oneself vulnerable is an act of trust and respect, as is receiving and honoring the vulnerability of another” (p. 93).

Another term for this component, briefly mentioned above, is intimacy. According to Sexton and Sexton (1982), “the word intimacy is derived from the Latin *intimus*, meaning inner or inmost. To be intimate with another is to have access to, and to comprehend, his or her inmost character” (p. 1). Intimacy is sharing what is inmost with others and deeply understanding the other (Kark, 2012; Popovic, 2005). Lerner (1989) suggested that: “An intimate relationship is one in which neither party silences, sacrifices, or betrays the self” (p. 3). Intimacy is initiated when one person communicates personally relevant and revealing information, thoughts, and feelings to another person, verbally or nonverbally (Keeley & Hart, 1994). Thus, intimacy is a sense of connectedness that results in a moment of self-disclosure and the other’s responsiveness (Laurenceau, Rivera, Schaffer, & Pietromonaco, 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Another important aspect of what I am calling authenticity is individual distinctiveness. This point is most thoroughly considered in Buber’s I-Thou relation, but is also recognized in Turner’s *communitas*. Individuals in mutuality are not only being more authentic to each other, but also to themselves. Buber describes that the “I” of a person differs in I-It and I-Thou. In I-Thou a person becomes whole through a relation to another self. The formation of the “I” of the I-Thou relation takes place in a dialogical relationship in which each partner is affirmed as a whole being. Only in I-Thou relation can the “I” truly develop as a whole being. In mutuality, participants move toward a union with each other that preserves and indeed affirms the distinctiveness and authenticity of each other.

Being in Relation

The second interrelated component of mutuality is the turning toward the other, being attentive, responsive, and attuned to the other. People foster an orientation towards connecting by focusing on the other, and attending to the other, and being aware and responsive to each other’s

needs (Gittell & Douglass, 2012). It is an orientation of being open rather than closed and defensive to each other (Gibb, 1961). This aspect most closely relates to the psychology construct of responsiveness, which refers to attending to and reacting supportively to central, core defining features of the self (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004: 203). Although Reis and others in psychology have largely thought of responsiveness as the active ingredient underlying many of the qualities of a healthy relationship, studies have also shown that responsiveness in moments of interaction fosters trust and intimacy (for a review, see Reis & Gable, 2015). Theorizing of the mechanisms of high quality connections has thus far focused on this component. Stephens and colleagues (2012) proposed a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral mechanisms for building HQCs, most of which dealt with building awareness and responsiveness to the other (none of the mechanisms dealt with the need for authenticity).

The first step toward being responsive to another is being aware of another person's presence and behaviors (Davis & Holtgraves, 1984). Being aware of others, who they are and what they do, fosters interrelating in a mutual and other-regarding way. Other-awareness is necessary to recognize the other as a unique, distinctive, and whole person (Overbeck & Park, 2001), and see the interaction as a singular encounter with a particular being at a particular now. This exclusivity has parallels with Bakhtin's (1993) notion of the "once-occurrent event of being" (p. 13), the unique meeting of two "freedoms" which forms the basis for Bakhtin's dialogically structured model of human being (Shotter, 1998). In contrast to Bakhtin, Buber does not see such once-occurrent meetings as the basis for all human interactions, but as unique to the I-Thou mode of relating. In I-It relation, individuals are stripped of their complexity and uniqueness, and so interactions are mechanical, general, and repetitive.

But mutuality calls for not only being aware each other's distinctiveness, but really seeing and understanding the other. Sandelands (2014) makes the distinction between physical "seeing" and metaphysical "beholding," or "holding in being." To behold "is to take the being of things into one's own and to be conformed to them... It is to understand: literally to "stand-under" or with it" (p. 19). This calls on our innate capacity of perspective-taking and empathy. Perspective-taking goes beyond other-awareness in not only recognizing another's distinctiveness, but also being able to understand and connect with the other's experience (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004). Perspective-taking has been conceptualized as the cognitive component of empathy, which, in combination with empathy's affective component, is viewed as the basis of human connection (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Rogers, 1951).

Finally, participants demonstrate their attentiveness by being responsive to each other. Individuals could hardly achieve mutuality by simply observing others with heightened sensitivity. One might say that the point of this heightened awareness is to enable us to respond. Friedman (1985) described genuine responsiveness as "an act of love through which one acknowledges the other as one who exists in his own peculiar form and has the right to do so" (p. 134). Participants can show esteem, dignity and care for another person (e.g., Ramarajan, Barsade, & Burak, 2008) through gestures, talk, and bodily postures. Research on civility (e.g., Pearson & Porath, 2009), dignity (e.g., Hodson, 2001), and respect (e.g., Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1999) suggest that everyday behaviors and small moves communicate how a person values another. Small actions in response to another, that communicate attunement, affirmation, and reflect the basic human entitlements of respect and dignity (Rawls, 1971), can increase people's willingness to be authentic and responsive in return, thus reinforcing a mode of relating conducive to mutuality.

Outcomes of Mutuality

Looking back at the theoretical starting point of this dissertation, high quality connections were conceptualized according to a set of three outcomes: positive regard, vitality, and mutuality. Further theorizing or empirical has yet to examine the relationships across these three outcomes. Considering mutuality as the driving mechanism of what we could still call a HQC, I theorize that positive regard and vitality are both outcomes of mutuality.

Mutuality Promotes Positive Regard

As articulated above, mutuality involves a fundamental affirmation of the other as a distinctive and whole person. Buber clarifies that confirmation involves an acceptance of the other in his or her potentiality—who he or she is meant to become—as well as in his or her present actuality (Anderson & Cissna, 1997). There are clear parallels here with Rogers' (1957) notion of “acceptance” or “unconditional positive regard,” particularly the emphasis on the acceptance of the other in his or her wholeness.

Compared to the objectification of I-It relation, where the other is experienced as an object, or the mechanical formalization of structured or forced interaction, where the other is also experienced as an object, in mutuality one encounters the other as vibrant, dynamic humanity: a “psychic stream” (Buber, 1965: 70) that cannot be objectified or labeled. The objectification of the other in I-It relation parallels with Sartre's (1958) notion of “the look,” in which the look of one human being constantly threatens to objectify the being of the other. While Sartre considers this objectification as the primary mode of human relating, Buber (1958) recognizes the potential for mutuality, where: “If I face my human being as my Thou..., he is not a thing among things” (p. 21). In Bakhtinian (1993) terms, mutuality offers the capacity to affirm someone else, not as an object, but as another subject, with commensurate dignity and esteem.

Empirical research supports the notion that attunement to another, in the form of perspective-taking or empathy, promotes greater liking (e.g., Mueller & Curhan, 2006). Empathy in particular increases feelings of warmth, compassion, and concern for the other (Batson & Coke, 1981; Davis, 1983), which may be markers of positive regard or positive relationships generally (Reis & Collins, 2000). Additionally, being the recipient of another's empathy and understanding toward oneself, receiving the gift of what Kohut calls "the accepting, confirming, and understanding human echo" (1978: 705), can foster a sense appreciation, and develop trust. So positive regard will be enhanced by both seeing and being seen by the other.

Mutuality Promotes Vitality

The energizing nature of mutuality likewise stems from the recognition and validation of one's self by others (Dutton & Ragins, 2007). Miller and Stiver (1997) have said that mutual empathy leads to mutual empowerment, which they define as having at least five components: "zest," action, knowledge, worth, and a desire for more connection. They explain, "In an interplay of mutual empathy, each person experiences a greater sense of "zest," the feeling that comes when we feel a real sense of connection, of being together with and joined by another person. It feels like an increase in vitality, aliveness, and energy. We can all probably remember its opposite, the "down" kind of feeling that we experience when we are not making an authentic connection with another person" (p. 30).

The energizing effect of mutuality is also articulated in Collins' (2004) theory of interaction ritual chains. The central mechanism of interaction ritual theory is that interactions that combine a high degree of mutual focus of attention emotional entrainment result in feelings of solidarity and emotional energy for ritual participants. Collins describes emotional energy as "a continuum, ranging from a high end of confidence, enthusiasm, good self-feelings; down

through a middle range of bland normalcy; and to a low end of depression, lack of initiative, and negative self-feelings” (2004: 108). Engaging in a successful interaction ritual gives participants feelings of confidence, enthusiasm, and desire to reproduce future successful interaction rituals (thereby forming interaction ritual chains). Conversely, failed interaction rituals, which would represent a disruption of mutuality, drain the emotional energy of participants.

Mutuality Promotes Future Moments of Mutuality

By pulling mutuality forward into an antecedent position relative to the other two aspects of HQC, a question that demands to be answered is whether the other two aspects could also be viewed as antecedents of mutuality. For example, could vitality be similarly pulled into focus as a driver of mutuality? Randall Collins (2004) offers an answer to this question in his theory of interaction ritual chains. Interaction ritual chains is a dynamic, microsociological theory of motivation from one situation to the next. The guiding premise is that individuals seek the emotional energy that comes out of a successful IR (p. 44). So when individuals experience emotional energy from an interaction ritual, they want to repeat it. It could be said that the extent to which an interaction ritual is successful or not depends on whether participants achieved mutuality in the moment. In other words, mutuality is the situational quality that generates the collective effervescence and emotional energy, which in turn motivates individuals to re-create successful IRs. Collins summarizes this pattern as follows:

“Perhaps the best we might say is that the local structure of interaction (read mutuality) is what generates and shapes the energy of the situation. That energy can leave traces, carrying over to further situations because individuals bodily resonate with emotions, which trail off in time but may linger long enough to charge up a subsequent encounter, bringing yet further chains of consequences” (p. 6).

Likewise, as mutuality produces vitality and positive regard, those feelings leave traces that might facilitate achieving mutuality in subsequent encounters. This might appear as if vitality

and positive regard act as antecedents of mutuality, but in fact the genesis is the “local structure of interaction,” in which individuals first achieve mutuality.

We see an example of this in play, which represents a type of interaction ritual. When people play together, they become more interested in and willing to play with each other again. In lacrosse, when a player had a good competition with another, he wanted to compete with him again. In theatre, actors who share moments of mutuality look forward to opportunities to play together again. A sense of connection experienced in play tends to last beyond the moment of play, even if there is no enduring relationship (like when you do not see someone for a long time, but when you see them again, it is as if no time has passed). As Huizinga (1955) describes, “The feeling of being ‘apart together’ in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game” (p. 12). Though the moment of mutuality may not last beyond the moment, positive regard and emotional energy in association with another may last, motivating and shaping future interactions with that person.

Mechanisms of Mutuality

Just as there has been little attention paid to the mechanisms by which high quality connections are built, the question of how people enter into a moment of mutuality has remained elusive. As much time as Buber spent thinking and writing about the I-Thou relation and genuine dialogue, he offers no clear steps to being in dialogue. Regarding how to achieve genuine dialogue, he stated, “But if you asked me, ‘What is to be done’ I would have to tell you that I do not have a prescription in my pocket, and I have nothing that resembles a prescription. For this call of the moment that all of you ought to hear cannot be translated into a formula” (2002: 254). This reflects his commitment to the ineffability of mutuality, and the difficulty of describing the

essence or quality of mutuality with another. For Buber, “The Thou encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking” (1958: 62). In fact, if a person deliberately attempts to create an I-Thou relation, it is already an I-It relation.

Turner similarly describes spontaneous *communitas* as something that people “slip” into, with no clear prescriptions on how it comes about. In this the mutual “mystical participation” (Levy-Bruhl, 1923/1966: 35), they obtain flashes of lucid mutual understanding. Collins proffers the ingredients of a successful interaction ritual, which include mutual focus and emotional entrainment (i.e., mutuality). But he gives little insight on how the mutuality is achieved, other than pointing to subconscious bodily awareness emerging from physical co-presence. According to Collins (2004), “Mutual focus of attention is a crucial ingredient for a ritual to work; but this focus may come about spontaneously and without explicit concern that this is happening” (p. 50). He refers to such moments of spontaneous, naturally occurring focus of emotion and shared emotion as “natural rituals,” that build up mutual focus and emotional entrainment without formally stereotyped procedures. Formal rituals may emerge from what start as natural rituals, as when *communitas* begins to develop a formal structure, but then the challenge becomes trying to maintain the quality of mutuality as the risk of “It-ification” increases.

Nonetheless, these perspectives give clues regarding the quality and structure of interactions that are conducive to mutuality. Although it may be beyond the reach of scientific inquiry to fully determine the antecedents of mutuality, we can identify contextual features that make mutuality more likely to occur, such as in sports and theatre. In the next few sections, I distill the central findings from my two studies, in conjunction with insights from the literature, to propose a set of conditions that potentiate mutuality. The first condition, inspired by the lacrosse team study, is the joint experience of being with and being against. The second

condition, inspired by the theatre study, is the joint experience of liminality and structure.

Finally, I conclude by proposing play as a unifying concept in which the seeming paradoxes in both conditions are resolved, and the potential for mutuality is most alive.

Being With and Being Against

The first condition for fostering the “dynamic of elemental togetherness” (Kramer, 2003: 24) that is mutuality, is people coming together, both physically and psychologically. Buber and Goffman stressed the importance of coming together physically, recognizing the role of embodied presence in achieving mutuality. A critical ingredient of a successful interaction ritual, according to Goffman, is joint action. Durkheim (1965: 262-263) writes, “[I]f left to themselves, individual consciousnesses are closed to each other... It is by uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same word, or performing the same gesture in regard to some object that they become and feel themselves to be in unison... Individual minds cannot come in contact and communicate with each other except by coming out of themselves; they cannot do this except by movements.” Goffman and later interaction ritual scholars clarified that this principle of joint action is not limited to literally doing or saying the same thing as another, but being physically engaged in a shared situation, such as a back-and-forth exchange. As Collins (2004) explains, “When human bodies are together in the same place, there is a physical attunement: currents of feeling, a sense of wariness or interest, a palpable change in the atmosphere” (p. 34).

The indication of a physical encounter becoming converted into a ritual is an intensification of shared experience, or heightened intersubjectivity (i.e., coming together psychologically). The participants feel some obligation of mutual focus, and maintain a shared understanding of the situation. Goffman writes that a key factor in achieving mutuality in a social encounter “is the maintenance of a single definition of the situation” (1959: 254). He later writes:

“Joint spontaneous involvement is a unio mystico, a socialized trance. We must see that a conversation has a life of its own and makes demands on its own behalf. It is a little social system with its own boundary-maintaining tendencies” (Goffman, 1967: 113). This description resonates with flow, where participants become fully absorbed in a shared activity.

The last mode of togetherness that facilitates mutuality is a teleological togetherness, or being together for a common purpose. Specifically, moments of mutuality seem to share some higher purpose than completing some instrumental objective. In fact, moments of mutuality often have a quality of seeming purposelessness; that is not to say they are meaningless, but they escape the hegemony of instrumental purposiveness. They occur when people are being together simply to be together, or the purpose is at least at some level to be together. Simmel (1949; 1950) referred to this as “pure sociability,” or association for its own sake. Sports and theatre both have this quality, which Kant labelled “aesthetic disinterestedness” (1987). Developed in the eighteenth century, the notion of disinterestedness signifies the perception of something (or someone) “for its own sake,” which became the distinguishing feature of the aesthetic mode of experience, distinguished from other common modes such as practical, rational, or religious experience. Kant’s view of aesthetic disinterestedness is as follows: “[T]aste in the beautiful is alone a disinterested and free satisfaction; for no interest, either of sense or of reason, here forces our assent” (p. 32). When connection is the telos, individuals would have increased interest in and sensitivity to contributing and supporting the happiness and self-worth of the other as an aim in itself, rather than for specific self-interested or instrumental reasons (e.g., Sullivan, 1953).

Paradoxically, the “turning towards” and dynamic facing of the other that is necessary to achieve mutuality is facilitated by not only being with, but also being against the other. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) noted that “the addition of a competitive element to a game usually

insures the undivided attention of a player who would not be motivated otherwise. When being ‘beaten’ is one of the possible outcomes of an activity, the actor is pressured to attend to it more closely” (p. 48). The capacity of competition to cultivate mutuality was empirically illustrated in the lacrosse team study. Now to theorize the proposition, I look way back to ancient Greece, where the concept of dialogue was originated. Socrates was a fervent advocate of competition, both in philosophical discourse and in athletic competition (it is no coincidence that philosophical discourse at that time took place in the same gymnasium where wrestlers would train for athletic competition). Socrates’ attitude toward competition reflects that of the enlightened wrestler who wants his opponent to ‘play hard’ so that he may learn and improve. Competing in the Socratic view is not striving for the destruction or demoralization of the opponent. The spirit of competition that Socrates endorsed is reflected by a competitor metaphorically helping an opponent back to his feet when he falls. Competitors should encourage one another to push on with the struggle. In this sense, a competitor is seen as a kind of friend – one whose challenge helps to improve the other.

This perspective is best illustrated in athletics. Wrestling, the oldest and most basic sport, is at the same time simple and paradoxical, in that it can be fiercely competitive and intrinsically cooperative. It is also intensely physical—scarcely anywhere else is one so conscious of one’s body as a focus of action. Slusher (1967) argues that sport is “basic to a philosophy of being” (p. 10), and an integral part of humanity (p. 20). He describes sport as a mystical experience that “opens the self to the mystery of being” (p. 8). Competition in sport provides an intensification of experience that transcends the commonness of everyday life.

In theatre, “being against” was accomplished not through competition per se, where one actor tries to win some contest against another, but through creating conflict and tension onstage.

It is often said in theatre that to generate excitement, there must be something at stake, which is momentous and uncertain, and the characters must be fighting for something. One of the golden rules in theatre, generally attributed to Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, is “No conflict, no drama.” Many theatre textbooks teach that conflict is the basis of all good theatre. As actors develop their characters, the objectives they set for themselves should always include some conflict, often from trying to get someone to do something. By positioning themselves against another in a scene, as in competition, the intensification, or drama, of the experience is heightened. Though different from the competition in sports, creating this tension still demands the commitment and attention of each actor, and keeps the actors turning toward each other.

In short, mutuality occurs in the synthesis of witness and againstness. Being against is being engaged in a dialogue between a person and the opponent, which allows for self-definition and the creation of man’s essential being. As Nietzsche described, opponents belong to each other, and we become dependent upon our opponents. Or, to use the formulation of Heraclitus, things which oppose each other fit each other (Graham, 2015). Competition in sport, and conflict in theatre, are both a joining together in the common struggle for being.

Liminality⁸ and Structure

Another important condition for mutuality, as discussed by Buber, and most explicitly reflected in the *communitas* perspective, is some level of freedom from formal structure. Turner’s concept of *communitas* is a form of anti-structure, which breaks in through the interstices of structure, in instances of stimulated liminality. Turner’s concept of liminality refers to a quality of space and time when people slip out of social structure and into a “realm of pure

⁸ In the theatre study, I label the aspect corresponding with structure as play, but in this paper I will be making a broader point about the qualities of play, and so I chose the more precise label of liminality here.

possibility” and structural invisibility. This liminal period presents “a moment in and out of time and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be, and has yet to be, fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties.” In the office, classroom, sports arena, theater, almost anywhere, people can be subverted from their roles and positions into an atmosphere of *communitas*, where they are no longer side by side (or above and below), but with one another.

The spontaneous nature of *communitas* corresponds with the spontaneous quality of I-Thou encounters, in contrast to the norm-governed, institutionalized, abstract nature of social structure. For Buber (1958), an I-Thou relation requires a person to engage with another in an immediate and spontaneous way, a way that is open to the other’s freedom, uniqueness, and “otherness.” Because of this, he describes genuine dialogue as a “perilous” and “unreliable” (p. 77) encounter, in which “the well-trying context” is “loosened” and “security shattered” (p. 33). This uncertainty inherent with freedom heightens each other’s attentiveness in the interaction.

Stepping out of the security and constraints of social structure increases vulnerability, and the potential for intimacy, between the participants. When people are freely engaging with each other, they are more able to engage with the whole of their being. Having no external structure from which to control or determine the interaction, everything they are is made available in the interaction. Social rites that promote *communitas* are often, across diverse societies, considered to be “sacred.” As such rites transgress the norms that govern structured relationships, they are accompanied by experiences of exceptional “spiritual” potency. The processes of “leveling” and “stripping” social status, to which Goffman (1961: 14) has drawn our attention, often appear to flood participants with affect, as natural energies are liberated in these human moments of being in relation. In contrast, structural action “swiftly becomes arid and mechanical if those involved

in it are not periodically immersed in the regenerative abyss of *communitas*” (Turner, 1969: 139). Thus, the capacity to enter into liminality is critical for mutuality.

Although *communitas* is described as antithetical to social structure, it is made evident or accessible only through its juxtaposition to structure. Just as in gestalt psychology, where figure and ground are mutually determinative, *communitas* can be grasped only in some relation to structure. Buber places great stress on I-It as a necessary partner in the interchange of mutuality, the point from which the awareness of the other as the other takes off: it is the chrysalis. According to Buber, I-Thou and I-It belong together and cannot exist separately. It is the separateness between the two entities established in I-It relation that “allows them perpetually to unite, and thus to know what the union of selves actually means” (Duggan & Grainger, 1997: 7). This view of “union” presents mutuality as “a phenomenon that unites fixedness and spontaneity, discovery and development, safety and danger within the same primal human experience” (Grainger, 2014: 160).

In addition to establishing otherness necessary for mutuality, roles and structure can facilitate mutuality by promoting both authenticity and responsiveness, as illustrated in the theatre study. Buber advocates the problematic nature of mutuality in purposive roles, but he offers an inadequate simplification of what those roles might mean to those engaged in relation. Mutuality in theatre depends on a balance between tension and safety brought about by the use of fictional scenarios. Thomas Scheff (1979) describes how people who are protected and exposed at the same time can abandon their psychological defenses and better connect with themselves and others (optimal distancing). The express fictionality of the roles and scenes in a theatre production can initiate activity more vulnerable and free than the constraints and dangers of the world ordinarily allow. In Goffman’s words, “Since the actor’s performance character is not his

real one, he feels no need to safeguard himself by hedging his taken stand” (1961: 132). The structure provides a scaffolding in which actors are more comfortable exploring deeper levels of authenticity and responsiveness, as long as they are given license to personally engage (Kahn, 1992) with their roles.

In short, mutuality calls for an appropriate balance between structured relation (I-It) and *communitas* (I-Thou), accepting each modality without rejecting the other. Structure provides the initial impetus for seeing and responding to the other, and the security to be comfortable with the other. Liminality provides the freedom for participants to be more fully themselves, within the given structure, and the uncertainty to keep both participants attentive to each other. Balancing both creates a kind of “rhythmic alternation” in which mutuality can emerge.

Mutuality through Play

One of the central themes of this dissertation, emerging from both studies, is that people experience mutuality in moments of play. Play provides a meaningful shared experience (Sutton-Smith, 1997) that constitutes “communal being” (Sandelands, 2010). The experience of play encapsulates the qualities of I-Thou relation, *communitas*, interaction rituals, and relational flow. In fact, along with mutuality, the concept of play has been discussed across these disciplines and bridges these related concepts. Play also provides a unifying concept for the proposed mechanisms of mutuality, as the false dichotomies of being with and being against, structure and liminality, find a resolution in play.

Playing facilitates mutuality in part by opening up authenticity and transmitting authentic interpersonal knowledge (Sandelands, 2003). In Clive Barker’s (1977) book, *Theatre Games*, he associates play with the release of actors’ inhibitions, allowing actors to move beyond their formal roles and be present in the moment. Play is interplay with other human beings that

combines great freedom with great concentration and responsibility. Such play opens up layers as we explore each other. As Plato famously said, you can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation. Friedrich Schiller (1967) suggested that humans can only be completely human when they play. There is a vulnerability inherent in play, as participants lower their defenses, open themselves up, and experience an authentic presence together (Shenk, 2014).

Play also facilitates the responsiveness necessary for mutuality. In play, there is always a dynamic interplay of move and counter-move. Hyland (1990) summarizes the stance play in sports and art as having the elements of openness and responsiveness. A tennis player must wait to see where the opponent will hit the ball. An actor must wait and see how a scene partner will deliver a line. This “waiting to see” indicates an essential feature of play—there is always an other to respond to. Huizinga (1955) and Bateson (1972) both point to tension as one of the critical elements of play. Huizinga states, “To dare, to take risks, to bear uncertainty, to endure tension—these are the essence of the play spirit” (p. 51). Well-executed play flows from beautifully-improvised reaction in response to one’s opponent working in harmonious concert.

To encourage authenticity and maintain responsiveness, play transpires within a “magic circle,” separated in time and space from ordinary life, with a distinct set of rules and conventions. In sports, the magic circle includes, most obviously, the rules of the game which are applied when and where the game is designated. When a player breaks a rule, especially if the violation is perceived as having selfish intent, the game ceases to be play. In theatre, the magic circle involves cooperating, or “playing along,” to maintain the artificial reality being performed on stage. When an actor “breaks character” or does something to violate the illusion of realism, it disrupts the play. Of course actors make mistakes, but they can respond to those mistakes in a

way that demonstrates a commitment to the play they are engaged in. The rehearsal space also has a set of norms that constitute the space as one where actors can feel safe and comfortable playing with ideas as they develop the scenes together. Directors often establish rituals at the beginning of rehearsal, such as warm-ups, that sets apart rehearsal time from the conventions of normal life outside of rehearsal, so that actors do not feel embarrassed doing things that would embarrass them otherwise. The magic circle reinforces a climate wherein players are willing to be vulnerable with each other, without concern of the world outside of the play.

Within the set of rules, norms, and constraints established in the magic circle, there must be some uncertainty and freedom to move. To Huizinga, certainty is the antithesis of play because the player loses control over his or her circumstance when the game has been essentially determined. This is why in sports, a close game is much more exhilarating than a lopsided victory, in which the outcome seemed already determined long before the end of the game. Although theatre is more predictable than sports given the predetermined script, there is always some uncertainty around how the performance will go, which requires a heightened level of responsiveness to the other actors on stage. Frost and Yarrow (1990) describe this element:

“Improvisation is fundamental to all drama... It does not matter that the play has been rehearsed for a month, with every move, every nuance of speech learned and practiced. In the act of performance the actor becomes an improviser... He hears the lines of his fellow performers as if for the first time, each time, and responds to them, for the first time. He keeps within the learned framework of the play; he does not make up new lines, or alter the play’s outcome in any drastic way. Yet, the actor improvises; and the relationship between formal ‘acting’ and ‘improvising’ is so intricate that we might say that each includes the other” (p. 1).

If there was no latitude for actors to play with their roles, and not just rigidly play their roles, and if there was no risk of making mistakes, it would feel less like play, in part because there would be less uncertainty. As Caillois (1961: 8) argues, “The game consists of the need to find... a

response which is free within the limits set by the rules. The latitude of the player, this margin accorded to his action is essential to the game and partly explains the pleasure which it excites.”

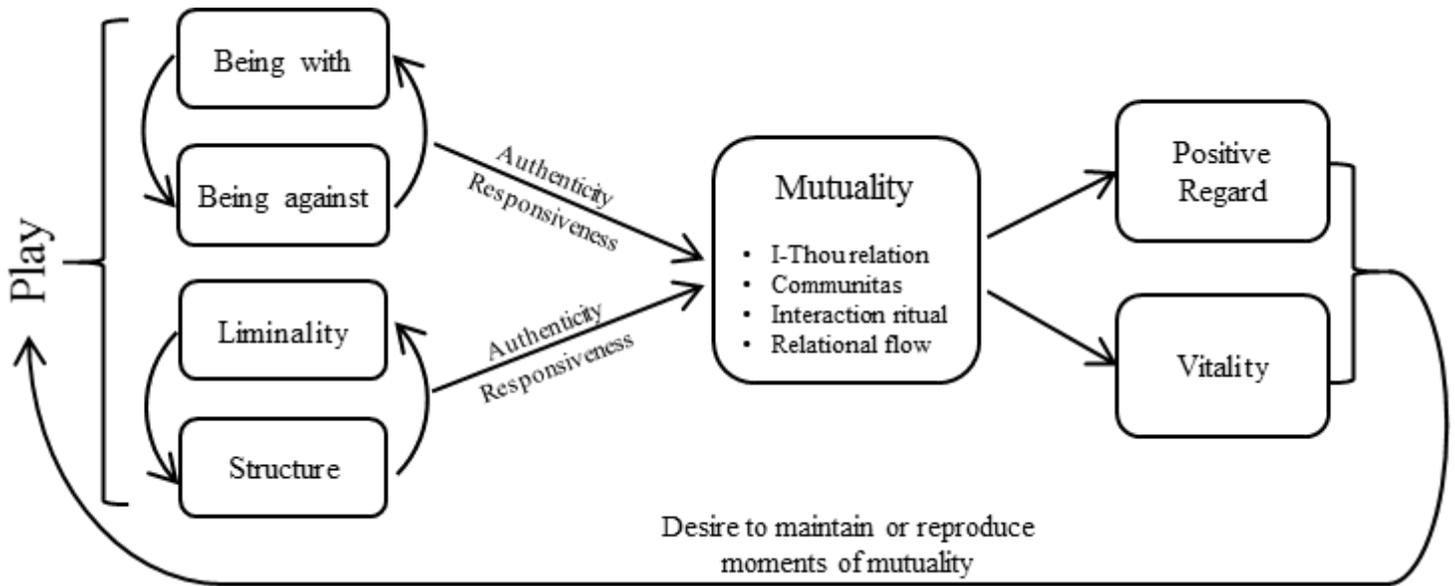
In the balance of being with and being against, and structure and liminality, found in play, the capacity for authenticity and responsiveness grows. By maintaining these dualities, play seems to provide a more complete, more fully human experience which has the capacity to form connections between people regardless of how different they might be in terms of their background, personality, religious beliefs, political ideology, etc. In play, external differences lose all relevance, and people see and connect with each other as fellow humans. This profound mode of being with others fosters feelings of wholeness, patterns of coherence, and total presence in a collective unity (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Sandelands (2010) draws on depictions of play by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) to characterize this aspect of play as selflessness: “In play, the boundaries that usually isolate one person from another – the identities that distinguish them as individuals – are overcome by the life of community” (p. 76).

I am not claiming that authenticity and responsiveness are qualities that are totally absent from non-playful experience. The point is rather that in play the demand for those qualities is so heightened that they become central to, and to an extent definitive of, our mode of comportment. These qualities naturally emerge from the conditions that make a situation playful. It should also be acknowledged that play does not guarantee the experience of mutuality, but participants absorbed in play are ripe for the possibility of mutuality.

Summary (see figure 5.1)

In summary, I argue that mutuality is the driving mechanism of moments of human connection, and that positive regard and vitality come out of these moments, which motivates participants to re-produce such moments together. Mutuality is achieved in moments of

Figure 5.1: Model of Being in Relation



interaction when individuals are fully being in relation, which involves being authentic and being responsive. Authenticity and responsiveness are cultivated by the structure of the interaction. I theorize two sets of conditions that cultivate authenticity and responsiveness, both false paradoxes. Interactions characterized as being with and being against provide the sense of safety (being with) and absorption (being against) that promotes authenticity, and a desire (being with) and need (being against) to be responsive to each other. Interactions characterized by both liminality and structure similarly cultivate authenticity and responsiveness. Liminality frees people up to being authentic and responsive to each other, while structure supports or bolsters them in their authenticity and responsiveness. Both sets of conditions have a common effect of removing barriers between people, creating a mutual vulnerability, and promoting a more completely human experience. Moments of play exemplify the resolution of these seeming paradoxes, which is why mutuality is so prevalent in sports and theatre. Next, I discuss some theoretical implications and directions for future research.

Discussion

The topology of human connection presented in this model, centering on mutuality, creates a scaffolding of propositions that have value to organizational researchers and practitioners. This model deepens our understanding of the phenomenon that the HQC construct was trying to capture. Admittedly, I am not claiming to have fully captured the essence of human connection. Mutuality is not human connection. In fact, I continue to struggle with understanding the relationship between mutuality and human connection, whether it is a driving mechanism or an indicator of human connection in a moment. However, building on the HQC concept, which simply identified human connection by three co-occurring indicators, this model brings new precision to understanding the mechanisms that account for how and why moments of human connection occur, and the relational outcomes that emerge from these moments.

This model also ties together principles that underlie prominent concepts in diverse fields trying to explain the same universally recognized phenomenon. Indeed, one of the major contributions in this dissertation might be introducing the likes of Martin Buber, Randall Collins, and Victor Turner to organizational researchers (Buber has not been mentioned a single time in the Academy of Management Journal, the others have only a handful of mentions). As a situational theory of moments of connection, it sits at the nexus of micro and macro theories. Moments of human connection have often been conceptualized, including in HQC research, as a subjective, intrapsychic experience, influenced by internal states. This model moves beyond individual mechanisms to a better understanding of how mutuality is achieved in context, and suggests some broad principles for how mutuality might be achieved in organizations.

For micro researchers, this framework sheds new light on the experience of human connection. One of the criticisms that HQC research has faced is high intercorrelations with

many different positive relationship constructs. This model opens the door to more rigorous theorizing of the mechanisms linking HQCs and other positive outcomes. With this refined framework, future research should explore additional outcomes associated with HQCs, centering on the capacities generated from mutuality. Beyond the common relational outcomes of trust, psychological safety, respect, etc, additional outcomes might include learning, innovation and creativity, thriving, and more. As an example, recent neuroscience research has found that when engaged in the neural state of social engagement (likely associated with mutuality), the neurons of social engagement are prompted to fire at higher speeds, which increases oxytocin and dopamine to support the neurons. As a result, these moments have potential to stimulate intense learning creativity (Porges, 2011).

For macro researchers, this framework merely scratches the surface in terms of designing social structure for mutuality. The theories of Turner and Collins on *communitas* and interaction ritual chains seem especially generative for organizational scholars. Also, research on HQCs, including this dissertation, has surmised that moments of connections can become the building blocks of a relationship. However, this process has yet to be explored. Future research should examine how organizations might leverage moments of connection to build relationships, or conversely, if they want to avoid personal relationships for some reason, how to leverage the benefits of moments of connection without developing relationships. In other words, the feedback loop linking moments of mutuality to future moments needs to be unpacked.

Finally, as I have mentioned before, this is one of the first studies I am aware of to explore the conditions and practices that cultivate HQCs or mutuality specifically. I studied two contexts and came away with two distinct, but related, processes. Future research can certainly find additional conditions and practices, and additional forms of play, in which mutuality

emerges. And as we expand our repertoire of pathways to mutuality, the core commonalities will become more plainly evident, giving us a better sense of the necessary and sufficient conditions for mutuality.

Conclusion

Human connection is a mystery whose depths may never be fully illuminated or articulated through academic research. However, this dissertation moves us a little closer to understanding the moments of connection that enliven and invigorate us. Drawing insights from sports and theatre, two of the longest enduring domains of social life (perhaps behind family and religion) opens up new possibilities for seeing and appreciating the different pathways to human connection. The concept of mutuality gives us a more refined view of what drives these moments of connection, and how organizations might cultivate these moments. Given the breadth of interest in and importance of mutuality across different fields, this framework offers to help organize and bring coherence to the diverse perspectives. This framework also provides organizations with a clearer target in order to cultivate moments of human connection at work.

Epilogue

Dissertations do not usually have epilogues. Epilogues are generally reserved for narrative literary works, to tie up any loose ends and bring closure to the story. This dissertation seems a bit unusual (one of my committee chairs described it as “a bit of a mongrel”), and perhaps more narrative-like in its development. And so in this section I want to briefly recap the journey that I have been on in my dissertation, the turns I have taken, how my thinking has evolved, and most importantly where I hope to go next.

When I started this dissertation, I was broadly interested in how people develop positive relationships. The sports context was an obvious choice of context for me, as some of my most positive relationship experiences were in sports. I thought of relationships as something to be developed over time, and that genuine relationships are those that come to transcend a delimited social structure. That is to say that genuine relationships are manifest by the extent to which the relationship exists beyond the organization or roles which provided the initial connection. Correspondingly, I assumed that structured relationships were inherently less genuine, or had an inherent layer of artificiality that made them less personal, less meaningful, less real.

Studying the lacrosse team challenged how I thought about relationships and human connection. The lacrosse players spent a lot of time with each other outside of lacrosse, forming many friendships, but the deepest connections experienced by the players did not seem to come from those friendships. What they experienced playing lacrosse was a different form of connection than a friendship. Players often pointed to moments of competition as the moments

when they deeply connected with a teammate, even though such moments did not necessarily happen among friends or turn into friendships outside of lacrosse. I struggled to find a story about relationships building over time in the data, so my focus shifted to moments of connection.

The same trend was even more apparent in the theatre study, where actors deeply connected with each other, but rarely formed relationships that carried outside of the show in any observable way. As I struggled to trace a particular quality of relationship formed in the cast, I was confronted with a wide array of relationships, but a common experience of connection, which resembled the moments of connection on the lacrosse team. These moments of connection did in a sense transcend the structured tie, although not in a temporal sense; rather, in those moments there emerged an awareness of some deep, universal human connection. Rather than thinking of relationships as something built over time, these moments of connection illuminated a connection that was there in the beginning.

In both contexts, it was some form of play that drew out these moments of connection. Both forms of play, competition and role playing, leveraged structural capacities that are prevalent in organizations. Somehow, what I thought to be barriers to human connection in organizations, the structured processes actually facilitated human connection by providing a sense of security that encouraged vulnerability.

While the bulk of my findings sheds light on playful practices that cultivate moments of connection, the most important contribution of this dissertation might be the shift in how we think of social life in organizations. The high quality connections literature attempted to shift the focus from relationships to moments of connection; however, most research claiming to study HQCs has overlooked this fundamental distinction. Existing empirical studies of HQCs use measures of relationships, and conceptualize the construct as a quality of relationship rather than

a quality of a moment. It seems that to truly unpack moments of connection almost necessitates qualitative inquiry, and this dissertation adds increased rigor and clarity to the HQC literature.

In addition to a timely empirical exploration of the phenomenon of human connection, another contribution that I am anxious to offer the field of organizational behavior is a depth of theoretical rigor from diverse perspectives. Studying moments of human connection led me to a variety of contemporary theoretical frameworks and classical philosophers (the lacrosse paper even references the earliest recorded literary work). This dissertation joins the HQC literature in OB to a much broader and older conversation of scholars engaged in social philosophy from various perspectives. For example, I was astonished to see the lack of reference to Martin Buber in our top management journals, and the scarcity of reference to Victor Turner, Randall Collins, and many of history's most respected social philosophers.

Related to this, part of this work that I found particularly generative was discovering a wealth of wisdom from the extensive literatures on the philosophies of sport and theatre. I selected these contexts thinking that I would find positive relationships, and they would be fun to study. It had not occurred to me that these are two of the most ancient forms of social life, and that the value, purpose, and nature of both have been explored for centuries. While I highlighted the connective capacity of play in sport and theatre, sport and theatre are not universally acclaimed as being worthwhile activities. There are those who criticize sport and theatre, recognizing dangers, manipulations, and potential costs to individuals and society. Both activities have faced periods of opposition in various societies. Michael Oriard (1982), a leading scholar in sports literature, reports that the "majority of serious sports novels [published in the USA] emphasize the negative impact of sports on individuals and the culture" (p. 13; for a thorough review of anti-sport literature, see Bale, 2008). Sport has long faced criticism for being tied up

with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, and pleasure in seeing another lose. More recently, it has faced criticism for being exploited by capitalism, and the resulting excesses of sport encourage cheating and bodily harm from overwork and injury. Likewise, theatre has a long history of critics (for a review of anti-theatricality, see Barish, 1981). Critics argue that theatre allows and even encourages actors to retreat from their values and modesty to mimic base characters, which risks tainting the actors. And like sports, theatre has also been criticized for its rampant commercialism, leading to an overreliance on “stars” and large spectacles. Sports and theatre have literally thousands of years of history being both praised and critiqued by philosophers and scientists, making them deep reservoirs of wisdom for understanding the complexity of social and organizational life, as well as human nature. This study has merely scratched the surface of what I feel is a treasure trove of potential insights for organizations from sports and theatre.

Just as I have only scratched the surface of lessons to be learned from sports and theatre, I also feel like I have only scratched the surface of understanding human connection in play. This dissertation, as all research, has limitations, which open up opportunities for future studies. The biggest area of limitation is the remaining question of the transferability of these findings to work organizations. The organizational context presents unique challenges and affordances. In future research, I hope to explore different forms of play that emerge in work organizations. And given the difficult relationship between work and play, which also merits further research, I hope to explore additional pathways to cultivating mutuality at work that may not involve play. Another limitation, these studies paid minimal attention to the influence of the group or group leaders on the process of cultivating mutuality. Moving into the organizational context, research should examine how dyadic moments of mutuality are influenced by the group context.

Another important limitation that relates to the relevance to work organizations is that these studies fail to consider any work-related outcomes beyond the connection itself. My data have no real performance outcomes associated with mutuality, or no way that I can demonstrate how mutuality actually improves the quality of the performance. Correspondingly, in the theory paper, the outcomes of mutuality that I theorize are limited to the other two aspects of HQCs, vitality and positive regard, and a propensity for re-creating moments of mutuality. Extant research previously summarized has demonstrated that HQCs are associated with improved cognition and creativity, group coordination, learning, and other performance outcomes. Within my revised framework centering on mutuality, the question becomes whether these and other performance outcomes stem directly from mutuality, or from the quality of relationships that emerge from moments of mutuality. On that point, because relationships do matter at work, a specific outcome that needs to be examined is the effect of moments of mutuality and relationship formation, as well as collective level relationship outcomes that emerge from moments of mutuality. This would reinforce the conceptual distinction between mutuality and relationships, and would extend the importance of mutuality through its effects on relationships.

Methodologically, these studies also have some limitations. One major challenge faced by most research on relationships in organizations is the challenge of capturing a dyadic phenomenon. Most of my data are accounts of moments of mutuality from one side of the encounter. Occasionally I would hear about an instance from both sides of the experience, but more often I was relying on one account, and then leaping to an assumption that such moments exhibited mutuality for both participants. In future research, I would be interested in video recording moments of connection, and then having both/all participants describe their experience, to more rigorously capture the phenomenon. A less surmountable methodological

challenge is the difficulty of trying to empirically, relying on observations and interviews, capture something metaphysical. I am relying heavily on people's descriptions of a phenomenon that is inarticulable. In the end, with both studies I arrive at a theoretical model, but do so with the recognition of the price we pay for linearizing and variablizing a metaphysical phenomenon. An empirical approach to this inquiry risks losing the depth and wonder of human connection by assigning words and models to it. Although I appreciate the usefulness of constructs and models for adding to the conversation in organizational scholarship, I think this field would benefit for a more philosophical rendering of this research.

Conceptually, this research created more questions than answers. One question that remains is that if human connection is something inherent that needs to be uncovered, such as through play, why is it so difficult for humans to realize this human connection? What is stopping us from achieving moments of mutuality more often? Looking at the question from that side may generate additional insights on how to cultivate mutuality at work. Another big topic that this research touches on is the nature of authenticity, or what it means to be authentic. The responsiveness aspect of mutuality has been thoughtfully considered, but there is still much confusion in the field regarding authenticity. The observation that theatre actors, when playing a character, and sharing no information about themselves or their lives outside of theatre, can feel deeply authentic, is a puzzle worth exploring in a separate paper.

Finally, in light of recent events in Charlottesville, Virginia, I am struck by the dire need of finding ways to cultivate human connection in society, especially in ways that do not draw lines between insiders and outsiders, but create awareness of a generic human bond. One of my favorite movies is *Remember the Titans*, which demonstrates the capacity of play in sport to break down barriers between social groups. I cannot help but think about the importance these

findings might offer toward re-enchanting social life in organizations and reducing prejudice, stigma, hatred, and greed that plague our society. This is just the beginning of my long journey of exploration of human connection, and I hope to find many more to join in this conversation.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Benefits of Positive Relationships

The need for social connection has been widely accepted as a fundamental and evolutionarily developed human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), with a large body of literature exploring the positive psychological effects of positive relationships and social support, including enhanced sensitivity to social cues (Pickett et al., 2004), increased helpfulness and reduced aggressiveness (Baumeister et al., 2007), improved stress resilience and psychological functioning (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986; Lepore, 1992; Sarason et al., 1991), and heightened performance on complex cognitive tasks (Baumeister et al., 2002). The relationship science literature has consistently and robustly found that social connection has a positive effect on individual health and well-being (e.g., Cohen, 2004; Taylor, 2006), which is also true of positive relationships at work (for an early and thorough review, see Dutton & Ragins, 2007).

Organizational scholarship in particular has also found that having positive relationships at work is important to individuals and organizations. Coworker friendships facilitate enhanced job performance (Methot, Lepine, Podsakoff, & Christian, 2016), higher levels of job satisfaction (Hamilton, 2007; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007; Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000), organizational commitment (Dotan, 2007; Morrison, 2002), and decreased turnover intentions (Hamilton, 2007). In addition, recent work on job design has highlighted the importance of taking the social characteristics of work into account (Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). A recent meta-analysis found that coworker support was associated with higher satisfaction and organizational commitment, and lower levels of employee withdrawal, including absenteeism, intention to turnover, and actual turnover (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Positive

relationships contribute to positive emotions at work (Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016), and reducing work-related strain (e.g., Dulebohn et al., 2012; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Methot et al., 2016; Grant & Parker, 2009). Lastly, workplace relationships provide resources, largely through social support, that lead to lower stress, in addition to higher commitment and higher productivity (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002; Morrison, 2004; Nielsen, Jex, & Adams, 2000; Riordan & Griffeth, 1995; Shadur, Kienzle, & Rodwell, 1999; Winstead et al., 1995).

Another way to classify positive workplace relationships is by the functions they serve (Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016; Rousseau & Ling, 2007). Positive relationships produce a higher willingness to engage in learning and experimentation (Davidson & James, 2007; Dutton, 2003) and share that new knowledge to benefit others (Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2000). Positive relationships promote increased interpersonal helping (Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007) and organizational citizenship behavior (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Relational qualities that accompany friendship, like trust, positive regard, and safety, are also linked to positive outcomes (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014; Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; McAllister, 1995; Spreitzer, Lam, & Fritz, 2010). Finally, those who benefit from the psychological resources generated by positive relationships will be in a better position to create virtuous gain cycles (Hobfoll, 2001), by investing those resources back into other relationships at work (e.g., Bommer, Miles, & Grover, 2003; Bowler & Brass, 2006; Settoon & Mossholder, 2002).

On the surface, workplace friendships seem unambiguously beneficial. Yet despite the obvious benefits, there is emerging evidence that there may also be downsides to developing friendships at work (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002; Duffy, Gangster, Pagon, 2002; Ingram & Zou, 2008; Methot et al., 2016). What makes personal relationships rewarding also brings the potential for detrimental outcomes. In particular, the difficulty and effort required to maintain a

personal relationship at work can be resource-depleting and lead to emotional exhaustion (Duffy et al., 2002). Personal relationships can also open the door to opportunistic behaviors, or coworkers taking advantage of the relationship in harmful ways (e.g., Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998). Finally, personal relationships at work also risk detracting from or harming relationships at home and outside of work (Harrison & Wagner, 2016).

Appendix B: Initial Interview Guide for Lacrosse Team Study

Ice breaker questions:

- How long have you played lacrosse?
- Why did you decide to come play for Midwest University?
 - Tell me about your experience getting recruited?
 - What impressions did you have of the team?
 - What did you like about the team/coaches?
- What is your main motivation for playing lacrosse?
- What benefits do you experience from playing lacrosse? Being part of this team?

Collective relationship:

- Describe your relationship with your teammates.
- What does it mean for you to be part of this team? How does it feel?
- Tell me about experiences when you have felt especially close to the team. Why?
 - When did this group first start to feel like your team?

Interpersonal relationships:

- Tell me which players you are especially close to on the team.
 - (ask the following questions about each player mentioned up to three players)
 - Describe your relationship with them. What does it look like during and outside team activities?
 - Why are you close to them?
 - How has your relationship with those players developed? For what reasons?
 - Can you describe an experience when you really connected with a teammate?
- What percentage of the team would you consider your close friends?
 - What sets those who are close friends apart from those who aren't?
 - Do you have close friends who are not part of the team?
 - What percentage of your close friend group is on the team?
 - How many of your current close friends did you know before college?
 - What does it mean to be a friend versus just a teammate?
- Do you act differently around your teammates than you do around other close friends or your family? Why?
 - Do you feel comfortable being yourself around your teammates?
 - Do you feel like they know the real you?

- How have you gotten to the point (or why not) that you can be authentic?
- Tell me about a time when you have felt a genuine connection with a player on the team.
- If you were upset about something in your personal life, would you feel comfortable discussing it with your teammates?
 - How much do you know about the personal lives of your teammates?
 - How much do they know about your personal life?
 - Tell me about a time when you have shared something personal with a teammate.

Potential relational constraints:

Competition

- How does competition influence your relationships with your teammates?
 - Within the team and against other teams?
 - How does losing influence relationships on the team?
 - Competing in drills vs competing for a spot?

Role structure; barriers

- How do your different roles on the team (e.g., grade, position, depth chart, midi line, roommate, friend, etc.) influence your relationships with teammates?
- Which cross sections of players on the team do you tend to feel closest to?
- Which cross sections of players do you feel least close to? Why is that the case?

Status

- How has the team changed from 3 years ago when it was a club team?
 - How have relationships changed?
 - How have the overall team dynamics changed?
 - How is your relationship with the new recruits?
 - What are the effects of being a club team or a varsity team on team relationships?

Hierarchy

- Who do you see as leaders on the team?
 - Why do they stand out as leaders?
 - How is your relationship with those players?

Practices:

- What have the coaches done to influence your relationships with your teammates?
- What practices/routines does the team have that influence your relationships with teammates?
 - LEAD meetings?
 - Work-out rituals?
 - Meals?
 - Living together?
 - Studying together?
- If you could change one thing about the team, what would it be?

Appendix C: Evolution of the Concept of Mutuality

The term mutuality has been used in a variety of organizational literatures to refer to different things. The earliest use of mutuality in organizational scholarship dates back to Frederick Taylor's (1911) philosophy of scientific management, which was focused on ensuring a "mutuality of interests" between employee and employer. In this sense, management scholars have long advocated mutuality as the basis for an effective employment relationship (e.g., Barnard, 1938). Relatedly in sociology emerged social exchange theory, which posits that all human relationships are formed on the basis of mutually contingent and rewarding exchanges (Gouldner, 1960; Blau, 1964). Two major approaches developed in social exchange theory. One camp developed an individualistic approach, which views individuals as utilitarian, and social exchanges as ruled by the aim of maximizing gains and minimizing losses (e.g., Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958). A second camp adopted a collectivistic approach, arguing that exchange behaviors are regulated by societal rules and norms (Levi-Strauss, 1969; Gouldner, 1960). Whether viewing social exchanges as governed by economic motives or societal norms, social exchange theory holds a basic premise that an exchange relationship must exhibit mutuality, meaning both parties feel that they can contribute, along dimensions that are valued by both parties (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Exchange partners strive to maintain a balance in the reciprocal value each has offered to the other (Blau, 1964; Eisenberger et al., 2001; 1986; Shore & Wayne, 1993). This perspective starts to emphasize mutuality as a relational quality, and how the degree to which a relationship is based on mutual benefit builds mutual trust (Malhotra & Murnighan, 2002; Kaufmann & Dant, 1992).

Organizational psychologists shifted use of mutuality from referring to the reciprocal interest in an exchange relationship, or in the structure of an employment relationship, to the joint understanding (i.e., mental model) of the commitments involved in the exchange, arguing that people are typically motivated to keep commitments as they understand them (e.g., Shanteau & Harrison, 1991). From this perspective emerged the notion of psychological contract, referring to the mutual beliefs, perceptions, and informal obligations between two individuals (Rousseau, 1989; 1995). In contrast to an economics view that workers are inclined to deliberately shirk their duties unless sanctions are in place to promote mutual interests (e.g., Alchian & Demsetz, 1972), organizational psychologists argue that much of what economists see as “shirking” occurs because incomplete information or miscommunication disrupts the “mutuality” of understanding (Rousseau & Shperling, 2003). This perspective views mutuality as shared understanding, or being on the same page, regarding mutual expectations in a relationship.

Recently, identity research has adopted yet another use of the term mutuality, referring to a state of reciprocal internalization of each partner’s attributes in a close relationship (Ashforth, Schinoff, & Rogers, 2016). What is mutually joined together or shared is not mutual expectations of each other, but aspects of each other’s person. Developing close relationships often involves a process of growing together (“becoming like two peas in a pod”). However, this identity mutuality “does not imply a loss of diversity; rather, the identity of each person is enriched by including attributes of the other” (Ashforth et al., 2016: 18). For example, Aron and Aron (1996) write: “To reduce any connotations of domination, we are using less often the phrase ‘including the other in the self’” because “including each other in each other’s self” is a more accurate description, albeit “awkward in English” (p. 50). So over time we have seen an evolution of the term mutuality from a structural feature of an exchange relationship, to a shared understanding of expectations, to a more profound coming together and mutual influencing of two persons.

Appendix D: Initial Interview Guide for Theatre Study

Ice breaker questions

- How long have you been involved in theatre?
- How many shows have you done at this theatre?
- What do you do outside of theatre?
- What draws you to being in theatre and doing plays?
- Why did you audition for this show in particular?

Relationship history with castmates

- Describe any relationships you had with specific cast members before this show (being in past shows together)
- How close would you say you became in your last show, and how close were you at the beginning of this show?
- Had any of these relationships gone beyond past shows? (e.g., hanging out together after the show is over, becoming friends, knowing about their personal lives and families)
- How do these past relationships influence the way you relate to each other in this show?
 - How do past roles that you and they held shape how you see each other now?
 - Is it awkward when roles shift and one person who was a lead, or director, before is now a background character, or vice versa?

Relationships in this show

- Describe your relationships with people in this show?
- How did your relationships develop over the course of the show production?
- What aspects of this experience brought you close to other cast members?
- Can you describe an experience that caused your relationships with other castmates to become especially close?
 - other experiences?
- Can you think of instances that tested your relationships with each other?
- Which actors are you closest to on the cast?
 - Why are you closest with them?
- Do you act differently around your castmates than you do around other close friends or your family? Why?
 - Do you feel comfortable being yourself around your castmates?
 - Do you feel like they know the real you?
 - How have you gotten to the point (or why not) that you can be authentic?
 - Tell me about a time when you have felt a genuine connection with another member of the cast
- If you were upset about something in your personal life, would you feel comfortable discussing it with your castmates?

- How much do you know about the personal lives of your castmates?
 - How much do they know about your personal life?
 - Tell me about a time when you have shared something personal with a teammate.

Potential relational constraints

Competition-

- How does the fact that you and several of your castmates competed for the same lead roles influence your relationships with those castmates?

Roles-

- How do your different roles in the cast (e.g., lead vs background, bad guy vs good guy, lover vs enemy, family relationship, other) influence your relationships with castmates?

In/outgroups-

- Did you feel like there were any ingroups or outgroups (cliques) in the cast?
 - How did those subgroups influence your relationships?

Practices

- What has the director done to influence your relationships with your castmates?
- What practices/routines did the cast have that influenced your relationships?
 - during rehearsals?
 - before/after rehearsals?
 - before/after performances?
 - online?

Appendix E: Comparing Play and Related Concepts in Organizational Research

Characteristics of play from three perspectives

| Johan Huizinga | Roger Caillois | Babis Mainemelis |
|--|--|---|
| 1. Play is free 2. Play is not “ordinary” or “real” life 3. Play is demarcated from “ordinary” life in both time and space 4. Play creates its own order 5. Play is connected with no extrinsic interest (not serious) | 1. Play is not obligatory 2. Play is separate from the routine of life, occupying its own time and space 3. Play is governed by rules that suspend ordinary rules 4. Play is unproductive in that it creates no extrinsic value 5. Play is uncertain—results cannot be pre-determined 6. Play involves make-believe and the existence of imagined realities set against “real life” | 1. Play is a “threshold experience,” existing between the true and the false, serious and not serious 2. Play has marked boundaries in time and space 3. Play balances uncertainty and constraint, freedom within a set of rules 4. Play has loose and flexible associations between means and ends 5. Play creates positive affect |

Play versus Fun

A related concept to play comes from the culture management trend that began in the early 1980s of fostering “cultures of fun” in contemporary workplaces. Fluegge (2008: 15) defines workplace fun broadly as “any social, interpersonal, or task activities at work of a playful or humorous nature which provide an individual with amusement, enjoyment, or pleasure.” Ford and colleagues (2003: 22) define fun not as a set of activities, but as a “work environment that intentionally encourages, initiates, and supports a variety of enjoyable and pleasurable activities.” An interesting distinction in this definition is of fun as intentionally promoted by the organization. Bolton and Houlihan (2009) recognize that not all fun is organizationally sponsored, and that we should distinguish between “packaged fun” and “organic fun,” the latter reflecting an “intrinsic and inherent part of organizational life” (p. 557). Based on these different conceptualizations, fun, like play, can potentially be derived from multiple sources and may or

may not be formally encouraged and initiated by the organization. It could be said that fun is a definitional component of play, or play is not play unless it is fun, but fun incorporates a broader range of activities, including anything that is enjoyable or pleasurable. Play is not the only way to have fun, but it is an important mechanism for making the work experience more fun.

Play was an inseparable part of the trend toward promoting cultures of fun. Many of the original culture gurus, including Peters and Waterman (1982), Pascale and Athos (1981), and Deal and Kennedy (1982), taught that managers should create a corporate environment that is conducive to humor and play to revitalize employees. What Deal and Kennedy (1982) called “work hard/play hard” cultures aimed to supplant the traditional stereotype that depicts work as a rigidly serious activity. Organizational managers and employees began to try to make work more fun through office parties, informal dress codes, jokes, and fun decorations (Greenwich, 2001; Reeves, 2001). The benefits attributed to making work fun focused on increasing motivation and developing a competitive advantage through hiring better talent (Peters & Austin, 1986).

In the latest integrative review of research on play in organizations, Mainemelis and Dionysiou (2015) observed that “During the early wave of this transition in the 1980s, some organizations merely tolerated employees’ spontaneous playful behaviors, but more recently, a growing number of organizations have deliberately institutionalized specific forms of play as integral to their culture to enhance work practices and creativity” (p. 121). For example, Google touts that one of the top ten reasons to work at Google is that “work and play are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to code and pass the puck at the same time” (Scott, 2008: 76). Other organizations such as Adobe, Zappos, and Facebook likewise intentionally design workspaces as “playspaces” (Meyer, 2010), complete with amenities such as community gardens, rock climbing walls, trampoline parks, putting greens, music halls, video game arcades, and ping-pong tables.

Play versus Gamification

A related trend that emerged with the purpose of improving employees' positive feelings about their work, or making work more fun, is integrating games into the work environment. While games have previously been criticized as frivolous and unproductive (e. g. Ford, 2007), they are now becoming an established management practice through the emergence of gamification (Deterding et al., 2011; Deterding, 2014), game-based learning (e.g., Harviainen & Vesa, 2016), and play-like remuneration (e.g. Bray & Konsynski, 2007; Werbach & Hunter, 2012). Games are systems in which players engage in an artificial competition (either alone or against other players) with a defined outcome according to defined rules (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Early management research highlighted many employee-created workplace games. Roy's (1959) study of machine operators examined how workers dealt with the "beast of monotony" by creating games around self-imposed goals ("stamp a thousand green shapes in a row") and around interactions with other workers (such as the ritualized game of stealing a coworker's banana). These games helped improve worker morale and their affective experience of work. More recent research has found similar games in a wide variety of settings, including among hotel employees (Sherman, 2007), truckers (Ouellet, 1994), casino operators (Sallaz, 2002), and job-seekers (Sharone, 2007).

The prevalence of games played by employees has caused managers to take interest in deliberately implementing workplace games, rather than merely tolerating employee-led games (Reeves & Read, 2009). This interest is driven by an instrumental logic: work is not always fun, but games are fun, so turning work into a game will make work fun, and lead to happier employees. This logic led to the emergence of gamification (Edery & Mollick, 2009), defined as "an employer-imposed game in a work environment where the goals of the game are designed to

reinforce the goals and purpose of the employer” (p. 16). Gamification seeks to use elements from designed games (such as video games, board games, and sports) to enhance the fun or effectiveness of a game in a work environment (Deterding et al., 2011). Gamification is purposefully designed with reinforcing rules, contexts, and mechanisms that create a more immersive feeling of play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Thus, gamification entails adopting the structure, look, and feel of a designed game with the intent of advancing instrumental organizational goals, creating the same experience for participants that they would have if they were playing a game.

Though games or contests are a common form of play, gamification violates two of the central definitional aspects of play, namely that play should be freely entered into and should not be motivated by some extrinsic objective. Indeed, recent studies have found that “the externally-imposed nature of gamification makes it vulnerable to the paradox of mandatory fun,” such that when employee consent is lacking, gamification actually decreases positive affect (Mollick & Rothbard, 2014: 39). Gamification represents a game structure under which employees may or may not adopt an orientation of play. Managers have the obvious difficulty of trying to institutionalize an experience that is usually considered spontaneous, or at least not mandatory or imposed. I will discuss this challenge later in the chapter.

Appendix F: Benefits of Play and Fun in Organizational Research

The popular management press has purported benefits of fun in virtually every aspect of organizational life. It has been argued that fun leads to higher job satisfaction, morale, creativity, retention, and service quality, as well as lower absenteeism, anxiety, and burnout (Abner, 1997; Abramis, 1989; Hemsath & Yerkes, 1997; Lundin et al., 2000; Bolton & Houlihan, 2009).

Whereas some academic research has demonstrated that fun does have positive consequences for individuals and organizations (e.g. Peluchette & Karl, 2005; Stromberg & Karlsson, 2009; Tews et al., 2012), other studies have been more critical, highlighting that workplace fun may be met with skepticism and resistance (e.g. Baptiste, 2009; Fleming, 2005; Taylor & Bain, 2003; Warren & Fineman, 2007).

One set of studies by Karl and Peluchette has examined the impact of fun as assessed by a scale measuring the perceived existence of fun in the workplace. The scale includes items such as: “This is a fun place to work” and “At my workplace, we try to have fun whenever we can” (Karl & Peluchette, 2006b; Karl et al., 2007). Using samples from healthcare (Peluchette & Karl, 2005; Karl & Peluchette, 2006a; Karl et al., 2007), volunteers (Karl et al., 2008), and students in service settings (Karl & Peluchette; 2006b), studies have demonstrated that fun was positively related to job satisfaction, negatively related to turnover intentions and emotional exhaustion, and that fun tempered the influence of emotional exhaustion on job dissatisfaction.

Other studies have examined the impact of fun as a multidimensional, higher-order construct (Fluegge, 2008; McDowell, 2004). With a sample of oil company employees, McDowell demonstrated that fun was significantly related to job satisfaction, organizational

commitment and turnover intentions. McDowell's framework of fun included socializing, celebrating, personal freedoms and global fun. Using the same framework, Fluegge found with a sample of working undergraduate students that fun had a positive impact on employee engagement, positive affect, and job performance, including task performance, creativity, and organizational citizenship behavior. Fun has also been found to be instrumental in strengthening employee attachment (Tews, Michel, & Allen, 2014) by producing positive relationships within organizations (Allen, 2006; Allen & Shanock, 2013; Mossholder et al., 2005).

One specific source of fun at work is humor, which has been leveraged as a potential solution for various organizational problems including subordinate/superordinate tension (e.g., Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1990), poor leadership (e.g., Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999), resistance to change (e.g., Dwyer, 1991), communication failure (e.g., Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995), and stress-induced turnover (e.g., Caudron, 1992; Kahn, 1989). The instrumental potential of workplace humor has been thoroughly explored in management scholarship (Duncan et al., 1990; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Malone, 1980), finding humor to reduce job boredom (Collinson, 2002), reduce conflict (Carnevale & Isen, 1986), increase creativity (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987), improve communications (Mettee, Hrelec, & Wilkens, 1971), strengthen cohesiveness in small groups (Duncan, 1984), increase employee retention (Mariotti, 1999), and increase profitability (McGhee, 2000). Humor "enhances trust, facilitates change and encourages plurality of vision... humor breaks down barriers between people and makes an organization more participative and responsive. It follows that an environment that is amenable to humor will also facilitate organizational learning and renewal" (Barsoux, 1996: 500).

Turning to qualitative investigations, a number of studies have illustrated that fun produces desirable outcomes. In describing the organizational culture at Disney, Van Maanen

(1991) illustrated that fun activities and coworker socializing were central features of the work experience that enhanced camaraderie and bonding among employees. In addition, Stromberg and Karlsson (2009), in a study of female meatpackers, demonstrated that work environments characterized by fun, humor, and laughter promoted group cohesion and enhanced the quality of work life in an environment that might otherwise be perceived as “greasy, monotonous, and repetitive” (p. 638). Bolton (2004) qualitatively demonstrated the use of humor among nurses, concluding that the humor may foster group cohesion and reduce the emotional exhaustion associated with service work.

Despite its potential benefits, other qualitative studies have cast workplace fun in a more critical light. Taylor and Bain (2003) illustrated that supervisor efforts to sponsor fun may at times be counterproductive. In addition, Baptiste (2009) found that senior managers could be resistant to participating in fun as such endeavors would “encroach on their already busy schedules” when confronted with work overload and other job stressors (p. 609). Others similarly found mixed results for different organizationally sponsored fun initiatives that encompassed elements such as social events, play and freedom for personal expression (Fleming, 2005; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Redman & Mathews, 2002; Warren & Fineman, 2007). Although some employees enjoyed and appreciated these initiatives, other employees were resistant and skeptical. For example, Fleming (2005) found that many employees disliked company-sponsored fun, considering it inauthentic and fake. Fleming and Sturdy (2009) found that some employees were resistant to participation in outside social activities, feigned interest in company fun, and hid their true identities when personal expression was encouraged. Although fun could be beneficial, these diverse studies highlight that implementing fun in the workplace is not as straightforward as popular press publications suggest.

With a rising workforce increasingly demanding jobs that are fun and provide intrinsic satisfaction, and organizations that honor the whole person, play can be a way to add a layer of fun and humanity to the work. Perhaps the most obvious benefit of play is that it is intrinsically appealing or fun (Abramis, 1990), but it can also be a powerful mechanism for enhancing the work experience by stimulating mental and emotional well-being. Inherent to play in its pure form is a sense of freedom, authenticity, and mutuality that belies the tensions associated with corporate-sponsored fun caused by feelings of stress and artificiality. Social scientists have established the importance of play in contributing to employees' mental and emotional well-being (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Brown, 2009). "The beneficial effects of getting just a little true play can spread through our lives, usually making us more productive and happier in everything we do" (Brown, 2009: 7). In addition to producing joy in the process, play also offers a safe space for the expression and transformation of negative feelings such as loss or pain (Winnicott, 1971). Play has been used therapeutically to allow people to work through and reconcile conflicting emotions by helping them overcome perceived obstacles. Through the capacity to pretend and shift roles, play allows for a voluntary or even non-conscious release of internal tensions and trial of new work identities (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Play may be particularly important for the millennial generation (Lamm & Meeks, 2009; Parker & Chusmir, 1990; Smola & Sutton, 2002), who exhibit a strong desire to balance work with play, freedom, and social involvement (Carless & Wintle, 2007; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Smola & Sutton, 2002).

Although play by definition may not have any obvious direct effects on productivity or efficiency outcomes, it does produce a spatio-temporal space wherein workers feel safe to imagine and explore new possibilities, which may provide beneficial outcomes beyond the frame of the play itself. The most common benefit attributed to play in organizational research is its

role in personal creativity (Amabile, 1996; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). Play lays at the core of creativity and innovation because it can open people up to new possibilities (Brown, 2009). Sutton-Smith says: “play is in the first place a reframing of activity. To play with something is to open it up for consideration and for choice. Play opens up thought. As it proceeds it constitutes new thought or new combinations of thought.” In this way, play becomes a force for change: “play is the envisagement of possibility. Play is adaptive potentiation” (Sutton-Smith, 1979: 315-316). Turning work tasks into play can affect creativity by creating a sense of freedom to explore new ideas. Play can also indirectly promote creativity by strengthening social bonds (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003) and increasing positive affect (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2002). Progressive companies such as Google are leveraging playful practices to stimulate creativity among employees to stay at the forefront of innovation. A key challenge with this approach, however, is that it might be difficult to deliberately stipulate play to fulfill some managerial mandate because this might conflict with the idea that people tend to engage in play for its own sake (Statler, Roos, Victor, 2009).

Related to creativity, play can be a source of learning, both for the individual and the organization. Developmental psychologists (e.g., Piaget, 1962) view play as a critical source of learning by providing children a safe space to make mistakes and improve skills with minimal negative consequences (Bruner, 1972). In play, mistakes are not discarded as disturbing anomalies, but can trigger exploration and practice (Glynn, 1994). Play is the “primary place for the expression of anything that is humanly imaginable” (Sutton-Smith, 1997: 226) and as such it helps employees and organizations adopt and survive in a rapidly changing and increased complex environment.

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