



Existential Resonances: Exploring the Nexus of Psychology and Performing Arts
in
Improvisational Practices

By

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Abstract

This study explores the existential resonances within improvisational practices by examining the intersection of psychology and performing arts. In-depth interviews with three professional performing artists, analysed through interpretative phenomenological analysis, reveal four key themes—authenticity, freedom, choice, and the pursuit of meaning—demonstrating the profound existential dimensions of improvisation and its potential for self-discovery.

Keywords: improvisation, psychology, existential phenomenological approach, performing arts, creativity

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Introduction

The notion of improvisation encompasses diverse meanings and is utilized in various contexts. The extensive literature dedicated to improvisation demonstrates the interest of researchers from different fields, including art, cognitive science, psychology, education, business and organizational studies, as well as computer science and artificial intelligence. However, the primary focus remains on the arts, especially the performing arts, as improvisation has been an integral part of many performative manifestations for centuries. Each of these fields applies different approaches to analysing improvisation, contributing to our understanding of creativity and spontaneous expression. As Frost and Yarrow (2016, p. 3) state, “Improvisation is not just a style or an acting technique; it is a dynamic principle operating in many different spheres, an independent and transformative way of being, knowing, and doing.” How does this transformation occur, and how is it connected to individual creativity? In the context of rapidly advancing technologies and AI, the question of an artist's creativity becomes particularly urgent. Recognizing the vast potential of improvisation for creative self-discovery, we propose that investigating the improvisational process from the perspective of artists' personal experiences can reveal aspects of improvisation that may be regarded as sources of creativity and transformative power.

A core challenge is grasping the complex creative processes involved in improvisational performance. While many studies have aimed to provide insights into brain activity and perceptual experiences when observing performances (especially in artistic forms), watching or listening to a performance differs significantly from acting in it or engaging in daily life activities. Although expertise has long been a focal point in psychological research (including sports, science, and various other fields), studies specifically addressing improvisational expertise remain paradoxically limited (Coste, Bardy, & Martin, 2019).

The aim of our research is to uncover the psychological underpinnings that drive spontaneous

artistic expression. This collaborative approach, integrating perspectives from psychology, music, dance, and theatre research, seeks to emphasize how improvisational art forms serve as conduits for existential exploration and self-discovery.

Methodology of research

Interest in the topic arose after the authors (a theatre researcher and a psychologist) engaged in an informal discussion with a composer about improvisation during a conference coffee break. A spontaneous remark made by the musician was, “Improvising is incredibly joyful and pleasurable; however, to make it happen and for viewers to take interest, two rules are essential: you must play as if it is your last time, and you must hear others better than your own self.” After this discussion, we felt that improvisation is a subtle and intriguing phenomenon that can encapsulate and touch upon the very essence of human creativity, revealing the profound dimensions of the human condition. We suspected that it might be related to existential resonances, but we needed to bracket our intuitions and conduct research based on emerging results and themes.

To explore the personal and profound aspects of improvisation, we selected a qualitative research strategy. The analysis was conducted using an Interpretative Phenomenological approach, as outlined by J. Smith (2008; 2009). The study involved three professional performing arts specialists: a dancer, a composer/music performer, and an actor. We conducted three in-depth semi-structured interviews with each artist. Each participant was presented with a broad question regarding the personal significance and meaning of improvisation, prompting them to recall a moment when they were improvising and describe their state. For anonymity purposes, each participant's response has been encoded with a consonant: G, M, and K.

Research results and discussion

While the artists' accounts of their improvisational experiences originated from diverse perspectives, a common thread emerged: the identification of a distinctive state characterized by

pleasantness, diffusion, and, most significantly, **revelation**:

“And then you notice how everything opens, revealing itself before your eyes. It's not about creating a view, but rather allowing it to emerge on its own...” (G)

“When you don't give yourself time, you allow spontaneity. You throw yourself into the unknown, giving it form—publicly, in front of others. You achieve a connection, you see your partner, and sparks fly all around.” (M)

“It's like walking barefoot through a forest, listening to every sound—questioning whether there are boars or snakes. It begins, something primal; your attention focuses on the question, sharpening your perception. It's a state close to meditation, a pleasurable concentration.” (K)

Improvisation, as described by the participants, is a rich experience engaging both cognitive and emotional processes, fueled by imagination and used to connect disparate phenomena, people, and experiences. This research identified four key themes, discussed in detail below, that illuminate the unique state of being experienced by both the individual and the artist: **authenticity, choice, freedom,** and the **pursuit of meaning**.

Authenticity – electrified special moments

Participants described this state as exceptional, akin to peak experiences characterized by heightened sensitivity and a profoundly embodied, energized feeling. The experience is often more physical than visual, blurring the lines between life and artistic creation. While difficult to articulate, it is a state deeply desired.

“It ignites, then doesn't ignite... then djjjjj... sparks flying everywhere. Energy takes over, the body is fully immersed, attention is sharp, you perceive everything perfectly—like you're on active drugs. Yet, at the same time, you feel light as a feather, not pushing yourself too hard.” (M)

“If improvisation is successful, you don't remember what happened. Only certain feelings remain,

but you can't say exactly what took place.” (M)

Authenticity in the moment is a key aspiration for improvisers. This aligns with Dudeck and McClure's (2018, p. 5) observation that “the best improvisers are 'obvious,' trusting their impulses and responding authentically to the moment.”

Van Deurzen and Kenward (2005) cite Heidegger's reflection on authenticity as accepting one's unique life path and acknowledging personal possibilities. However, they note that it's easy to lose oneself in inauthenticity, neglecting self-care by becoming absorbed in roles. This contrasts sharply with humanistic psychology's emphasis on self-expression and self-realization. Heidegger (1992) highlights the inherent tension between authenticity and inauthenticity in all human experience.

Choice – *the leap into the abyss*

A key finding was the participants' recognition of improvisation as a unique moment—a descent into the unknown, a leap into the abyss. This involves choosing to engage with the uncharted, moving beyond mere apprenticeship. Improvisation requires choosing new experiences, actively listening to others rather than oneself, and adopting a receptive stance, even towards mistakes, viewing them as opportunities rather than failures.

“After reading the note, there's no time to think; you just have to throw yourself in.” (M)

“It's either staying in your comfort zone with familiar tools, or pushing beyond your limits—that's where the real thing might emerge. It's always scary; you're always on the edge.” (G)

“It's not just about enjoyment; you question whether to do it, making sure you truly want to.” (K)

The participants' accounts highlighted the significance of choice as a defining characteristic of improvisation. Rather than viewing freedom as the absence of constraints, they emphasized the capacity to actively shape the creative process in the present moment by embracing uncertainty. This correlates with Dudeck and McClure's (2018, p. 6) assertion that skilled improvisers operate successfully “on the

edge of chaos”, demonstrating authentic engagement with others, a willingness to trust their intuition, an acceptance of risk and failure, and an ability to navigate the tension between structure and spontaneity.

Freedom – *the encounter with uncertainty and then BOOM*

The leap into the unknown unleashes a flood of possibilities, exhilarating for the creators. True creativity emerges when a new reality is constructed, a process enhanced by embracing uncertainty, avoiding pre-conceived plans, and relinquishing a need for complete control.

“You need fear, a kind of worry. When danger appears, the actor starts to think, to act. What is danger? Uncertainty.” (M)

“Sometimes, those unexpected moments are fun. Without them, there would be no improvisation... these unexpected moments disappear; some situations become easier, others harder.” (K)

Improvisation embraces mistakes, transforming them from errors into essential components of the creative process. This shift in perspective allows for the emergence of novelty and unexpected creative solutions. In dance improvisation, Susan Leigh Foster (2003, p. 4) underscores the freedom to venture into the "previously unimaginable," a process that necessitates building upon existing knowledge. This dynamic interaction between the known and the unknown fosters the creation of entirely new realities, where established frameworks are challenged, and spontaneous invention takes center stage. The challenges initially perceived as daunting can become opportunities for growth, aligning with Sartre's conception of freedom (2012; 2024). For Sartre, freedom is essential—not as a mere choice among options, but as an ongoing process, that defines both human existence and creative agency. This freedom shapes our capacity for imagination and creation by enabling consciousness to transcend the constraints of the given world. In *L'Imaginaire*, Sartre (2024) demonstrates that freedom is foundational to our ability to imagine and create, allowing us to envision new possibilities and actively participate in our own self-definition.

Pursuit of meaning – *harmony with the world and unfolding of the artistic outcome*

The participants' accounts consistently highlight the integral role of embodied experience in the improvisational process. This state of heightened interconnectedness with the surrounding world is characterized not only by its affective dimensions but, more significantly, by its generative capacity, resulting in meaningful and aesthetically significant creative outcomes.

“It’s an embodied process; it’s not just in your head. Your ears and eyes are fully focused, but your body is also involved. You have to make decisions incredibly fast, as if you had no body, and yet you are completely present within it.” (K)

“For my contribution to be worthwhile in this group, I can’t focus only on myself. I have to see, listen, understand, and know where everyone is, what they’re doing, what states and relationships they’re in before I contribute.” (G)

The importance of a strong sense of connection with the environment and a desire to contribute something meaningful is highlighted in the participants' accounts of improvisation. This resonates with Madson's (2005, p. 15) perspective that effective improvisers are “awake, not entirely self-focused, and moved by a desire to do something useful and give something back”. Improvisation facilitates the creation of novel artistic realities. This process of generating something new aligns with Frankl's (1998) perspective on the search for meaning, which emphasizes the importance of creative, experiential, and attitudinal engagement.

Conclusion

This research, employing theoretical saturation and an existential phenomenological approach, provides new insights into the nature of improvisation and its transformative impact on human experience. The four key existential dimensions identified—authenticity, choice, freedom and the pursuit of meaning—offer a more nuanced understanding of the improvisational experience and its potential to facilitate personal growth and transformation.

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