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Girls just want to be funny : the potential for increased self-esteem, self-efficacy and empowerment through all-female comedy groups : a project based upon independent investigation

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Elizabeth Simone Ehrenberg
Girls Just Want to Be Funny:
The Potential for Increased
Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy
and Empowerment Through
All-Female Comedy Groups

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined the potential impact that being in an all-female comedy group has on feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and empowerment in women who participate in such groups. Twelve subjects, who were either currently in an all-female comedy group or had been in one (or more) of these groups in the past, were individually interviewed. Subjects were asked to reflect on their tenure in the comedy groups in terms of how those experiences may have impacted their self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal empowerment. Participants were also asked to reflect on whether the concept of comedy as a forum for social justice was present in their work.

The findings demonstrated that taking part in an all-female comedy group in an academic setting was correlated with increases in self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal empowerment. These increases were derived both from elements of doing comedy as well as group dynamics. Participants who had been involved in an all-female comedy group outside of an academic setting also demonstrated increases in self-esteem and self-efficacy, however they primarily attributed these elevated feelings to aspects of doing comedy in general and not to group dynamics. Participants who had been in an all-female comedy group outside of academia were more likely to report decreases in self-esteem due to group dynamics.

This study indicates that all-female comedy groups have the potential to be an intervention for women, if they include the supportive elements that were present in the academic-based groups represented in this sample.

GIRLS JUST WANT TO BE FUNNY: THE POTENTIAL FOR INCREASED SELF-
ESTEEM, SELF-EFFICACY AND EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ALL-FEMALE
COMEDY GROUPS

A project based upon independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2010

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“I had... an adolescence that bordered on delinquency. I was kicked out of my first high school for cutting class and low grades. I barely graduated, which is unspeakable to Asian parents. I coped with the pain by laughing at it” (Tung, 1999).

-Margaret Cho

The experience of having "coped with the pain by laughing at it" is central to this study on women who take part in all-female comedy groups. Prominent theorists in the field of psychology have long written about the value of humor for coping with emotional pain. Freud called humor "the highest of [the] defensive processes" (as cited in Berk, 2001, p. 325) and George Vaillant regarded the use of humor as an ability that "enables one both to tolerate and to face the unbearable" (as cited in Bloch, 1987, p. 174). Contemporary scholars have postulated that this process of using humor to cope can go so far as increasing one's sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Berk, 2001; Franzini, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to explore the outcomes of women involved in learning and performing comedy skills in the context of all-female comedy groups. The hypothesis is that taking part in an all-female comedy troupe has the potential to enhance feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal empowerment in the women who participate in such groups. Do women who are involved in all-female comedy groups

cope with painful experiences using their craft? And if so, does this defense mechanism serve to increase their feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy?

The concept of using humor to cope with painful experiences is only a fraction of the justification for the study's hypothesis. There is indication that performance comedy could be psychologically healing in general, as it bears some similarities to therapeutic modalities, such as psychodrama and expressive arts therapy. In addition, performance comedy is a medium for social action or a way to "speak truth to power," especially when created by those who have been marginalized in society. While not apparent in the above quotation, Margaret Cho's comedic style is a good example of this. She is a queer-identified comic who often uses her standup routine as a platform for gay rights messages, such as: "I think that gay people should have the right to get married by Elvis like everybody else" (Revolution Tour). It is possible that feelings of personal empowerment may be gained through this process of engaging in social justice comedy.

If humor and comedy may enhance feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal empowerment in potentially anyone, why does this study look only at women who have participated in all-female comedy groups? Women's humor has a history of being disparaged (Barecca, 1988) and, despite gains, women continue to be scarce in the comedy world (Horowitz, 1997; Ryzik, 2009). "In the performing arts (music, dance, acting) the only profession where an overwhelming majority of performers are men is standup comedy" (Horowitz, 1997, Preface). It is this researcher's belief that getting together to take part in an endeavor in which they have been marginalized, might perhaps be empowering for women. In addition, the hypothesis that women doing comedic work together could experience increased feelings of personal empowerment and self-esteem

relies heavily on self-in-relation theory, a psychological theory that underscores the importance of relationships for emotional growth (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991; Schiller, 1997). While self-in-relation theorists believe in the importance of relationships for the psychological and emotional well-being of everyone, the theory has feminist roots, as it was developed in reaction to the phallogocentric psychological canon. Based on the tenets of self-in-relation theory, groups composed only of women, such as consciousness raising groups, have been shown to be empowering and boost the self-esteem of their participants (Home, 1991; Kravetz, 1980; de la Rey, 2001). This indicates that the relationships forged within all-female comedy groups may be a factor in potentially increasing the self-esteem and personal empowerment of women.

In this qualitative study, 12 women who were either current or veteran members of an all-female comedy group were interviewed one-on-one by the researcher about their experiences working in all-female comedy groups. Later chapters will discuss the content that emerged from those interviews, as well as whether or not the hypothesis was validated. If the hypothesis does prove to be true, this study could indicate that all-female comedy groups are a novel intervention for helping women increase their sense of self-esteem, self-efficacy and/or personal empowerment. The following chapter, Chapter II, will expand upon and delve more deeply into the literature surrounding this topic, some of which has been briefly mentioned in this introduction.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The working hypothesis of this research project is that all-female comedy groups have the potential to increase feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and empowerment in their members. It has been difficult to locate any previous research on this specific topic. Therefore, instead of looking at the existing research that has been done *on* this topic specifically, as a typical literature review would do, this chapter will examine a variety of literature *surrounding* the topic. The review is divided into the following five sections: The Therapeutic Value of Humor; Psychodrama, Expressive Arts Therapy and Play Therapy; Interpersonal Relationships and All-Female Groups; Comedy as Social Justice; and Women on the Margins in Comedy. Taken together, the material in each section will build a case for the working hypothesis. In addition, showcasing the published writing that has been done around this subject will serve to demonstrate that a gap exists in the literature on this specific topic and thus that there is a niche for this study.

The Therapeutic Value of Humor

There is ample literature on how humor itself is healing and may help increase self-esteem and self-efficacy. The therapeutic value of humor has been written about from both a physiological and psychological standpoint. Cousins (1991) reported that in 1964 he cured himself of ankylosing spondylitis, a painful and debilitating form of arthritis, through a combination of high doses of ascorbic acid and high doses of laughter. Cousins writes how he "... made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anaesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free

sleep” (p. 55). In synthesizing 30 years of research on the subject, Berk (2001) writes about a number of physiological benefits of humor, including improved mental functioning, relaxation of muscles, improved respiration, stimulation of circulation, decrease in stress response, increase in immune system response, and increase in endorphin levels (p. 328-332).

There is also much literature on the psychological benefits of humor. Freud said that humor was “the highest of [the] defensive processes” (as cited in Berk, 2001, p. 325). Bloch (1987) explains how theorist George Vaillant regarded humor as a mature defense, “... insofar as it enables one both to tolerate and to face the unbearable” (p. 174). Humor helps people get a fresh perspective on their problems (Berk, 2001; Bloch, 1987). Rollo May explained this quality of humor by saying that it is a “healthy way of feeling a ‘distance’ between one’s self and the problem, a way of standing off and looking at one’s problem with perspective” (as cited in Berk, 2001, p. 325). Taking a different perspective on difficult material can help increase self-esteem and self-efficacy (Berk, 2001; Franzini, 2001). Connected to this idea of offering fresh perspective, humor helps people to laugh at themselves and not take their situations too seriously (Bloch, 1987).

According to Berk (2001), the process of using humor as a coping mechanism to gain a fresh perspective happens in a three-step process. First, there is a “problem stimulus” or outside stressor. The second step is the “humor response” in which one’s perspective on the stressor is changed, or re-framed. The final step is the emotional response that comes from having made the cognitive shift (p. 326). This psychological concept— that one can cope with difficult experiences by reframing them in a comedic light—is what is meant by the saying, "comedy is tragedy plus time."

Franzini (2001) writes specifically about the use of humor in psychotherapeutic modalities. In psychotherapy, humor can help patients to more readily self-reveal (Bloch, 1987, p. 181). Humor also assists patients overcome their earnestness or “tone of gravity” in therapy sessions and allows them to have “creative fun” (p. 180). Franzini (2001) notes that while there is a paucity of research on the use of humor in group therapy, “the group setting would seem to be a natural opportunity for the use of humor by both patients and therapists because of its built in audience” (p. 175). Bloch (1987) outlines a number of characteristics of humor that make it especially useful in a group therapy setting, such as the way it helps create group cohesiveness and works to dissipate group tension (Bloch, 1987, p. 182-3).

There is anecdotal evidence on using humor as the basis of the group therapy process. Brausa (1993), a social worker at a VA medical center in Topeka, Kansas, describes a group he facilitated that used comedy as its basis. In 1986, Brausa led a comedy group for veterans with chronic psychiatric disorders. The curriculum included having group members bring in jokes to share, listening to comedy (many of the group participants were older and had grown up on radio), studying the lives of specific comedians, and then watching and listening to their work. Finally, group members learned and performed short physical gags. While not a formal research study, Brausa’s article anecdotally includes the changes he observed in the group participants, such as “stress reduction” and improved mood through laughter and clapping. Brausa also believes that the sharing of jokes led to short-term increases in self-esteem and that group members improved their social skills through the process of speaking their jokes out loud and responding to each other’s humor. The author also notes that finding and telling jokes

forced the participants to concentrate on something outside themselves, which he saw as significant “in a population frequently preoccupied with an internal focus” (Brausa, 1993).

Like Brausa's (1993) comedy group for veterans, most of the research that has been done on the healing effects of humor has been anecdotal. Franzini (2001) points this out and says that despite all the writing on the salutary effects of humor such "claims remain essentially untested empirically” (Franzini, 2001, p. 171). Owing to his own belief in the therapeutic value of humor, he calls for its effectiveness to be “evaluated empirically” (Franzini, 2001, p. 177).

The literature in this section demonstrates how humor itself may amplify self-esteem and self-efficacy, as it can be employed as a coping mechanism to help one gain a new perspective on difficult experiences. This concept that one can reframe circumstances using humor and that this process may increase one's self-esteem or self-efficacy is a large part of what underlies the working hypothesis of this research project. While undertaking comedy in a performance is not the same thing as what this literature is referring to—using humor as an intra-psychic or inter-personal coping skill—part of what I am curious about is whether women who participate in all-female comedy groups feel that their self-esteem or self-efficacy has been enhanced through their utilization of humor as a coping skill.

Psychodrama, Expressive Arts Therapy and Play Therapy

This section will look briefly at the modalities of psychodrama, expressive arts therapy, and play therapy for adults. Comedy resembles elements found within these three types of therapy and these parallels shed light on how comedy may be healing in a

similar fashion. As these three modalities are therapies and this study is looking at women who have been in a performance group (not a therapy group) I will not delve deeply into them and only briefly acknowledge how these topics relate to the study.

Psychodrama was invented in the 1930's by Viennese psychiatrist Jacob L. Moreno. It is a therapeutic technique that draws on elements of theater. It is "the staging of a problem in life as if it were a play" (Blatner, 1996, p. 1). Through this acting of one's problems, cognitive learning is integrated with experiential involvement. The theory is that doing the emotions and enacting the scenario will evoke feelings that could not be accessed simply by talking about them. "When an idea is embodied in a form that can be both witnessed by others and kinesthetically processed in one's own being, it becomes 'more real'" (Blatner, p. xiv). Moreno referred to this as "act hunger" and believed that if it were not satisfied, people would "act out" (as cited in Blatner, p. xiv). In psychodrama the problem is not always acted exactly as it happened in real life. Sometimes, "the action is played out and even exaggerated" (Blatner, p. xiv). This might include playing out that which did not happen but might have been "thought, or feared or remained at the subconscious level" (Blatner, p. 1-2).

A number of the elements of psychodrama bear similarities to comedy. In stand-up comedy, as in psychodrama, one is also relating a story from one's life experience, often something that was painful or embarrassing at the time it was lived. Like psychodrama clients, standup comics, often exaggerate or tell their story in a way that differs from how it actually happened. (This process of transforming a negative life experience into a comedic performance is what happens in the use of humor as a coping mechanism, discussed in the previous section.) In addition, in standup comedy, as in

psychodrama, one is witnessed in the narrative process. Standup comedy is not the only comedic form that is comparable to psychodrama. Sketch writing and sketch performance that includes elements of retelling a problem in life would also have similar characteristics to psychodrama. Psychodrama can also be used to “re-evaluate...the larger social network” (Blatner, 1996, p. 1). Something akin to this happens in comedy in the form of parody, which draws attention to what is going on in a culture or subculture. While Psychodrama draws on elements of performance, it is therapy, not a "theatrical piece" (Blatner, p. 8). The comedy in this study clearly is theater, not therapy. However, due to some of these parallels between psychodrama and comedy, it stands to reason that what is healing about psychodrama may also apply to comedy.

Expressive arts therapy, also known as creative arts therapy is another therapeutic technique that is important to acknowledge, as comedy fits within the umbrella of expressive art. Clients who are undergoing creative arts therapy treatment might be working in one or more mediums. Creative arts therapists might have clients create visual art (such as painting or drawing), performance art (such as dance, drama, or music), or pieces of writing (such as poetry). Proponents of this type of therapy believe that expression, creativity, and spontaneity are inherently therapeutic. Landy (1993) refers to the expressive arts as "naturally" therapeutic and gives as examples the creativity of children and the use of theater in shamanistic healing rituals in indigenous cultures (p. 360). Landy and other creative arts therapists believe that the act of creation produces a sense of “well being” in people (p. 360). Comedy, it could be argued, falls within the category of creative arts and includes elements that expressive arts therapists value as naturally therapeutic. The comedy in which the women in this study are engaging is

comedy of their own making, so it is certainly creative and expressive. Improvisational comedy involves the element of spontaneity. The process of making and showcasing your own comedy also includes the artistic mediums of writing and performance. Therefore comedy might have similar healing properties as other creative endeavors.

While those in the field of creative arts therapy believe that the arts may be beneficial for everyone, there is an emphasis on the use of art therapy for those who have a history of trauma. As Landy (1993) says, "if art implies a natural and unconscious form of healing, then art can be harnessed consciously as a means to heal those who are imbalanced [or] victimized" (p. 360). He goes on to refer to a process known as "aesthetic distancing" in which one is "moving away from the [traumatic] event...and transforming it into images within a story (p. 364). He likens this to how children make sense of upsetting events with magical thinking. This is akin to how comedic storytelling can help one cope with challenging life events by reframing the experiences.

Finally, it is necessary to briefly mention play therapy, as it has been theorized that humor is one of the main ways that play manifests in adults. One of the earliest proponents of the therapeutic benefits of play for children was psychiatrist and pediatrician D. W. Winnicott who stated that, "playing facilitates growth and therefore health" (as cited in Ablon, p. 349). Winnicott was a firm believer that play and the benefits of play did not end with childhood.

Whatever I say about children playing really applies to adults as well, only the matter is more difficult to describe when the patient's material appears mainly in terms of verbal communication...It manifests, for instance, in the choice of words, in the inflection of the voice, and indeed in the sense of humor. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 54)

As adults, we continue to play, but instead of toys, we use language. "[H]umor, and word play such as puns, irony and sarcasm" are adults' play things (Ablon, p. 351). If playing is so vital for growth and development, then humor, one of the main tools that adults use to play, may be central to our psychological and emotional growth as we age. Women who play in all-female comedy groups may experience this emotional growth as an increase in their self-esteem or self-efficacy.

As the hypothesis of this project is that engaging in the creation and performance of comedy may be beneficial to women in all-female comedy groups, it was important to acknowledge the three therapeutic modalities in this section—psychodrama, expressive arts therapy, and play therapy for adults. As all three techniques share some elements with comedy and humor, it stands as a possibility that what is curative about these therapeutic modalities may also be beneficial about the comedic experiences of the subjects in this study.

Interpersonal Relationships and All-Female Groups

As this study looks at women in all-female groups, it is important to look at the feminist social work and group work literature on women's relationships with one another and all-female groups in general.

Feminist literature in psychology and social work has done much to draw attention to the social context in which psychological models are developed. Scholars at The Stone Center in Wellesley, Massachusetts wrote about how dominant psychological theories (such as those of Freud, Winnicott, Kohut, Erikson and others) were created by White, Western men and therefore reflect the realities of only a fraction of the population, while purporting to represent the normal human psychological

condition. The Stone Center scholars were looking to "develop new...models to better represent women's lives" (Jordan, et al., 1991, p. 1). One of the primary critiques these authors levied against the canon of psychological theories is that these dominant models view human development as "stages of ever increasing levels of separation and spheres of mastery and personal independence" (Jordan, et al., p.1). Instead of these developmental models that view interconnectedness as merely a stage on the way to the ultimate goal of mature independence, Jordan, et al. propose that interpersonal connectedness itself is essential for adult health. This idea that relationships are integral to health is the foundation of self-in-relation theory. While these writers acknowledge that interpersonal relationships are vital to everyone regardless of gender, they were primarily talking about the importance of relationship in women's psychological development.

Fundamental to the belief that "the organizing factor in women's lives is 'relational growth'" is the concept that women derive manifold benefits as a result of relational connectedness (Jordan, et al., 1991, p.1). As Schiller (1997) states, "a sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and even identity is often experienced in direct relation to the quality of interpersonal relations a woman has in her life" (p. 7). She goes on to describe one of the mainstays of self-in-relation theory, namely that "aspects of self such as creativity, autonomy and self-assertion, emerge within the context of relationship" (p.8).

In addition to self-esteem, Jordan, et al. (1991) propose that interpersonal relationships are personally empowering to women. Miller (1991) defines the traditional notion of power as "the ability to augment one's own force, authority, or influence as well as to control and limit others" (p. 198). This kind of "power over" implies dominion or

control. Surrey (1991) mentions that theorists such as Rogers and Maslow have put forth the notions of personal power or inner strength, however she critiques these concepts as conjuring the image of a "highly individuated self-actualizer" (p. 163). Instead of these conceptualizations of power, Surrey proposes that personal empowerment happens "only through the larger lens of power through connection, that is...mutually empowering relationships" (p.164). In this model, power is conceived of as non-hierarchical—instead of a powerful agent acting over one who is powerless, both agents empower each other in an interactive process. "Miller (1986) has described ... the nature of an empowering interactive process resulting in increased zest, empowerment, knowledge, [and] self-worth" (as quoted in Surrey, p.167).

In the self-in-relation model, action and relationship take place together. Surrey (1991) notes that often we think of relationships as things that we "*have* when we are not working" and that the concepts of "agency" and "community" are often held as dichotomous. She critiques this idea that work and relationship are mutually exclusive, as male centric and a function of how boys are raised to see relational disconnect as foundational to the development of the independent worker. Girls, she argues, are "encouraged to act and work in connection" (p.168). Therefore for girls and women relationship and action go together. If working in relationship is fundamental to women's development and the relational context can yield fruitful benefits for women such as "increased zest, empowerment, knowledge [and] self-worth," Surrey begs the question of how we can "build empowering relational contexts for personal growth" (p.170)?

One manifestation of such a relational context among women was the consciousness raising groups that took place during the women's movement in the 1960's

and 1970's in the United States. A key feature of this type of meeting was the development of critical consciousness, or the understanding of the personal as political. In these groups women came together to discuss issues important to their lives and made connections between their lived experiences and public policy. In many of these groups the participants would go on to develop social action strategies (Home, 1991; Kravetz, 1980; de la Rey, 2001).

There has been a lot of research on the personal change outcomes of consciousness raising groups. Kravetz (1980) reviewed a number of U.S. studies on the therapeutic benefits to women who took part in consciousness raising groups. The majority of these studies were qualitative—they were based on interviews with women and observations of participants. One of the therapeutic benefits that appeared most frequently among all of the outcomes reported in the literature was "increased self-awareness, self-respect, and self-esteem" (p. 274).

Kravetz (1980) does point out that many of the women involved in these studies took part in other feminist organizations and activities, which may have also contributed to the positive outcomes, and that feminists in general may be more likely to already hold some of the characteristic that were found to be the beneficial outcomes of consciousness raising groups. "Research indicates that, as compared with nonfeminists, feminists have... higher self-esteem, and more self-acceptance...are more creative, original, and willing to take risks" (p. 276). In other words, there may be some self-selecting bias that may skew the outcomes in terms of which types of women take part in consciousness raising groups in the first place.

It is possible that the outcome of increased self-esteem is not specific to consciousness raising groups, but occurs in all-female spaces more generally. Kravetz (1980) notes that, "some of the reported outcomes of [consciousness raising] groups may be related to the positive effects of all-women groups" (p. 275). She cites a study that indicates that female assertiveness is more likely to increase in all-female as opposed to mixed-sex groups. While assertiveness is not the same thing as self-esteem, an increase in assertiveness can be an indication of a heightened sense of self-esteem. In discussing the benefits to women who participate in all-female social change organizations, Home (1991) states that, "In all-female groups... women are more assertive and androgynous, while being less defensive and stereotyped in their role behavior" and that "these groups allow women to develop... skills, confidence, autonomy and group experience" (pp. 156-157). In mixed-sex social change groups, Home states that a "[l]ack of confidence and group experience can prevent all but 'superwomen,' who are usually White and highly educated, from challenging men's leadership" (p. 156). While the overall message—that women may be more assertive, more self-confident, and better able to develop their skills in an all-female group—comes through, I find her characterization of highly educated White women as "superwomen" to be problematic. First of all, because it fails to analyze the institutionally racist structure that creates and supports dynamics in which White people have the privilege to "challenge" authority. Secondly, it ignores that fact that even in all-female spaces, power differentials based on identity markers aside from gender (such as race, class, sexual orientation or ability) could also impact who is most assertive and confident.

Acknowledging identity differences based on race and class is important in a discussion about consciousness raising groups. The consciousness raising groups that took place in the U.S. during the 60's and 70's were mostly composed of White, middle class, educated women (Home, 1991; Kravetz, 1980). The women's liberation movement has a history of speaking for White, middle and upper-class women while assuming to speak for all women, thus ignoring the oppression of poor women and women of color. A prime example of this exclusion is found in the abortion and reproductive rights campaigns of the women's movement (Mama, 1995; Gerber-Fried, 1990; Davis, 1990).

While the consciousness raising groups of the 60's and 70's were primarily composed of White women and focused on issues pertaining to that segment of the population, the model of consciousness raising has been used with a variety of populations. Mama (1995) wrote about consciousness raising groups for Black women in Britain. Gutierrez and Ortega (1991) studied the use of consciousness raising groups with Latino undergraduates. Gutierrez and Ortega refer to the process of seeing "the connections between personal and political life "as something that occurs in spaces with "similar others" and within "intra-group interaction," not as something that is particular to White women, or even women in general (p.26). Consciousness raising groups have been organized for men. de la Rey (2001) mentions groups for African-American men and for boys in South Africa, both with the goals of increased critical consciousness and empowerment (p. 318).

This section has reviewed the literature on the importance of relational connectedness for women's development. The fundamental belief of self-in-relation theory is that relationships help women grow in numerous ways, such as increasing their

self-esteem and feelings of empowerment. The ideas put forth in this body of literature are a piece of the justification for my hypothesis. If women experience boosts in self-esteem and empowerment as a result of participation in all-female groups, such as the North American consciousness raising groups of the 60's and 70's, then all-female comedy groups— another all-female relational context—may be a space in which members experience increased feelings of self-esteem and empowerment.

While the authors who wrote about self-in-relation theory did not have all-female comedy groups in mind, I was surprised to find that their arguments could apply to what takes place in a comedy group. As Jordan, et al. (1991) say, “other aspects of self such as creativity, autonomy and self-assertion, emerge within the context of relationship” (p. 8). Creativity is fundamental in the production of any original theatre piece, while autonomy and self-assertion are both aspects of finding one's own voice through the modality of standup comedy. And each of these elements could arise within the relational context of a group.

Comedy as Social Justice

As stated in the previous section, one of the mainstays of feminism is the notion that the "personal is political." As Mama (1995) says, "feminist scholarship... has meant forging a politics of the personal through a collective articulation of women's experience" (p. 8). In the consciousness-raising groups of the 60's and 70's, women came together to illuminate the connections between the personal and the political. Sometimes these groups led to collective social action projects, such as letter writing campaigns or lobbying efforts. While comedy groups do not engage in social justice projects in this traditional sense, comedy can be a forum in which to articulate one's personal experience

of oppression. In this way, comedy can be seen as a kind of "politics of the personal." In this section I will discuss the scant literature that supports the idea that comedy is a way for those who are marginalized to "speak truth to power" and how these acts may be empowering.

Barecca (1988) writes about how comedy is a forum in which women engage in social struggle. She sees comedy as a way for women to express their anger at the current social structure. "It is my belief that comedy and anger are two fundamental mainstays of women's writing" (p. 7). She speaks of the "crucial roles of comedy paired with anger as shaping forces and feminist tools" (p. 5).

According to Barecca (1988) women use the "feminist tools" of comedy not simply to express anger at a social structure that oppresses them, but also to attempt to create a new order. "Women writers have traditionally used comedy to subvert existing conventional structures" (p. 5). Part of the classic definition of a comedy is that it is a story in which the narrative ends with a "happy ending, joyous celebration, and re-establishment of order" (p. 8). Shakespearean comedies and romantic comedy films are examples. Barecca argues that women write comedies that push against this "re-establishment of order." She says that, "they write comedies which destroy a social order, perhaps but not necessarily to establish a new and different order" (p. 8). Another theory of comedy is that it functions "as catharsis of desire and frustration...as social safety valve" (p. 8). In other words, comedy is a way to let off steam. Barecca argues that women do not use comedy in this way. "...they use comedy not as a safety valve, but as an inflammatory device, seeking ultimately, not to purge desire and frustration but to transform it into action" (p. 8). In this way comedy is not simply an outlet for expressing

that which may be taboo in other contexts, it is a way of struggling to make societal changes.

Women are not the only oppressed group that has utilized comedy as a means for social struggle. In her thesis, Jones (2007) discusses how African Americans have used comedy as a way of critiquing institutionalized racism and attempting to create change. "Humor is a primary source of resilience and means of struggle against the social, economic, and political oppression faced by African Americans within the United States" (p. 1). In referencing the work of African American comic Dick Gregory, Jones states that, "by using humor, Gregory offers up a critique of the problems with American society and the effects of those problems on African Americans" (p. 8). Jones analyzes African American standup comedy through the lens of socio-political development theory. She cites Watts, Williams, & Jagers who define socio-political development as "the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and the capacity for action in political and social systems necessary to interpret and resist oppression" (as cited in Jones, p. 3). Jones argues that, "African American stand-up comedy serves as a catalyst to African American sociopolitical development" (p.1). Comedy is therefore a tool that African Americans use in the fight against oppression.

If comedy is a form of social action, how does the action of comedy relate to feelings of personal empowerment in comics? A lot of the literature that discusses empowerment talks about personal or psychological empowerment as occurring first and these feelings in the individual setting the stage for larger scale social change. Gutierrez and Ortega (1991) put forth the idea that there are three levels of empowerment: personal,

interpersonal, and political. The personal level includes "feelings of personal power and self efficacy [and] being able to experience oneself as powerful and capable..." (p. 24-25). The authors say that this first level of empowerment "is a crucial foundation for the other levels..." (p. 25). Similarly, Watts, Griffith, & Abdul (1999) talk about the importance of decreasing "internalized oppression" as a necessary first step towards social action. They say that "[e]mpowerment at the psychological level is the cognitive engine for liberation at higher levels" (p. 259). First one has to feel personally empowered and capable to be able to effectively engage in political action. Home (1991) mentions the opposite chain of events, how personal empowerment can take place as a result of engagement in social justice. "Participation in social action can have secondary benefits such as increased self-esteem, feelings of mastery and empowerment..." (p. 155). In sum, one may have the wherewithal to participate in social action because they already feel personally empowered and/or conversely, engaging in social action may create feelings of personal strength in the individual.

As the literature in this section has demonstrated, comedy can be seen as a form of social action as it is a tool that marginalized groups, such as women and African Americans, use to struggle against oppressive social structures. In this study I am curious about whether women in all-female comedy groups see the comedy they create as a type of social justice work and if and how this relates to their feelings of personal empowerment.

Women on the Margins in Comedy

One of my main impetuses for doing this project and focusing it on women specifically is because of the messages I have received that women are just not as funny

as men. Growing up in the 1980's and 90's I was aware of many successful female comics such as Gilda Radner, Lilly Tomlin, Janeane Garafolo, and Margaret Cho. The majority of comics, however, always seemed to be men. On Saturday Night Live women were always in the minority in the cast. My childhood memories of the comedy world were probably pretty accurate. Despite the fact that there have been many successful female comics, comedy is an industry that has historically been dominated by men. As Horowitz (1997) notes, "In the performing arts (music, dance, acting) the only profession where an overwhelming majority of performers are men is stand-up comedy" (Horowitz, Preface).

The belief that women are somehow innately un-funny has been around for a long time. As far back as the 17th Century male literature critics have pronounced women incapable of producing humor. Barecca (1988) quotes William Congreve as stating in 1695: "I must confess I have never made any Observation of what I Apprehend to be true Humor in Women" (as cited in Barecca, p. 3). Barecca notes that, "Congreve's statement that women lack a sense of humor echoes through three hundred years of criticism in British literature" (p. 3). The 20th Century has brought few changes of attitude. In *Humor in English Literature* (which was first published in 1959 and reprinted in 1970) Reginald Blyth stated:

[W]omen have not only no humour in themselves but are the cause of the extinction of it in others...women correspond to and are representative of nature. Is there any humor in nature? A glance at the zoo will answer this question...[women] are the unlaughing at which men laugh. (as cited in Barecca, pp. 3-4)

In 1976 J.B. Priestly wrote that, "the movement generally called 'women's lib' does not seem likely to produce more and better feminine humor" (as cited in Barecca, p. 4). As

Barecca sums up, “commentators on comedy continue to treat the subject as a necessarily all-male pastime, rather like writing in the snow” (p. 3).

It may be tempting to say that these attitudes are in the past, times have changed, and there are many successful female comics and humorists today. Indeed there has been progress. Women once represented less than 1% of standup comics. By 1997, they constituted 15-20% of standup comics (Horowitz, 1997, Preface). But even today we have not reached a point where there is parity between the sexes in the comedy world, despite the fact that there are many successful female comics. In a 2009 interview, comedy executive Lisa Leingan was asked why there are "so few women in comedy?" Leingan, who books the comedy acts for Seattle's music festival, Bumbershoot, did not answer the question, but instead lamented the fact that it is so difficult to book female performers for that show, saying, "it's a little bit light at the moment, unfortunately" (Ryzik, 2009).

Where do the ideas that women are not funny come from and why have women continued to be disproportionately outnumbered by men in the field of comedy, despite the obvious success of a number of individual female comics? To answer this question it is useful to view comedy as a form of communication, one that is in line with the way men are linguistically socialized, and antithetical to the way women are socially conditioned. Greenbaum (1997) interviewed three female standup comics who she reports all "separately acknowledged that they are engaged in a predominately male form of discourse" (p. 118). Greenbaum quotes William Keough who makes an analogy between standup comedy and boxing to illuminate the confrontational and aggressive

nature of standup: "A comic enters, takes the mic, and tries to 'destroy' his audience... His job is to deliver the payoff, the punch line" (as cited in Greenbaum, p.118).

According to much of the linguistics literature on gender and communication women are socialized to avoid conflict in their language. Deborah Tannen who has written extensively on gender and communication explains how men are more likely to "engage in conflict talk" than women (as cited in Greenbaum, p. 118). In referring to linguistic interactions between the sexes, Tannen (1994) has stated, "that men dominate women is not in question" (p. 21).¹

One of the most influential books on language and gender in linguistics is Robin Lakoff's, *Language and the Woman's Place*, first published in 1975. Lakoff put forth the idea that women's language includes elements such as tag questions (adding a phrase such as "isn't it?" to a declarative statement to turn it into a question) and uptalk (a raised inflection at the end of a statement, which makes it sound like a question). Such elements have the effect of "diminishing the force of what is said, rendering it powerless" (McConnell-Ginnet, 2004, p.138). Lakoff believed that such speech patterns are a reflection of how "women are brought up to think of assertion, authority and forcefulness as masculine qualities which they should avoid. They are taught instead to display the 'feminine' qualities of weakness, passivity and deference to men" (Cameron, et al. as cited by Greenbaum, p. 119).²

¹ She explains, however, that how men dominate women in communication styles varies across cultures.

² It is important to note that Lakoff's work has been criticized as being culturally specific to a particular race and class of women, while assuming to represent the language of all women. Morgan (2004) writes that Lakoff's work was based on her "observations and intuitions as a middle-class white woman" (p. 253). She argues that we must take racial,

If women's language is a reflection of their social conditioning towards passivity and weakness, and comedy is by nature confrontational and aggressive, then women's communication styles and comedic discourse are at odds. In order for a woman to be a comic she must violate cultural expectations that she should not be aggressive.

Comic Carol Burnett talks about how women who do comedy are fighting against their own cultural conditioning:

If you're a woman, it's difficult to break through the barrier of having others accept you as funny. There's all that training you've had since you were three. Be a lady! Don't yell or try to be funny. Just be a nice little girl. Sit quietly with your knees close together, and speak only when you are spoken to. (as cited in Horowitz, 1997, p. 2)

While Burnett is not talking about Lakoff's linguistic constructs, the message is the same.

From a young age, women are socialized to communicate in polite and deferential (ie. "lady-like") ways. Comedy is a form of communication that, like boxing, is aggressive and confrontation and therefore not lady-like. This understanding from the linguistics literature, that women's language is marked by passivity and powerlessness coupled with the idea that comedic discourse is aggressive and confrontational helps explain why the stereotype persists that women lack comedic ability and why women have for so long been marginalized and under-represented in the field.

The existence of the stereotype that women are less capable than men when it comes to comedy and the relative dearth of female comics was a fundamental part of

ethnic and class diversity into account in order to "represent the complexity of women's place" (p. 258). She talks about how Black women's language is representative of being caught between two discourses—African American speech under slavery and de-facto segregation, which was marked by passivity and politeness in communicating with Whites, and the discourse that developed during the Black Power movement that was focused on confronting white supremacy and has been viewed as "aggressive, impolite, indirect and threatening" (p. 255).

what propelled me to do this project and to develop my working hypothesis. It is my belief that girls who grow up receiving message that they are not funny or cannot do comedy can be empowered if they are given the opportunity and support to develop their own comedic voice. Through this opportunity they may not only gain confidence in their ability, they will also be subverting dominant cultural assumptions about girls and women.

The intentions of this literature review have been two-pronged. On the one hand, as there is no literature on the specific topic of women doing comedy in all-female groups I have had to delve into areas of the literature that surround the topic in order to build a case for the hypothesis that all-female comedy groups might have the impact of augmenting the self-esteem, self-efficacy and feelings of empowerment in members. The second intent was to demonstrate that because there is no literature on this specific topic, a niche exists for doing the study in the first place.

While the literature cited above supports the working hypothesis, it is possible that the findings will be different from the hypothesis. There are two examples from the literature that support this potentiality. Franzini (2001) who writes about the therapeutic value of humor, balances his argument by giving voice to the possible deleterious effects of humor, such as how it can serve to “humiliate” or “undermine...self-esteem” (p. 174). Another way that doing comedy could potentially have a negative impact on women has to do with the concept that comedy is an aggressive form of communication and women are not socialized to communicate in this manner. Kravetz (1991) explains how engaging in “behaviors that deviate from the accepted norms of society may incur increasing difficulties for women” (p. 279). If to do comedy as a woman is to break with societal

gender norms, some women may face hardships as they come up against the policing of gender norms. These two examples shed light on how subjects' responses will most likely be far more complex than the hypothesis can predict.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of women involved in learning and performing comedy skills in the context of an all-female comedy group. The question I am asking is: Do all-female comedy troupes have the potential to increase feelings of empowerment, self-esteem and self-efficacy in their participants? My working hypothesis is that they do.

Research Design

A flexible, qualitative research strategy was used to conduct this project. This design was utilized in order to explore individual women's experiences in all-female comedy groups in their own voice. This exploratory methodology was also employed due to the novel nature of the research topic. As was demonstrated in the literature review, while there has been a lot of research in areas surrounding this topic, such as the therapeutic benefits derived from humor and creative arts in general, as well as research that indicates that women who take part in all-female relational contexts experience increased feelings of empowerment and/or self-esteem, there is a lack of research on the particular topic of whether women who participate in all-female comedy groups experience increased feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and/or empowerment. As Rubin & Babbie (2007) state, exploratory studies are, "typical when a researcher is examining a new interest, when the subject of study is relatively new and unstudied..." (p. 29).

Sample

The method of sample selection for this study was non-probability snowball sampling. The reasoning behind using this recruitment method was that I was looking for subjects who fit a specific set of criteria. Recruitment materials were sent to contacts I knew to fit the criteria and posted on a website where people who fit the criteria were likely to frequent. The recruitment materials could then be passed on to others who also fit the criteria.

The criteria for participation in this study were as follows: All the subjects had to be at least 18 years old. Participants had to either be a current member of an all-female comedy troupe, and/or be a former member of an all-female comedy troupe with participation in the troupe having occurred within the past 10 years.

The sample was composed of 12 women, most of whom were in their 20's. The majority of the participants were White, and two were women of color. Five of the participants were currently in an all-female comedy group. Seven subjects had been in an all-female comedy group in the past, with participation in that group occurring anywhere between two and nine years ago. Two participants had been in two different all-female comedy groups and three participants had been in at least one co-ed comedy group as well.

Procedures

Participants were recruited to the study after receiving approval for the research design from The Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (Appendix A). The majority of the sample was recruited through snowball e-mails. Recruitment flyers were also posted on an Internet message board on the website

improvresourcecenter.com. Those who received the e-mail or saw the post could forward the information on to others they knew who might be able to participate. In the e-mail and website post (Appendices B and C) I explained the research project, what participation entailed and the inclusion criteria. In all of the recruitment materials I asked potential participants to contact me via e-mail or phone by a specified date if they were interested in participating in the study.

After potential subjects contacted me, I screened them in a telephone call to make sure they fulfilled the inclusion criteria. In these calls I also gave potential subjects a chance to ask any questions they might have about participation. Once I determined that a potential participant fit the inclusion criteria, I proceeded to set up an interview appointment. Before interviews took place, each participant signed an informed consent letter (Appendix D). Participants received the informed consent via e-mail, mail or in person. Participants returned the informed consent to me via mail, e-mail or in person. Participants were given a chance to ask questions of the researcher before signing the informed consent.

The majority of the interviews took place over the phone. One interview was done in person in a coffee shop. All interviews were audio recorded. Interviews were one-on-one in order to allow the women to be as candid as possible. At the beginning of each interview participants were asked a couple of demographic questions. The interview consisted of semi-structured questions about the women's experience in the all-female comedy group. The women were asked questions regarding their experiences in the group and if and how they believe the experience impacted their self-esteem, coping skills and feelings of personal empowerment. An operational definition of self-esteem was given

during the interviews. After doing the first four interviews it became evident that a definition of personal empowerment was also needed, as participants were interpreting this term to be synonymous with self-esteem. At this time, I also modified the questions regarding whether experiences in the group gave participants coping skills that could be applied to life situations outside the group. These questions were meant to assess if participants found comedy to be a coping skill and increase their self-efficacy. Because of how these questions were originally worded, the first few participants had mainly answered this question in terms of group dynamic skills and so I changed these questions slightly to specifically ask about comedy skills. Appendix E is the interview guide, including demographic questions. The duration of each interview was between half an hour and an hour. All the interviews were selectively transcribed by the researcher.

Participation in the study was not anonymous, however several steps were taken to ensure subjects' confidentiality. Names and other identity markers have been disguised in the quotations culled from the transcriptions for use in publication and presentation of the data. In presenting the data and quotations from interviews, I have removed all participant names and replaced them with code numbers to identify participants' quotations. Audio files of interviews and transcripts were stored digitally on my computer and were password protected and encrypted. Signed informed consent letters, which had participants' real identities on them were kept in a secure location apart from the data. All data will be kept in a secure location for a period of three years as required by Federal guidelines. If the data is needed for longer than three years, they will continue to be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed when no longer needed.

It is difficult to assess the reliability and validity of the measurements employed in this study. This was a qualitative study only and did not make use of accompanying quantitative measures of self-esteem, self-efficacy or empowerment. Quantitative data is thought to be more reliable than qualitative data and is sometimes used in conjunction with qualitative data to reinforce the credibility of the study. A method that can be used to ensure the reliability of a qualitative study is to have multiple raters examine the same interview transcription data. If each rater independently comes to the same conclusions about what the data means, then the qualitative measurement is thought to be more reliable. In this study the researcher was the only one analyzing the content of the interviews and making assessments about what the data indicated. My research advisor was the only other person who had access to the selective transcriptions and therefore could provide his interpretation and assistance in my content analysis. My advisor, however, did not have access to the interviews in their entirety. For confidentiality purposes, the researcher was the only person who had access to the interviews in full. This fact certainly detracts from the internal consistent reliability of the research. A key factor in making sure that qualitative measures are reliable and valid is that analysis of parts of the text are consistent with the entire text (Rubin & Babbie, 2007, p.107). As the researcher was the only one who had access to the entire text, this means that no one was able to offer alternate interpretations or challenge the researcher's individual bias that may have occurred in the analysis of the data.

Data Collection and Analysis

All of the interviews were audio recorded and partially transcribed by the researcher. Data from the interviews was interpreted using content analysis. Each

interview transcription was highlighted based on themes. The age and race of each subject was noted next to their narrative in order to analyze potential differences and similarities based on these factors. In addition, the general facts of each subjects' participation in the all-female comedy groups (how long ago they were in the group, the duration of their tenure in the group, and whether they have participated in other comedy groups) was also noted next to their narratives so that the researcher could compare responses based on these differences as well. The Findings chapter summarizes the themes that emerged in the interviews.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The area of inquiry for this study is the impact that learning and performing comedy in all-female comedy groups has on the women who participate in such groups. The major research question that was asked was whether all-female comedy groups have the potential to boost feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal empowerment in their members. The working hypothesis was that they did have that potential.

The major findings of the study were that participants felt that their self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal empowerment were all impacted by their experiences in the all-female comedy groups. For the most part, participants reported positive impacts. In other words, the majority of subjects expressed increases in these three areas, which they believed to be a result of a number of elements that were part of being in an all-female comedy group. However, a few subjects expressed that their participation in an all-female comedy group correlated with decreases in their self-esteem. And some subjects reported mixed feelings— both increases and decreases in their self-esteem – which they attributed to aspects of their group participation.

The sample consisted of 12 women. The mean age of the participants was 24.6. The mode ages were 21 and 27. Nine participants were either currently in or had previously been in the same all-female comedy group in college. One participant had been in an all-female comedy group when she was in high school. Two participants had only been in an all-female comedy group outside of academia (what I will hereafter refer to as the "real world"). Out of those two subjects who had only been in groups in the real

world, one was currently in an all-female comedy troupe and the other had been in the group in the past. Out of the 12 participants, there were two women who had been in more than one all-female comedy group, each having participated in one group within academia and another group in the real world. I make these distinctions between groups that took place in an academic setting and those that did not because, more than any other demographic characteristic, the correlations in the findings break down along whether the group that the subject belonged to was a college or high school group, or whether it was a real world group. In terms of racial and ethnic background, ten of the subjects self-identified as either White or Caucasian. One participant self-identified as "Filipina, Mexican, Irish, and CapeVerdean" and one participant self-identified as Black American.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was operationally defined as, "feelings of self-worth, confidence, pride and competency." Based on this definition, all twelve of the subjects responded that they experienced an increase in self-esteem owing to aspects of being in an all-female comedy group. Five subjects also reported feeling that their self-esteem decreased, and they attributed these declines to elements of being in an all-female group. Therefore, some subjects were reporting mixed feelings—that their self-esteem increased in certain ways and decreased in others. There was a strong correlation between participants who had been in the comedy group in either college or high school reporting more emphatically that their self-esteem improved. Whereas, of the participants who felt that the group negatively impacted their self-esteem—most were talking about a group they had been in outside of an academic setting. Even the two subjects who had experience in both an all-female comedy group in college or high school and a real world all-female

group, they both felt the school-based group had a positive impact on their self-esteem, whereas they believed that the real world group had a negative impact on their self-esteem. There was only one participant who was in the all-female group in college who felt like there were negative impacts on her self-esteem from that group. And she felt mixed; she also reported increases in her self-esteem.

Increases in Self-Esteem

The reasons that participants offered for how their self-esteem was impacted can be broken down into two general areas: creating and performing comedy and group dynamics. All of the subjects reported boosts in their self-esteem that they attributed to the first area of creating and performing comedy.

Participants related a number of different reasons why they felt their self-esteem increased due to the process of creating and performing comedy. These reasons can be grouped into four general themes. The first theme is simply the act of engaging in the creative process. Two participants spoke specifically about how creating something augmented their self-esteem. Subject #7 said, "I think that by getting to...create things that feel so meaningful in our shows and everything, that definitely has increased my self esteem."

A second theme that arose as a reason for why participants felt that their self-esteem increased as a result of creating and performing comedy was the excellent feedback that they received from the audience. Speaking generally about how the audience response amplified her self-esteem, Subject #12 said, "when it goes well, especially to have an audience recognize your work brings a lot of self-worth...it's a great sense of power to have a room cheering for you... it makes you proud of yourself." Most

participants, whether they had been in an all-female comedy group in the real world or in an academic setting, referred to having a similar experience and it having a positive impact on their self-esteem. Some subjects spoke of this experience of audience feedback in terms of a sense of being famous. Subject #2 who was in a real world group had this to say:

It would always make me feel good when I would get stopped somewhere out in public and like, "hey aren't you in that group? Oh my god I saw your show that was amazing." That was a real thumbs-up to my self-esteem.

Subject #10, had a similar experience of feeling famous. She referred to it as "a certain level of notoriety." Unlike Subject #2, Subject #10 was talking about an all-female group that she was in during college and the experience being akin to being a celebrity on a college campus:

When you get it all reinforced by all these people—having to turn people away...like that was great—normal people other than celebrities— how many experiences do you have where people are coming to see you and your friends to goof off and you have to say, "oh I'm sorry, we're full" or "we have to add another midnight showing because— we're so cool!" [laughs] It's great, it's a great feeling.

The one subject who was in an all-female improv troupe in high school also talked about this experience of audience feedback as being something that elevated her self-esteem. She said, "to have outsiders...to just appreciate that you are good at improv is a really satisfying part of it that really boosts your confidence."

Part of this experience of getting positive feedback from an audience is simply having the ability to make others laugh. A couple of subjects referred specifically to making others laugh as part of what they attribute to their increase in self-esteem. Two subjects spoke about how good it feels to come up with ideas privately and with other group members and then to have those ideas received so well by an audience. Subject #3,

in talking about a production she created with her improv troupe in high school, had this to say:

We made a video that was full of mini sketches...and then had the improv show after it, and so I think that doing that...really raised my confidence because...we thought it was funny but we didn't know how funny other people were going to think it was and then when we put it up people were like shitting themselves laughing and we had no idea it was going to go over so so so very well...and that sort of made me feel like, wow stupid ideas that I come up with in my head... can really work and can really make people laugh.

Subject #10 spoke about a similar experience of her confidence increasing based on the bringing of material in front of an audience and making them laugh: "Just that moment of when you've worked on something and when you show it to people hoping they'll laugh and they laugh, just that moment is enough to boost my confidence through the roof."

Subject #11 talked about why it feels so good to be able to make people laugh. She said, "When you hear people laughing at something that you want to be funny it sort of gives you a sense of control or a sense that people are receiving you the way you wanted them to which, ya know, feels really good...." She added that when she is entertaining people in order to get a message across and they laugh then, "at least you understand that you are being understood." This idea of people "receiving you the way you wanted them to" is about being validated by others. It is what Subjects #3 and #10 were talking about when they refer to creating something they believe to be funny and then having other people laugh at it.

A third theme that arose as a reason participants gave for why they felt creating and performing comedy elevated their self-esteem was how risky an endeavor it was. Three subjects referred to the bravery of performing comedy as something to which they attribute their self-esteem increase. Subject #12 said that, "it takes a lot of cojones to

standup in front of a group of people and just say things that you wrote that you think are funny, so that probably flows into other parts of your life." Subject #5 also spoke about the risky quality of performing as something that could boost her self-esteem in a way that doing well academically could not:

There was some sort of risky, daring quality to doing this work that really empowered me in a way that getting an A on a paper isn't quite the same thing as making 100 people crack up because you are talking about your bra. And not in a "Hey, look at my bra" way, in a "Now you know why I hate my bra" way.

The fourth theme that falls within the category of how creating and performing comedy has the potential to increase participants' feelings of self-esteem was subjects referring to their comedic genre in and of itself as something that had self-esteem boosting qualities. The comedic activities in which subjects performed in their respective groups varied. The participants that were in the college all-female group were mainly doing sketch and standup, while the women who were in real world all-female groups were mostly doing long form improv in those groups. The one participant who was in an all-female group in high school was doing short-form improv with that group.³ No matter whether they were in the group in an academic setting or not, subjects spoke generally about the type of comedy they were performing as having a positive impact on their self-

³ Sketch comedy consists of short comedy scenes that are written in advance, rehearsed by the actors and performed in front of an audience. Improv refers to comedy scenes that are improvised during the performance using suggestions from the audience to guide elements of the scene, such as the relationship between the characters. In long form improv, the actors improvise a story (for sometimes as long as 45 minutes) made up of a number of scenes. In short form improv, the actors improvise brief scenes, often using games or rules, such as an entire scene in which the actors must alternate beginning their lines with subsequent letter in the alphabet. Standup comedy involves a comic telling jokes and stories to a live audience. Standup material is usually written in advance, although some comics improvise parts of their stand-up routines.

esteem. Subject #4, who performed with the college group, spoke emphatically about how doing standup comedy raised her self-esteem:

Standup is like the most vulnerable public act you can do...and I was successful at it so... I just, my self confidence shot up like 600% and I felt just a lot more comfortable... it changed me. I mean I felt fundamentally better as a person.

Subject #6, who was also in the college group, said, "I am really proud when I tell people I did standup...I'm really proud that I did it." Subject #2, who was in an all-female improv group in the real world, spoke about how doing improv increased her confidence level:

I felt... really confident as a person and I still do, improv...it's a great life skill to have, I tell everybody I know whether or not you want to perform you should take an improv class because it will really change you and how you see yourself...and I think that the benefits of that are really really valuable.

Group dynamics was the second general area that participants reported impacting their self-esteem. Participants felt that group dynamics increased their sense of self-esteem, however, by and large it was those who had been in an all-female comedy group in an academic setting that felt positively impacted by group dynamics. For the two subjects who had been in a comedy group in both an academic setting and the real world, they both linked group dynamics from the comedy group in the academic setting with increasing their self-esteem. (Whereas, they attributed group dynamics from group the real world group as negatively impacting their self-esteem.) None of the other demographic characteristics such as age, race or when they had been in the group correlated with whether or not participants felt that group dynamics played a role in enhancing self-esteem. Under this category of group dynamics engendering positive changes in self-esteem, five general themes can be identified from subjects' responses.

The first theme that participants spoke of in terms of group dynamics was how working collaboratively with other group members improved their self-esteem. Collaboration was only referred to by those participants who had been in the all-female group in college and out of those nine participants, five named it as having a significant impact on their self-esteem. Subject #12, in looking back at the experience of being in the group, said, "I really think the collaborative project, working with a group of people to create something, like a show...it makes you proud of yourself." Subject #8, who is currently in the all-female college group, also highlighted the collaborative nature of the group as something that boosted her self-esteem:

The way we do things, it seems really unique to me, the process by which everyone is involved putting stuff together and I guess there's been times... I've been able to get a part and be really useful to everyone... and I think that experience is always really gratifying to know that I've helped the team along.

The nature of being friends with the other group members is another theme that emerged from participants' responses about how the group dynamics positively impacted their self-esteem. Again, it was only the women from the college group who spoke about friendship being a factor that amplified their feelings of self-esteem. Four of the nine participants from the college group talked about friendship. Subject #4 said:

It was a way for me to make friends even though I had friends, it was, I had like a posse I guess, of ya know, of very angry female [college] students with limited social skills. I had a really tight group, a friend group and that was a really great feeling for me, that really helped me out a lot.

In the course of the interview Subject #4 had said about herself, "I didn't have the potential to have good social skills before, I thought I was a more of an outcast."

Therefore, when she describes her friends in the comedy group as "very angry female [college] students with limited social skills" she is describing a group of people bearing

similar characteristics to herself. Subject #4 is therefore conveying, not simply the importance of being friends with other group members, she is also talking about being able to identify with the other women in the group.

This concept of being able to identify with, as well as receive support from other group members, is the third theme under the category of group dynamics that participants identified as positively impacting their self-esteem. Eight participants talked about either being able to find commonalities with other group members or receive support and/or encouragement from other group members as augmenting their self-esteem. This was primarily talked about in regards to the all-female group in the college setting, however one participant who took part in a real world group talked about the significance of being able to identify with the other women. This subject, Subject #9 said, "it makes me feel good to know that there are so many people out there who are just like me and we are all trying to go to the same place." The participants who were referring to the all-female comedy group in the college setting conveyed a sense of shared identity as well as intra-group support as factors that increased their feelings of self-esteem. In talking about being able to identify with and support one another, Subject #11, who is currently in the all-female group in college, said:

Being able to bitch about things that have happened during the day with everybody and hearing other people's experiences because a lot of times something that pisses me off is something that pisses another girl off... we're kind of like always supporting each other.

Subject #10 who was in the same college group six years ago, also expounded on the importance of the supportive nature of the group in boosting her confidence:

The way that we worked as a group being very supportive of each other and having a policy that everyone got to perform if they wanted to, if you wanted to

do standup we would find a way for you to do standup. So you had the budding confidence just from other people in the group who were telling you and helping you and putting faith that you were going to have a good performance

Subject #12 who was in the college group three years ago talked about how it gave her "more confidence" working as a team because, "it's like someone's got your back."

Four participants spoke about having their comedic work validated in some form by other group members and this having a positive impact on their self-esteem. This theme was mentioned by three women who had been in a group in an academic setting and one who had been in a group in the real world. Sometimes this validation took the form of making other group members laugh. Subject #1, who is currently in the college group said, "I like to make people laugh and especially the other girls in [the group] they are so funny and we just laugh nonstop...making them laugh, it is really good validation for I am funny, I should keep doing this." Similarly, Subject # 3 who was referring to the all-female group she was in during high school said, "it felt really good to go to rehearsal and have everyone really laughing at what I was saying... like the confirmation from teammates, people that you respect as comedians, to have them laugh at you is great." Subject #9 who was in an all-female group in the real world talked about getting validation from fellow group members in the form of positive feedback on her work. "When you have successful scene work and people give you praise, that definitely boosts your confidence." She had also been in co-ed groups, but she was talking about the feedback she received in the all-female group, because as she said, "I think women are more apt to praise than men."

This idea that women are more likely to compliment than men, relates to the fifth theme that emerged as a reason for why participants felt that group dynamics increased

their sense of self-esteem. Seven participants named the fact that the group was composed of only women as a reason for why they believe the group helped to augment their self-esteem. Six of those seven women were referring to the group they were in during high school or college. A couple of participants talked about feelings of pride increasing due to being in an all-female comedy group. Subject #3 said, "we were all a bunch of girls, high school girls, but we still were really proud of what we were accomplishing." Subject #1 said, "I'm very proud of the work we do and that we are women carving out a place for ourselves in comedy." This idea of "women carving out a place" in comedy highlights the notion that women are marginalized in the comedy world. A number of participants spoke about how being in an all-female comedy group in light of this marginalization has increased their self-esteem. Subject #9 said, "because the comedy scene is so male dominated, to be able to spend time with women I think is cool and fun and empowering because it boosts your confidence." Two of the women who are currently in the group in college believe that their self-esteem has increased based on their political activism about women in comedy. Subject #11 talked about how being in the group and learning to defend women's place in comedy has increased her confidence and self-worth:

It's just so easy for someone who knows nothing about comedy to say "girls aren't funny" or "oh yah well, I like comedy, I prefer men" it's easy for someone to say that but I couldn't really figure out how to like argue against it ... and to not sound like an angry bitter feminist, but since being in [the group] and kind of having to defend that often has sort of given me good practice for defending a lot of other things too, so I do feel more confident and I think that my self-worth has improved over the last four years.

Subject # 8 also talked about defending women in comedy and how that experience has "affected my feelings of competency and pride in a positive way." She went on to say

that, "just knowing that I'm in this group that's really challenging a lot of things about comedy and about gender roles in general, and that it's so good, is amazing."

Decreases in Self-Esteem

Contrary to the original hypothesis, the findings reveal that some participants felt their experience in the all-female comedy group led to decreases in their self-esteem. Out of the two general areas that are identified above as impacting self-esteem, it was only group dynamics that participants reported negatively affecting their self-esteem. No one said that anything related to creating and performing comedy led to decreases in their self-esteem. It was almost exclusively the women who were in a real world all-female group who attributed a drop in self-esteem to their experience in that group. Only one of the nine participants who had been in the college all-female group referred to group dynamic themes that were associated with drops in self-esteem. Some of the women who felt that aspects of the group negatively impacted their self-esteem expressed feeling mixed about the group—that it both increased and decreased their self-esteem. In other words, a few of the subjects whose voices are included in the findings on the increases in self-esteem above, are represented in this section as well.

One theme that stood out as a reason for why the group dynamic led to decreases in self-esteem was feeling that the group was competitive or hierarchical. Three participants mentioned this theme. The two women who had only been in real world all-female comedy groups both spoke about this dynamic. In talking about the hierarchical nature of the improve group she was in, Subject #2 said:

No one wanted to come out and say there was a hierarchy but there was and at times I was acutely aware of how low down on the hierarchy I was as a

member... In terms of my self-esteem I would say that lately they kind of destroyed my self-esteem as a performer.

Subject # 9 talked about the competitive nature of the group in light of how the comedy world is male dominated. She said that her confidence went down because "the competition can be super fierce ... there's so many girls and there's only so many spots for funny girls.... It's particular present in all-female groups, because it's like, well there's only one Tina Fey, who's gonna be her?" Only one member of the all-female comedy group in college spoke about that group being competitive. She said, "I think ultimately our group, with the exception of a few people, it was about who could get the best laughs and then it became a competition...I feel like it became a who's dick is bigger contest sometimes." It is important to note, however, that she did not say this in direct response to a question about her self-esteem and did not link this competitive nature to a decrease in her self-esteem.

One woman, Subject #2, felt that her self-esteem was negatively impacted in part because of how the women in the group engaged in indirect communication:

There's a lot of internal unrest being in that group because there was no director and therefore there was no established system for feedback, so all the feedback you got when you got it was sort of like this indirect, snarky at times....

This experience, of someone who was in the all-female group in the real world, contrasts sharply with the experiences of some of the women who were in the group in college.

Subject #6 talked about how open the communication was in that group:

It was nice to have this body of people who were your friends but would also like think about what you were saying somewhat critically because they don't want you to make an ass of yourself but they also want it to be a good show so it helps everybody to be honest and tell you when you are not being funny or being offensive.

Another theme that arose in terms of some participants experiencing a decrease in their self-esteem was feeling like they did not belong in the group in some way. Two participants spoke about this, one who had been in the group in the real world and one who had been in it during college. Subject #2 spoke about a sense of feeling left out in her group. Some of that feeling is implicit in her quotation above when she speaks of "how low down on the hierarchy I was." It is also conveyed in the following:

There was a lot of anxiety about who belonged in the troupe and who didn't... the term junior high kept coming up a lot...it just brings up all like crappy stuff we went through with girls as kids. I don't really need to do that in my 30's.

The same participant from the college group who spoke about feeling like that group was competitive at times, also talked about a sense of being left out:

I hated, hated, hated some of our collaboration meetings and I felt really frustrated by them to a point where towards the end I really did feel that when I was being silenced, I didn't want to do it anymore. I don't think that had a long term affect on me...but at the time it was definitely not easy to always feel like, ok the eight sketches I wrote were rejected.

There were two participants who had been in an all-female comedy group in both an academic setting and in the real world and both experienced an increase in self-esteem that they attribute to the former, and a decrease in self-esteem that they connect to the latter. About her experience in her high school improv troupe, Subject #3 has this to say:

I feel like [the first group] really increased my confidence level a lot because I was so scared that I wasn't going to be good at improv and then it turned out that I was really good in that setting at that time with those people...it felt really good to go to rehearsal and have everyone really laughing at what I was saying.

Her confidence went up due to both performing comedy and group dynamics. However, she reported that the second all-female improv group she was in (in the real world) led to decreases in her self-esteem:

And then there was sort of the opposite with the other group because the lack of enthusiasm, the lack of familiarity, the lack of commitment, and the lack of being very funny...[that] scene in general made me be like oh maybe I can't really rise to the top at this, it was just too hard for me or something.

She felt that her confidence decreased with that group, primarily due to group dynamics such as a "lack of commitment." To be fair, she does say that it was also due to a "lack of being very funny" which could be viewed as a decrease in self-esteem due to the process of performing comedy. However, in other parts of her interview she reveals how this particular group was short lived and never got to the stage of performing in front of an audience. So it seems more likely that it was group dynamics that arrested that group and also contributed to the participant feeling her confidence level decline.

The other participant who had been in all-female groups both in academia as well as the real world, also reported her self-esteem increase in the first group and decrease with the second. She attributed the decrease she felt in the real world group to it being too professionally focused as opposed to being about fun and experimentation. She also saw the real world group as not being supportive. These elements constitute a final theme of how group dynamics affected a decline in feeling of self-esteem, as another participant who was only in a group in the real world, echoed these feelings. Subject #10, after expounding on how the first group she was a part of in college elevated her self-esteem, went on to say this regarding the second all-female group she was in, in the real world:

I would like to add though that I've been speaking mainly about [the first group]. Number 2 presented a lot more difficulties because we weren't just dealing with a college environment we were trying to market ourselves for a larger viewing audience, our confidence was weakened because it's hard to know outside of the liberal arts bubble, what would be funny and we didn't have the support you didn't have these hundreds of people trying to come to your shows and...the group wasn't as supportive...because people wanted success over experimentation when

that was never the point in number 1 where it was definitely experimentation over success and it became a whole lot less fun.

Subject #2, who was only in an all-female comedy group in the real world, reported similar dynamics of the group having a professional focus and being unsupportive as negatively impacting her self-esteem.

I think that [my troupe] could never come out and say that they wanted to be this really like top-notch professional troupe... There was just this weird air of non-support... I think in improv you have to decide at the outset whether or not your troupe is a family or a group of friends that are just in it to have a good time and have fun and do something cool and not try and turn it into some giant professional thing.

Self-Efficacy

The next two parts of the working hypothesis for this project were about self-efficacy and personal empowerment. It came to this researcher's attention during the course of analyzing the data that the term "self-efficacy" was part of the operational definition of personal empowerment. Therefore, the findings about self-efficacy also constitute findings about personal empowerment. This section will report on the findings about self-efficacy specifically, while the next section will report the findings about personal empowerment that relate to other parts of the definition of that concept, as well as the personal empowerment findings that are specifically about doing social and political justice work.

For the purpose of this study and analyzing the data, self-efficacy is defined as "the belief that one has agentic capability to execute certain actions in order to attain specific goals." This definition of self-efficacy was not explicitly given to participants during the interviews. Rather, a couple of questions were designed with the intention of determining whether participants feel that their experiences in the all-female comedy

group had an impact on their self-efficacy. These questions include those that are about using comedy and/or group skills as coping tools, as well as the question about whether participants believe that based on their experience in the all-female group they are talented enough to participate in other comedy groups. In the course of analyzing the data, it became apparent that some participants also talked about feelings of self-efficacy (based on the above definition) while answering other questions as well. The findings reveal that feelings of self-efficacy increased for most participants in terms of both their "agentive capability" for doing comedy specifically, as well as their capability for doing other non-comedy related actions.

Every participant felt that they had comedy-specific self-efficacy, in other words they all responded in the affirmative that they believed they were talented enough to participate in other comedy groups in the future. However, not everyone attributed that increased self-efficacy for doing comedy to participation in the all-female comedy group. Two participants who had also been in co-ed comedy groups attributed their increased self-efficacy for doing comedy either to the co-ed groups or to having more practice in multiple comedy groups in general. As Subject #9 said, "I don't think that there's necessarily a correlation between all female groups and—I think experience is experience and having any experience is great." Participants who had been in the all female comedy group in college, however, tended to specifically attribute their augmented feelings of self-efficacy for doing comedy to their experience in that group. To be fair, it is important to note that these women did not also have a co-ed comedy group experience as a basis for a comparison. In speaking about another comedy group outside of college that she

auditioned for, Subject #7 said, "It was definitely largely my experience in [the all-female comedy group] that gave me the confidence to audition for that group and I got in."

Three of the four participants interviewed who are currently in the all-female comedy group in college explicitly stated plans to pursue comedy after college, which is indicative of feelings of self-efficacy for doing comedy. As Subject #7 said, "I've loved the process so much that I think I'm going to pursue it after I graduate... I also feel empowered that once I do get that chance I'll have a certain capability." And all of the participants who were in a group in the past (whether or not it was in an academic setting) feel like they are still capable of doing comedy again. Subject #3, speaking about her experience in the all-female group in high school said, "I'm feeling as positive as I was since leaving [that group] if not more so because I feel like I am capable of more as an adult who has some technical skills." And Subject # 10 said of her experience in the group in college, "It solidified comedy as one of my personal characteristics that I would continue to have...so it's something that, although I'm not doing it right now I still have confidence that I could do it if I wanted to."

A number of participants also spoke about self-efficacy skills they had gained from the comedy group that were for other areas of their life more broadly (not just for comedy specifically). Four of these non-comedy areas can be identified as themes in participants' responses. As a result of being in the all-female comedy group, many subjects felt they had gained "agentive capability" in terms of their interpersonal relationships, for dealing with difficult and painful life experiences, for risk taking, and for functioning at work and in school. Most participants spoke of increased self-efficacy in one or more of these areas. And demographically these results were distributed fairly

evenly—in other words, it was not solely those participants who had been in the group in an academic setting, or those who had a specific identity characteristic, who felt this way.

Some subjects reported that aspects of being in the comedy group helped them develop self-efficacy in interpersonal relationships. One way in which interpersonal effectiveness was grown through participation in the all-female comedy group was through the comedy itself. Subject #4 spoke about how her "excellent standup abilities" led to her being "well liked by a lot of people" and how she believes this helped her overcome her shyness in social settings: "Once you feel like you are well liked by others you're like, 'people like me,' so... I can go to a party and make friends with anybody and do really well." Subject #2 connected improv in general to increased social skills and helping her overcome her own "introverted tendencies": "It's made me less afraid to talk with people, I think I'm a better communicator...good life skills."

It was not only the comedy itself that influenced self-efficacy in interpersonal relationships. One participant talked about how the group experience has helped her develop effectiveness in surmounting difficulties in relationships. Subject #8 had this to recount:

Being in the group has been really great practice in relationships...we had kind of a...fight earlier this year...and we decided to meet and we had something like a three hour conversation and everything got put out in the open and everyone got angry, got sad, got mad and we did it, we moved on and I guess knowing that that sort of a thing can happen, I guess knowing that I can talk about things that I'm not doing well at and I can ask for help and I can take criticism and help it make me a better person or at least a better group member, I think like that experience may happen again in my life...that I'll have to deal with it and talk about it with people I care about... so in some ways just the group and the way we get along with each other and the way we work together is going to be something I carry with me for a long time.

The group experience also helped a couple participants develop self-efficacy for dealing with difficult personalities. Subject #10 felt that being in the group affirmed for her that working with difficult people was a skill she already possessed:

Comedic people tend to be very disorganized and not show up to things on time or to have personality issues with each other, because you are dealing with very large personalities, and I found through the group that I am very good at dealing with difficult groups of people.

Subject #5 felt that being in the group actually helped her to develop efficacy for dealing with those difficult personalities. She said, "I'd like to think that I've learned how to deal with certain personalities after being in the group."

The second area in which participants reported increased feelings of self-efficacy was around dealing with difficult or painful life experiences. Seven participants responded that comedy and/or humor helps them cope with difficult experiences.⁴ Subject #10 spoke in general about how humor has helped her and will continue to help her be more resilient in the face of life's challenges: "It has made me much more able to roll with the punches...just having a good sense of humor is going to—it makes you bounce as opposed to break."

A number of subjects spoke about how humor and comedy have given them the capability to cope with emotionally painful experiences. Subject #6 explained generally the process by which she transforms painful experiences using humor:

I think whenever anything personally upsetting or traumatic happens... I do respond...with humor naturally... and it's like a distancing mechanism in a way because it's like, 'no I don't really want to talk about how I'm having this horrible

⁴ As was stated in the previous chapter, the interview question that addressed this aspect of self-efficacy had to be re-worded after the fourth participant was interviewed because, as it was originally written the question was not asking what I had wanted to study. Therefore whether or not the first four participants also felt this way is unknown.

break up with a person.' Instead you can talk about all the things that are driving you crazy but sort of spin them in a different way where it's funny. [It] is like my buoy in most situations, or my what do you call it? Lifejacket...It's just nice to even know that your frustration can result in something that's positive. If it just like changes your day or if it changes your outset, your attitude, or if it becomes a product in and of itself, like if it actually does become a comedy routine, I think that's really useful...It's much better than bitching...I believe in humor as a tool and I think being in a comedy group made me recognize that but also sort of made me hone in on it.

She is describing a re-framing process in how she is able to "spin [experiences] in a different way where it's funny." Many participants echoed this idea of how they too "spin" emotionally painful life experiences using humor. Subject #7 talked about how she feels like:

[The group] has ... strengthened and validated and reframed my sense of self so that I feel like the type of person who uses comedy as a defense mechanism or uses comedy in a way that's healthy to help overcome difficult issues.

She went on to say that she, "feel[s] like when difficult things come up I will often make a joke about it or reframe it in a way that I can say, 'well at least this is going to make great material.'" In a similar vein, Subject #9 said, "if you can stand back and look at a horrible situation and say 'oh well I imagine this on an improv stage it would be hysterical' you can sort of put things in perspective."

A number of participants offered specific examples of difficult moments in their lives where they have been able to cope by using humor. Subject #7 gave the following example:

My brother has autism and...I have done a little bit of standup about ya know, different things that have come up in my life with him...ya know the different times that autism manages to have its perks like when we don't have to wait in line at Disneyland because he gets a special pass and that sort of thing...It's definitely something that comedy has helped me work through.

Subject #9 also talked about using humor to cope with a family member's illness:

My mom is in a nursing home, she has alzheimer's and she's only 59 and whenever I go there I just try to make jokes and make light of the situation because it is so so glim, glum? Glim? It is just horrible. So I always try to fix it, to make jokes or make people smile...I try to make her laugh to avoid the reality of what's going on.

Subject #10 talked about how she has used humor to cope with her own learning disabilities:

It can be a very heavy topic that people don't like to talk about or tiptoe around and for me to find ways to make people laugh about it... I would have to go to the teacher before the class would start especially in college and tell them right away this is my disability this is what I need and as a way to establish trust if you can get someone to laugh with you, it's just much faster, it's easier to build relationships and people feel at ease because you have a good sense of humor.

One participant talked about how she used humor and her relationship with the group to cope with her own physical pain. Subject #8 said:

I got really sick my sophomore year and talked a lot to the group and actually maybe you could say that laughter—I mean I was really sick and I would go to meetings every week and I would feel like they were the only thing keeping me going, they were the only part of my life where I was laughing and kind of like letting go of what was happening to my body.

Although many of these examples are about subjects' current capability to cope with difficult experiences, a number of participants mentioned believing they will be able to handle difficult experiences that may present themselves in the future using humor as a lens. Subject #7, for example, said "now I just sort of anticipate that whatever comes at me I will have that perspective ... that it will be material somehow."

A third area in which some participants spoke about how their experience in the comedy group lent them greater self-efficacy skills was around taking risks. Three subjects mentioned their ability to take risks (both within the group and in their lives outside the group) as something that they gained from the experience. Two of these participants spoke about how they gained the ability to take risks based on the experience

of facing rejection both on stage and in working with other group members. Interestingly, it was the two women of color in the sample who talked about dealing with rejection as formative in developing the ability to take risks. Subject #5 said:

I'm going to tell a joke that is actually really embarrassing, but maybe laughing at it will help me get over the issue. I'm going to tell the boy I like on stage that I like him in a joke and maybe I can get through the rejection. I think that really is preparing myself for a letdown... In this particular instance I knew I had a safety net and I was cool with that. I was ok with going out on a limb because there were 8,000 other people...By doing it in a performance I could make a joke that people would like, he would know, and if things didn't go my way I still had 10 other friends in the same row as him laughing hysterically and cheering me on.

This quotation speaks to how having the support of the group and the comedic venue helped her to take the risk. Subject #11 also talked about facing rejection (albeit in a different sense) and how tolerating it has helped her take greater risks in her life outside of the group:

Through [the group] I've sort of faced rejection in a lot of new ways and it has made me stronger and more resilient, so rejection in the sense that sometimes ideas might get shot down in a meeting or things might not work out in a meeting but also as a group we have faced rejection before and so the way that we've tolerated that has helped me figure out sort of how to carry myself as a person and kind of like be confident in things that I believe in even if someone else doesn't totally agree with it... I owe [the group] a lot in that sense.

A third participant echoed Subject #5's sentiment in terms of how it was the support of the group that gave her the capability to take risks in her life beyond the group. Subject #4 said, "I think it was a good experience for me to feel like I had a support network and once you feel like you have a support network, it allows you to take deeper risks."

Finally, a number of participants identified feeling like their experience in the all-female comedy group increased their self-efficacy around performing their jobs well or managing the stresses of higher education. For some subjects, this efficacy was based on

comedy skills they honed in the group. For example, Subject #8 talked about how she feels capable of performing well in an interview setting based on her experience doing standup. "I had this group job interview where I had to make speeches and I was like, 'oh this is easy right, I can do this.'" Subject #5 talked about how improv has helped her in her work with high school students. "In that experience working with high school students there were certain things I did that related to my comedy abilities... I mean you're working with kids, you improv all the time." Subject #12 told a story about how improv has helped her navigate medical school:

Doing improv games, you have to be kind of quick witted and then today I was in the operating room and the surgeon was sort of joking with me and I was able to you know—like if you can make a surgeon laugh while he is stapling someone's rectum, like I think that's a good skill and people like you more easily and you are more likely to get ahead.

Subject #6 talked about how humor has helped her cope with the stress of being in a competitive graduate program in a foreign country. "This [graduate] program is known for—usually they accept six people and usually three to four people graduate—like they destroy you and humor is really the best way I find to get through it."

For a couple participants, increased feelings of self-efficacy for doing their job is based on the group skills (as opposed to the comedy skills) they developed in the all-female troupe. Subject #4's experience is a good example of this. She is currently a social work student and feels like her experience in a directorial position in the comedy group increased her capabilities as a social worker. She said that her work in the group made her feel "like I was a person capable of managing a large project." From that experience she now knows that she has, "the capability of carrying a project to completion, which a lot of people can't do, let's not lie." She said that the experience in the group, "taught me

the importance of— if there's a problem you need to take initiative and direct it and do it. And I think as a social worker that's helped me a lot." She also believes that her experience working individually with other members to help them with their standup material has served her as a social worker. "I think that one on one individual training experience has helped me as a social worker, as far as not cutting people out entirely but giving them the support necessary for them to succeed."

Personal Empowerment

Some of the most interesting findings were around participants reporting how their experiences in the all-female comedy group increased their feelings of personal empowerment. The operational definition of personal empowerment that was given to most⁵ of the participants was "a change in the perception of the self in society...the development of a sense of group identity, the reduction of feelings of self-blame for problems, an increased sense of responsibility for future events and enhanced feelings of self-efficacy, power, and capability." As stated above, self-efficacy is part of this operational definition, so all of the findings about self-efficacy could apply as findings about personal empowerment. In this section, I will delve into two areas of increased personal empowerment that emerged as themes. All of the participants whose voices are represented in this section were in the all-female comedy group in college.

The Development of Identity

One area of personal empowerment that was a theme in participants' responses was "the development of a sense of group identity" and the blossoming of personal

⁵ As was noted in the previous chapter, the definition was not stated in the interviews until the interview with the fifth subject.

identity that emerges out of a shared identity. As might be expected, a number of participants spoke about the development of their personal identity as a comedian, based on the shared identity of being in a group of female comics. Subject #10 is an example of this:

It made me have that be a part of my identity and before it was just like I was the class clown or I thought I was funny. Then I was definitely funny because I was a standup comedian, or I was a member of [the group].

What was perhaps a more unexpected and interesting finding was that three participants spoke specifically about the development of a personal and group identity that was not specifically about being a comedian, but was about being a woman in a non-traditional role. These three participants were all White women from the college comedy group. Subject #7, who is currently in the group, spoke about how along with participation in the comedy group, feminist politics became more a part of her everyday life and her identity:

I definitely have thought more about my identity as a female and being a female in a non-traditional role and I think that has come about both from being in the group with seniors that I looked up to when I was a sophomore who definitely had a certain sort of political view of the world and I didn't have a lot of friends who were always talking about the patriarchy and things like that and I think that things that had previously been sort of classroom politically correct discussion topics become more a part of my life when I joined [the all female comedy group] and became issues that were much more important to me and I think that those have always stayed with me as I've pursued comedy and as I think about how few female comedians there are and that sort of thing.

Subject #10, who was in the group five years ago, also talked about how the experience brought her more in touch with an identity as a woman in a non-traditional role:

I think that was definitely something that I honed with the group, was not having to really present myself always in a very ya know like make sure I speak well and dress well. Being around lots of women just goofing off, it makes it easier to embrace it and have it be a part of who you are that you can be gross and rude

sometimes it doesn't make you a bad person, if you are doing it in a funny way it is very much acceptable.

Although Subject #7 is talking about a feminist political identity and Subject #10 is focusing on "goofing off" behavior, they are both talking about developing non-traditionally female identities. Subject #10 is conveying how the comedy group let her be herself, she no longer felt constrained to act in certain socially prescribed, "feminine" ways. The third participant who spoke about the development of a non-traditional female identity was Subject # 8, who is currently in the group. For her, the group helped her come out as a lesbian (which is also a kind of non-traditional female identity). Being mentored by upperclassmen group members who she refers to as "queer influencing" assisted her in coming out of the closet. She also talked about how the jokes that were shared in the group about being gay helped her cope with the coming out process:

People would make jokes a lot about how everyone is secretly gay and I guess...to this day I still kind of hold those jokes as a part of my identity like a part of-I don't know how to put that- a part of being like so ridiculous and having a sense of humor about who you are and how strange it is that you've only discovered who you are this late in life and you haven't really discovered it yet, I don't know, it opens a lot of doors.

Speaking Up for Social Justice

The second area of personal empowerment that was a theme in participants' responses was around working for social justice. This is embedded in the definition of personal empowerment in terms of an "increased sense of responsibility for future events" and "enhanced feeling of self-efficacy, power, and capability" as they relate to social justice causes.

One way that this social justice theme manifested in the data was in terms of speaking up for one's political and social beliefs. Four participants talked about how their

experience in the all-female comedy group has transformed and increased their ability to make their voices heard. These are all women from the college all-female group (both currently and in the past) and two of the four are women of color.

One participant talked about her increased ability to speak up in terms of defending women's place in comedy and an increased insistence on her part that women's comedic voices be heard. Subject #6 said:

This particular group had to defend itself to some extent so... I'm not defensive about women in comedy, but I'm adamant, it is something I feel very strongly that women are funny and that a group like this is appropriate and that voices like that need to be heard. I guess if I've changed it's that there's more of an insistence on my part that people speak up.

A second participant also talked about defending women's place in comedy, and she connected the practice of arguing that women are funny to an increased ability to speak up for other issues that are important to her. In reference to defending that women are capable comedians, Subject #11 said, "since being in [the group] and kind of having to defend that often has sort of given me good practice for defending a lot of other things too." In a later part of the interview, she explains how she believes her ability to speak out against certain injustices has increased as a result of being in the comedy group

Before [the group] it was kind of like someone could get away with saying like a racist, sexist or homophobic comment and I wouldn't say anything about it, I mean I might say something kind of like, "hey, woah, that's sort of racist" but like now I'm at the point where I can just flat out let someone know, like "sorry, no, that's not ok" and kind of like do it in a way where I'm heard and I won't feel bad about it, I won't feel guilty at all because there's a space for that...so [the group] has taught me how to do that, sort of in the upper classmen's ruthlessness and their ability to say fuck you to things that just aren't ok...If someone says something that I find hurtful because it offends me or someone I know or just someone who's really important to me, I feel that I now have the language to defend myself and to fight against it and sort of help the person either see why their wrong or see why that's hurtful or just at least let them know I am offended...before I was worrying like "oh my god, if this person thinks that I'm

mad at them then we can't be friends and then they'll go tell people that I'm this angry Black girl" like no I don't care, if that's what someone takes away from that, that's fine, think I'm an angry Black girl because quite frankly sometimes I am a little angry, sometimes things just are not cool with me.

The power of her transformation is palpable in this quotation. She went from being hesitant to speak up against injustice for fear of seeming like an "angry Black girl" or losing friends. However, being in the group with other women who acted as role models for speaking up, empowered her and gave her "the language to defend" herself "and to fight against" injustice.

Another participant also made reference to how her capability for voicing her beliefs was affected by being in the all-female comedy group, however for her it was more about the comedy skills themselves, than the other group members being role models. Subject #5 had this to say:

I don't think I'm someone who always speaks my mind, but when I have something that I absolutely need to say, I will say it. Being in the group made me feel like I could do it in any way shape or form, I didn't have to just complain. I could use different avenues to achieve that. Sometimes the way to tell a story is to tell it in a circle, so if I'm trying to prove a point to someone about educational theory, let me give you a contextual example and then get back to the point. Just things about the sort of the impact you can have via different ways of narration.

As part of her current job, this participant does lobbying work for educational public policy. For her, the tools of comedic storytelling have transformed how she speaks her mind when she lobbies.

The fourth participant who spoke about the impact that the group has had on her ability to raise her voice for social and political justice was talking about using comedy itself as a tool for expressing those beliefs. Subject #8, who is currently a senior in the college group said:

One thing that I've changed a lot is what I write about and what I try to bring into the group, so I really make a big effort these days to bring in a lot of political humor, which my freshman year wasn't really on my radar.

To be fair, every participant responded in the affirmative when asked if they believed that comedy and/or humor has the potential to impart messages about social or political injustice. (Some went so far as to say that comedy is a "more effective" or "unique" tool for transmitting social justice-related messages.) However, I highlight Subject #8's response here, as she explicitly states that her experience in the group changed her ability to speak up about social and political issues, and this is a finding that reflects an increase in personal empowerment. This is the same participant who talked about how being in the group helped her come out of the closet, which is also about speaking up about issues of importance. On that topic, she said, "I think it like kind of made me realize that I needed to be talking about it, it was important to me and I needed to be sharing it."

Another way that personal empowerment for social justice appeared in the data was the way in which a few participants spoke of how comedy and the group experience increased their feelings of "self-efficacy, power and capability" for doing social justice-related work outside of comedy. Three subjects talked about how they felt that doing comedy or working with the group contributed to an increase in their capability to address social justice issues in the world beyond comedy. These participants' responses have already appeared in the self-efficacy section of this chapter, however I wanted to give them mention here, as they are about self-efficacy specifically for doing social justice work.

One of the participants who felt that her experience in the group increased her ability for social justice work outside of comedy was Subject #4 who felt that she learned

skills in the group that have benefited her work as a social worker. The other two participants were Subject #5 and Subject #11 who both talked about how facing rejection in the comedy performances and within the group have increased their ability to take risks. They both felt that facing rejection also increased their ability to defend their political beliefs. Subject #5 explains how facing rejection on the comedy stage has helped her be resilient in her work lobbying for changes in education policy:

I feel like I can do my job – work on education [policy] – while this is absolutely 100% my passion, I'm ok if it doesn't go the exact way that I want it to. I've already reconciled the fact that it might not. I think that relates to I might bomb on stage... In the field that I'm in I can tell just as many people as I possibly can, but I'm not going to change everything and that's ok, like that sort of same reconciliation I guess, is something that I've definitely felt way more empowered about in the last two years. I'm not going to change our education system, but maybe I'll change 10 people's minds, 'woo, yes, score, I got my laugh' that kind of thing. Like that one person who laughs really loud at a joke that you think is hilarious but nobody else does. That's very much how I feel about my career sometimes. Only one person is going to get this right now. I feel like I'm more ok with it than I would be otherwise.

Subject #11 also talked about how facing rejection "has made me stronger and more resilient" and how managing that rejection has increased her self-efficacy for defending social and political issues that are important to her. She said that tolerating rejections, such as sketch ideas that "might get shot down in a meeting," has made her more "confident in things that I believe in even if someone else doesn't totally agree." This is the participant who felt that before joining the group she might let people get away with making sexist, racist or homophobic comments, but that since being in the group she has become a lot more capable of calling this behavior out. It can be assumed that this naming of that which offends her is part of what she means when she talks about her

increased ability to "be confident in things that I believe in even if someone else doesn't totally agree."

Other Findings

The findings reported thus far have been those directly related to the original research question of whether participation in an all-female comedy group impacts feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal empowerment. During the course of data analysis, a couple of other findings emerged that, although they do not explicitly answer the original research question, are nonetheless interesting. Some of these findings relate to the literature that was outlined in Chapter II.

One of the questions asked of participants was if the all-female composition of the group was significant and if so, how was it significant? There is crossover between the themes that came out participants' answers to this question and themes that have already appeared in previous sections of this chapter.

The women in the college group were apt to report that the all-female composition of the group was significant to them in terms of the relational closeness of the group. A number of these women talked about how the group was supportive both in terms of writing comedy and in terms of their lives outside of comedy. Subject #8 referred to "the level of support both emotionally and comedically we have for each other." Subject #1 said that if she "were in a comedy group that had men in it I would feel better about shutting down an idea" but that in a group with only women if someone has an idea, the other group members "come and they build off of it as opposed to just shutting someone down." This same subject also talked about how the all-female nature of the group meant that they were emotionally supportive of each other in terms of non-

comedy related issues as well. "We acknowledge that we have emotional investment in our shows and in other areas of our lives and we don't have to pretend that we don't have emotions involved."

Two of the women in the college group also talked about how they felt that the all-female composition of the group was significant because women tend to value the group over the individual. Subject #4 said:

I think it's more focused on less about individual competition and making sure the group as a whole is successful, which I think is, obviously it's not biological by any means, I'm a constructionist or whatever but I do think we've been socialized to think about the group, to see ourselves in relation to others and so I think, there's this idea that women are mushier and that's probably the reason-ya I think that's probably true, I think we're probably better people but I also think a lot of it is women think about the group first and it's not always just about individual success.

Subject #10 also talked about how women are more relationally as opposed to individually focused. "We seem to not operate on our own as much, we're very much more of like a collective like talk it out kind of people as opposed to go off on your own and be bold independently, we like to have support." She attributed this to "why you don't see many women in comedy" and said that she thought that women comics who worked in teams were more successful.

A couple of the participants from the college group also talked about the friendship of the group as being part of what was significant to them about it being an all-female group. Subject #12 (who tried being in a co-ed comedy group after leaving the all-female comedy group) said of her experience with the all-female comedy group, "it's like more of a camaraderie thing that I don't know if you find in a co-ed group, that I haven't found...."

Another theme that came out of participants' responses to the question of the significance of the women-only nature of the troupe was that it was a space in which female-specific issues were raised. Three women from the college group talked about being able to identify with each other's experience. For example, Subject #11 said:

The fact that we are all women and we are experiencing this college together we share a lot of the same experiences and then we also have a way of listening to each other that I don't think would be the same if there were men in the group, I think men at this school are often very entitled and think of themselves first and can't always understand their privilege, but I think that the girls in the group...we have all the same criticisms about [the college's] space and so it is easier for us to understand each other....

Some participants talked about how female-specific issues were more likely to become part of the content of the comedy and that this was a significant feature of the group being all-female. For example, Subject #3 said, in reference to the real world all-female group she was in (as opposed to the all-female group she was in at her single-sex high school), "I feel like your female-ness and female experience is so much more glaring to you when you are in a co-ed environment, it does inform what you do on stage."

Some of the participants in the college group talked about the humor that comes out of an all-female group being more intelligent than the comedy that is produced in a co-ed group. Comparing her first impression of the college all-female group to the co-ed groups on campus, Subject #6 said that the women in the all-female group were "talking about things that they were actually thinking about and caring about...what I saw coming from other comedy groups was just this weird not funny slapstick stuff." Echoing this, Subject #12 said, "I've tried to do things with a co-ed type group, actually just all men, and it is only about penises. Like I think the all female aspect adds this whole political and intellectual component to any kind of actual jokes."

A third theme that emerged from answers to the question about the significance of the group being all-women had to do with the communication styles of the group participants. For the most part, women in the college group talked about how there was open communication in their comedy troupe. For example, Subject #11 said:

When it comes time for problem solving, if we feel like someone is saying something that's a little problematic or offensive we can have that dialogue really openly, whereas I think that there might be more of a fight if there was a boy in the group.

This contrasts with one of the women in a real world group and one of the women in the college group who talked about how being all women meant that they were less likely to communicate directly with one another for fear of hurting each others' feelings. Subject #2 who was in a real world group said, "women are just-can't speak directly to one another and it just turns into notes behind your back and cattiness and constructing all these rules." She told a story about how her troupe thought that one member had a bad singing voice and yet avoided asking this woman to take singing lessons. "No one wanted to be direct with her about this because it would hurt her feelings." She went on to say, "I'm in a troupe with mostly guys now and that doesn't happen, they just tell you, it's very refreshing." Subject #5 was the only member of the college group who felt that that group's communication was impacted by there being women who did not want to hurt each other's feelings.

I think it really sometimes boiled down to the fact that we were a bunch of women who cared about each other. So it's not like we could have a boxing match to figure it out or pull names to figure it out, we wanted to be like somewhat diplomatic.

The most common response to the question of the significance of the all-female nature of the group was participants' saying that the group gave them an opportunity to do

comedy where they would not otherwise have one because the larger comedy world is so male dominated. Five participants from the college group talked about this being significant to them. Many of them mentioned how women are typecast in co-ed comedy groups and only play traditionally female roles or supporting roles to a lead male character. As Subject #7 said, in an all female group "you're allowed to do things that... normally women wouldn't be doing because there's no one else to do it." Women who were in an all-female comedy group in the real world did not talk about the opportunity that being in an all-female group gave them. One subject, Subject # 9, did mention the marginalization of women in the comedy world, but connected it to the all-female composition being significant because it made the environment in the all-female group more competitive: "In the back of your head you know that probably most of the people in the group are not going to succeed and that you really have to strive to try harder to be better than them."

In addition to these findings about the significance to participants' of the all-female composition of the group, there are some other interesting additional findings to be mentioned. The majority of participants (10) reported that at least some of the content of the comedy they created in their all-female comedy group had social or political justice messages. Of course, some of those participants were talking about the same group, however this finding also included women who were not in the same all-female college comedy group.

Four of the women (who are either currently in or have been in the college group) thought that the very fact of women doing comedy is a political act itself. As Subject #5 said, "I think the very act, in and of itself of having women up there doing comedy was a

political act." Three other subjects expressed a similar belief. The reasoning that was given by all who held this belief is that the comedy world is male dominated and women are marginalized in comedy.

Seven different subjects referred to the idea that the comedy world (in college and beyond) is limiting for women. And three subjects referred to the existence of the idea that women are not as funny as men. These ideas were mentioned by participants across the board— including both those who had participated in all-female comedy groups in an academic setting and those who had been in groups in the real world. The researcher never prompted the participants to talk about either of these concepts.

Some of the questions that were asked early on in the interviews were asked as warm-up questions—not for the purpose of generating data necessarily, but rather to increase subjects' comfort level in the interview. However, two of those questions produced thematic findings that are interesting to report. Nine participants said that growing up they were encouraged by family and/or friends in their humor and no one reported being discouraged or told that they could not be funny or were not supposed to be funny. This is interesting in light of the fact that the majority of participants are aware that women are marginalized in the comedy world and that there is a societal belief that women are not as funny as men.

Another finding that came out of the warm-up questions that was surprising was how many participants referred to themselves as "shy" or quiet as children. Five participants talked about being shy, reticent, or flying "under the radar" as children. Only two participants said they were the "class clown," but most fell into the category of saying they were shy or explicitly stating that they were not the class clown. As Subject

#4 said, "Women are funny, but they're not always as loud about it." She may be on to something.

The findings reported in this chapter were obtained from interviews with 12 women about their experiences in all-female comedy groups. Their responses indicate that their feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and personal empowerment were all impacted by their experiences in the groups and that mostly the feelings in all three of these areas increased. However, a few participants felt that their self-esteem decreased due to elements of being in the group. There was a correlation between participants reporting an increase in self-esteem if they had been in the comedy group in an academic setting, versus participants reporting a decrease in self-esteem if they had been in the group in the real world. The implications of these findings will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study was conducted to explore whether women who participate in all-female comedy groups experience increases in feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal empowerment that they attribute to taking part in such groups. The working hypothesis was that women who participate in such groups would experience amplified feelings in these three areas based on elements of doing comedy as well as through the relational experience of working in a group with other women. It was expected that the use of humor as a coping skill would engender increases in self-esteem and self-efficacy and that performance comedy might be healing due to the ways in which it parallels various therapeutic modalities, such as expressive arts therapy. Performance comedy as a way to "speak truth to power" or a forum for social justice was also proposed as possibly having bearing on increased feelings of personal empowerment in those who participate in comedic endeavors.

This chapter will summarize and discuss the findings in terms of how they relate to the literature that was outlined in Chapter II. In many ways the findings do support the literature as well as the original hypothesis. However, there were other ways in which the findings did not coalesce with the literature, nor support the hypothesis. In addition to discussing the findings in light of the literature and the original hypothesis, this chapter will also outline the implications of the study for social work, examine the strengths and limitations of the study, and address areas for possible future research on this topic.

Summary of the Findings

It is important to state up front that all of the findings in this project are correlational and not causational. There is no evidence that participants' self-esteem, self-efficacy, or personal empowerment increased or decreased as a direct result of their participation in an all-female comedy group. Rather, in the interviews in this study, individual participants talked about how they believe they changed and to what factors they attribute those changes. The patterns analyzed in their responses show correlations between certain elements of experience and certain outcomes. But causation cannot be demonstrated due to there being many other variables that cannot be controlled.

As stated in the previous chapter, it became necessary to distinguish between research participants who were in an all-female comedy group in an academic setting (either college or high school) and those who were in an all-female comedy group in the real world, as the correlations in the findings were divided along this difference. In terms of self-esteem, subjects who had been in all-female comedy groups in either academia or the real world (or both) reported increases in self-esteem based on elements related to creating and performing comedy. However, it was by and large the women who participated in an all-female comedy group in academia who believed that they experienced increases in their self-esteem based on elements of group dynamics. Women who had been in a group in the real world were more apt to report a negative impact on their self-esteem, which they attributed to group dynamics. The self-efficacy findings were more evenly distributed, with women from groups in both an academic setting and groups in the real world reporting enhanced capabilities for doing comedy and for dealing with other areas of their lives. Personal empowerment was analyzed as a measure of a

strengthening of identity as well as one's capability for doing social justice work. Based on this conception of personal empowerment, it was only the women from the all-female group in college who demonstrated increases in personal empowerment. In the implications section of this chapter, I will discuss the reasons why participants in an all-female comedy group in an academic setting may have had more positive outcomes than those who participate in such groups in the real world. But first, I will turn to an analysis of where the findings did and did not line up with the literature.

The Findings in Light of the Literature

As there was no previous research on this specific topic, the review of the literature wove together work from various fields surrounding this topic. The first section of the literature review enumerated the ways in which humor could be therapeutic, including an overview of the literature that views humor as a coping or defense mechanism. While the psychological use of humor as a defense mechanism is different from performance comedy, I was curious to see whether the women in this study used humor as a defense mechanism. The results were that they did use humor as a coping mechanism, in ways that are both characteristic of the literature and in ways that expand on the literature. There was evidence that participants used humor for physical as well as psychological healing in ways that were in line with literature. For example, Subject #8's discussion of how she was ill during her tenure in the group and how going to meetings and laughing "were the only thing keeping [her] going" echoes Cousins' (1991) account of how laughter helped him overcome physical pain.

A number of participants talked about how humor has helped them to cope with emotionally difficult situations in their lives. Subject #6 is a good example of this:

I think whenever anything personally upsetting or traumatic happens... I do respond...with humor naturally... and it's like a distancing mechanism in a way because it's like, "no I don't really want to talk about how I'm having this horrible break up with a person." Instead you can talk about all the things that are driving you crazy but sort of spin them in a different way where it's funny.

This "distancing mechanism" is exactly what Freud (as cited in Berk, 2001) or Vaillant (as cited in Bloch, 1987) are talking about when they describe humor as a mature defense. In this way, Subject #6 is using humor to "face the unbearable" of the breakup (Vaillant as cited in Bloch, 1987, p. 174). She is also describing going through the three-step process that Berk (2001) outlines for how humor works as a coping mechanism. First, "the problem stimulus" is her "horrible break up." Second, the humor response, in which one's perspective on the problem is re-framed is what Subject #6 is talking about when she says she is able to "spin [the situation] in a different way where it's funny." Lastly, there is the emotional response that is derived from making this cognitive shift. Subject #6 describes this step when she goes on to say, "It's just nice to even know that your frustration can result in something that's positive. If it just like changes your day or if it changes your outset, your attitude...."

In addition to using humor in their personal lives, a number of participants talked about using humor as a coping mechanism in their performance material. Subject #6 said in regard to coping with painful experiences, "if it becomes a product in and of itself, like if it actually does become a comedy routine, I think that's really useful." Subject #7 talked about how, "when difficult things come up I will often make a joke about it or reframe it in a way that I can say, 'well at least this is going to make great material'." And Subject #9 said, "'if you can stand back and look at a horrible situation and say 'oh well I imagine this on an improv stage, it would be hysterical' you can sort of put things in perspective."

A couple of participants gave examples of painful life experiences, such as an illness, that they were able to turn into comedy material and how this process helped them cope.

These experiences are in line with theorists such as Rollo May who talk about humor as a “healthy way of feeling a ‘distance’ between one's self and the problem, a way of standing off and looking at one's problem with perspective” (as cited in Berk, 2001, p. 325). While such findings are supported in this literature on humor as a coping mechanism, what is unique about these findings is that they are not only about the use of humor as a coping mechanism in the intra-psychic or inter-personal way that George Vaillant, Sigmund Freud and Rollo May conceptualize this defense mechanism. Rather, these women are talking about using humor as a coping mechanism by taking their personal troubles and re-framing them writ large in front of a theatrical audience.

Another way that participants' experience being part of a theatrical comedy group adds to the literature on humor as a defense is that a couple of participants talked about how being in the comedy group solidified for them that they had the capability to use humor to cope. Subject #7, for example, said that being in the all-female comedy group “has ... strengthened and validated and reframed my sense of self so that I feel like the type of person who uses comedy as a defense mechanism or uses comedy in a way that's healthy to help overcome difficult issues.” Where these women may have always known they had access to the “mature defense” of humor, being in a comedy group validated and enhanced their ability to draw on that defense.

The literature indicated that the ability to use humor as a coping skill could enhance one's feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy. However, when asked about which elements of their experience they believe impacted their self-esteem, none of the

participants referred to using humor to cope as an element that impacted their self-esteem. In the analysis of the data, humor as a defense mechanism was only interpreted as an indication of self-efficacy, as in one's capability to cope with difficult situations in life.

There was one element of the literature on the therapeutic value of humor that was borne out in the findings in terms of increases in self-esteem. In Brausa's (1993) anecdotal study on a comedy group he facilitated with a group of veterans, he talks about how he observed increases in the self-esteem of his participants, which he attributed in part to their speaking jokes aloud and responding to one another's humor. This is in line with the findings in this study, as a number of participants believed that one element that served to increase their sense of self-esteem was their ability to make others laugh, both within the group and in performances. Making others laugh was valuable to participants both because it affirmed their comedic ability and because it validated that they were being heard in the way they intended. Brausa also talked about how he observed an increase in the social skills of the vets with whom he worked. A similar finding was borne out in this study, as a couple participants noted how doing comedy elevated their self-efficacy around social skills. Subject #2, for example, talked about how doing improv helped her overcome her "introverted tendencies."

The literature review mentioned three therapeutic modalities that bear some semblance to performing comedy and it was postulated that these similarities might mean that theatrical comedy is healing in a similar fashion to these therapies. The crossovers between psychodrama and theatrical comedy did not show up in the findings. While some of the elements of comedy that parallel psychodrama were mentioned in participants'

narratives, they were not alluded to as bearing the same significance as they do in psychodrama. For example, while being affirmed by other group members and the audience was cited as an element that boosted participants' self-esteem, this was more about being validated that one is talented than it was about the importance of others bearing witness to one's story, as would be the case in psychodrama. The connections between performance comedy and expressive arts therapy were more apparent in the findings. A couple of subjects named the creative process as one of the elements they believed were integral in raising their self-esteem. The creative aspects of comedy helped engender a sense of well being in some participants. In addition, the expressive arts concept of "aesthetic distancing" in which an upsetting or traumatic event is transformed using a story was present in the participants who talked about using humor and comedy to cope with painful experiences, such as illnesses, deaths and disabilities. The literature review mentioned play therapy and the possibility that humor may engender psychological and emotional growth, just as Winnicott (1971) proposed that play facilitated growth in children and humor is one way in which adults play. While many subjects cited experiencing emotional and psychological benefits that they attributed to aspects of being in an all-female comedy group, it was not solely the humor and the creation of comedy that led to these benefits. As the findings reveal, a lot of the benefits to self-esteem, as well as self-efficacy and personal empowerment can be attributed to elements of group dynamics.

The literature on the importance of interpersonal relationships in all-female groups addresses the heart of why so many participants reported elements of group dynamics as being integral to the positive outcomes they experienced. The literature in

this section of the review built the case that through interpersonal relationships, women's sense of self-esteem and empowerment is augmented. The working hypothesis of this research project was supported in regard to this theory, as many participants reported relational elements as having a positive impact on their self-esteem and personal empowerment. However, it was primarily the women who had been in an all-female comedy group in an academic setting who demonstrated such outcomes.

The primary thesis of self-in-relation theory is that inter-personal relationships are fundamental to women's psychological and emotional health. Jordan, et al. (1991) proposed that, "women derive manifold benefits as a result of relational connectedness." Chief among these "manifold benefits" is a "sense of self-worth [and] self-esteem" (Schiller, p. 7, 1997). The findings on the increases in self-esteem in this study are clearly in line with this tenet of self-in-relation theory, as primarily those participants who had been in an all-female comedy group in an academic setting named a number of aspects of the group dynamics or their relationship with other group members as factors that they believe contributed to a boost in their self-esteem. These relational factors that were identified as having a positive impact on self-esteem were: working collaboratively with other group members, being friends with teammates, identifying with and supporting one another, being validated in their work by other group members, and that the group was composed only of women. Most of the participants who spoke of this last factor were referring to feelings of pride derived from participating in a field in which women are usually marginalized.

It is interesting to note that a lot of these relational thematic elements that were named as reasons why participants felt that their self-esteem increased, were also the

reasons they named for the significance of the group being all female. When asked what the significance was of the group being composed of women only, the participants from the college comedy group mainly named positive relationship dynamics such as the relational closeness, support, friendship, valuing the group over the individual, identifying with each other's experience, and engaging in open communication. While Jordan, et al. (1991) mention that interpersonal relationships are important for the psychological health of everyone, they were originally talking about their importance for women. It is therefore supportive of the female-focused roots of self-in-relation theory that the findings about the significance of the group being all-female are parallel to the reasons listed for why the group boosted self-esteem.

Aside from self-esteem, another one of the "manifold benefits" that self-in-relation theory purports to be derived from interpersonal relationships among women is a sense of identity. Schiller (1997) states that, "a sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and even identity is often experienced in direct relation to the quality of interpersonal relations a woman has in her life" (p. 7). This sense of identity being borne out of quality interpersonal relationships was demonstrated in the findings on personal empowerment that were about the development of identity. Three participants from the college all-female group each spoke of their experience as helping them to develop a different non-traditional female identity. One talked about the development of her identity as a woman invested in feminist politics. Another spoke about presenting herself in a less formal manner. And the third told about coming out as a lesbian. Each of these women cited interpersonal relationships with other group members as a key ingredient that shaped these non-traditional identities. In relating her newfound interest in feminist politics,

Subject #7 said, "I think that has come about...from being in the group with seniors that I looked up to when I was a sophomore who definitely had a certain sort of political view of the world." In explaining why she feels more comfortable behaving in informal ways, Subject #10 said, "being around lots of women just goofing off, it makes it easier to embrace it and have it be a part of who you are that you can be gross and rude sometimes it doesn't make you a bad person." And Subject #8 cited the support of "queer influencing" upperclassmen as helpful to her coming out process.

A number of the authors who write about the importance of interpersonal relationships talk about women's assertiveness increasing as a result of relationships. Jordan, et al. (1991) state that, "other aspects of self such as creativity, autonomy and self-assertion, emerge within the context of relationship" (p. 8). Women's ability to assert themselves is proposed to increase especially in the context of all-female spaces (Kravetz, 1980; Home, 1991). This was borne out in the findings, as a number of women referred to an increased ability to assert themselves, a characteristic they attribute to participation in the group. This showed up, for example, in the findings on personal empowerment in terms of the subjects who found that taking part in the group has helped them speak up about their social and political beliefs, both through the comedy that they write and interpersonally in the world beyond comedy. For example, Subject #8 talked about how she has honed her ability to write comedy with social and political justice themes: "I really make a big effort these days to bring in a lot of political humor, which my freshman year wasn't really on my radar." Subject #11 spoke about how being in the group has given her the strength, on a daily basis, to challenge comments she finds offensive. And the reasons these participants gave for why being in the group has

augmented their ability to voice their social and political beliefs is largely about interpersonal relations. Subject #8 feels that she is more likely to write political humor because of "watching other people in the group write stuff and kind of knowing that I wanted to say more of what I felt." Subject #11 explains why she is more apt to challenge stereotypical or racist comments by saying that the group "has taught me how to do that, sort of in the upper classmen's ruthlessness and their ability to say fuck you to things that just aren't ok." The relational dynamic of role-modeling was integral to increasing this aspect of their personal empowerment. (Subject #5 was the only participant who cited aspects of performing comedy, as opposed to relationships, as the reason why she feels her capability to be vocal for social justice has increased.) This way in which subjects felt more personally empowered to speak up for social justice because they saw other group members doing so, is also in line with the self-in-relation literature that talks about how relationships are "mutually empowering" (Surrey, 1991; Miller, 1986).

The next section of the literature review dealt with the concept of comedy as a forum for social justice, or a way for the marginalized to "speak truth to power." The findings supported this literature in a number of ways. First of all, the fact that the majority of participants stated that at least a portion of the comedy they created with the all-female group had some sort of social justice theme is indicative that they are using comedy as a tool to speak truth to power. In the literature on women's comedic writing, Barecca (1988) talks about how women use comedy to express anger at the current social order. The theme of anger showed up in a few participants' responses. Subject #4 proudly referred to her friends in the group as a "posse...of very angry female [college] students." Subject #11 talked about how before she was in the group, she was worried to speak up

when she heard racist or homophobic comments because it was "like 'oh my god, if this person thinks that I'm mad at them then...they'll go tell people that I'm this angry Black girl." Since being in the group, however, she says that now "I don't care, if that's what someone takes away from that, that's fine, think I'm an angry Black girl because quite frankly sometimes I am a little angry, sometimes things just are not cool with me." While neither of these comments are a clear example of Barecca's notion that women use comedy to express outrage at oppressive social structures, they are both indicative that something about being in the comedy group helped these women to own their anger as part of their identity. Subject #11's comment is more supportive of Barecca's argument, as Subject #11 is clearly talking about feelings of anger at that which she finds oppressive.

Part of Barecca's (1988) argument is that women are not simply expressing anger at the current social order in their comedy, but they are using the "feminist tool" of comedy with the goal of changing that order (p.5). A number of subjects spoke to the belief that women doing comedy, in and of itself, is a political act as so few women are represented in the comedy world. This notion is in line with Barecca's thesis, as some of the women in this study see their participation in an all-female comedy group as the embodiment of creating a new social order in which women are successful comics. Subject #8's statement is representative of this belief. She said, "just knowing that I'm in this group that's really challenging a lot of things about comedy and about gender roles in general, and that it's so good, is amazing." Additionally, a couple of the participants who had been in the college group said that what was significant to them about the group being composed of only women was that it influenced the kind of comedy that was created. They believed that women tend to engage in more intelligent, questioning

humor. As Subject #12 said, "I've tried to do things with a co-ed type group, actually just all men, and it is only about penises. Like I think the all female aspect adds this whole political and intellectual component to any kind of actual jokes." Whether or not it is true that male humor is "only about penises," Subject #12's reflection on her experience supports Barecca's arguments that women's comedy does something different than traditional comedy. Instead of just functioning "as [a] catharsis of desire and frustration," a way to express the taboo, women use humor as a tool to struggle against societal oppression (p. 8).

Owing to this concept that comedy can be a tool for struggling for social justice, I had been curious how this connected to feelings of personal empowerment in comics. Did comics' feelings of personal empowerment increase through the act of doing comedy with a social justice message? Or did feelings of personal empowerment come first, allowing them to then feel more confident bringing political messages before an audience? The literature on personal empowerment mentions both these avenues. Gutierrez and Ortega (1991) talk about three levels of empowerment, with the personal level ("feelings of personal power and self efficacy") being a "crucial foundation for the other levels" of interpersonal and political empowerment (p. 259). Watts, Griffith, & Abdul (1999) echo this structure, saying that "[e]mpowerment at the psychological level is the cognitive engine for liberation at higher levels" (p. 259). They also talk about the importance of decreasing "internalized oppression" as groundwork for being able to do social action at a higher level. Home (1991) talks about the opposite path, how feelings of personal empowerment can increase as a result of engaging in social justice at a macro level. The findings bear out the arguments of Gutierrez and Ortega and Watts, et al., as opposed to

that of Home. Some participants talked about their experience in the group as helping propel them to tackle social justice issues both onstage and in the world beyond comedy. Subject #11 is a good example of this, as she talks about overcoming internalized oppression ("they'll go tell people that I'm this angry Black girl") in order to arrive at a level of empowerment where she feels confident confronting injustice in her everyday interactions. This is clearly an example of empowerment at a "psychological level" being a "cognitive engine" for the higher level of interpersonal empowerment.

What was the experience in the group that precipitated this shift towards greater personal empowerment? For most participants, it was not the act of doing of comedy (with or without a political message) that brought on increased feelings of personal empowerment. Rather, as mentioned above, personal empowerment stemmed more from interpersonal relationship dynamics between group members. The interpersonal dynamics were mostly about other group members serving as role models in one way or another: Having a feminist political identity, speaking up about what they find offensive, and writing political sketches. One subject also talked about how facing rejection within the group and coping with it made her more resilient and increased her personal empowerment. It is also important to note that it was only the women in the all-female comedy group in college who demonstrated these elevated feeling of personal empowerment.

Just like the female standup comics who Greenbaum (1997) interviewed, many participants in this study acknowledged knowing that women are marginalized in the comedy world. And a few talked about the societal belief that women are naturally less funny than men, demonstrating that the history that Barecca (1988) chronicles of men

criticizing women as un-funny, still has an impact today. As stated in the previous chapter, participants talked about these topics unprompted by the researcher, which demonstrates how large these issues loom in light of the topic under discussion. Acknowledgement of these concepts was demonstrated both by the women in the academic-based groups and women in the real world groups, showing that these issues are present on a larger domain than just college campuses. However, when asked about the significance of the group being all-female, it was only the women who were in (or had been) in the comedy group at college who responded that the group gave them opportunities that they would not otherwise have had due to women being marginalized in the larger comedy world and pigeonholed in co-ed groups. The fact that these responses were only given by these participants is most likely an indication of these women being in the same group and talking about this topic with one another.

In the literature review, I attempted to explain women's marginalization in the comedy world and the belief that women are not as funny as men using literature on language and gender. Linguistics literature proposes that women are socialized to communicate in ways that are deferential and passive (Tannen, 1994; McConnell-Ginnet, 2004). Comedic narratives have been analyzed as being aggressive and confrontational, as in the analogy Keough draws between standup comedy and boxing in which a comic tries to "'destroy' his audience [with] the punch line" (as cited in Greenbaum, 1997, p. 118). If women are socialized to speak in ways that are passive and avoid conflict, and if comedic narratives are confrontational in nature then in order to be comics women must violate the gendered norms of communication into which they were socialized. This concept of gender and communication can shed new light on the findings about the

development of identity. As mentioned above, three participants said that being in the group helped solidify three distinct, yet all non-traditionally female identities; becoming a woman concerned with feminist politics, being more comfortable behaving informally, and coming out as a lesbian. The second participant of these three, who talked about feeling more comfortable acting informally, said, "something that I honed with the group, was not having to really present myself always in a very ya know like make sure I speak well and dress well. Being around lots of women just goofing off, it makes it easier to embrace it and have it be a part of who you are." This experience echoes Carol Burnett's words about gender-normative socialized behavior: "There's all that training you've had since you were three. Be a lady! Don't yell or try to be funny. Just be a nice little girl. Sit quietly with your knees close together, and speak only when you are spoken to" (as cited in Horowitz, 1997, p. 2). Even though this participant's experience is more directly in line with the concept of acting un-ladylike, all three of these identity shifts can be analyzed in light of the literature on gendered norms of communication and comedy. Just as women are socialized to communicate in gender-specific ways, they are socialized to perform in gender-normative ways more broadly. While each of these three participants is speaking of a different facet of identity, all of their experiences are about breaking out of gender-normative socialization. Above, I mentioned that interpersonal relationships were a common element that all three women identified as integral in facilitating these changes in their identities. However, looking at these identity shifts in terms of the literature on gender-normative language and comedy puts these findings in a different light. Perhaps there may be a connection between doing comedy (and communicating in a way that goes

against how women are socialized linguistically) and the development of other non-traditionally female identities.

Implications

A main finding was that for the majority of participants, elements of relationship dynamics between members of the all-female comedy group had a lot to do with positive outcomes in terms of self-esteem and personal empowerment. This supports the self-in-relation theory literature, which proposes that working in relationship can produce benefits for women such as "increased zest, empowerment, knowledge [and] self-worth." (Miller, as quoted in Surrey, 1991, p.167). If relationships are fundamental to women's self-worth and empowerment, Surrey (1991) asks how we can "build empowering relational contexts for personal growth?" (p.170). As seen in the literature review, one way to build these relational contexts has been through consciousness raising groups. Kravetz (1980) reported that one of the most common benefits to women who participated in the consciousness raising groups of the 1960's and 70's in North America was increased self-esteem.

The findings of this study show that just as in consciousness raising groups, the relational elements of all-female comedy groups are key factors in increasing women's feelings of self-esteem. Therefore, another way to "build empowering relational contexts" for women's growth is through all-female comedy groups. This is one of the implications for clinical social work. All-female comedy groups can be viewed as an intervention, a way to boost feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and empowerment for women. All-female comedy groups could be an intervention, not only for women's individual mental health, but also for doing more macro social justice work, as demonstrated by the

participants who spoke about their experience in the group and with comedy in general as increasing their capability to speak up against oppression and engage in other political justice projects.

As demonstrated in the findings, however, not all of the women reported experiencing the same increases in self-esteem and personal empowerment. It was overwhelmingly those participants who took part in groups in an academic setting who experienced enhanced feelings of self-esteem that they attributed to group dynamics, and only those participants in the college group who appeared to have increases in personal empowerment. Those women who had participated in an all-female comedy group in the real world often reported decreases in their self-esteem due to group dynamics. The elements of group dynamics that these women felt were harmful to their self-esteem included the group being competitive or hierarchical, group members engaging in indirect communication, feeling left out of the group, and there being a lack of support in the group. Some of these themes were repeated in response to the question about the significance of the group being all female. There was something clearly distinct (and almost opposite) occurring in the relational dynamics of the women in the real world groups versus those women who were in academic-based groups. Therefore, if you were designing an all-female comedy group as an intervention with the goal of elevating feelings of self-esteem and personal empowerment in women, you would want to make sure that the group had the elements that were reported in this study by the women in the academic-based groups.

What were those elements that made the academic-based groups more successful than the real world groups in terms of correlating with a positive impact on participants'

feelings of self-esteem and empowerment? And why might these elements be more likely to occur in a school setting than the real world? One overarching thematic element of the academic-based groups was relational closeness. The women in the college group were the only participants who talked about being friends with each other. A good way to analyze the differences between the academic-based groups and the real world groups is to listen to the two subjects who had experiences in one of each. Subject #3 and Subject #10 had each been in an all-female comedy group in an academic setting and an all-female comedy group in the real world. Subject #3, who was in an all-female improv troupe in high school, had this to say about the friendship element of a school-based group: "Improv in the school setting is so much easier because you know the people well and you're friends as well as teammates." They are already friends from classes and other activities and so it facilitates forging emotional closeness within the comedy group as well.

Other relational elements are apparent in academic-based groups, such as greater support and being able to identify with one another. A number of participants from the school-based groups talked about support, both in terms of the support they received intra-group from other members as well as audience support. The supportive nature of the other players is probably based on already being friends with each other. The support from the audience is most likely because the audience is also composed of friends and other folks within the school community. In comparing her experience in a real-world group to her tenure in an academic-based group, Subject #10 said of the real-world group, "we didn't have the support you know, you didn't have these hundreds of people trying to come to your shows and...the group wasn't as supportive." The support from an audience

of classmates and friends in a comedy group in academia has the effect of conveying to someone that they are a successful comic, which in the real world in front of an audience of strangers is harder to achieve.

The relational aspect of being able to identify with one another, which was a lot more common in the narratives of the women from the college comedy group, is probably due to experiencing the same small college "bubble" environment. Subject #11 talked about how all her teammates experience the same gender dynamics of the school. People have a lot more experiences in common in a smaller community than they do in a larger, real world environment.

Another element that was present in the academic-based groups was that the environment was more about having fun and experimenting with the comedy, whereas in the real-world groups the endeavor was more about professional success. Subject #2, who was only in a real-world improv troupe, had this to say about the experience:

I think in improv you have to decide at the outset whether or not your troupe is a family or a group of friends that are just in it to have a good time and have fun and do something cool and not try and turn it into some giant professional thing or you're setting out ya know for major world domination and ya know aspiring for professional greatness.

It was clear from her entire narrative that a troupe whose aim was to do a "giant professional thing" and achieve "major world domination" was a recipe that could easily turn a group into a hurtful, self-esteem defeating experience. Subject #10, who was first in an all-female comedy group in college and then after college was in an all-female group in the real world, echoed this sentiment about how a group whose focus was professionalism and success was ultimately damaging. In this quotation she refers to the college group as "number 1." She said that in the real-world group:

People wanted success over experimentation when that was never the point in number 1 where it was definitely experimentation over success and it became a whole lot less fun...in [the real-world group] we brought in a seasoned director and an editor and writers that did commercial work in New York and...it became more of a power struggle.

A comedy group in an academic setting is more likely to be about experimentation and having fun and less about professional success. This is probably because school is an environment in which experimentation and having fun in general are encouraged. Also, creative experimentation is part of the learning process. And school is not a professional setting. Therefore, factors such as success, competition and hierarchy (which showed up more prominently in the narratives about real-world all-female comedy groups) do not take center stage. The women in the group are not trying to "go somewhere" professionally while still in school and so there is less pressure to be successful and more room to experiment. Subject #3 said of her experience in an all-female improv troupe in high school, "you are always there to practice and it's something that you prioritize in your life and you don't have to worry about paying rent and stuff." Her experience speaks to how as a teenager in school she had less adult responsibilities. This is another reason why a school setting may mean greater freedom to simply have fun and experiment.

An advantage that school-based all-female comedy groups also have is that a school is a smaller sub-culture than the real world. Subject #10 said that compared to the college group, the real world group:

Presented a lot more difficulties because we weren't just dealing with a college environment we were trying to market ourselves for a larger viewing audience, our confidence was weakened because it's hard to know outside of the liberal arts bubble, what would be funny.

In a smaller "liberal arts bubble" it is easier to write comedy that is tailored to that specific audience. Therefore the likelihood that the comedy will be successful with the audience is higher, which correlates with elevated confidence and self-esteem levels. Another possible factor for why the groups that took place in academia were more correlated with increases in self-esteem and personal empowerment may be because the women who took part in those groups tended to be younger during the time of their participation and therefore at a stage in life where personal growth is more likely to occur.

All of these factors that existed in the school-based all-female comedy groups would have to be present if one expected a comedy group to be an intervention that could improve women's self-esteem and personal empowerment. Does this mean that all-female comedy groups can only exist as after-school programs in secondary schools and extra-curricular organizations in colleges if they are to have these effects? Not necessarily. Subject #2's narrative speaks to this. She was only ever in an all-female comedy troupe in the real world and yet she knew that the elements of friendship and having fun are necessary if a group is to avoid being a self-esteem deflating environment. I imagine that it is possible for an all-female comedy group that empowers its participants to exist outside of academia provided the elements named above, such as friendship, fun and experimentation, are present. This does not mean that success must be forfeited for women in comedy in the real world, but perhaps positive, enriching relationships are more necessary for women in comedy. Maybe those elements can even lay the groundwork for success. As Subject #10 reflected about women:

We seem to not operate on our own as much, we're very much more of a collective, talk it out kind of people as opposed to go off on your own and be bold independently, we like to have support... when Tina Fey and Amy Poehler come together and they were doing all this stuff, they just seem like they were having fun so much fun together...you can imagine them just sitting around just like making stuff up and having it be a really fun time, even ... with Jennifer Saunders and Dawn French how they've done different comedic endeavors, it just seems like with women it's the comedic camaraderie that makes it special... I think the successful women a lot of times have support.

Strengths and Limitations

Any research project is susceptible to limitations and this study was no exception.

This study lacks generalizability, partly due to the small sample size of 12 subjects.

However, as this study was looking at an area that has not been researched before, an exploratory qualitative study made methodological sense. The qualitative nature of the study is also a strength, as it allowed for intimate interviews and the possibility to probe comics about their own experiences in detail.

As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, the nine subjects who were in an all-female comedy group in college were in the same all-female comedy group, however some were currently in the group, while others had been in the group up to six years ago. The fact that three quarters of the subjects were from the same group means that the data cannot be generalized to other all-female comedy groups. It makes the findings about that specific all-female college comedy group as opposed to all-female comedy groups more broadly, or even all-female comedy groups in other academic settings in general.

However, the one participant who was in an all female comedy troupe in high school had similar outcomes to the women who were in the all-female comedy group in college. This is why a correlation was made based on whether the group took place in an academic setting or not. The fact that there was only one participant who was in an all-female

comedy group in high school made it difficult to say with certainty what was unique about the experience of being in a comedy group in high school versus one in college.

In terms of the data not being generalizable to all-female comedy groups in other academic settings, it is worth noting that the college group took place at a co-ed college that was once an all-women's college. It is possible that the feminist roots of the college may have made it an environment that was more amenable to an all-female comedy group. This environment could have meant that the group was a more self-esteem boosting experience than would be the case for an all-female comedy group at another academic institution. While some participants from that group talked about having to "defend" the group to people in the college community who protested it, the strength they felt engaging in that defense may have been bolstered by the feminist roots of the college environment. A historically female college environment in general may also be one that supports the type of growth-enhancing group dynamics (illuminated in feminist-based self-in-relation theory) that were found in the comedy group specifically. The participant who took part in an all-female comedy group in high school was attending an all-female high school, and that school in general may also have been an environment that was more conducive to the growth via relationship dynamics that were seen in that comedy group specifically.

There is probably some self-selecting bias in terms of which women choose to participate in all-female comedy groups. The type of woman who takes the risk to do comedy may also be more likely to do other activities that would boost her self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal empowerment. Or she may be more likely to already possess some of those qualities. For example, it can be argued that the kind of individual who

puts themselves into the situation of being in a comedy group already has a certain level of self-efficacy as they are setting out to achieve specific goals, such as improving their comedic abilities. Aspects of doing comedy and being in the group may then serve to reinforce and augment personality characteristics that are already present. In other words, there is no evidence that *any* woman who joined an all-female comedy group (or even these specific groups) would have similar outcomes. The data may also be skewed by a self-selecting bias in terms of which women chose to volunteer to participate in the study. It is probable that someone would much rather be interviewed about an experience which they feel positively about and enjoy recalling. (Of course there were participants who had negative experiences in their group and this did not deter them from volunteering for the study.)

The sample size was also not very diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, as most participants identified as White and only two of the subjects were women of color. This made it difficult to analyze how the intersection of one's racial identity and their gender identity may have affected their experience in the all-female comedy group. The two participants of color, for example, were the only participants who talked about facing rejection as a factor that they believe affected their ability to speak up for social justice causes. Due to there only being two participants of color in the sample, it is difficult to discern whether this finding is related to their racial identity or not. Also, there were no questions in the interview that specifically asked participants whether they believe their racial identity impacted their experience in the group.

A strength and possible limitation of the study is that I am a woman who has done comedy in all-female comedy groups. My experiences were complex, but overall I found

them to strengthen my self-esteem and my self-efficacy. It is possible that my experience biased the way I asked questions, the way I heard responses and the way I culled quotations and analyzed data. I could have been unconsciously seeking to highlight experiences that matched my own. However, my comedy history can also be viewed as a strength. I was familiar with the terms my interviewees were using and I could easily identify with their stories. In analyzing the data I could also draw on my own knowledge to postulate why certain trends may have appeared in the data.

Future Research

As the subject of this research project—the potential impact that being in an all-female comedy group has on one's feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal empowerment— is such a unique topic and no previous studies have been done on it, the possible research designs on the subject are numerous. The findings as well as the limitations of this study, however, can serve to point the way towards a couple of specific questions for future inquiry.

The one participant who was in an all-female comedy group in high school was an adult looking back on her experience as a teenager. This begs the question of how an adolescent girl would reflect on her experience of being in an all-female comedy group in high school or middle school. What would this subject have said if she could have been interviewed at age 16 or 17? Would adolescent girls report similar outcomes as adults? It would be interesting to do a study that looked at adolescent girls who take part in all-female comedy groups.

The correlation between the positive outcomes for self-esteem and personal empowerment of the participants in the academic-based groups, coupled with the

limitation that this data was sampling women from the same college group makes me wonder if similar findings would exist if the sample included women from other college all-female groups or even other academic-based group in general. A study that included women from a variety of school-based all-female comedy groups could address how much of the findings of this study were only about this specific group or whether the elements that made the academic groups successful in this study are a facet of all-female comedy groups in academia more broadly.

It would also be valuable to seek a more diverse sample size and include interview questions that address whether participants believe that identity factors other than their gender, such as their race and class, impacted their experience in the group and/or had bearing on their self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal empowerment.

Summary and Conclusion

This study set out to look at the potential impact that all-female comedy groups may have on feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal empowerment in the women who participate in such groups. While, the majority of subjects in this study self-reported that their experience in an all-female comedy group precipitated increased feelings in all three of these areas, there was a disparity in the findings between women who took part in an all-female comedy group in a school setting and those who took part in an all-female comedy group beyond the walls of academia, out in the real world. For the most part it was only the women who were in a comedy group in academia who reported increases in their self-esteem based on group dynamics, such as the supportive nature of the group, being friends with each other, and being able to identify with one another. The positive outcomes for the women in the academic-based groups appeared to

be a function of school being a space in which they were more able to experiment and have fun with the creation of comedy, whereas in the real world there was more pressure to be successful.

The outcomes for self-efficacy were more evenly distributed, with participants from both the academic-based groups and the real world groups reporting feelings of capability. Many participants related that aspects of being in an all-female comedy group not only increased their feelings of capability as a comic, but also their capabilities in areas that extend to their life outside of comedy such as interpersonal relationships, taking risks, dealing with the stresses of work and higher education, and coping with painful life experiences. This last area of self-efficacy, for coping with difficult experiences in life, is reflective of the ample literature on humor as a healthy defense mechanism. However, this study sheds light on the unique way that this healthy defense operates in the lives of comedic performers, as they are able to re-frame upsetting life experiences with humor not only intra-psychically but also by creating comedic material that is performed in front of hundreds of people.

At the outset of this study, I was aware of performance comedy as having the potential to be a forum for social justice theater or a way to "speak truth to power," however I was unsure how this would operate in participants' experiences. Most participants reported that at least a portion of the comedy they performed had social justice messages. The findings that were really surprising and exciting, however, were the ways in which some of the women in the college group felt that aspects of being in the group personally empowered them to speak up for social justice causes and lent them the tools to do so, not only in their comedic writing, but also in the world beyond comedy.

There has been a paucity of research into this specific area and this research project had its own limitations in terms of the sample, however this study serves to lay some groundwork for the potentiality of all-female comedy groups to impact the lives of women. It appears from this study that all-female comedy groups that take place in an academic setting, such as high school or college, have real potential to increase the feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal empowerment of girls and women. Of course, more research would need to be done looking at a variety of groups in different schools and how the endeavor impacts women at different ages. Perhaps, just as women's sports teams have been validated as increasing girls' confidence, doing comedy with peers has the potential to be beneficial to women and girls. Comedy, therefore, should be taken seriously.

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Appendix A
HSR Approval Letter



Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950
F (413) 585-7994

December 10, 2009

Elizabeth Ehrenberg

Dear Elizabeth,

We have received your revised materials. You have done an excellent job in reshaping and refocusing your study and made use of some excellent and very relevant materials in your literature review that create scaffolding for your work and make clear the connection to social work. I guess our suggestions had some meaning to you because you sure did pick them up and run with them. Your new questions make more possible and available some very rich material and the project is really very creative. The other revisions are also complete and we are happy to give final approval to your study.

One little thing, in your recruitment letter, don't end a phrase with the "at" how about "a number where I can reach you" or "at which I can reach you." It's important because it's going out to your potential participants.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your recruitment and with your project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ann Hartman".

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Fred Newdom, Research Advisor

Appendix B

Recruitment E-mail

Subject: Attention: Funny women. Be part of a research project on all-female comedy groups!

Body:

Hello

My name is Elizabeth Ehrenberg and I am a social work student at Smith College School for Social Work. For my master's thesis I will be researching whether participating in an all-female comedy group has the potential to impact women's feelings of empowerment, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

I am asking for your help to find people to participate in my study. Participants must be at least 18 years of age and meet one (or both) of the following criteria:

- a) be a current member of an all-female comedy troupe, and/or
- b) be a former member of an all-female comedy troupe, with participation in the troupe having occurred within the past 10 years

For the purpose of this study I am defining an "all-female comedy group" or troupe as a group of women who come together to practice any, or all (but not limited to) the following: stand-up comedy, improvisational comedy, and skit writing. In addition, members of this group perform in front of an audience.

Participation will involve being interviewed by me (either in person or via the phone) about their experience in a group. The interview should last about an hour.

If you, or anyone you know may be interested in participating, please call me at [researcher's phone number] or send an e-mail to [researcher's e-mail address]. In your phone message or e-mail include the following information: your name, a good phone number to reach you at, and a couple of times you can be reached in the next few days. If you would like to participate, please contact me by January 31st, 2010.

If you have any questions about the study or are not sure if you qualify for participation, please call me at [researcher's phone number] or e-mail me at [researcher's e-mail address].

If you know of anyone who may be interested in participating in this study, please forward this e-mail on to them.

Thanks in advance for helping me out with my research.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Ehrenberg

Appendix C

Recruitment Website Post

Subject: Attention: Funny women. Be part of a research project on all-female comedy groups!

Body:

Hello

My name is Elizabeth Ehrenberg and I am a social work student at Smith College School for Social Work. For my master's thesis I will be researching whether participating in an all-female comedy group has the potential to impact women's feelings of empowerment, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

I am looking for people to participate in my study. Participants must be at least 18 years of age and meet one (or both) of the following criteria:

- c) be a current member of an all-female comedy troupe, and/or
- d) be a former member of an all-female comedy troupe, with participation in the troupe having occurred within the past 10 years

For the purpose of this study I am defining an "all-female comedy group" or "troupe" as a group of women who come together to practice any, or all (but not limited to) the following: stand-up comedy, improvisational comedy, and skit writing. In addition, members of this group perform in front of an audience.

Participation will involve being interviewed by me (either in person or via the phone) about their experience in a group. The interview should last about an hour.

If you are interested in participating, please call me at [researcher's phone number] or send an e-mail to: [researcher's e-mail address]. In your phone message or e-mail include the following information: your name, a good phone number to reach you at, and a couple of times you can be reached in the next few days. If you would like to participate, please contact me January 31st, 2010.

If you have any questions about the study or are not sure if you qualify for participation, please call me at [researcher's phone number] or e-mail me at [researcher's e-mail address].

Thanks in advance for helping me out with my research.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Ehrenberg

Appendix D
Informed Consent

Dear Participant,

My name is Elizabeth Ehrenberg and I am a social work student at Smith College School for Social Work. For my master's thesis I will be researching whether participating in an all-female comedy group has the potential to impact women's feelings of empowerment, self-esteem and self-efficacy. The research data will be printed in my thesis, and in possible professional publications and public presentations.

By signing this letter you are giving consent to participate in my research study. To participate, you must be at least 18 years of age currently and meet one or both of the following criteria:

- a) be a current member of an all-female comedy group and/or
- b) be a former member of an all-female comedy group, with participation in a group having occurred within the past 10 years.

For the purpose of this study I am defining an all-female comedy group or troupe as a group of women who come together to practice any, or all (but not limited to) the following: stand-up comedy, improvisational comedy, and skit writing. In addition, group members perform these theatrical endeavors in front of an audience. I will interview you individually (either over the phone or in person) about your experiences in the group.

This interview should last about an hour. I will tape record and selectively transcribe the interview myself.

There should be minimal risk to you in participating in this research. In addition to taking time out of your day to be interviewed, you may have some discomfort in describing your personal experiences. The benefits of participating include taking part in an area of study that has not been researched before and furthering the development of knowledge on a subject that has potential implications for benefiting other women. You may also enjoy sharing your experiences and learn more about yourself through this reflection.

Your responses to interview questions will be kept confidential and only I will have access to the full tape-recorded interview and text of the selectively transcribed interview. In presenting my data and findings, I will use quotations from your interview only after your identity has been carefully disguised. My research advisor will also have access to the transcripts once I have disguised all identifying information. All data (notes, tapes, and transcripts) will be kept in a secure location for a period of three years as required by Federal guidelines and data stored electronically will be protected. If I need the data for longer than three years, they will continue to be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed when no longer needed.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any point prior to March 1st, 2010. Any materials pertaining to your participation will be destroyed should you decide to withdraw. In addition, you have the right to refuse to answer any interview questions you do not want to answer. Please feel free to contact me if you have any further questions about the study or wish to withdraw. My phone number is [researcher's phone number] and my e-mail address is [researcher's e-mail address]. If you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of the study, do not hesitate

to contact me or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at 413-585-7974.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research opportunity. I am very grateful for the opportunity to learn from you.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR AND/OR YOUR CHILD'S (OR WARD'S) PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR AND YOUR CHILD'S (OR WARD'S) RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE AND TO ALLOW YOUR CHILD (OR WARD) TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of Participant

Date _____

Signature of Researcher

Date _____

Elizabeth Ehrenberg
[researcher's phone number]
[researcher's e-mail address]

Please retain a copy of this consent form for your records

Appendix E

Interview Guide

Demographic Questions:

What is your name?

How old are you?

What is your racial/ethnic identity?

Interview Questions:

When were you involved in the all-female comedy group?

For how long were you a member?

Before joining the group, were you ever in any other organized comedy groups?

Since leaving the group, have you continued to do comedy in any organized way?

What specific comedy activities did/do you do in the all-female group? (Some examples include: stand-up, sketch, improv, performance.)

What made you decide to audition for/participate in the all-female comedy group?

What kinds of messages did you receive about your comedic ability from those around you growing up?

Did you consider yourself to be funny before you began in the all-female comedy group?

Did/does being a member of the group impact how funny you consider yourself to be?

Have you changed in any ways you are aware of since doing this group? If so, what are they?

Do you feel that being part of the comedy group has impacted your self-esteem? I am defining self-esteem as feelings of self-worth, confidence, pride, and competency.

If so can you give me some examples of how you feel the experience in the group impacted these self-esteem traits?

Which specific aspects of participation in the group do you believe contribute/ed most to changes in your self-esteem?

Some examples of group activities:

Writing stand-up material

Writing sketch material

Working with other group members
Performing in front of an audience

Can you describe how these activities impacted your self-esteem?

(For those who are no longer in a group):

Have these changes in your self-esteem that you believe to be a result of being in the group, changed since you left the group? If so, how?

If participant did not speak to this earlier:

Do you believe that the female only composition of the group is/was significant to you? If so, how was it significant?

Have you ever used skills you developed in the group to cope with difficult situations in your life outside of the group?

If yes: Can you describe a situation where you used a skill developed in the group to help you to cope?

Based on your experience in this particular all-female comedy group, do you believe that you have the talent to participate in other comedy groups in the future?

Do you think that being in the group has impacted your ability to handle difficult life situations that may arise in the future? If so, how?

Do you view comedy and/or humor as having the potential to impart messages about social or political injustice?

If so, is/was social justice an important part of the comedy you create/created in the group? If so, can you describe how your comedy was about social justice?

Do you feel that the experience of doing comedy with the group was personally empowering? If so, what made it empowering?