Blinded by the Lights. Improvisational Theater as a Method for Researching Regional Identities

Sabine Hostniker & Frank Meyer

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Abstract: We explore how improvisational (improv) theater can be used to illuminate the everyday performance of regional identity. This can help manage reactivity-related and counter-performative effects during qualitative research. By utilizing improv theater as a performative qualitative method, we highlight its analytical potential. We identify methodological gaps in existing qualitative research and human geography studies, and we propose a methodological framework for integrating improvisational theater into research practice. Participants of improv theater-workshops draw on personal and collective experiences rooted in their personal backgrounds to evoke emotions related to their home regions. By engaging in spontaneous and unscripted performances, individuals express nuanced perceptions of regional identity that may elude traditional qualitative approaches. Ultimately, we illuminate the complex interplay between individuals and the transformative potential of improvisational theater.

Table of Contents

"Darkness behind me. Blinded by the lights. My head and my mind are blank, only seconds before I enter the stage. Focused. I am ready. Ready to follow the moment physically, I let go, I trust. That is the only way I can let myself fall and express my inner self" (HOSTNIKER, Fieldnotes of the Improv Show *Nektar und Improsia*, Forum Stadtpark Graz, Austria, 2006).

1. Introduction: Setting the Scene

"This is the moment I thrive on, the thrill of the unknown, the magic of improv. The audience is a sea of faces, but I'm in my world, ready to dive into a realm of spontaneity and creativity. The unknown is my canvas, a blank slate waiting to be painted with the emotions of the moment. I don't know where this scene will take us, and that's the beauty of it. I'm a vessel for the characters and stories waiting to come to life. My everyday region also becomes a canvas, a backdrop against which our stories unfold. It provides the context that shapes my characters and my interactions. The characteristics and accents of a place infuse our scenes with life, grounding them in a tangible reality" (HOSTNIKER, Fieldnotes of the Improv Show *Nektar und Improsia*, Forum Stadtpark Graz, Austria, 2006).

The emotions detailed here exemplify what participants in improvisational (short: improv) theater experience, drawing inspiration from one of the authors, HOSTNIKER, who brings to the discussion her decades-long background as an improv theater trainer and ensemble member. Working within the format of theater sports inspired by JOHNSTONE (1999), HOSTNIKER observed improv theater actors' performances, showing their implicit knowledge in spontaneous settings. As a basic understanding, we see our point of departure for a new methodological journey in the foundational work of BOAL's "Theatre of the Oppressed" (1993 [1979]), where techniques for transforming traditional theater into a participatory experience invite the audience to engage and propose changes to the narrative, thus becoming active participants in the storytelling process. [1]

These experiences with, and reflections on, improv theater inform the central claims of this paper on the role of improv theater as a research methodology (KURT, 2010, 2011). In particular, we reflect on how improv theater participants tap into personal and collective experiences related to their regional backgrounds, along with accompanying emotional registers, during improvisational performances. [2]

Utilizing improv theater as a method in the context of research on regional identity emerged within HOSTNIKER's work on regional identification processes in Styria/Austria. This methodological innovation arose from a desire to better capture the dynamic and performative nature of identity construction in peripheralized socioeconomic contexts. It is rooted in the belief that improv theater, with its emphasis on spontaneous and unscripted performance, can potentially offer a unique platform for individuals to embody and express their perceptions of regional identity. It methodologically enables a deeper introspection into the subjective experiences and meanings of the participants

attached to their sense of place (TUAN, 2018 [1977]). Through spontaneous enactment of scenarios that are more or less related to their regional context, individuals can articulate and embody the subtle nuances that may be challenging to express through traditional talk-based qualitative methods. [3]

In this article, we explore the methodological potential of improv theater as a method of accessing a specific register of knowledge and actions. Far from presenting a comprehensive methodological framework ready for application, we instead outline methodological blind spots in recent studies within qualitative research, human geography, and the study of performativity and argue that improv theater can be systematically utilized as a novel qualitative method. Furthermore, we present a methodological outline of how to apply this method in research practice. Our goal is to shed light on the complex relationships between individuals and the potentially transformative power of the artistic experience of improv theater, and to take advantage of the spontaneous outcomes that emerge from the process of improvisation. With this exploration we aim to gain insights into human interaction, communication, and collaboration, as well as how improvisation fosters adaptability, empathy, and creative problem-solving skills. This enriches our comprehension of human behavior and social dynamics. [4]

In the sections that follow, we bring together two distinct bodies of literature to flesh out the methodological potentials of improv theater. First, we identify specific methodological challenges recently addressed in human geography regarding methodological and epistemological intricacies in researching regional identities and senses of belonging and identification (e.g., MIGGELBRINK & MEYER, 2015) (Section 2). Then, we elaborate on existing works on theater and improv theater from performing arts, how they are used to explore personal and social dynamics (e.g., HOSTNIKER, 2022; WRENTSCHUR, 2019) (Section 3), and highlight how improv may be used as a qualitative method (Section 4). Finally, we discuss key methodological questions for future research (Section 5). The insights employed in this study are not only derived from the conceptual framework, but also—and most importantly—from three different sources of data that the authors have gathered: First, the study incorporates HOSTNIKER's experiential knowledge in the domain of improvisation. The second source is MEYER's expertise gained through interviews and group discussions focusing on regional identity. Within this study, we present findings from an exploratory workshop that was conducted to investigate the use of improvisation as a methodological approach. Together, these diverse data sets contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon under investigation. [5]

2. On Methodological and Epistemological Intricacies in Qualitative Research and Human Geography

2.1 Conceptualizing feedback effects in qualitative research

As trained human geographers, we have encountered methodological challenges in our research on regional identities. These challenges arise from subjective and emotional connections individuals may feel towards territorial entities such as regions, often rooted in personal experiences and enacted in everyday life. For instance, we frequently observed that participants did not provide detailed accounts of their life experiences within their home regions (the area where they have spent a significant portion of their life and with which they have a strong emotional connection), but rather echoed prevalent regional stereotypes and narratives. It appears that public and popular discourses, whether pertaining to traditional attire, perceptions of rural backwardness or economic decline, had not only shaped the public image but had also significantly influenced individuals' subjective perceptions. Additionally, we encountered participants who actively sought to challenge our preconceptions, proactively attempting to persuade us that their home regions were faring better than what they anticipated us to expect. This led to encounters with individuals whose discussions on regional identity predominantly reiterated existing narratives or advocated for certain viewpoints. It illustrates the complexity of gathering insights and knowledge, sometimes riddled with challenges on how we conceptualize the issue of performativity in qualitative research and translate it methodologically. [6]

We use this example from human geography to pose more fundamental questions in reactive qualitative research related to our capabilities of managing the effects that our fieldwork may have, ultimately influencing our participants' immediate responses and behavior, or—from a structural vantage point—shaping how they approach encounters with researchers. This is not to say that qualitative research can, in principle, access pure pre-rationalized knowledge, or reach a point where reactive qualitative research can be disentangled from the researchers' presence. Instead, we aim to reflect on reactive effects during qualitative research, investigate our capabilities to manage them, and ponder new ways to bypass the effects they have on our findings. [7]

To systematize, we *first* highlight retroaction as a theoretical concept describing the societal phenomenon of subjects reacting to quantitative observations. *Then*, by delving into concrete empirical situations, we consider past scholarship on respondent biases (or: effects) within qualitative research such as reactivity as a prominent issue in fieldwork. *Finally*, we review research on performance and performativity and elaborate on recent contributions of counter-performative effects in qualitative research. [8]

Our *starting point* is the postulate that scholarly inquiry and findings have an impact on society in the sense that they may be observed or reviewed by individuals or groups, and may be utilized to further social, economic, or political actions. For instance, DESROSIÈRES (2005 [1993]) described the case of

national statistics which led him to consider statistics as tools to simplify complex realities that enable governmental control. In emphasizing and omitting certain aspects, statistics exert influence beyond what is commonly considered their allegedly neutral scope. DESROSIÈRES (2015) termed this kind of feedback *retroaction*, meaning the retrospective effects of statistical concepts and indicators on the behavior of those having been statistically measured (SCHWEGLER, 2024, p.36). [9]

Others have highlighted how qualitative concepts trigger reactions from those being described. For instance, HACKING (1986, 1995) elaborated on how scientific categorizations of humans may trigger reactions from those classified and even exert impacts on how scientific observations would have to react in response (see MARCHIONNI, ZAHLE & GODMAN, 2024 for an extended discussion). These—what HACKING (1995) called looping effects—provide the foundation for exploring how such feedback phenomena may impact specific qualitative empirical situations in that respondents and participants reacting to researchers in qualitative data collection settings such as interviews exhibit *reactivity*. Reactivity, in this regard, refers to:

> "a number of facets related to the way in which a study is undertaken, and the reactions of the participants involved [...]. That is, reactivity involves changes in persons' responses that result from being cognizant of the fact that one is participating in a research investigation" (ONWUEGBUZIE & LEECH, 2007, p.236). [10]

Reactivity may lead to certain biases, e.g., related to the interviewer's behavior or the nature of responses (MEIER-KRUKER & RAUH, 2005, p.10; OLTMANN, 2016; ONWUEGBUZIE & LEECH, 2007; ZAHLE, 2023). These biases may be perceived as undesirable, yet they are—at the same time—inevitable "interaction effects" (OLTMANN, 2016, §17) or "reactive effects" (ZAHLE, 2023, p.7) of methods that involve researchers and participants interacting openly, or that involve the participants noticing the researchers (even without knowing their intent or role; p.8). Consequently, they are usually considered to require reflection, control, and transparent descriptions regarding their occurrence and the extent to which they influence the research outcome (p.9)—a perspective aiming to achieve "reactivity transparency" (p.8; sometimes also termed "reflexivity"). [11]

Finally, accepting reactivity as an aspect to be managed in qualitative research leads us to consider the concept of performativity. Whereas this concept has been introduced, e.g., by AUSTIN (1962), and underwent further development by BUTLER (1990), we refer to performativity in the sense that scientific models and theories "do not represent an independent social world, but rather contribute to its creation" (MARCHIONNI et al., 2024, p.17), leading to the widespread notion that any "theory to determine the extent to which its empirical performance is due to its causal contribution to bringing about the event rather than the event itself" (p.18). This interestingly led MONAHAN and FISHER (2010, p.362) to further reflections on "staged performances" of observants during ethnographic

encounters: Discarding observations of social behavior that have been altered due to the presence of the researchers would pose new problems as

> "[i]t presumes that 'natives' are fixed in their social settings and that their beliefs are held constant, unless—and until—they are compelled to perform for the visiting researcher. This underplays and therefore undervalues the constant reconstruction of cultural meanings and group identities that occurs through engagement with a steady stream of outsiders and insiders, policies and practices, technologies and symbols, and so on" (ibid.). [12]

MONAHAN and FISHER concluded that "[m]eaning is not out there to be found by the researcher; it is continuously made and remade through social practice and the give-and-take of social interaction, including interaction with the researcher" (p.363; see also HALL, 1996, p.14). Whilst this itself is a profound postulate with many methodological implications, we connect this thought to its societal consequences in the long run. People, according to DIAZ-BONE (2011, p.306), may respond to researchers using the sociological categories and explanations that have become science-induced societal cognitive structures—a phenomenon that SCHWEGLER (2021) termed "theoretically-informed actors" who possess "the same or similar cultural- or socio-scientific theory-resources as the researcher(s)" (p.1)[1]. This may even lead to situations of *counter-performativity*, meaning that respondents may "deliberately relate to a theoretical concept, then later shape a social process in a way that specifically does not conform with the conceptually driven expectations" (SCHWEGLER, 2024, p.35). SCHWEGLER, in his endeavor to methodologically further reactive qualitative research based on the example of actors engaged in the field of art and cultural production, interpreted aspects such as counter-performativity or retroaction as "defense mechanisms" by those researched to theoretically informed descriptions of them by researchers (ibid.). [13]

In summary, feedback effects in scientific research may occur from a broader societal vantage point (e.g., in the form of retroaction, or looping effects) and in empirical situations (e.g., in the form of interaction effects, or counter-performativity). Whereas SCHWEGLER's empirical results did not comprehensively confirm the empirical presence of deliberate defense mechanisms in the sense of counter-performativity in his fieldwork (pp.472), his conceptualizations conform with empirical observations in human geography, as will be elaborated in the following section. [14]

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1 All translations from non-English texts are ours.

2.2 The relevance of feedback effects on human geographic research on regional identities

While SCHWEGLER could not empirically validate counter-performative aspects in respondents' replies and behavior, MEYER and MIGGELBRINK (2018) have extensively documented encounters with a gatekeeper-interviewee that can be considered an example of reactivity or counter-performativity: "Already during the initial phone call, it became clear. Besides introducing myself [MEYER] and scheduling the appointment, he immediately held a several-minute monologue on how wonderful the Altenburger Land [his home region] is" (p.18). [15]

This respondent had done a background check on MEYER, who conducted the interview, and had found a past scientific presentation, where MEYER detailed the scientific concept of looping effects (see Section 2.1) about how regional actors may negatively respond to being labeled, for example, a region that suffered from decline:

> "My original intention for the meeting was general outreach and an exemplary delve into the topics debated locally, it seemed that my conversation partner had made it his mission to paint as positive an image of the region as possible to me, the scientist" (ibid). [16]

The interview was not a sequence of questions and answers but had become a performance by the interviewee to convince the interviewer. MEYER and MIGGELBRINK (2018) continued to detail how this preformed impression shaped the course of the interview as the respondent referred to MEYER's point of view "without having heard it and to 'their' point of view without clarifying whom he speaks for" (p.18). [17]

The respondent even questioned the researchers' terminology providing an important insight into the societal embeddedness of researching regions suffering from economic and population decline. This led the authors to conclude:

> "The obvious anticipation of my basic assumptions, my prior knowledge, and a supposedly inadequate view of his home region led to a strongly one-sided and difficult-to-moderate conversation. My impression was that—in times of crisis—a scientific judgment can carry particular weight, which is why it is important for those affected to ensure that perspectives on the region are influenced positively" (p.19). [18]

The conversation did not unfold in the typical manner of a researcher posing inquiries to elicit subjective reflections from respondents; it became a strategic performance by the respondent, based on previously acquired information, and with the intention to influence the researcher's perspective. MEYER and MIGGELBRINK aimed to contribute to the human geographic debate on peripheralization, meaning that certain, often rural regions—peripheries—have increasing difficulties ensuring adequate quality of life and opportunities for their population; this involves structural deficits as well as negative labels of such regions (BEETZ, 2008, p.11). [19]

Regarding such labels, BEETZ explicitly recognized feedback effects—precisely references to socio-structural developments such as economic or population decline using negative or pejorative terms (e.g., shrinkage, deprivation, left-behind). This emphasis on the discursive effects of negative labels corresponds further with contributions, for example, from GERTNER (2005) on the investment effects that negative images of places have, and the strategies of local actors to positively alter them, from MIGGELBRINK (2006) on the negative effects of statistical rankings of regions according to their socio-economic potentials, to SLATER and ANDERSON (2011) on the negative emotional and political implications of territorial stigmatizations. Furthermore, MEYER and MIGGELBRINK (2013) applied the concept of HACKING's (1995) looping effects on the influences that regionalized socio-economic descriptions may have on some regions' inhabitants. In addition, MEYER and MIGGELBRINK (2013) elaborated on traces of media depictions of regions in the subject's perceptions whilst LANG (2015) worked on political programs seeking to shape or even counter socio-structural developments. Whereas much of this strand of geographic inquiry has been inspired by the socio-economic decline of many rural regions in Eastern Germany, its scope has been further expanded to other countries (e.g., DANDO, 2009 for the USA; PLÜSCHKE-ALTOF, 2019 for Estonia). [20]

Identifying with one's home region plays an important role in this research. We conceptualize "region" as a spatial entity characterized by a subjective and potentially fluid delineation, to which individuals develop a personalized sense of affinity and connection. According to PAASI, the identification of individuals with their spatial environment or region is a crucial dimension of the concept of "regional identity" (1986, pp.131f.). This aligns with considering the extent to which individuals engage and identify with their region—and to which elements and characteristics they each form individual connections and attributions. In this regard, the geographic concept of sense of place, as termed by TUAN (2018 [1977]), is used to denote the affective and cognitive attachments an individual establishes with a particular spatial unit (e.g., home, region, birthplace, etc.) based on subjective encounters and interactions. [21]

However, these affective and cognitive attachments to places or regions may influence our perspective as our respondents may feel the need to create ideal narratives about their regions or to counter what they anticipate being negative presumptions by the researchers. Hence, during researching the subjective perceptions of socio-spatial phenomena (e.g., the population decline in a region) by utilizing qualitative methods, our respondents may:

> "... become suspicious of why researchers have chosen to dissect this specific region when searching for a 'struggling' area. We witness over and over again that researchers are dragged into the situation and become part of the dynamics that were originally to be researched" (MIGGELBRINK & MEYER, 2015, p.73). [22]

In conclusion, accessing lived experiences and identities presents a significant challenge due to their inherently subjective nature. However, qualitative research

should not be measured against hypothetical access to a seemingly natural, genuine, pure, or authentic reality as this perspective would not conform with a constructivist notion that research itself co-constructs its observations (SCHWEGLER, 2024). Instead, we may consider alternative approaches to investigate the subjective realm in order to manage effects in qualitative research. [23]

2.3 Pinpointing the methodological issue: How to access affect and spontaneity in qualitative research

Researchers on regional identities have experienced the methodological problem of reactivity and, as seen in the example of MEYER and MIGGELBRINK (2018), even counter-performativity. In this strand of research, this has led to problematizations of how to dissect lived regional identities (tackling the issue of reactivity) and distinguish it from mere replications of regionalized stereotypes. Furthermore, pro-active performances countering the researchers' attempts to study especially peripheralized regions has triggered questions of avoiding such cases of retroaction or counter-performances, if possible. Finally, we must ask to what extent issues of retroaction, of reactivity, and of counter-performativity may even be tackled. [24]

Based on this problematization and inspired by the concepts of retroaction and reactivity/counter-performativity (Section 2.1), the scientific goalpost is twofold, yet interconnected. *On an epistemological level*, the complex positionality of research within society, meaning the "infinite regress" (MIGGELBRINK & MEYER, 2015, p.72) of observing researchers being observed by society needs to be thoroughly illuminated as this feedback loop shapes our findings and should inform our methodology (SCHWEGLER, 2024; ZAHLE, 2023). *On a methodological level*, we may need to find ways to accept our respondents' reactivity in the shape of performances and counter-performances as part of (qualitative) research and assess new approaches regarding their implications for illuminating topics, which—from the respondents' side—may trigger such reactions, for instance, in research on regional identities. [25]

Consequently, we postulate that

1. symptoms of retroaction cannot be solved on a single-case study basis yet would need to trigger changes in how research findings are communicated, and how research questions can take into account this kind of feedback loop. We consider retroaction as a methodological problem to be inevitable, and to an extent even desirable regarding the proliferation of knowledge in society;
2. effects of counter-performativity as possible consequences of retroaction; and
3. reactivity as a methodological feature of, and an influential aspect in, certain methods (e.g., interviews, group discussions) may not be avoidable yet manageable by deliberately implementing more affect-based interactions at the center of our empirical work. [26]

In other words: If our research findings are shaped through our interactions with our respondents, we may legitimately consider research as a co-constructive process, or—which is what we will discuss below—consider methodological innovations that help us harness our respondents' spontaneous performances. As discussed by HOSTNIKER (2022), performativity should be considered a key theoretical concept in working with regional identity, elucidating how identity is not merely an inherent attribute but is actively shaped, constructed, and performed within social contexts. Within the field of human geography, theories of performativity promise to provide a powerful lens through which to examine the dynamic interplay between space, identities, and social practices. This unveils the intricate layers that constitute the mosaic of regional identities, offering an understanding of how individuals negotiate their affiliations with specific spaces, countering oversimplified treatments of regions as homogeneous entities, and thus neglecting the diversity of identities (PAASI, 2003). Instead, it is central to analytically distinguish between the identity (or image) of a region and a regional identification of individuals living in a region (PAASI, 1991). [27]

By using this approach, we presuppose that identities are not a fixed, essential quality but rather a continuous process that unfolds through performative acts within specific social contexts (BUTLER, 1990). Correspondingly, in the realm of regional identification, theories of performance and performativity become particularly salient as they illuminate how individuals actively construct and enact their sense of place (TUAN, 2018 [1977]) through embodied practices and spatial interactions. Bringing together these considerations, we therefore want to understand people's sense of their region and their place using improv theater as a methodological tool. [28]

3. Improv: Insights Into the Interplay of Social Actions, Dynamics, and Structures Through Theatrical Play

To begin this section, we want to take a look at social science research and the concept of "performative social research" (ROBERTS, 2008). As discussed by WRENTSCHUR (2019, p.86), performative researchers may integrate art, particularly theater, into the social sciences. Building further upon insights from human geography research (BOECKLER, DIRKSMEIER & ERMANN, 2024, p.131), we also invoke the concept of "performative geographies," aiming to methodologically enhance the study of social phenomena. If society is enacted and performed through everyday practices, then it becomes imperative for projects within an everyday-oriented human geography perspective to methodically approach these physical performances, actively engage in them, and strive to closely approximate the lived experiences of these performances. According to HOSTNIKER (2022), an interesting approach to performativity can be included in a theatrical concept of performance as described in WIRTH (2002). Within this perspective, the creation or "performance of social reality through enactment" (STRÜVER & WUCHERPFENNIG, 2015, p.108) of social reality has been highlighted. [29]

3.1 Glimpses into improv's development

To introduce our approach to spontaneous performances of participants in qualitative research, we elaborate on the progressive exploration of improvisation in theater- and performance studies and then argue for its potential as a tool for methodological inquiry. Improvisation is a fundamental aspect of human social interactions and a cornerstone of creative expression. The practice of using interactive or participatory theater has been known worldwide as storytelling and truth-telling for many years, starting with FREIRE's (2018 [1970]) educational philosophies, continuing through BOAL's (1993 [1979]) transformative theater techniques and practical application later shown e.g., by JOFFRE-EICHHORN (2011, 2013). [30]

Furthermore, it is also a central quality in the fields of music (e.g., BAILEY, 1993; COKER, 1964; LEWIS & PIEKUT, 2016; NACHMANOVICH, 1991 [1990]) and has a rich and historically significant tradition in theater and performance studies (e.g., BOAL, 1993 [1979]; FROST & YARROW, 2007; JOHNSTONE, 1999; SALINSKY & FRANCES-WHITE, 2017; SPOLIN, 1963). HODGSON and RICHARDS (1974) identified a dual objective within theatrical improv. Using improv as a theatrical practice, the innate elements of everyday improvisation may be harnessed—the spontaneous response to unforeseen circumstances as they unfold. Then, it encompasses the creative resourcefulness required to effectively navigate these situations (p.2). This framing of improvisational techniques can deepen our understanding of what utility improv theater may have for qualitative research as participants navigate challenges presented by unexpected scenarios. [31]

The roots of improv theater can be found in the work of SPOLIN (1963) who developed improvisational games as a means of training actors. However, it was JOHNSTONE (1979) who formalized and popularized the principles of improvisational theater in the late 1970s. He provided a comprehensive framework for understanding and practicing improvisation. Embracing both verbal and non-verbal elements, improv theater was considered to revolve around the spontaneous creation of dialogue, character development, and narrative progression on stage. In its most elemental form, an improvised scene emerges from a free-flowing creative process without preconceived scripts or predetermined plans (for a comprehensive exploration of the history and various styles of improvised theater, see LEEP, 2015 [2008]; SALINSKY & FRANCES-WHITE, 2017). [32]

We consider improv theater as a "theatre form that is process-oriented" (LÖSEL, 2013, p.157). Individual experiences are combined during the creation of performances. It is marked by an open structure in the sense of spontaneity and the absence of predetermined scripts, therefore offering a broad scope for personal experimentation with various roles, where no prerequisites are expected of the actors. JOHNSTONE (1999, 2018a [1979], 2018b [1983]) stated that one of the main aims of improv theater, particularly in *theater sports*, is to develop individuals' skills such as creativity and spontaneity. JOHNSTONE believed that

these qualities are lost in educational processes (2018a [1979], p.114), yet may be regained through deliberate practice through improv theater games (pp.141-143). This inspired the practical application of improv theater as a method as described in Section 4. [33]

3.2 Unscripted insights: Methodological utilizations of improv theater

Applied improvisation is a widely recognized practice beyond the realm of theater. The versatility of improv theater as a methodological research tool extends across various disciplines and in recent years, improvisation techniques have gained significant attention. In particular, improv theater has been explored as an effective pedagogical tool in education, built on the term *Dramapädagogik* [drama in education] (SCHEWE, 1993, p.8). This refers to the use of dramatic or theatrical means for educational purposes (BERK & TRIEBER, 2009; MENDEZ-MARTINEZ & FERNANDEZ-RIO, 2021a). We consider this approach particularly interesting in a potential application of improv theater within school settings. Furthermore, KURT (2011) explored the use of improvisation as a method for empirical social research in youth contexts. He outlined a profile of improvised social research similar to the practical research approach we want to develop. [34]

In the area of economics and management, improvisation techniques have been used for human resource development fostering creative thinking and spontaneity (KEEFE, 2020 [2003]; LEWIS & LOVATT, 2013) or as a team development tool (KIRSTEN & DU PREEZ, 2010). Its use as a tool for business development, team building, or even personal development exemplifies an area that we see as a side benefit of our work for improv theater participants. Furthermore, improv theater has been widely used in medicine, psychology, and care. NEEL, MAURY, HESKETT, IGLEWICZ and LANDER (2021) investigated its usefulness in medical education by identifying the value that "improv theater training can provide in areas such as active listening, empathy, teamwork, adaptability, and resiliency" (p.1). MENDEZ-MARTINEZ and FERNANDEZ-RIO (2021b) showed that theatrical improv can have positive effects related to spontaneity and imagination among adolescents with Asperger syndrome. FABIAN, TARASOVA, BERGMANN and SAPPOK (2022) explored the impact of improv theater on disability and mental health, reporting positive effects on social skills and self-esteem when used in therapy. KEMP et al. (2022) worked on care issues and dementia and argued that improv theater training for care partners would improve caregiving competence. [35]

In addition, improv theater techniques have been used in various psychological contexts, such as promoting psychological well-being by increasing personal awareness, interpersonal attentiveness, and trust within groups (BERMANT, 2013). Being involved in improv theater promotes changes in participants' focus, values, and perspectives, which may be beneficial to mental health (REID-WISDOM & PERERA-DELCOURT, 2020). The impact of improv theater on creativity, acceptance, and psychological well-being was highlighted by SCHWENKE, DSHEMUCHADSE, RASEHORN, KLARHÖLTER and SCHERBAUM (2021). Positive correlations have been found between

improvisation experiences and phenomena such as coping with uncertainty (FELSMAN, GUNAWARDENA & SEIFERT, 2020) and fostering creativity (WEST, HOFF & CARLSSON, 2017). More generally, in the interdisciplinary field of social science, social work, and theater, WRENTSCHUR (2019, 2021) as well as REICH (2013) used "forum theater" (an interactive form of performance) as a tool for participatory research. Of particular interest for the methodological development presented in this paper is the application of a theater form as a method and the discussion of the requirements involved (WRENTSCHUR, 2019, 2021) to be further discussed in Section 3.4. [36]

Common for all these applications is the emphasis on the process of improvisation rather than the theatrical product. Improv theater may help to flesh out performative expressions of personal affects in a focused environment. As such, it can support self-expression as a means of personal development and help access spontaneously articulated knowledge and actions. We see that divergent thinking is widely promoted through that method, as well as spontaneity, teamwork skills, and adaptability. Improv theater as a method is used to strengthen awareness and interpersonal sensitivity and to promote changes in focus, values, and perspectives among individual participants. [37]

Our primary considerations in this regard are related to the importance of affect, as discussed for instance in KUHN (2023), and furthermore to the concept of spontaneity. When presenting information in an improvisational format, we argue that how content is presented is at least as important as the content itself. Researchers and improvisers need to be aware of the potential that lies beyond the verbal realm: by eliciting embodied knowledge and generating new forms of thought and affective actions through the process of playing improv. These (inter)actions arise from affects that are influenced not only by the emotions cultivated on stage but also relate to the everyday emotional worlds that participants bring to the improv theater stage. [38]

This discussion is consistent with the concept of atmosphere (LEWIN, LIPPITT & WHITE, 1939; see also LEZAUN & CALVILLO, 2013), where affective behavior and embodied knowledge emerge during facilitated processes. In the context of theater, LEWIN's (1947) theory of the social field is crucial, emphasizing the environment's influence on behavior, which is also demonstrated by the creation of social climates in studies conducted by LEWIN et al. (1939). LEWIN's (1947) theory is further expanded through BOAL's interactive theater methodology in which he used "aesthetic space" (1994, p.19) to explore social connections and dynamics, paralleling LEWIN's aim to uncover underlying group forces (REICH, 2013). [39]

It is evident that the facilitator's role is pivotal in influencing the group atmosphere to facilitate the gathering of information, and the development of improvisational understanding. In ANDERSON's work on affective atmospheres (2009), this was complemented by illustrating how these atmospheres are actively produced and experienced through interactions, aligning with KOLEHMAINEN and MÄKINEN's

(2021) view of atmosphere as a co-produced, dynamic process involving both facilitators and participants. [40]

In improvisation, understanding atmospheres helps researchers and facilitators navigate and influence the affective environment, impacting the flow and outcome of the process. Facilitators attuned to subtle atmospheric shifts support spontaneity and affective interactions essential for an effective improv. Facilitation and participation are interdependent, co-producing and engaging affectively in a continuous loop. By recognizing these dynamics, facilitators and researchers can refine their approach, fostering more nuanced and insightful improvisational experiences. [41]

3.3 Key characteristics of improv theater

At its core, improvisation is a collaborative ensemble art, actors working together to co-construct a compelling and harmonious story, but its central principles remain challenging to pinpoint. Drawing from SPOLIN's ideas (1963) and JOHNSTONE's work (1999) and having been elaborated by many theater trainers and actors (e.g., FROST & YARROW, 2007; HALPERN, DEL & JOHNSON, 1994; SALINSKY & FRANCES-WHITE, 2017), we emphasize three central qualities that provide a basic framework for understanding improv theater and for dealing with the challenges we identified in Section 2:

1. *Acceptance:* Improvisers are encouraged to never withhold information and to avoid judging other people's ideas, instead allowing their creativity to flow freely. Central to this ethos is the "Yes, and ..." principle, as nicely illustrated by JOHNSTONE (1979, p.92), who captured the essence of this principle, highlighting its transformative potential, because those "who say 'Yes' are rewarded by the adventures they have and those who say 'No' are rewarded by the safety they attain." This principle is one of the most fundamental aspects of improv theater popularized by SPOLIN (1963), encouraging actors to accept and build upon the ideas of others, rather than rejecting or blocking them. Accepting offers made during on-stage games underscores the understanding that each improviser shares the responsibility to build on and extend offers in some way, thereby fostering collaborative creativity. "Yes" means agreeing with your scene partner's reality. "And" means adding new information to the previous. This is very important at the beginning of each scene, as it allows the actors to discover the basic reality in which the characters exist (BESSER, ROBERTS & WALSH, 2013, p.12).

2. *Spontaneity and creativity:* Spontaneity and creativity in improv theater are central themes explored extensively in the work of JOHNSTONE (2018a [1979], pp.113ff.) and are intertwined with the concept of acceptance. According to SPOLIN (1963, p.112), the practice of "letting go," or releasing control and expectation, may be used to enhance the spontaneity of performances. By surrendering to uncertainty, actors can take risks, resulting in unexpected moments on stage. Actors access their creativity and respond naturally to the evolving dynamics of the scene by remaining present in the

moment. In this process, actors are required to be continuously aware of their surroundings and to stay alert.

3. *Trust and support:* A sense of mutual respect enhances the quality of the performance (FROST & YARROW, 2007, p.4) and is enabled by cultivating trust and support among each other. Trust includes belief in oneself, belief in the creative process, and a willingness to release control (HALPERN et al., 1994). The principle of "making your fellow players look good" (p.22) shows the embodiment of support in improv theater. According to this principle, improvisational actors can rely on their teammates to step in and accept and build on their contributions through physical actions or verbal suggestions (FROST & YARROW, 2007) when they encounter challenges, such as difficulty moving a scene forward. [42]

These characteristics highlight how improv's core concerns are spontaneous dynamics in the moment such as status, blocking, utilizing space, and overcoming reluctance or insecurities. Practitioners must have actionable insights to improve their improvisational skills and create collaborative onstage environments. In improv theater, a unique artistic dynamic arises, requiring actors to spontaneously create and continue narratives and characters. To effectively navigate the creative landscape inherent in improvisational performance, individuals must understand the foundational principles that underpin successful improvisation. Thus, our investigation aims to clarify and underscore the significance of three further aspects of improvisational performance: status dynamics, spatial use, and strategies for managing psychological barriers:

4. In theater, the *concept of status* is related to the hierarchical arrangement of social standing among characters portrayed on stage. Status dynamics encapsulate the intricate interplay of social hierarchy and power dynamics among these characters. A deep understanding of status dynamics is the basis for improvisers to create more dynamic and engaging scenes by playing with power dynamics and character relationships. SPOLIN (1963) emphasized how subtle shifts in behavior, speech patterns, and physical comportment can fundamentally transform scene dynamics, providing a framework for character development and narrative progression.

5. *Effective use of physical space* is crucial in improv theater, as it influences scene realism and dynamic storytelling. Consistent with SALINSKY and FRANCES-WHITE's (2017) findings, improvisers learn to intentionally navigate the stage, using gestures and spatial awareness to create convincing environments and facilitate meaningful interactions. This strategic movement within the performance allows for enhancing the audience's immersion and contributes to the narrative coherence of improvised enactments.

6. Improvisers may experience moments of hesitation or self-doubt during a performance, which can impede improvisational performance, undermining confidence and spontaneity. BESSER et al. (2013) and JOHNSTONE (1999) proposed techniques to promote acceptance and collaboration, offering practical strategies to *overcome reluctance and insecurities on stage*. Central

to this approach is the concept of "Yes, and ..." (Section 3.1), which is used to encourage improvisers to embrace and build upon each other's ideas, fostering a supportive creative environment. [43]

The qualities described above provide a structured yet flexible approach to the creative process, applicable to both actors and practitioners. Improvisation allows for engagement with participants and exploration of complex social dynamics. Facilitating dialogue about sensitive topics is central to its application; in improvisational settings, participants may feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics due to the supportive environment. Improvisation also stimulates responses from participants due to its spontaneity. Additionally, the principles of improvisation are applicable in daily life, extending beyond the stage. [44]

4. On Stage: Insights Into Practical Method Application

In this section, we briefly explore the potential application of improv theater as a methodology in anticipation of its integration into our research on regional identity. Whereas this section will remain a rather brief overview, exemplary application of improv may be found in KURT (2010, pp.221f.) as well as SCHINKO-FISCHLI (2018). Our approach is compatible with the work done by REICH (2013) on forum theater to explore and engage with confessionalism in post-war Lebanon. REICH emphasized the importance of aesthetic space in creating an environment conducive to reflection and transformation. By engaging participants from different confessional backgrounds, she was able to reveal the subtle social dynamics and tensions inherent in their everyday interactions, situating her work within the broader field of human geography (ibid.). This reinforces the importance of considering both individual and collective dimensions in our analysis and highlights the potential of theatrical methods to promote deeper understanding and social change, and thus can serve to inspire implementation when applied. Furthermore, after having outlined the epistemological and methodological foundations of improv as a qualitative research method in this paper, we will detail practical applications in subsequent papers. [45]

Research questions that would necessitate improv as an analytical method could

- involve premises about the performative and embodied foundations of the social;
- thematically focus on the realm of the social and how everyday practices contribute to its constitution, and/or on questions of identity at the intersection of the collective (e.g., groups), the individual and the contextual (e.g., regions);
- methodologically place individuals at the heart of applications through which the constitution of the social is to be reconstructed. [46]

As improv theater is a highly social phenomenon, it is important to analyze the outcomes not only at the individual level but also in a group setting. To do this,

we are developing an experimental methodology which we tested in an early stage during a scientific workshop for method development during the 8th Annual Meeting of the German Working Group for "Qualitative Methods in Geography and Spatial Social- and Cultural Sciences" in March 2024. Through the preliminary testing of this methodology, we were able to gain initial insights and data to explore and identify information about how participants actively shape their regional identity and how it is enacted in social contexts. The methodological experiment focused on collecting observational data, individual reflections, as well as visual and written reflections from both participants and observers. [47]

Further tests will take place during 2024 by HOSTNIKER. We also plan to establish a detailed empirical study design with transparent guidelines. Our goal is to integrate the methodology of improv theater into our research efforts by creating structured improvisational activities tailored to our research objectives and engaging participants in the collaborative exploration of issues related to regional identity. While we are still in the process of developing our experimental methodology, we would like to provide a glimpse of our vision for practical implementation, inspired by WRENTSCHUR's participatory research framework (2019, 2021), KURT's work on improvisation in youth contexts (2010) and JOHNSTONE's theater sports (2018a [1979])—but mainly by HOSTNIKER's experience and what we learned from the preliminary method test. [48]

According to WRENTSCHUR (2021, pp.642f.), in working with improv theater as a method we consider the body a crucial source of knowledge and understanding. The research process thus incorporates physical perceptions, attitudes, and evaluations related to regional identities. This may involve stimulating body memory as well as exploring nonverbal and symbolic expressions and dimensions of regional identity. Consequently, it is our goal for participants to express, condense, distort, examine, and creatively process moments and experiences from their everyday lives. WRENTSCHUR (2019, pp.90f.) suggested that participants often identify elements of their own life experiences in theatrical images, scenes, and stories from other participants. A certain thematic interest from the participants is advantageous but not required, the same applies to experience with improv. [49]

Practical considerations for implementing improv theater in the research process entail identifying suitable participants for performances and providing clear guidance and support for both researchers and participants throughout the improvisational journey. Improv theater is usually practiced in groups, requiring full participation from all involved. Furthermore, a certain interest in creative thinking and acting outside-the-box are useful, but not necessarily individual requirements for participation. Thus, we suggest that researchers collaborate with local schools or existing theater groups in specific pilot or research regions to facilitate improvised performances centered around regional identity themes. It would be advantageous to select a venue that is both familiar and perceived as secure by the participants. However, it is essential to consider the potential influence of any given location (e.g., schools or community centers) on improv participants based on their personal connections to such locations. Furthermore,

the selected venue must align with the research question and be convenient for the participants (e.g., regarding accessibility). [50]

The research cycle starts with an introductory workshop lasting one or two days (four to six hours per workshop). In that initial session, the research team introduces the workshop series explaining its goals, procedures, and the basics and significance of improv theater. Workshops are led by a team of two to three researchers and one improv theater trainer, or a person experienced with facilitating in theater settings and they are offered regularly (weekly) over the span of at least six weeks. They are characterized by alternating stages, following a structured format that includes introductory segments, warm-up exercises, improvisational performances, and a reflective discussion. Depending on the existing experience of the group, the facilitators provide training in improvisation techniques in reference to and adapted from JOHNSTONE (e.g., 2018b [1983]), so that through this training, trust and cooperation are strengthened, allowing participants to approach problem areas with an open mind. [51]

To facilitate focused instruction and engagement, participants are then divided into groups of improvisers and observers/audience members according to experience and willingness to play. To address aspects like self-doubt or insecurity, lack of interest, or other individual factors, the facilitator/researcher team has to be aware and mindful of the individual participants. Subsequent workshops include warm-up exercises to prepare participants for improvisational tasks and observational roles. The workshop series is planned on preparing an internal improv theater performance, not open to the public, allowing participants to explore spatial identities through performance while the observers/audience study and log aspects of the group's performance which culminates in the performance of short scenes and improv theater formats such as "marathon" or "freeze tag."[2] These approaches may be used as a form of impulse for participants regarding regional identity in the form of predetermined or co-created keywords, emotions, or genres. [52]

At the end of the process, participants critically evaluate the methodology and its applications in a collective reflection session. Throughout the series, participants engage in progressively more challenging exercises and thematic explorations. We suggest that, in addition to video documentation, a small group of observing participants take written notes of the emerging scenes. Subsequently, the group will collectively discuss the footage in a plenary session, guided by the research team. Additional interviews with the participants may be conducted to complement the research framework. At the same time, the symbolically condensed images and their collective analysis serve as a prompt/impetus for exchange and discussion among the participants about the situations and issues presented and experienced. [53]

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2   The "marathon" format involves continuous, extended scenes with evolving narratives, while the "freeze tag" format allows performers to pause or "freeze" a scene and replace a performer to initiate a new direction. These formats can be combined.

5. Improv Theater's Methodological Potentials for Qualitative Research

5.1 Potential 1: Triangulating existing findings

We suggest triangulation of various sources and methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of, for example, regional identity production, aiming to illuminate aspects of identity production that may be hidden behind our respondents' reactions to qualitative methods such as interviews. This is not to say that we consider this an example of uncovering something natural (and thus disregarding the performative dimension of qualitative research itself) but using an alternative tool to manage aspects like counter-performativity. [54]

As previously discussed by HOSTNIKER (2022) and elaborated in Section 2, the region is characterized by a continuous interplay of interactions, presenting itself as an ongoing performance, involving embodied knowledge, spatial understandings, everyday interactions, and experiences. From the perspective of theories of performativity, identification becomes integral to the regional lifeworld and contributes to the everyday production of space through the social realm; it involves not only narratives but also embodiment; and it is manifested through experiences and movements that resemble affective actions (THRIFT, 1996, p.10). These aspects, while important from a conceptual perspective, may, however, not be reflected by our respondents. Instead, as we illustrated in Section 2, they may be buried under—among many—reactive or counter-performative articulations. [55]

Whereas existing research remains in the realm of either the subjects' rationalizations during interviews or based on document or media analyses related to the proclamation or advertisement of a region, we propose to leverage the parallels between theater and daily life using improv. Improv theater could help us put our research subjects into the situation to embody and re-experience everyday situations spontaneously, as during improvisation, actions that arise unconsciously and unexpectedly constitute a "play with the mechanisms of constructing social reality" (LÖSEL, 2013, p.331). In line with this, we advocate for the translation of spontaneously created narrative content from everyday life into the artistic realm of improv theater. This can be achieved through creative engagement with clichés and stereotypes and through the parody of norms (KURT, 2010, p.222). [56]

Furthermore, regional identity formation is considered to be the effect of collective processes (see Section 2). As improv theater is fundamentally collaborative, requiring participants to co-create narratives, environments, and interactions, we consider this dynamic to mirror the way in which individuals negotiate and construct space in everyday life and highlights the relational aspects of spatial experience. The use of improvisation can potentially access the unconscious in the performances of improv theater. The goal is to bring unconscious (collective) knowledge about regional identities into the consciousness of the participants and

onto the stage, making it visible to researchers. Improvisation has transformative potential that can be utilized for productive scientific work. [57]

5.2 Potential 2: Accessing implicit knowledge and understandings through improv theater

We recognize the potential of improv theater as a tool for revealing implicit understandings that may elude direct expression. Traditional qualitative research methods often struggle to capture the depth of individuals' experiences not only due to the limitations inherent in elucidating implicit knowledge but also because of the inherent subject matter of regional identity research. Regional identities are not solely defined by explicit narratives or overt expressions but are shaped by a rich tapestry of implicit understandings, unspoken norms, and subtle cues that shape individuals' perceptions and interactions within their respective regions or everyday surroundings. By delving into the realm of implicit knowledge through improv theater, we aim to access these nuanced aspects. [58]

Drawing on KURT's insights (2010, pp.221ff.), we recognize the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in addressing individuals' resistance to objectification during interviews. It is important to acknowledge that unspoken communication can also be conveyed through gestures or mime in a theatrical context. We aim to access implicit understandings and unspoken norms that shape individuals' perceptions and interactions. While explicit narratives clearly can provide valuable content information, we argue that it is within the implicit realm where the nuances of lived realities are brought to light. [59]

Improv theater emphasizes spontaneity, embodiment, and collaborative storytelling, offering a dynamic platform for participants to express and embody their implicit understandings. Through improvised scenarios and interactions, participants can gain insights that transcend conscious reflection and delve into the depths of experiential knowledge. We envision improv theater as a powerful tool for accessing implicit knowledge, drawing on LÖSEL's (2013) exploration of improvisation as a means of engaging with unconscious processes, offering a unique approach to exploring the complexities of human cognition and behavior. Through improvised scenarios and interactions, researchers can help the participants tap into their experiential knowledge and reveal insights that go beyond conscious reflection. By guiding participants through improvisational exercises, a space is created where implicit understandings can surface, offering valuable insights into the lived realities of regional identity. [60]

5.3 Potential 3: Mitigating the restricting effects of retroaction and counter-performativity

Triangulation may be used to tackle issues arising from the fact that by engaging with our research subjects about regions, regionalization or regionalism, we may introduce certain preconceptions or may influence our respondents. Instead, we as researchers or moderators of such settings must ensure methodologically that we do not unintentionally impose our categories and questions on the participants; we must rather aim at helping our respondents express themselves. [61]

We argue that improv theater—characterized by spontaneity, collaboration, and physical embodiment—is a useful methodological approach in social science to harness our respondents' spontaneity, for example in formats like "freeze tag" or "marathon," where everything on stage is completely improvised, with no scripts unless suggested by the audience or trainers. Drawing parallels between theater and everyday life, we recognize affective scenes, the emergence of play routines, and the enactment of everyday situations, including impulsive scenes and intense emotions in performance. Improvisation happens spontaneously and situationally, drawing inspiration from the unconscious, chance, and the unexpected (LÖSEL, 2013). [62]

Research on regional identities involves tackling processes of reification and reproduction of popular stereotypes about the focused regions (e.g., MEYER & MIGGELBRINK, 2013), while possibly disguising more complex, or conflicting, domestic regional identities. Improv theater can help access more such articulations from participating subjects and thus may help to evaluate and enrich existing research on regional identities. [63]

5.4 Potential 4: Radically utilizing improv's artistic capabilities

From a less instrumental perspective, improv theater must not necessarily be reduced to a mere tool to supplement other methods but can be considered an artistic method that may create/incite new perspectives. As ARCHIBALD (2022, p.193) summarized in the context of health research, art is taken into consideration more and more "but increasingly as a tool to encourage other outcomes such as awareness or knowledge of an under-recognized topic or finding as is often the case with arts-based knowledge translation in the health and social sciences." Similarly for population geography, BEURSKENS, MEYER and HARVEY (2022) highlighted the potential of art-based research (ABR) to "give impulses and to integrate a variety of actors seems promising [...] to bridge the gap between societal groups, generations, and cultures [...]—which makes art especially valuable for exploring new forms of communicating research." These examples are in line with CHILTON and LEAVY's (2020, pp.606-609) assessment of the strengths of ABR, locating it in relation to trans-disciplinarity, the potential evocation of "metacognitive" experiences, social justice, and dissemination practices. This has been further complemented by SCHNEIDER and ROHMANN (2021) who positively evaluated the potential of art-based methods in educational settings. [64]

ABR must not necessarily be considered a sub-division of qualitative research. LEAVY (2020, p.12) argued that ABR should be considered an alternative paradigm since ABR approaches

> "have caused concerns and inspired debates. As our methods history shows, such debates are critical to scientific progress, as they create a space for a professional public renegotiation of disciplinary practices and standards. [...] I therefore suggest that the emergence of ABR advances critical conversations about the nature of social-scientific practice and expands the borders of our methods arsenal." [65]

In ABR, the creation of the art product equals the process of knowledge, using the body as the site of experience creation (SCHREIER, 2017, §24). Improvisation ties into this rationale for its potential as a valuable tool to reveal complex everyday relationships between individuals and society or as an empowering experience allowing them to take risks in other areas of their lives. [66]

As our research is thematically focused on the exploration of identity and self-expression, we believe that by embodying different roles and experiences, individuals can gain insight into what they believe, value, and feel, which can lead to a greater understanding of both themselves and others. Improv theater can be a stage on which solutions to social problems can be sought, and alternative patterns of interpretation and action can be tried out. It recreates and feeds on the everyday world but remains aesthetically distant from it by creating free spaces for artistic interaction with it. In the as-if of improv theater, things can be played out without sanctions that would be unthinkable in everyday life (KURT, 2010, p.223). [67]

Yet far from this instrumental perspective, we want to bring in LEAVY's (2020, p.31) account of the inherent value residing in ABR, considering that ABR is "publicly accessible, can be collaborative (involving nonacademic stakeholders), and draws on the emotional, evocative, and resistive to jar people into seeing, thinking, and/or feeling differently," highlighting its potential for radical new insights into established topics. [68]

6. Methodologically Blinded by the Lights? Critically Examining Improv Theater as a Potential Analytical Method

During improv theater, participants should be invited to explore and negotiate space spontaneously through their bodies, posing a unique form of embodied knowledge. Thus, we hope to shed light on spatial dynamics and how individuals interact with and within their environment, whilst being less constrained by formalized interview settings. Our approach is usable for collecting detailed data on cognitive processes that may be observed during an improv theater performance. [69]

More specific methodological applications of our findings will be published in the future after a systematic analysis, but here we will—in contrast to the potentials highlighted before—infer several (of many) key questions that will have to

accompany the development of improv theater as an analytical method and similar methods in general:

- From a *conceptual perspective*, carefully weighing our impulses for the participants and our interpretations of their performances will be essential so as not to lose the creative and insightful potential of their spontaneity. At the same time, we will need to introduce participants to our research goal, inform them about the method, and even accept occasions in which they may resist a potentially "un-scientific" method. Balancing our scientific goals with improv's radical potential and translating it into something that enables our participants to express themselves will be a continuous and reflexive task.

- Similar to *quality criteria* for quantitative or qualitative methods, such criteria will have to be established for improv theater—ultimately guiding its implementation and its documentation (FLICK, 2020). In addition to classic quantitative criteria such as reliability, validity, or objectivity, FLICK (pp.252-255) argued for method-appropriate criteria; for instance, alternative means of validation (e.g., communicative validation; MEYER, 2018), methodological triangulation or transparent documentation. Improv theater as a potential non-standardized yet scientific method will have to satisfy the need for criteria to assess its procedures and quality.

- Similar to *methodological biases* observed during other reactive methods (e.g., qualitative interviews, face-to-face surveys; see MEIER-KRUKER & RAUH, 2005, p.10), improv theater participants may be influenced by their improv theater trainer—the person who facilitates the room and the participants, who warms up the group or introduces new keywords during "freeze tag." Whereas we have set out to establish improv theater as one way to manage issues of reactivity or counter-performativity, eliminating their possibility is elusive. Whilst improv theater may help put our participants into situations shaped by spontaneity, the trainer's actions, impulses, and interventions must satisfy similar quality standards as the moderator's actions have to during a group discussion, whilst still maintaining an encouraging and enabling approach. Consequently, improv theater as an analytical method will need to be assessed according to new biases.

- *Documentation* during improv theater may take shape in photos, videos, transcripts, and participants' vignettes. Furthermore, we may conduct additional interviews and group discussions with our participants, ultimately resembling the very methodological heterogeneity faced, for example, in participatory or mixed-method research designs. For each of these methods, we may use different *analytical and interpretative* approaches. Whereas a single standardized approach to documentation may not handle this heterogeneity, improv theater as an analytical method will need to be accompanied by a transparent mode of documentation and interpretation to allow for its scientific assessment.

- From an *analytical point of view*, we need to explore ways to harness improv's radical openness regarding the relation between our scientific premises and the participants' performances and their documentation. Additionally, new modes of presenting analytical results may need to be considered as textual

descriptions of embodied practices and knowledge may impede a comprehensive analysis and communication. Impulses for this may emerge from other approaches in the realm of ABR, but also from empirical research on embodiment—beyond the disciplinary boundaries of, for instance, human geography.

- *Ethical issues* arise as a consequence of our attempt to access the spontaneous expressions of our respondents as this goal may be considered to conflict with paradigms such as formal informed consent. Whereas our respondents may consent to such research (and document this by signing a form), our goal is not to access what they consider consent-able beforehand, but access what they could not have anticipated to express beforehand. This poses new challenges as conflicts and irritations may arise during improv. Consequently, safeguarding confidentiality for our respondents would be advised. On the other hand, formalized data protection rights of EU citizens as a consequence of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) involve our respondents' unlimited right to pull their data from our research. Consequently, this may apply in situations where respondents may not feel confident about what has come up during improv. This may result in limited usability of the generated data. [70]

In conclusion, for future methodological applications, a detailed empirical study design with transparent guidelines will need to be established. Yet despite this goal and all of improv's potentials in light of human geography's blind spots, open questions remain: How do we unite improv's radical openness to match a scientific need for terminological clarity, methodological transparency, and for rule-governed analysis? How do we document the process and the findings properly, and how could we devise a systematic analysis? What brought us to improv was the premise that the social practices and identities are continuously negotiated in embodied ways, and the realization that our respondents' reactivity may be considered an obstacle to and feature of qualitative inquiry. Answering these questions may help us harness improv theater as an analytical method, and potentially access something that intrinsically resists—even further: is deliberately implemented to resist—restriction and rationalization. As HOSTNIKER described:

> "At the end of exploring, I am taken back to the simplicity of that one moment before the curtain falls and the stage comes to life. The conclusion of a journey that has led from darkness to light, from the emptiness of the mind to a wealth of insight. My words echo as I reflect on my experiences. The essence of expression is to be found in those moments when the spotlight is blinding and the mind is at rest. Where I express a willingness to follow the momentum, surrender to the flow of exchange, and trust" (HOSTNIKER, Fieldnotes of the Improv Show *Nektar und Improsia*, Forum Stadtpark Graz, Austria, 2006). [71]

Like an improviser on stage, surrendering to the rhythm of improvisation, we embark on a journey of exploration, ready to let go. Yet as thrilling as this endeavor may seem, an unanswered question lurks in the shadows ahead: How

will the radical nature of improv transform scientific concepts of reactivity, of regional identity, or of everyday practices? An uncharted land. A genuinely untapped realm of knowledge. Are there cliffs threatening the premises of our voyages? We are explorers aiming to bridge gaps, blinded by the lights, and excitedly freed from our ability to see what lies ahead. Raise the curtain! [72]

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Authors

Sabine HOSTNIKER is a PhD researcher at the Institute of Geography and Regional Research at the University of Graz since 2020. She currently works on the research project "Forschungsvernetzung zur Regionalentwicklung in der Steiermark (FoReSt)" at the interface between science and practice, focusing on spatio-regional identification processes through the lens of performativity in her PhD-project.

Contact:

Sabine Hostniker

Department of Geography and Regional Science
University of Graz
Heinrichstraße 36, 8010 Graz, Austria

Tel.: +43 (0)316 380-8697

E-Mail: sabine.hostniker@uni-graz.at
URL: https://geographie.uni-graz.at/

Frank MEYER is a postdoctoral researcher at the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography in Leipzig since 2024. From 2010 to 2019, he was a research associate at the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography in Leipzig, and from 2018 to 2024, he was a research associate at the Technical University of Dresden. After completing his diploma in geography at the University of Leipzig in 2010, he earned his doctorate in 2019 with a dissertation on church restructuring in rural regions. His research areas are the geography of religion (as one of the speakers of the Working Group on Religious Geography), globalization research, rural geographies, political geography, migration research, and the theoretical and methodological foundations of geographical research. He also leads a DFG network of geographers for the visualization of qualitative research (together with Kristine BEURSKENS).

Contact:

Frank Meyer

Leibniz-Institute für Länderkunde
Schongauerstr. 9, 04328 Leipzig, Germany

Tel.: +49 (0)341 600 55-148

E-Mail: f_meyer@leibniz-ifl.de
URL: https://frankmeyer.eu/

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