

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THEATER AND SELF: PUTTING SELF-CONCEPT  
INTO PLAY

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The current study investigated the nature of the experience of participation in theater as it related to the self-concept of college students. The context for the study was the theater department of a comprehensive university emphasizing undergraduate education. The university offers a major and a minor in theater. The study used a qualitative, interpretive, case-study methodology, with analysis influenced by traditions of ethnography and phenomenology. Four participants were interviewed in order to ascertain their perspectives regarding the aspects of theater engagement that were perceived as meaningful. The resulting data were supplemented by multiple observations of the participants embedded in theater activities in order to garner relevant information regarding contextual features of significance. Data analysis commenced via analytic induction and the use of a constant-comparative approach. Accordingly, key ideas emerged that were then compared in a search for patterns of similarities and differences. Primary themes that emerged as significant across cases included the nature of motivation influencing theater engagement, the meaning ascribed to the social context, and the perspectives of participants regarding the influence of theater on self-concept. In addition, significant idiosyncratic sub-themes were identified respective to individual

cases. Thus, it emerged that one participant experienced exclusion based on racial inequity within the department. Another participant expounded on the meaning attributed to costume and makeup in the context of performance in theater. Findings support the notion that aspects of theater engagement support identity formation and self-development. Specifically, it was noted that the social context of the theater department was viewed as cohesive and supportive, thereby facilitating feelings of belongingness and connectedness. Additionally, it was revealed that elements of play production and the academic coursework required in the major necessitate a level of self-reflection that can lead to insight and enhanced self-concept. Finally, existing research regarding the positive influence of theater on self-concept was supported.

THEATER AND SELF: PUTTING SELF-CONCEPT INTO PLAY

by

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Louise Elaine Isenock. Her passion for education inspired my pursuit of a doctorate. Although she is not here in body to witness the completion of my degree, she lives on in spirit as the inspiration and the foundation of my own dedication to the project. Mom was not able to finish her own doctorate in the time that she was given here, and I know that she is proud of me. In my own small way, I hope to carry on her legacy of empowering others through a caring approach to teaching.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the current study that investigated the experience of college students in theater with respect to the development of self-concept. The chapter includes an introduction, an overview of the related research, a statement of the problem, a purpose statement, statement of the research questions, definition of relevant terms, a description of the potential contributions, and discussion of the limitations of the study.

This study investigated the development of self-concept of college students relative to participation in theater. There is a significant body of research directed toward an understanding of the development of self-concept. Formal conceptualizations of the process of this development can be traced back to William James (1890) and his conception of the *I* self and the *Me* self. Since that time, the study of self concept has commenced within the context of social influences and the progressive understanding of human nature. This background of this study traces some of the major developments and identifies the major contributions to the field of study.

Additionally, the field of arts education has engaged in theoretical discourse regarding the potential benefits of the various arts, including drama and theater, for children and adolescents. More recently, researchers have begun to establish empirical support for these convictions via structured research efforts. This emerging body of literature provides some evidence of positive benefits of the arts on academic outcomes, with a limited degree of focus on other benefits. This paper will summarize this body of literature, highlighting the contributions of most significance to the current study.

Although there is little formal research to support a positive impact of the arts on self-concept, the claims made by theorists, arts educators and various arts related institutions seem to provide a reasonable basis for this assumption. Indeed, the continuing provision of arts education, including drama and theater, has rested on the tacit assumption of a positive outcome of engagement in these activities. However, recent decades of financial stress and the necessity for provision of documented outcomes for learning objectives has caused some to question the utility of the arts. As a result, some school districts have decreased the resource allocation for arts programs and de-emphasized their importance in academic preparation.

### The Development of Self-Concept

As noted, the history of self-concept studies can be traced to William James (1890). His articulation of the *I* and the *Me* as distinct and fundamental aspects of the self provided the foundation for future investigations of self-concept. Of particular relevance for the current study is his notion of the emergence of multiple social selves as a reflection of the social contributions to one's view of self. Symbolic interactionists, such as Cooley (1902), Baldwin (1906), and Mead (1934) expanded on the nature of the social contribution of self via linguistic exchanges. According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, the opinions of others are integrated into one's sense of self, rendering it a social construction. Cooley's (1902) *looking-glass-self* has endured in the literature as a metaphor for this process. Notably, Mead (1934) perpetuated the Jamesian idea of multiplicity of the self with his assertion that "we divide ourselves up in all sorts of different selves with reference to our acquaintances" (p. 142).

The advent of the 20<sup>th</sup> century heralded the emergence of the cognitive paradigm as the dominant explanation for numerous aspects of human behavior. Accordingly, Piagetian, followed by Neo-Piagetian influences on the study of self emphasized development consistent with the acquisition of various cognitive skills and strategies. These theoretical postulates formed the framework for the conceptualization of self-concept development as a cognitive process as described by self-theorists such as Harter (1999).

Current notions of self-concept development are also influenced by contemporary sociocultural themes such as those identified by Gergen (1991). Gergen asserts that the impact of cultural influences is magnified as a consequence of the technological advances of the times. He points out that devices such as cell phones, fax machines, and beepers facilitate a level of social connectedness that can be perceived as complex and demanding. One outgrowth of this environment, according to Gergen, is the necessity for the creation of multiple social selves to respond to varying demands. The culmination of this complex array of social demands and associated responses is viewed by Gergen as the notion of the *saturated self*. Ultimately, he postulates a risk to the sense of the *true self* due to the necessity to craft responses to meet the social demands of the culture.

Current theories of self-concept development reveal the influence of these historical perspectives. Prevailing notions of self-concept incorporate the construct of multiplicity, with the impact of social influences acknowledged as fundamental. Harter (1999) notes that current approaches tend to integrate notions of individual and societal contributions to self, while emphasizing the ability of the self to adjust to social demands across situations.

The current study is predicated on the assumption of a multiplicity of self as a foundational principle guiding the investigation of the nature of this experience as interpreted by college students. The theater setting was chosen to intentionally invoke the multiplicity construct, allowing it to manifest outwardly in the mechanisms of character assumption, along with the respective accoutrements. Accordingly, the context of acting in a play provides the opportunity for enactment of a potent metaphor facilitating examination these constructs. The influence of social and cultural elements were thus explored and explicated, while the participants engaged in introspection regarding their own experience of multiplicity, both on stage and in real life settings.

#### Models of Self-Concept Structure

A number of models have been proposed to explicate the self-concept construct (Byrne, 1996). Models enjoying current widespread appeal include the hierarchical model as articulated by Marsh and Shavelson (1985) and the correlated factors model as exemplified by Harter (1990). The prevalent hierarchical model depicts self-concept as a multidimensional and hierarchical structure, with global self-concept occupying the apex. Global self-concept is subdivided into academic and non-academic self-concepts, with each construct further subdivided toward the base, which is formed of more specific components, related to particular behaviors.

Extensive research has supported the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model regarding its depiction of self-concept as multifaceted and hierarchical (Byrne, 1996). However, there is evidence that the integrity of hierarchical structure declines in adolescence, and it is postulated that the model is not as useful in adolescence and beyond (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985).

Harter (1990) supports the notion of domain-specific facets of self-concept as separate and distinct from a global construct of self-worth, while agreeing that there are correlations among the various facets. However, in contrast to the hierarchical structure proposed by Marsh and Shavelson (1985), she articulates support for the correlated factor model as a framework to support various potential combinations of domain-specific self-evaluations. While acknowledging the existence of a global self-concept construct, she resists application of a single linear hierarchical model.

### Benefits of Engagement in Theater

Another body of research that was surveyed as preparation for the current study is that regarding the benefits of theater participation. A survey of arts education literature revealed a wealth of theoretical discourse regarding the positive benefits of the arts, and of drama or theater in particular. Authors such as Dorothy Heathcote (1998) and Brian Way (1973) have long espoused the positive outcomes of drama engagement. Among Heathcote's assertions is that drama functions as a tool for personal development and social adjustment. While she does not address self-concept directly, she implicates drama as a means of learning and broadening experience that "draws directly on the individual's live and subjective experiences as its basic material" (p. 55).

Way (1973) engages in more specific discussion of the application of learning through drama to the development of the self. His writing particularly concerned the impact of drama on adolescents. Way notes that adolescents are typically engaged in an *inner questioning* regarding the essential nature of the self. Way alludes to concepts articulated throughout the self-concept literature, beginning with William James (1890), when he asserts that young people are often faced with social pressure to be someone

different from their *true selves*. In direct, albeit unwitting, support of the current proposed study, Way claims that drama experiences afford an opportunity to *try out* some of the *if* conditions in a process of self-discovery.

Support for the positive benefits of engagement in theater can be found as well in documents of various educational and arts organizations. The National Standards for Arts Education (1994) makes wide claims for the importance of the arts to society, noting the positive impact on the ability to understand human experience and to express oneself. According to this organization, the arts are nothing short of essential for life, as echoed in their statement that “a society and people (without the arts) could not long survive” (p. 5). A 1987 task force of the American Council for the Arts and Music Educators National Conference produced a set of recommendations for the improvement of arts education. The resulting statement included the recommendation for the provision of arts education on a daily basis to all students K – 12.

Perhaps even more compelling are the proclamations regarding the importance of the arts from organizations and individuals outside of the arena of arts education. The 1983 report by the College Board entitled *Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able To Do*, described the arts as an essential means of enriching life and gaining understanding through self-expression and a broadening of human experience. William J. Bennett, former Secretary of Education, made a statement regarding the importance of the arts in a report entitled *First Lessons: A Report on Elementary School Education in America*. According to Bennett, “Music, dance, painting, and theater are keys that unlock profound human understanding and accomplishment” (1986, p. 34).

These comments regarding the importance of the arts in school curricula are presented in a context where arts education is facing de-emphasis in academic settings. Various organizations, including the National Commission on Music Education (1991), the New York State Department of Education (1995), and the National Center for Education Statistics (1995) report declining resources for and enrollment in drama and other arts education.

Researchers have responded to declining enrollment and decreased emphasis on the arts by generating a number of empirical studies supporting the value of arts education in terms of academic achievement and other outcomes such as personal and social development (Danielson, 1992; De la Cruz, 1995; Kassab, 1984). In support of academic aims, some research has indicated that students who study the arts achieve higher scores on the verbal and the math subscales of the SAT tests (Murfee, 1995). Luftig (1993) has examined this issue as well, reporting findings that support the impact of arts experiences on various dimensions including academic achievement, locus of control, creative thinking, and self-esteem.

One of the larger studies of the impact of the arts was conducted using NELS data for a longitudinal survey of 25,000 middle school students (Fiske, 1999). Results of the data analysis indicated strong relationships between arts involvement and dimensions such as achievement, persistence, and attitudes.

Drama participation has often been investigated under the auspices of arts involvement, but there are a few studies that have examined drama and theater participation specifically. Although research has indicated a positive effect of drama on adolescents as a therapy modality (Frehner, 1996), it has been investigated in the

academic context as well. Creative drama has been shown by Dont (1992) to positively impact reading scores in a group of low-ability fifth grade students, and by Freeman (2001) to positively affect self-concept and other dimensions of third and fourth grade children. Additionally, dramatic writing has demonstrated a benefit for student writing skills (Moore & Caldwell, 1993).

Of particular relevance to the current study is an investigation conducted by Yassa (1999). His research utilized a similar methodology to the current proposed study and the subject of inquiry was the perceptions of high school students regarding the impact of drama involvement on social interactions. Yassa (1999) concludes his study with the assertion of a clear connection between learning in a drama classroom and personality development, providing evidence in support of the postulates under girding the current proposed study.

#### Statement of the Problem

While a substantial body of theoretical discourse exists that espouses the value of drama and other arts experiences for the developing individual, there is little empirical support for these claims. The research that has been thus far conducted is far short of that which is needed to provide a compelling case for the benefits of arts engagement. Faced with declining resources for education, school systems may sacrifice arts programs in favor of other programs that have demonstrated positive academic outcomes. Research demonstrating positive outcomes of drama and other arts experiences is necessary to preserve the arts as an academic agenda.

Additionally, the impact of the arts, including drama and theater, is theorized to benefit individuals much more broadly than that captured by measures of academic

outcomes. While it has been stated that the arts contribute to human experience and are, in essence, necessary for living (National Standards for Art Education, 1994), there is little empirical support for these broad claims. There is a need for systematic investigation of the nature of the benefits of arts engagement to individuals, inclusive of, but not restricted to, academic domains.

Research regarding the outcomes of arts education on self-concept is particularly lacking, and studies investigating the impact of drama on self-concept are quite rare. Additionally, research about the development of self-concept has most frequently addressed individuals up to the age of adolescence, with little attention directed to emerging adulthood. Popular models of a multifaceted, hierarchical self-concept structure (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985) have indicated that the self-concept of adolescents appears to increase in complexity while the linear hierarchical model proves an imperfect tool for conceptualizing it. Authors who are most actively engaged in validating these models call for additional research in the adolescent and older age group (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985).

Furthermore, late adolescence and early adulthood have been implicated as quite significant for the psychosocial task of identity formation (Marcia, 1966). Marcia (2002) had stated that identity re-formulation continues throughout the life cycle, necessitating an exploration of the mechanisms constituting identity formulation throughout young adulthood and beyond. While much of the original research regarding identity formation focused on the period of adolescence, subsequent investigations are expanding the research throughout the life cycle (Marcia, 2002).

The theoretical and empirical body of literature regarding identity formulation has strong implications for the study of self-concept. Adamson, Hartman and Lyxell (1999),

comment on the theoretical intersect between the constructs of identity and self-concept. They point out that a central notion of Erikson's view of identity is the "intersection of the individual and society" (p. 21). Therefore, the researchers claim that identity is inclusive of the self-concept of the individual in the context of the social environment. self-concept, defined in terms of one's mental representations of self, is thus viewed as simply one aspect of the dual construct of identity. As such, self-concept represents an essential aspect of identity, while not inclusive of the entire construct (Adamson, Hartman, Lyxell, 1999).

### Purpose

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the impact of participation in theater on the developing self-concept of college students. Accordingly, the focus of inquiry was the perceptions of the participants regarding the influence of theater engagement on self-concept. Research questions were developed to guide the inquiry process. The guiding research question for the study is "How do late adolescents/young adults understand the experience of their participation in theater relative to their developing self-concept?" Subsidiary questions include:

1. What is the understanding of college students regarding the nature of self-concept?
2. What is the role of theater engagement in the self-concept of college students?

## Definition of Terms

*Self-concept* is a construct that has enjoyed a diverse range of definitions across the literature (Byrnes, 1996). For this study, I have chosen to use a definition of self-concept as posited by several prominent researchers in the field. Harter's (1990) definition of self-concept as a series of self-representations encompassing the characteristics which one chooses to describe oneself provides an initial definition of the term for this study. In order to provide a more expanded definition of the construct, the notions of Damon and Hart (1988) are incorporated into the current definition as well. These researchers use the term self-understanding, which they define as a conceptual system comprised of one's thoughts and attitudes about oneself. These authors note that they embrace the notion of the Jamesian (1890) *Me* self as the objective sense of self and the object under study, while adopting elements of the Jamesian (1890) *I* self as first proposed by Mead (1934). In essence, they propose that the *I* self can be more accurately understood via the subjective awareness of personal "agency, continuity, distinctness, and reflection" (p. 10).

Therefore, the current study defines self-concept as a conceptual system comprised of one's thoughts and attitudes about oneself, inclusive of the characteristics with which one defines oneself, and including those elements of the *I* self which can be perceived and understood by the *Me* self.

*Self-esteem* is generally used to refer to "global self-evaluations" (Harter, 1999, p. 5). Accordingly, the current study will use the term self-esteem to reflect the valuing of one's overall worth as a person.

*Identity* refers to the construct originated by Erikson (1963) to describe the subjective sense of the individual regarding his or her continuity over time and across situations. Erikson (1968) further articulated a developmental process of identity formation whereby the individual interacts with the social environment in the construction of an “identity configuration.” His notions were further expanded by Marcia and colleagues through the development of Ego Identity Status theory (Marcia, 1966, 1980; Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer & Orlofsky, 1993). In the current study, use of the term *identity* refers to the construct as defined by Erikson and further explicated via Marcia and colleagues (Marcia, 1966, 1980; Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer & Orlofsky, 1993).

*Emerging adult/young adult* refers to an individual who is between the ages of 18 – 25. This age group is targeted in the current study as representing a developmental period that persists beyond the stage traditionally defined as adolescence. Some researchers have stated that this stage represents a crucial developmental period for identity formulation, warranting additional research (Marcia, 2002).

*Theater involvement*, for the purposes of the current study, refers to any activities in which a subject engages that are relevant to her role as a theater student. Play rehearsals and performances were included, as well as additional activities that support the play production.

*Theme* is used in this study to indicate primary ideas that emerged consistently across cases. An example of a theme that emerged in the current study is the notion of *theater as community*.

*Sub-type*, in this study, refers to various iterations of the primary themes that emerged. An example of a sub-type is the identification of *character development* as a significant subsidiary aspect of the broader theme of *theater as community*.

*Sub-theme* refers to the ideas that emerged as significant in relation to one case only. To illustrate, the significance of costumes arose as a sub-theme for one participant.

*Key idea* refers to the ideas in this study that were identified as significant in the line-by-line analysis process, such as the construct *family*

### Limitations

Although it is hoped that the current study offers a significant contribution to the literature regarding self-concept development in the context of theater engagement, there are limitations to the study as well. Qualitative methods, by definition, are limited to the in-depth examination of a small number of cases. Results of the study cannot be generalized to a broader context in the manner traditionally ascribed to quantitative methods. Therefore, results must be taken as indicative of the perspectives of *these* students in *this* context, not necessarily reflective of theater students elsewhere.

An area of limitations in the current study concerns the relationship between the participants and myself. Although I assured the participants that all information would be treated confidentially, it was apparent to them through encounters with me in other theater contexts that I was familiar with faculty in the theater department. In fact, participants observing my interactions with theater faculty members during rehearsals and other contexts would likely conclude that we were *friends*, due to the nature of our interactions. Therefore, participants might have been reticent to share certain perspectives

with me out of concern that the information would somehow be divulged to the theater faculty.

Additionally, my role as a faculty member at the university was apparent to the participants, as well. Therefore, unspoken cultural norms regarding dialogue with professors may have proved more influential on the dynamic of our relationship than my status as a researcher. Accordingly, participants may have felt that there was certain information about behaviors or attitudes that would be inappropriate to share with me.

A related issue concerns the fact that only one participant revealed the phenomenon of drug use and abuse among theater students. If that participant was accurate in his characterization that such drug use was “common knowledge,” the failure of other participants to mention it to me throughout the course of interviewing suggests that a climate that would encourage the sharing of such sensitive material did not exist in three of the four interviews.

Another issue related to the dynamic between myself and the participants concerns the differences in racial background between myself and one minority participant, Larry. It is notable that his comments evidenced a significant level of mistrust for the majority faculty in the theater department. It is likely that the racial difference between us, exacerbated by my role as a faculty member, influenced the type of sharing with which he felt comfortable. Additionally, the differences in our racial backgrounds likely precluded a full understanding on my part of the experiences that he related. However, it should be noted that Larry did share strong feelings with me regarding the mistrust that he experienced with the theater faculty, indicating a level of trust with me.

In fact, I can counter the noted limitations with the observation that, at no time was I aware of participants' hesitancy to divulge information to me, or a lack of comfort in the interview format. Instead, I found that all participants were forthcoming in answering the questions, often adding much more detail than I requested. Our interviews were generally lively and animated, with an easy exchange of dialogue between us. Additionally, it should be noted that Ian and Kate both shared highly personal background information, indicative of a high level of trust. Each of the participants thanked me and stated that they "enjoyed" the interview process. Several participants noted that it was "fun" to talk about theater and to talk about themselves with someone who was so interested in listening.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

This review is provided as a context for understanding the constructs and theoretical principles foundational to the current proposed study. As preparation for the study, literature was surveyed in the fields of adolescence and early adulthood, self-concept, and arts education. This chapter provides an overview of these areas of study as well as a survey of the major theoretical approaches and respective research. Therefore, the literature review can be conceptualized as three sections, corresponding to the constructs mentioned.

In the first section, literature defining the developmental periods of adolescence and early adulthood is reviewed. Issues pertinent to these developmental periods are introduced. Additionally, the task of identity development is discussed as related to context of the proposed study.

In the second section, a description of the historical development of the self-concept construct is provided, reviewing the various models of conceptualization of self-concept from William James (1890) to the present. Constructs relevant to self-concept research are defined and the history of measurement of self-concept is presented. Harter's (1990) model of self-representations is selected as the primary model guiding the proposed study; therefore her model of the development of self-representations is reviewed. Models that have been inspired by Harter and have direct influence on the current study are reviewed as well, with respect to the literature on real versus ideal selves (Higgins, 1987) and the recent emergence of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) as a construct with relevance to the proposed research. Additionally, the section of

this chapter concerning self-concept research will introduce issues relevant to assessment of self-concept.

In the third section, theoretical premises regarding the benefits of the arts are reviewed. Significant theoretical contributions and perspectives are reviewed. Research regarding the benefits of arts education is reviewed, with an emphasis on research in the dramatic arts.

### Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

G. Stanley Hall is generally credited with establishing the study of adolescence early in the 20th century (Arnett, 2000). The parameters that he proposed regarding the scope of adolescence ranged from age 14-24 years of age. Since that time, studies of the period of adolescence have typically focused on development ending at age 18 (Arnett, 2000). The onset of the developmental period is generally designated as beginning with the onset of puberty (Papalia, 2001). Puberty is biologically defined, and is marked by the physiological changes associated with hormonal changes.

The developmental consequences resulting from the hormonal changes include physical and sexual maturation, as well as related fluctuations in mood and emotionality (Papalia, 2001). However, the mechanisms leading to the emotional manifestations characteristic of adolescents are not clearly delineated (Papalia, 2001). Discrepancies in the hypotheses regarding the nature of these observed mood fluctuations range from emphasis on the role of hormones to a consideration of the environmental (Buchanan, Eccles, & Becker, 1992), personal (Harter, 1990; Moore, Jarrold, Russell, Lumb, Sapp, & MacCallum, 1995) and social sequeli of the physical and sexual maturation.

Erikson (1968) noted that the shift in role expectations during this transition from childhood to adulthood could make this a challenging developmental stage. In fact, themes of *transition* are pervasive in the literature describing adolescence (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Warren, 1995; Papalia, 2001; Seifert, Hoffnung, & Hoffnung, 2000; Wigfield, Eccles, MacIver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). The shift from assumption of dependent roles to more independence is described and adolescents are assumed to engage in experimentation and preliminary assumption of adult-like roles (Seifert et al., 2000).

Other theorists note that the span of adolescence covers from 7 to 10 years, making it difficult to characterize in terms of one transition (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Some propose that the initial two-year period of pubertal change be viewed as a distinct stage, imbued with the most significant of the transitional factors of importance for adolescents (Alsaker, 1996; Silbereisen & Kracke, 1993). Others have suggested that transitions be more specifically defined, such as the transition from one school to another (Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998; Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

The age range associated with adolescence has been under scrutiny as well, with several authors suggesting that the range of ages associated with adolescence has increased (Arnett, 2000; Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Arnett (2000) cites two factors potentially impacting the age range ascribed to adolescence. First, he notes that the age of pubertal changes such as menarche declined over the decades between 1900 and 1970, although it has since leveled out. Second, he suggests that the cultural shift regarding the prevalence of teenagers attending high school may be a factor impacting developmental maturity. The proportion of teenagers attending high school increased steadily throughout

the twentieth century with high school enrollment currently viewed as the standard.

Therefore, the end of high school at age 18 may seem a natural demarcation point for the end of adolescence.

However, a case can be made for expanding the study of development beyond the age of 18 and into early adulthood. Arnett (1999) labels this period *emerging adulthood* and he considers it to include ages 18 – 25. He describes this as a transitional period, building on development that occurs in adolescence and posing significant implications for the developmental trajectory leading to adulthood. Specifically, Arnett characterizes this period as one of experimentation and exploration. He notes that individuals in this age range are experiencing greater autonomy from parents, but that they often have not committed to love or work arrangements typical of older adults. In fact, the necessity of decision-making regarding relationships and career contributes to the opportunity for identity formulation through confrontation with disequilibrating circumstances, as described by Marcia (2002).

The cultural context defining the transitions of adolescence has received recognition as well, with theorists noting differences and similarities in maturation and role assumption across various cultures (Chisholm & Hurrelmann, 1995; Malmberg & Trempala, 1997). It has been proposed that cultural differences result from variations in expectations placed on those in the adolescent and young adult age ranges (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). According to Arnett (2000), the stage of emerging adulthood is consistent with cultural expectations supporting a delay in assumption of adult roles, such as that provided in industrialized societies representing the context of the current study (Chisholm & Hurrelmann, 1995).

## Identity Development in Late Adolescence and Early Adulthood

The period of the life cycle referred to as late adolescence has been characterized by Erikson (1959) as crucial for identity development. In fact, this life-stage was historically implicated as the most significant in terms of the crisis associated with identity development (Marcia, 1980). However, identity theory has evolved to conceptualize the process of identity formation as continuing throughout the life-span (Marcia, 2002).

Expanded versions of Erikson's (1959) theory continue to emphasize late adolescence and early adulthood as crucial periods in the process of identity development (Kroger & Haslet, 1991). These researchers observe that, while initial identity formation typically occurs during late adolescence, it is the subsequent occurrence of disequilibrating events that facilitates the continued development of identity through adulthood (Kroger, 1993; Kroger & Haslet, 1991; Marcia, 2002). Thus, encounters with disequilibrating events serve to facilitate identity development through the resultant reconstruction and re-formulation of identity (Kroger, 1993).

Consistent with Marcia's (2002) identity status theory, experiences faced by late adolescents and young adults in college may provide a context for the confrontation of the choices that are thought to constitute a crisis event. The young person entering college is faced with many new challenges, opportunities, and responsibilities that may represent new demands. In addition, college students are typically faced with increased opportunity and responsibility regarding socialization and dating. As noted by Marica (2002), identity crises during this developmental period are more likely to arise from intimacy issues. Finally, if one manages to avoid any crisis confrontations throughout the

years of college, there remains the prospect of obtaining formal employment looming on the horizon after graduation.

Marcia (2002) points out that life events are deemed disequilibrating by virtue of individual perception. Therefore, any of the events associated with college may or may not constitute a disequilibrating circumstance. Additionally, the response to any such events will be determined, in part, by one's current identity status. Nevertheless, the circumstances faced by many college students offer the opportunity for identity development, based on the constellation of individual circumstances involved.

Therefore, the current study is predicated on the continued recognition of the life stages of late adolescence and early adulthood as crucial in the process of identity formation, as well as the presence of numerous opportunities for disequilibrium in this setting. It is felt that the college setting offers a unique environment for exploration of the manifestation of identity issues as related to self-concept development.

Additional research has focused on the implications of race and ethnicity for identity development (Phinney, 1989). Ethnic identity has been defined in various ways (Phinney, 1990). However, a frequently cited definition is that of Tajfel (1981), who describes ethnic identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from [his] knowledge of [his] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 255).

Phinney (1989) devised a model of ethnic identity development based on Marcia's (1980) theory of identity status. Phinney's model is based on the assumption that identity development is influenced by the exploration of ethnicity as well as one's commitment to an ethnic group. Accordingly, Phinney concluded that the ethnic identity

status of adolescents reflects the level and nature of exploration of ethnicity issues. The model cites an achieved identity as the optimal outcome of the process, and the stage is characterized by a sense of “confidence and pride” regarding one’s ethnicity, as well as a “clear understanding of issues related to ethnicity within the dominant culture.” (p. 37)

Related research regarding ethnic identity has noted the implications for other aspects of development, including academic success (Ogbu, 1987) and self-esteem (Phinney, 1988). Of significance to the current study, various researchers have explored the relations between ethnic identity development and self-concept. Notably, Tajfel and Turner (1979) state that membership in an ethnic group provides a sense of belonging that contributes positively to self-concept. However, others have noted that identification with a low-status non-dominant group, such as an ethnic minority, can lead to detrimental effects on self-concept (Hogg, Abrams, & Patel, 1987; Ullah, 1985). Illustrating the numerous complexities surrounding the issue, Lewin (1948) and Tajfel (1978) have discussed the difficulties in identity formation that exist for individuals who hold membership in groups with conflicting attitudes, values, and behaviors.

In a review of the research investigating ethnic identity in adolescents and adults, Phinney (1990) observes that there is little agreement across the research regarding the relations between ethnic identity and self-concept. In commenting on the mixed results obtained across studies, Phinney notes that there is a range of complex factors influencing the relations between these constructs. She concludes that ethnic identity is largely defined by context and does not necessarily represent a linear construct, suggesting that it is best understood in terms of the qualitatively different ways in which individuals interact with social groups.

For the current study, the issue arises with regard to the single African American participant. It will be noted that this participant identifies his minority status as a significant feature of his experience in the setting of the research. Therefore, an awareness of the idiosyncratic features of ethnic identity formation provides a helpful context for understanding the meaning of his experiences. Accordingly, this construct, and the related literature, will be further explored in subsequent chapters concerning data analysis and conclusions.

### Historical Development of Self-Concept

This section traces the historical development of theories of self-concept from William James to the present. Major theoretical contributions will be reviewed and placed in an historical context.

#### *William James*

This history of self-concept studies can be traced to William James (1890) and his identification of the *I* and the *Me* as distinct and fundamental aspects of the self. The *self as object* or the *Me* self, as defined by James, is the dimension that has gained the label of self-concept and has attracted the most attention in terms of research. However, contemporary self-theorists (Damon & Hart, 1988; Harter, 1999) implicate the *I* self, defined by James as the subject or the knower, as an active agent in the construction of the *Me* and, as such, a construct integral to the understanding of self-concept.

James (1890) conceptualized the *Me* self as comprised of 3 constituents, the material self, the social self, and the spiritual self. One's physical body and one's possessions are attributed to the realm of the material self, while the social self is defined as those characteristics recognized by others. The spiritual self encompasses an *inner*

*core* of thoughts, consciousness, and psychological mechanisms. Additionally, James proposed a tiered system with material self-concept occupying the bottom tier, superseded by the social self, with the spiritual self at the apex. This model provided the foundation for current views of self as multidimensional and hierarchical.

Regarding the social self-constituent, James (1890) noted that such a conceptualization leads to the notion of multiple social selves, reflective of the various social contributions to one's construction of a social self. As a result, it could be postulated that an individual may construct numerous social selves in response to expectations of various individuals and contexts in one's environment. The resulting contradiction among selves, while functioning adaptively in some circumstances, could potentially also lead to a sense of conflict or incompatibility.

Additionally, James (1890) postulated that one might conceptualize potential future roles that present as incompatible with the actual self. He concluded that one must selectively choose among alternative selves while suppressing the other potential options. This line of thinking led to his conceptualization of pretensions and the role they play in self-esteem, leading to his origination of the definition of the construct. In his view, self-esteem was not simply a function of one's view of one's successes, but must instead be considered in terms of one's pretensions or aspirations.

Damon and Hart (1988) note that James's (1890) resulting characterization of the *Me* aspect of self-concept represents a fairly comprehensive model, incorporating all aspects of the self that can be objectively known. However, these authors also note that the Jamesian model does not implicate any developmental component, while more recent conceptualizations of self-concept hold a strongly developmental stance (Damon & Hart,

1988; Harter, 1999). Harter (1999) notes that many of the themes introduced by James provide a foundation for current research and theorizing about the self.

### *The Symbolic Interactionists*

In the decades following James's (1890) articulation of a model of the self, symbolic interactionists contributed to models of understanding the self, with their notion of self as socially constructed via linguistic exchanges with others (Baldwin, 1906; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). According to symbolic interactionist theory, the opinions of others are integrated into one's sense of self, forming self-concept as a social construction.

Cooley's (1902) metaphor of the *looking-glass-self* posited that one derives a sense of self from the imagined perceptions of the individual in one's social world. According to Cooley, the development of self is founded on the propensity of individuals to engage in a process of assuming the perceptions of others around them in regards to one's appearance, manner, and actions. Those opinions become integrated into one's self-concept. The process is captured poetically in the following infamous quotation, "Each to each a looking glass - reflects the other that doth pass" (1902, p. 152).

With respect to the influence of the social context, Cooley (1902) notes that the characteristics that one ascribes to oneself will vary at any given time as a function of the surrounding environment. The process was described as developmental, with the more vulnerable self of youth giving way to a more stable sense of self in adulthood. According to Cooley, the mature self-concept is not as vulnerable to social feedback, and is, instead, more enduring and stable.

Mead (1934) further contributed to symbolic interactionist theory, emphasizing the role of social interaction in construction of the self. Mead characterizes the self as inherently social in nature, noting that the self is constructed through the process of social interaction. According to Mead, an infant begins to construct a notion of self when she is able to gain an objective awareness of her body and her behavior. However, the development of the self-concept is also dependent on the emerging awareness of the selves and personalities of others. Role-playing assumes an essential function in the process of creating self, according to Mead. He views the process of role taking as an avenue for the child to take on the roles of others and to use parts of those roles in “building a self” (Mead, 1934, p. 153). According to Mead, the child *fashions* herself using the model of these other selves. It is through the process of increasing facility in role taking that an increasingly complex and integrated notion of self is able to arise.

Mead (1934) articulates a model of a two-stage process whereby the initial *play* stage is expanded on in the subsequent *game* stage. The game stage provides an opportunity for the child to take on additional roles in a context of proscribed procedures and rules. Participation in games encourages the child to begin to view herself as the group views her, integrating these viewpoints into a more highly integrated and unified self of self. Through this process, according to Mead, the *generalized other* constitutes a significant influence on the development of the self-concept of an individual.

It is also of interest to note that, among Mead’s contributions to current understanding of the self, is the notion of multiple selves. Mead (1934), as well as James (1890), can be credited with the articulation of the multiplicity of self that has become foundational to the work of current self-theorists, such as Harter (1999) and Markus

(1983). The notions of various selves reflected in current constructs of *real* self, *ideal* self, and *possible* self, are predicated on the assumptions first proposed by these early theorists. Mead (1934) describes the experience of different selves, noting “we divide ourselves up in all sorts of different selves with reference to our acquaintances” (p. 142). He views this phenomenon as a normal outgrowth of the social process and as a function of the different relationships we have with various individuals.

Baldwin (1906) is credited with significant contributions in the area of social origins of self from a symbolic interactionist perspective as well. Baldwin proposed an intimate relationship between the concepts of self and other, symbolized in his conceptualization of the *bipolar self*. Baldwin proposed that the initial experience of *self* at one pole and *other* at the opposing end, develops as the infant’s awareness of the *other* emerges. The developing individual is thought to engage in a process of imitation and internalization as she reciprocally constructs a sense of self and a sense of others.

In this manner, the awareness of the *other* is viewed as an essential precursory stage leading to the internalization of various features of self. According to Baldwin (1906), individually ascribed characteristics have their origin in the awareness by the individual of their existence in someone else. He proposes that an individual encounters traits in her social environment, and then engages in a process of *transferring* them to herself, by imitating and eventually assuming the traits. Interestingly, this relationship is posited as converse as well, with the supposition that one’s view of others must, in turn, be predicated on one’s understanding of oneself. Therefore, self and other engage in a recursive relationship of co-construction, according to Baldwin.

### *Cognitive Approaches*

Toward the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of the cognitive revolution in psychology (Bruner, 1990), Piagetian (1960) models of cognitive development influenced the return to viewing self as a cognitive construction. In this emerging context, self was explicated as a constellation of mental representations (Epstein, 1973; Greenwald, 1980; Markus, 1977, 1980)

Initial work by Harter and colleagues followed this cognitive paradigm, generating a model consistent with the Piagetian (1960) framework (Harter, 1983, 1998). Accordingly, young children's concrete conceptualization of self in terms of physical attributes and material possessions was presented in the context of the cognitive abilities consistent with Piaget's preoperational period. Subsequent observations of the developmental progression from trait-like self-conceptions to the abstract self-definitions of adolescents were viewed in the Piagetian framework of progression through the stages of concrete operations and formal operations.

However, Harter (1999) points to a growing critique of Piagetian theory and the emergence of neo-Piagetian frameworks (Case, 1992; Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 2002) that have gained in prominence, with a resulting impact on theories of self-development. Specifically, Piagetian theory was implicated as portraying a model of cognitive development characterized as "too monolithic, universal, and endogenous" (Case, 1992, p. 10). Additional criticisms include an emphasis on description versus underlying processes, lack of clearly defined transitions between stages, and lack of emphasis on individual differences in development (Flavell, et al., 2002).

Neo-Piagetian frameworks have expanded prior theory, in part with the integration of concepts from information-processing theories (Flavell, et al., 2002). Continuity of development is an integral feature of these more contemporary frameworks as well as an expansion of the number of structural levels implicated and a more integrated model of the interaction between these levels. Additionally, variation in functioning across different domains emerged as a fundamental construct. Other constructs that have been further refined and explicated include: the development of memory functions (Case, 1985, 1992; Pascual-Leone, 1988), the automatization of skills (Case, 1985; Siegler, 1991) and the identification of encoding and strategy construction (Siegler, 1991).

Harter (1999) notes that, while these additional influences were identified and credited with facilitating progression through cognitive levels, most neo-Piagetians continue to acknowledge constraints on development as a function of age and relative brain development. Additionally, Harter states that these developments have direct relevance to self-theory research, given the wide acceptance of self as a cognitive construction. Specifically, the *I* self came to be recognized as an important influence on developments of the *Me* self, and the self came to be viewed as a distinct domain of knowledge, with a level of development that could differ from that of other domains.

A subsequent section of the current paper will review the developmental differences in self-representations as they evolve through the lifespan, with reference to the corresponding impact on contemporary models of self-concept development.

### *A Sociocultural Perspective on the History of the Self*

More recent theorists have contributed expanded notions regarding the relationship between social influences and the development of self-concept, placing renewed emphasis on the import of social context. A notable instance is found in the work of Gergen (1991), who proposes a contemporary sociocultural perspective regarding self-concept. Gergen traces a historical path of development of views of self-concept, observing that the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries posed a view of the self that was characterized by attributes such as love, passion, morality, and creative inspiration. This romantic period, with its emphasis on interior, psychological processes, experienced a radical revision by the advent of scientific and technological advances of the modern period. Gergen proposes that the romanticist perspective was supplanted by values based on pragmatics and utility, with the machine emerging as the primary model for the self.

More recently, the advent of even further technological advances has created the context for his notion of the *saturated self*. Gergen (1991) implicates fax machines, cell phones, beepers, and answering machines as providing an increasingly complex and demanding context for social interactions. This postmodern period, according to Gergen, is filled with an array of devices designed to keep individuals socially connected, with the resulting need to respond with the creation of different selves to correspond to the various demands. Ultimately, he postulates, the sense of the *true self* is at risk of being compromised in the service of meeting the social self demands of the culture.

In conclusion, this section has highlighted several major theoretical influences contributing to current notions of self. The work of William James (1890), in his

articulation and differentiation of the *I* self and the *Me* self paved the way for succeeding discourse regarding the nature of the development of the self. The symbolic interactionists provided a framework for consideration of the relationship between development of self-concept and the social context.

Harter (1999) observes that prevailing current approaches seem to favor an integration of individual and social contributions to self-concept development, with an increasing interest in models that describe a variation of self across situations. She notes that contemporary theorists appear to value the notion of a pervasive entity defined as self, which retains the capacity to vary from one context to the next. The ability to adjust behavior to meet various contextual demands is viewed as adaptive, with the understanding that consistency across relationships is of secondary importance.

Examples of this paradigm shift can be seen in the work of Snyder (1987). This researcher identifies a characterization of individuals who are *high self-monitors*, described as those who frequently alter their self-presentation as they strive for socially appropriate behaviors and positive impressions. This style of social relatedness is viewed as adaptive, with positive social and personal outcomes. Gergen (1977) reflects on this dynamic as well, noting that such behavior reflects a value on social comparison, with a potential resulting conflict among various selves and a lack of an identifiable core of self.

Lifton (1993) proposes a similar theme in his identification of the *protean self*, named for Proteus, a Greek god who possessed many forms. Similarly to Gergen (1977), Lifton proposes that rapid economic and social changes have led to confusion about the self. Contrary to Gergen's somewhat apocalyptic projections, however, Lifton optimistically endorses the flexibility and resilience of the protean self.

### *Defining the Constructs*

Byrne (1996) notes that social science research has long investigated the nature of the self-concept. She further notes that, despite the resulting *wealth* of research on the topic, the field has been fraught with inconsistent findings. Methodological weaknesses are implicated as a major source of the inconsistencies (Byrne, 1984; Hansford & Hattie, 1982; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976; Wylie, 1974, 1979). Fundamental to problems of methodology is the issue of inconsistency of conceptual definition. More specifically, Byrne (1996) observes a lack of a universally acknowledged definition and the lack of distinctions between associated terminologies.

Shavelson et al. (1976), in a survey of the existing literature, noted 17 different dimensions utilized for the categorization of concepts and Zirkel (1971) identified at least 15 as well. Hattie (1992) notes the tendency of self-concept researchers to use the terms interchangeably and some authors devise their own terms in the process of designing their research, as in the case of Damon and Hart (1988) and their use of the term self-understanding. Definitional problems are not limited to the global self-concept construct, but are noted in the more specific dimensions under investigation as well. Among the terms used interchangeably with self-concept are self, self-perception, self-identity and self-awareness (Hattie, 1992).

One of the most significant definitional issues impacting the research is the discrepancy between self-concept and self-esteem. In general, self-concept is defined as a relatively broad term encompassing the various aspects of how one views the self, while self-esteem tends to be used to designate the more evaluative component of the broader self-concept (Byrne, 1996). In other words, self-concept may be considered the more

descriptive term, with self-esteem connoting the more evaluative aspect (Brinthaupt & Erwin, 1992).

However, construct validity research has as yet failed to provide support for the discrimination (Marsh, 1986; Shepard, 1979) and many researchers continue to use the terms interchangeably (Hughes, 1984; Shavelson et al., 1976). Additionally, confusion regarding the terms is perpetuated as some researchers (Harter, 1990; Marsh, 1986; Shavelson, et al.) purport to discuss self-concept, while actually limiting the scope of their definition of the construct to the aspect of perceived competence (A. Wigfield, personal communication, December 19, 2002).

Discrepancies exist as well in the use of the term self-concept versus self-efficacy, although Bandura has contended that they are distinct constructs representing different phenomena (1986). Bandura (1998) defines self-concept as “a composite view of oneself” (p. 10) to be contrasted with his notion of perceived self-efficacy as one’s judgments of personal capability. Additionally, he questions the value of self-concept as a valid construct, observing that it has no predictive validity once perceived efficacy is factored out.

In their attempt to clarify the distinction between terms, Pajares and Miller (1994) note that, even when seen as a multifaceted construct, self-concept remains less specific than self-efficacy. They suggest that self-efficacy can be defined as “a judgment of one’s capabilities to execute specific behaviors in specific situations” (p. 194). Self-concept is seen as incorporating beliefs of self-worth in addition to perceived competence.

Harter (1999) confronts the issue as well, noting the abundance of terminology and the importance of clarifying constructs in order for research to be interpretable. For

her own work, she has chosen to focus on self-representations, which she defines as the “characteristics of the self that are consciously acknowledged by the individual through language – that is, how one describes oneself” (p. 3). Harter notes that some in the field have urged her to make distinctions between self-descriptions and self-evaluations. For clarification, she points to work by Gordon (1968) and McGuire and McGuire (1980) who use the methodological approach of asking respondents an open-ended question as a means of describing self. The resulting data are analyzed for self-descriptions that are spontaneously generated, to be then coded into categories. The outcomes of these investigational methods are thought to be self-descriptive versus self-evaluative. In comparison, self-report measures that require the subject to indicate a positive or negative assessment of self-referential traits are viewed as self-evaluative.

However, Harter (1999) also characterizes the distinction as somewhat arbitrary as she acknowledges that favorable judgments may be inherent in some responses. Additionally, she posits that much of the meaning attached to self-representations is naturally derived from a tendency to form positive or negative judgments. In support of this notion, Harter cites Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1971), who demonstrated, using semantic differential, that evaluation is fundamental to the process of making meaning out of linguistic concepts. Essentially, these findings support the notion that individuals organize concepts about self or others through positive versus negative judgments. Judgments are ascribed to various categories, including moral, aesthetic, social, and emotional, with the positive/negative dichotomy represented for each. This research supported the theory that the evaluative dimension is fundamental to human thinking. Harter (1999) concludes that it is most appropriate to assume some valence of attributes

when focusing on self-descriptions. To further clarify her usage of terminology, she notes that she uses self-evaluation when addressing the valence of self-descriptors, but otherwise uses the more general terms of *self-descriptions*, *self-perceptions*, and *self-representations* in her research.

Damon and Hart (1988) discuss their approach to the discrepancy in terminology as well, and conclude by proposing their own term, self-understanding. These researchers define self-understanding as a conceptual system comprised of one's thoughts and attitudes about oneself. As such, the construct includes all of the characteristics that one might ascribe to oneself in the domains of physical qualities, capabilities, social or psychological characteristics, and philosophical beliefs. Additionally, the notion can be expanded to incorporate conceptions of one's past or future, as well as beliefs about the processes causing personal changes and one's own reflections on the self or one's own consciousness.

Damon and Hart (1988) further define their own construct in comparison to the self-theories of William James. They state that their notion of self-understanding is comparable with the notion of self as posited by James (1890). However, these researchers embrace the *I* self, as well as the *Me* self, which is the subject of much of the self-concept research to date. As they note, James concluded that inquiry regarding the *I* self was best relegated to philosophy or religion, with the focus of psychological inquiry to be on the self-as-object, embodied in the *Me* construct. Here Damon and Hart (1988) take a departure from James's views, invoking a caveat proposed by Mead (1934). Mead proposed the study of individuals' knowledge of both the objective and the subjective

self, thus providing some insight into the *I* through the individual's conceptualization of the self-as-subject.

Damon and Hart (1988) embraced this expanded view of self and adopted it as the framework for their investigation of self-understanding. They explain that their use of self-understanding begins with an individual's self-definition, as defined by James's *Me*. The construct is then expanded to include the individual's understanding of personal "agency, continuity, distinctness, and reflection" (p. 10). The actual *I* self is not, however, included in this definition, as it is considered to be beyond the scope of self-understanding so defined. Therefore, the proposed definition of self-understanding includes "a person's conceptions of objective and subjective self" (p. 10).

#### Contemporary Theoretical Models of Self-Concept

Byrne (1996) envisions a general dichotomy between theoretical models of self-concept: those predicated on a unidimensionality framework versus those supporting the notion of the multidimensionality of the self. Within these categories, she identifies seven theoretical models. These models will be outlined here.

##### *Nomothetic Model*

Byrnes (1996) describes the nomothetic model as the oldest and most traditional. The model proposed that self-concept, as a general, overriding construct, could be subdivided into academic, social, physical, and emotional components. The model proposed the general self-concept as the summation of these sub-components. Those who support this perspective claim that the dominance of the general self-concept factor supersedes attempts to differentiate between the subcomponents (Coopersmith, 1967; Piers & Harris, 1964). Those who oppose this model argue that combining all

subcomponent scores together disregards relative distinctions made by individuals about the importance of the different dimensions.

Byrne (1996) notes that construct validity research has not supported the nomothetic model, while finding unequivocal support for the multidimensionality of the self-concept (Marsh & Hattie, 1996). Consequently, the nomothetic model has fallen from favor in current thinking, although remnants of this model remain.

#### *Rosenberg Unidimensional Model*

Rosenberg's model (1965) posits self-esteem as a single dimension representing only one's overall self-concept, irrespective of other dimensions of the construct. Although Rosenberg acknowledged the existence of self-evaluation in various specific dimensions of life, his research focused only on the global sense of self worth. In contrast to the nomothetic model, the Rosenberg model does not assume a construct of global self-concept as a simple summation of attitudes and competencies in different domains. The Rosenberg model attempts to measure global self-concept directly, without respect to any specific self-perceptions.

#### *Independent Factor Model*

This model was initially proposed by Soares and Soares (1980), and Byrnes (1996) notes that they appear to be its only supporters. The model is based on the premise that self-concept is comprised of multiple independent dimensions, with only weak correlations at best. These authors have argued against a global self-concept and a hierarchical structure. Byrnes notes that there is little, if any, support for this model, with recent research definitively disputing it. Specifically, substantial correlations have been

found among subscales as well as the yield of a hierarchical factor structure. These findings have led some experts in the field to discount the model (Marsh & Hattie, 1996).

#### *Correlated Factor Model*

This model proposes that the domain specific dimensions are correlated among themselves as well as with a separate dimension of global self-concept (Byrne, 1996). Harter (1990), being a primary proponent of this model, has proposed that the rationale for the separation of domain-specific facets from a construct of global self-worth is to allow for investigation of the nature of the relationship between the specific competencies and global self-worth.

Although Byrne (1996) states that she is unaware of construct validity research directly supporting this model, she notes that some validity studies of the hierarchical model provide indirect support. Additionally she points to the abundance of construct validity research that has supported the model indirectly through the validation of assessment measures based on it.

#### *Compensatory Model*

This model was proposed by Marx and Winne (1980). The model proposes a construct of global self-worth that is accompanied by various domain specific facets that may be negatively rather than positively correlated with the global dimension. The theoretical notion is that “self-perceptions of low status in one domain will be compensated for by self-perceptions of status in other domains” (Byrnes, 1996, p. 17). This dynamic is described as an attempt by the self to retain a threshold sense of well being, using self-perceptions of some domains to balance out self-perceptions in the others.

This model has been criticized in terms of its statistical support (Hattie, 1992; Shavelson, Bolus, & Keesling, 1983). Indirect support for the compensatory model is derived from Marsh's (1986b) model of *internal/external frame of reference*. Byrne (1996) notes that the Marsh (1986b) model holds promise as a replacement for the earlier model articulated by Marx and Winne (1980), but she calls for substantial additional research supporting it.

#### *Taxonomic Model*

Taxonomic models tend to rely on an underlying structure that reflects two or more facets. Byrne (1996) uses the analogy of a factorial research design to explain the nature of taxonomic models. Taxonomic models are designated as those that identify a number of facets, with each facet manifesting in numerous levels. The resulting combinations of facets and levels yield a series of potential outcomes, although the resulting relationship to an overall global self-concept score remains questionable. Regarding taxonomic models, Marsh and Hattie (1996) conclude that the model is potentially compatible with a multidimensional structure of self-concept, but that the method of scoring used in the current tools is not consistently valid. They call for further construct validity research to clarify the potential utility of these models.

#### *Hierarchical Models*

Theories of the hierarchical structure of the self can be traced to Epstein's (1973) notion of a hierarchical arrangement of one's beliefs about the self, culminating with self-esteem positioned at the apex. The dimensions he proposed as second order constructs included general competence, love worthiness, power, and moral self-approval. These constructs were supposed to arise from lower order self-perceptions in more specific

domains such as physical ability leading to general competence. The lowest-order components were self-assessments of specific abilities. Central to Epstein's theory was the notion of increasing importance of aspects to maintenance of self-theory as reflected by elevated position in the hierarchy.

A hierarchical model that has since received wide attention is that proposed by Shavelson et al. (1976). Shavelson et al. viewed self-concept in terms of the perceptions of an individual regarding self that are formed through one's experiences in the world. These perceptions are said to be organized into a structure that is multidimensional and hierarchical, depicted with global self-concept at the apex. Global self-concept is subdivided into academic and nonacademic self-concepts, with the nonacademic aspect further broken down into social, physical, and emotional self concept. These aspects are subdivided as well, into more specific self-concepts. In the lower sections of the hierarchy, components of self-concept are more specifically targeted to particular behaviors.

Since the Shavelson et al. (1976) model was proposed, Marsh and colleagues have engaged in the most comprehensive studies to evaluate the model (Marsh, 1986a, 1987, 1990b; Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988; Marsh & Hocevar, 1985; Marsh & Redman, 1994; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Shavelson & Marsh, 1986). The results of extensive factor analyses resulted in adjustments to the model that is now cited as the Marsh and Shavelson Model. This subsequent investigation has tended to confirm the multifaceted and hierarchical structure of the initial model, while raising questions about the utility of the hierarchical structure with older participants. According to Marsh and Shavelson (1985), research conducted since the initial publication of the Shavelson et al. (1976)

model has consistently supported the multifaceted nature of self- concept, with an increasingly complex structure emerging with age. However, the strength of the hierarchy has been found to diminish with age. Further, the authors call into question the utility of retaining a hierarchical structure past adolescence, although they note that the general self-concept factor remains well defined.

Byrne (1996) notes that the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model enjoys the most extensive empirical validation of any model of self-concept and that many subsequent models are theoretically linked to it in some way. She further notes that, although much construct validation research has accompanied this model, the majority of it has focused on the academic domains. Marsh and Shavelson call for additional research to clarify the nature of the hierarchy with older participants.

Although enjoying unprecedented popularity since its publication, the Shavelson et al. (1976) model, as well as other hierarchical models, have received some criticism (Hattie, 1996). In assessment of hierarchical models, Harter (1999) contends that individual processes of organizing self-constructs do not necessarily follow the path predicted by models such as that of Marsh and Shavelson (1985). She notes that her own research has supported the notion of various pathways to global self-worth, arising from various potential combinations of domain-specific self-evaluations (Harter & Whitesell, 1996). Alternatively, she suggests a model allowing for individual variation in the organization of self-constructs, as well as allowing for different constellations of attributes predicting global self-worth.

An extension of the Shavelson et al. (1976) model has been proposed by Vispoel (1995), that holds particular relevance to the current proposed study. Vispoel expressed

interest in clarifying the relationship of artistic self-concept to other facets of self-concept, while attempting to integrate self-perceptions in various artistic domains into the Shavelson et al. model. Vispoel used the Arts Self-Perception Inventory (Vispoel, Wang, Bleiler, & Tzou, 1993) as well as the Self-Descriptive Questionnaire-III (SDQ-III) (Marsh & O'Neill, 1984). The SDQ-III was derived in part from the Shavelson et al. (1976) model and has been extensively used in subsequent research by Marsh and colleagues.

Vispoel (1995) surveyed 831 students from the University of Iowa with these instruments. Mean age of respondents was 24 years and they were predominantly female (71% versus 29% male). Many of the participants reported prior involvement in the arts, including dance, drama, music, or visual art. Percentage of participants reporting previous engagement in these activities are provided, however, the author does not indicate what proportion of participants reported no prior involvement in any of the arts, nor does he specify what proportion of students were accounted for due to participation in multiple artistic domains.

Conventional factor analysis revealed that the respondents were able to reliably differentiate the 17 facets of self-concept assessed by the two instruments, including four factors associated with self-perception of artistic abilities. Confirmatory factor analysis provided support for the correlated factors model, providing strong evidence in support of the multidimensional nature of self-concept as proposed by Shavelson et al. (1976). The author also concluded that the 17 facets investigated were found to be clearly defined and modestly correlated.

Vispoel (1995) also found support for the existence of a second-order Artistic Self-Concept factor, with the first order factors representing artistic domains found to be more highly correlated with each other than with other first order factors. However, it is also noted that self-concepts in different artistic domains overlap, but are more distinct than similar. Therefore, the author cautions against inferring self-concept in one artistic domain from self-concept in other artistic domains. Vispoel (1995) notes that his study provides strong support for the multidimensional nature of self-concept, but only moderate support for the hierarchy, within this college age population.

#### Theoretical Framework of the Current Study

The current study was based on a theoretical framework based on the construct of self-representations as defined by Harter (1998) as well as self-understanding as conceptualized by Damon and Hart (1988). These researchers agree in their use of the Jamesian (1890) model as a foundation to their understanding of self. The current study is predicated on this theoretical formulation as well. Both Damon and Hart and Harter have adopted a theoretical perspective which views developmental progression as espoused in part by the neo-Piagetians (Case, 1992; Flavell, 2002) as a fundamental aspect of the construction of self-concept. Additionally, these theorists agree that social and contextual features play a significant part in the construction of self, as initially proposed by the symbolic interactionists.

In this study, I embraced these theoretical postulates as well, with the goal of expanding on the significant and invaluable contributions of these researchers in the field of self-concept research. In my own point of departure, I chose to adopt a definition of self-concept that borrows from Harter (1998) and Damon and Hart (1988). Accordingly,

self-concept is viewed as a constellation of self-representations, with the inclusion of the conceptualization of self-understanding as articulated by Damon and Hart (1988). Thus, the construct of the Jamesian (1890) Me-self was included as an aspect of self-concept.

My initial interest in self-concept was not so focused on the evaluative aspect, as I simply desired to know more about the self, as those in late adolescence/early adulthood understand it. However, I was intrigued with the notion that Harter adopts from Osgood et al. (1971) that evaluation is a primary function of human awareness. If this theoretical premise is adopted, it implies that an evaluative lens is used to construct and categorize virtually all self-reference information, and therefore renders evaluative thinking as a fundamental aspect of self-concept, as well as self-efficacy, self-esteem, and the other labels traditionally given to the evaluative aspect of self-knowledge. My interest in the reasoning behind this theoretical approach led me to remain alert to evaluative components of self-concept as articulated by the participants.

Two theoretical models influenced the study design. They included the correlated factor model of Harter (1998) and the hierarchical model of Marsh and Shavelson (1995). Although these models concur that self-concept is comprised of related domains of self-concept, they differ regarding their respective views of the nature of the relations. Marsh and Shavelson propose a hierarchical self-concept, with global self-concept at the apex. Harter, however, adheres to the notion that the domains are related, although not in a linear, hierarchical fashion. Therefore, the primary distinction between these models resides in the notion of a superordinate, global self-concept as proposed by the hierarchical model (Marsh & Shavelson, 1995).

In the current study, Harter's (1998) conceptualization of self-concept as constituted by self-representations was adopted as a guiding premise. However, I chose to preserve the contributions of Harter (1998) regarding the structure and content of self-representations, while situating them within the hierarchical model proposed by Marsh and Shavelson (1995). It was felt that perspectives gleaned from the participants regarding self-concept would shed some light on this theoretical debate. Further discussion of the outcome of analysis of data regarding these theoretical models will be presented in Chapter 9.

Vispoel's (1995) work provides additional context for the current study, in its validation of artistic self-perceptions as distinct constructs consistent with the multifaceted self-concept supported by Marsh and colleagues. The resulting lack of support in the Vispoel study for the hierarchical structure of self-concept in college-age students provides a helpful juxtaposition to the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) hierarchical notions. As stated by these researchers, the integrity of the hierarchy for adolescence and beyond is in need of further investigation. This qualitative study proposed to contribute to this body of research.

#### Measurement of Self-Concept

Self-concept measures have historically been lacking in reliability and validity (Byrne, 1996). In fact, Hattie (1992) is of the opinion "there can be no perfectly or valid indicator of an individual's self-concept" (p. 246), although he also states that self-report measures often seem to present the more dependable alternative. Wylie (1989) was in agreement, positing self-report as the most appropriate manner of gathering data regarding self-conceptions. Virtually all self-concept measures utilize some level of self-

report (Byrne, 1996). As a result, there has been criticism of the measures and an ongoing discussion of the relative advantages and disadvantages of this methodology (Brinthaupt & Erwin, 1992).

Additionally, techniques of self-concept evaluation have suffered from various methodological difficulties, as noted in several reviews of available assessment tools (Byrne & Shavelson, 1987; Wylie, 1974, 1979). Shavelson et al. noted a lack of attention to methodological issues among researchers (1976). More recent models reflecting self-concept as a multidimensional construct have influenced the development of improved assessment methodologies in response to Shavelson et al.'s (1976) mandate for construct validation research in the area. As a result, most newly developed measures are designed to measure multiple aspects of self-concept, and Byrne (1996) notes that the development of these measures appears to be based more consistently on sound theoretical and methodological principles.

However, Byrne (1996) notes ongoing issues regarding self-concept research. She cites Wylie's (1974, 1979) observation of the misuse of measuring instruments, such as administration to a population other than that for which the tool was developed and normed. Cross-cultural factors are highlighted, with reference to the views of Oyserman and Markus (1993) who note that self-processes are inherently bound by sociocultural context and not necessarily captured in the same manner across cultural groupings.

Developmental issues are relevant to the consideration of valid assessment of self-concept as well. Harter (1999) articulates the need for a battery of assessment methodologies responsive to the cognitive and language abilities present in participants

of various ages. Harter (1990b) and Damon and Hart (1982) point out the import of shifts in salience of aspects of self due to differences in developmental stages.

In conclusion, a review of the literature regarding self-concept assessment revealed a lack of consistency among methodological approaches, an inordinate reliance on self-report measures, lack of culturally sensitive measures, and a lack of data supporting the validity and reliability of the tools. Self-report measures proliferate, while a debate about their validity persists. Therefore, the qualitative methodology of the current study offers an added dimension to the field of self-concept research.

### The Development of Self-Representations

Harter (1998) describes the process of the development of self-representations throughout childhood and adolescence. The following section will present the primary features of the developmental stages as backdrop for the understanding the self-representations characteristic of late adolescents and young adults. The developmental progression is outlined respective to the cognitive achievements of successive periods, consistent with the views of Harter. More attention will be granted to adolescence, especially the later stages, as this period is most relevant to the current study.

#### *Childhood*

Consistent with cognitive development relative to age, the initial self-representations of the young child are concrete and reflect observable features of the self, such as personal traits, attributes, or skills (Fischer, 1980; Higgins, 1987). During early to middle childhood, the ability to integrate concepts begins to emerge as children are able to identify categories of competencies, although thinking remains unidimensional with an inability as yet to integrate opposing attributes or emotions (Harter, 1999). Hallmarks of

middle to late childhood include the ability of the evolving self-representations to integrate seemingly contradictory attributes (Harter, 1999). Additionally, children begin the process of integration of emotional attributes at this stage (Fischer et al., 1990; Harris, 1983; Harter, 1986; Harter & Buddin, 1987). The resulting self-descriptions of children at this stage tend to be more balanced, with a more realistic awareness of both abilities and limitations (Harter, 1999). Research notes an increasing utilization of social comparisons as well, as children begin to assess themselves relative to others in terms of their skills and attributes (Damon & Hart, 1988). Finally, Harter (1990) proposes that the construct of global self-worth does not emerge until the period of middle childhood.

### *Early Adolescence*

The onset of early adolescence is generally thought to mark the advent of the capacity for abstract thought (Case, 1985; Fischer, 1980; Flavell, 1985; Harter, 1983; Higgins, 1991). As a result, trait conceptualizations can now be integrated into abstract representations (Harter, 1998). Following a traditional Piagetian perspective (Piaget, 1960), it could also be anticipated that the adolescent can now begin the construction of formal theories, including a theory of the attributes of the self. However, a number of researchers have found that, although the representations may be more abstract at this period, there continues to be a limited capacity to integrate them (Case, 1985; Fischer, 1980; Harter, 1990; Higgins, 1991). As a result, the inability to integrate seemingly contradictory qualities persists into adolescence.

The influence of the social context is noted in the proliferation of different selves constructed to meet varying contextual expectations (Harter, 1999). However, Harter also notes that young adolescents do not articulate the awareness of contradictions of the

experience of conflict regarding varying roles. This characteristic is thought to be adaptive in that it spares the adolescent the psychological conflict that later accompanies this phenomenon (Harter, Bresnick et al., 1997; Harter & Monsour, 1992).

Also characteristic of this period is the tendency of young adolescents to identify varying levels of self-worth across contexts (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998). Harter (1999) invoked Cooley (1902) as the inspiration for her supposition that validation relative to the various contexts be highly related to the self-worth of the corresponding context. Relatedly, Rosenberg (1986) observed the increasing concern among adolescents regarding the appraisals of others. As a result, social comparisons continue, although in a more subtle fashion (Pomerantz, Ruble, Frey, & Greulich, 1995).

#### *Middle Adolescence*

During middle adolescence, it is noted that individuals begin to understand conflicting aspects of self by recognizing the relationship between seemingly opposing traits. Hence, the developing self-concept is characterized as increasingly differentiated (Harter, 1998a). However, the inability to integrate these abstract concepts results in confusion and conflict for the adolescent (Fischer et al., 1990; Harter, 1999; Higgins, 1991). As a result, individuals at this age may engage in all-or-nothing thinking, viewing themselves at alternate extremes of the continuum of a trait at different times.

Some researchers have investigated the experience of adolescents during this period who report the experience of different selves expressed in response to varying social influences (Rosenberg, 1986). Such studies have identified discrepancies in the self-descriptions reported across different social settings, corresponding with different roles (Hart, 1988; Harter & Monsour, 1992; Rosenberg, 1986). Authors have noted that

the resulting conflict in the view of the self produces feelings of confusion and distress in adolescents of this age group (Harter & Bresnick, 1996), as well as instability in the self-portrait (Harter, 1999).

It has also been determined that the cognitive advances of the developmental period lead to an increase in introspection regarding these conflicts, resulting in a focus on a search for identity and a coherent sense of self (Harter, 1999). The increasing proclivity for self-reflection, therefore, results in a “torturous search for the self” via the questioning of “what or who am I” (p. 68). Self-representations, therefore, are characterized as “unstable” (Harter, 1999, p. 69).

The role of the social environment continues to be significant as adolescents as this stage exhibit increasing levels of concern regarding the opinions of others. Decisions must be made relative to the characteristics to adopt for various roles. The experience of varying levels of self-worth across situations continues, adding to disparate notions of self-worth (Rosenberg, 1986).

#### *Late Adolescence*

During late adolescence, capacity for abstraction increases, with the resulting ability to integrate lower-order single abstractions into coordinated higher-level abstractions (Case, 1985; Fischer, 1980; Fischer & Canfield, 1986). Seemingly contradictory characteristics, such as friendly and shy, are now integrated into a notion of self as more comfortable in certain social situations. Thus, internal conflict associated with previously contradictory attributes begins to resolve (Harter, 1999). Additionally, self-representations now include attributes that “reflect personal beliefs, values, and moral standards that have become internalized...or constructed” (Harter, 1999, p. 79).

Harter (1998) notes that the ability to generate more integrated self-labels provides a sense of meaning and legitimacy that helps to resolve some confusion surrounding the awareness of the contradictions within the self. Other researchers note that use of these strategies leads adolescents to internalize traits (Higgins, 1991) and to devise a self that is reflective of a more organized system of beliefs and values (Damon & Hart, 1988). In fact, older adolescents embrace the value of the ability to manifest different traits in response to contextual demands, thereby adopting a stance felt to be adaptive for adults (Gergen, 1968).

Another aspect of development with the respect to the self-representations in late adolescence is an increasing focus on future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Accordingly, the adolescent evidences a focus on goals for the future, including further education and vocational exploration.

Contributions of the social environment continue to be significant, such as the necessity of support and validation. In fact, Case (1985) and Fischer (1980) note that cognitive resolution of opposing attributes does not necessarily arise automatically. Therefore, the importance of contextual support for the transition to higher levels of abstraction regarding self-conceptualizations is emphasized. Thus, subsequent development of high-order abstractions in the effort to resolve prior conflicts in self-representations is thought to result from a combination of increasing cognitive capacities and contextual factors (Harter, 1999).

Finally, there is evidence that global self-worth improves in late adolescence (Rosenberg, 1986; Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973). Accordingly, the late adolescent tends to articulate an improved overall self-concept. However, specific

valuations of self-worth continue to vary regarding particular contexts (Harter et al., 1998). Interestingly, such research also revealed that one domain of self-worth tended to emerge as most related to global self-worth. In addition, it was observed that the domain of heightened self-worth varied among individuals. It was recommended that maintaining focus on the identified context would, therefore, tend to promote enhanced overall self-worth (Harter et al., 1998).

### *Summary*

In summary, the development of self-representations is thought to evolve in relation to advancing levels of cognitive ability in combination with relative social influences. The initial self-representations of children are concrete and reflective of observable features of the self. During middle childhood, individuals begin to identify categories of attributes, although they remain unable to integrate opposing attributes or emotions. Integration begins to occur in middle to late childhood as a more balanced self of self emerges. Therefore, older children demonstrate an awareness of limitations as well as abilities. Social comparisons begin to exert an influence on the developing self-concept and global self-worth emerges.

Adolescence heralds the emergence of the capacity for abstract thought, with the resultant integration of traits into abstract representations. However, the ability to integrate seemingly contradictory qualities continues to progress. Early adolescents evidence various selves relative to context, with varying levels of associated self-worth. Concern about social appraisals is heightened and conflict occurs as the adolescent is confronted with increasing differentiation. The emergence of the capacity for

introspection leads to a subjective sense of the search for identity experienced during this developmental period.

In later adolescence, higher-level abstractions begin to emerge and the internal conflicts of middle adolescence begin to resolve. Older adolescents adopt a value of the ability to manifest different aspects of self in relation to contextual demands. The social environment is tapped for support and validation and global self-worth beings to improve.

#### Benefits of Theater and the Arts for Young People

"All peoples, everywhere, have an abiding need for meaning – to connect time and space, experience and event, body and spirit, intellect and emotion. People create art to make these connections, to express the otherwise inexpressible. A society and a people without the arts are unimaginable, as breathing would be without air. Such a society and people could not long survive" (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994, p. 5).

The Consortium of National Arts Education Associations makes some compelling points regarding the positive impact of arts education. In the (1994) report, the benefits to society are described as the offering of tools to understand human experience, to learn to respect others' ways of thinking, learning creative ways to problem solve, making decisions in ambiguous circumstances, and an expanded repertoire of self-expression. In this report, the intrinsic value of the arts is described with references to the unique experience of beauty embodied in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Beyond their intrinsic value, the arts are credited with enhancing the development of skills needed in our current culture, including the ability to deal with ambiguity and

subjectivity, communication skills, problem solving abilities, self-esteem, self-discipline, and cooperation.

The comments in the NAEA Consortium report are reflective of much of the literature supporting arts education. Much of what is written in the field is intended to provide a justification for the inclusion of the various arts modalities in the general curriculum. Arts educators have found themselves in the midst of a debate concerning the value of the arts, with a need to respond from a defensive stance in attempts to justify what they offer.

A report published by the College Board in 1983 was entitled *Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able To Do*. In the report, the arts were included as one of the six basic curricular areas in which students should participate. The report cites the arts as a means of enriching life and gaining understanding through self-expression and a broadening of human experience.

William J. Bennett, former Secretary of Education, also commented on the value of the arts in education. His views are expressed in a report entitled *First Lessons: A Report on Elementary School Education in America*. While citing the arts as essential to education, he stated, “Music, dance, painting, and theater are keys that unlock profound human understanding and accomplishment” (Bennett, 1986, p. 34).

In 1987 the American Council for the Arts and the Music Educators National Conference convened a gathering of leaders of various organizations working to improve arts education at the local and national level. Out of this meeting emerged a set of recommendations for the improvement of arts education. Within the recommendations is the statement that arts education should be provided on a daily basis to all students, K-12.

Essential areas of art instruction were noted to include visual art, music, dance, creative writing and theater. It was also recommended that resources and expertise expended on these areas be equal to that allocated to other areas of study in the schools (American Council for the Arts, 1977). The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development has weighed in on this issue as well. The association adopted a resolution in 1978 regarding the provision of arts education. In the resolution, this group also acknowledges the arts as an essential component of curriculum.

While generating reports on the importance of arts education, national organizations have commented on the lack of emphasis on the arts in seeming disregard of the purported benefits to students. The National Commission on Music Education (1991) reported on the status of arts education, stating that the arts are being relegated to the curricular periphery in schools. Henry (2000) notes that drama education has experienced drastic cuts due to financial issues and the lack of programs in many schools. He notes that the New York State Department of Education reported in 1995 that only 0.5% of public school students in the state were enrolled in any type of drama course. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that national figures of drama course enrollment are fewer than 10% (1995).

In a study of the impact of drama-based instruction on social skills of high school students, Danielson (1992) introduces the issue by noting that educators, students, or parents have not embraced the value of drama education. This author goes on to lament that theater is not viewed as a discipline worthy of inclusion in the education of high school students. Danielson quotes the 1988 report to Congress from the National

Endowment for the Arts, noting that while 49% of high schools offered courses in dramatic arts, only 13% of students enrolled in these courses.

Elliot Eisner is recognized as a leading proponent of arts education in this country. He and others participated in the formation of a special interest group of the American Educational Research Association to focus discussion and research efforts on the issues of arts education. Eisner (1998) recalls numerous instances where he and others have been called on to cite research indicating a positive contribution of the arts to academic achievement. He poses an alternative query from his own perspective, asking if anyone has proven that “reading and math courses contribute to higher performance in the arts?” (p. 1).

#### Theoretical Approaches to the Benefits of Art and Theater

There is a substantial body of literature examining the relationship of the arts to education. A review of this literature reveals that much of the writing is of a theoretical nature, contributed by several noteworthy proponents of the utility of the arts in the educational arena. Authors contributing to the discourse regarding the benefits of theater for young people include Gavin Bolton (1979), Dorothy Heathcote (1988), and Brian Way (1973), among others. This section will review several of the major theoretical frameworks supporting the positive outcomes of drama and theater involvement.

This review of theoretical approaches supporting the benefits of art and theater begins with a summary of the views of Heathcote (1988), who is generally viewed as a pioneer in the field of drama and education. Heathcote was born in Yorkshire in 1926. She began her training in the theater in 1945 and was later appointed to the Institute of Education at Newcastle University, despite her lack of training as an educator.

Heathcote's writings about drama and education are extensive and she is oft cited in subsequent literature. A review of her essays and transcriptions of her lectures reveals her to be an ardent and articulate proponent of the use of drama in education.

Heathcote (1988) proposed that drama functions as a tool for personal development and social adjustment. In addition, her perspective of the potential role of drama instruction included the ability to draw on the experiences of the students and to assist them to gain a perspective on the human condition, as well as a greater understanding of society.

Heathcote (1988) identifies aspects of theater that could be viewed as important in the construction of self. She notes that drama "draws directly on the individual's live and subjective experiences as its basic material" (p. 55). Heathcote further describes the totality of experience of the involved student when she notes that drama requires, beyond the "suspension of disbelief," all of the collective past experiences available to the group as well as "any conjecture of imagination they are capable of" (p. 62).

This characterization implies a wealth of material contributing to the drama experience, including the experiences of the individuals and their potentially imagined experiences. The drama process that could result from such a rich and fertile foundation contains exciting potential opportunities for self-expression and interpersonal dynamics and growth for all of the participants involved.

Heathcote (1988) describes drama as a means of learning and broadening our experiences and she ascribes acting to all humans as an instinctive mechanism. She defends this premise through the observations that all people dramatize through our experiences of reading a book, watching television, or hearing a story told. Heathcote

also points to the tendency of people to imagine events as a form of preparation, and to the tendency to dramatize events after they occur through storytelling about the event to others. She characterizes the *willing suspension of disbelief* as an essential human trait.

Another primary author cited as foundational to the establishment of drama as an avenue for personal development is Way. In his book, *Development Through Drama* (1973), he states that drama “leads the inquirer to moments of direct experience, transcending mere knowledge, enriching the imagination, and possibly touching the heart and soul as well as the mind” (p. 1).

While the terms drama and theater are often used interchangeably in the literature, Way (1973) makes a helpful distinction between them. He describes theater as the act of communication between the actors and the audience. Drama, however, is construed as being concerned with the experience of the participants. It is his definition of drama that most closely approximates the proposed intended object of the current study. Therefore, it is helpful to have his distinction with which to frame some of the perspectives and approaches considered here.

Way (1973) discusses the application of learning through drama specifically to the development of the self, particularly with adolescents. He notes that adolescents are typically engaged in an inner questioning of self. According to Way, young people are faced with social pressure to be someone different from their *true selves*. Drama experiences, therefore, afford an opportunity to *try out* some of the *if* conditions in a process of self-discovery (Way, 1973)

Way (1973) also notes that drama assists with the development of personality through the encouragement of creativity and the provision of opportunities to strive for

the student's own personal aspirations. He states his belief that the resulting development of the uniqueness of the individual is an enduring benefit that persists after the student has left school.

Way (1973) goes on to describe the outcome of drama experience as the development of intuition, which he compares with the development of intellect that is often stressed in academic settings. He describes the development of intuition as essential to the *full enrichment of life* and as perhaps the most important factor in the attainment of *inner resourcefulness*. Way believes that, like intellect, intuition needs training.

Bolton's (1979) contribution to the study of benefits of theater differs somewhat in focus from the theories espoused by Way (1973). Bolton decries Way's emphasis on the personal application of drama experience, preferring to frame the pursuit of dramatic activities toward a more educational outcome. Accordingly, the content of the learning experience is the element of emphasis, occurring as it may in the context of a dramatic experience. The drama itself is viewed as a distant secondary process, subservient to the primary mission of serving the mind through the pursuit of a learning goal. As such, according to Bolton, dramatic activities of this type differ significantly from the art form of drama.

Much of the current empirical research regarding the benefits of the arts for young people seems to be consistent with the context articulated by Bolton (1979). Investigations that attempt to link drama or arts experiences with academic outcomes are consistent with Bolton's conceptualization of drama as a means to the end, defined as academic achievement. Heathcote (1988) and Way (1973) espouse the benefits of drama

in a more personal context, with emphasis on the development of self-expression, human understanding, and understanding of the self.

More contemporary theoretical discourse may be found in the writing of Gressler (2002). In his book "Theater as the Essential Liberal Art in the American University," Gressler makes a case for the multifaceted experience that a student gains when participating in theater. According to Gressler, theater is the "most wholly integrated" (p. 27) liberal art due, in part, to the necessity of the theater student to integrate knowledge about others and the world into knowledge of self. Gressler notes that theater requires the engagement of all aspects of the organism, including "thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving." (p. 29) Through the various experiences involved in putting on a play, the student learns valuable lessons about self in an *enlightening* experience that is not necessarily available through other disciplines.

Gressler (2002) notes that student actors engage in self-discovery while preparing for parts in a play. The process of identifying with aspects of characters in the play leads to comparisons of self with the character and a resulting increased personal knowledge and insight. The complex processes of researching a character and integrating these understandings provides a learning experience that uses a vast range of learning processes, including the integration of the processes into one's own person (Gressler, 2002).

Gressler (2002) and other contemporary supporters of drama and arts education are finding support in the theories of Kolb (1984) and Gardner (1993). Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1984) proposes a system whereby students learn through a developmental process of: personal involvement with the construct, reflection on the

experience to find meaningfulness, leading to conclusions which guide further actions, providing additional concrete experience. Gressler applies Kolb's model to drama experience and finds a natural fit, as the drama student engages in active exploration through character development and other aspects of dramatic performance.

Arts educators have similarly been very enthusiastic about the theoretical framework proposed by Gardner regarding multiple intelligences (1993). Although Gardner posits a separate dimension of musical intelligence, he discredited the notion of an artistic intelligence. However, this proposition did not prove discouraging to arts educators, who instead found support for their disciplines in his assertion of the importance of engagement in meaningful activities. Gardner's interest in the role of the arts in human development predates his published theory of multiple intelligences, however, and he has long been proposing that the arts offer a unique opportunity for development. Regarding theater in particular, Gardner describes the most challenging goal of the actor as that of "being himself through superlative realization of other characters" (p. 331). As such, he joins the other theorists noted here in providing support for the notion of an impact on the self through engagement in theater.

This section has briefly summarized the theoretical notions articulated by some of the foremost contributors to the discourse regarding the import of arts education, while focusing primarily on discussions relevant to drama experience. While Bolton's (1979) ideas are recognized as an important framework for considering the utility of drama in the pursuit of learning goals, it is the theoretical notions of Heathcote (1988) and Way (1973) that provided a foundation for the current study.

This study was based on an interest in the contribution of theater to self-concept, rather than academic or other outcomes. The views of Way (1973) and Heathcote (1988) regarding the potential contributions of drama provide partial rationale for supposing this relationship. Each of these theorists notes that theater provides a somewhat unique opportunity for gaining self-knowledge. Heathcote implicates aspects of theater as potential tools in construction of the self and Way further articulates a process of self-exploration as the result of participating in drama.

Gressler (2002) is acknowledged as providing foundational support as well, with a contemporary model of support for drama in the liberal arts curriculum. In particular, his views regarding the facilitation of self-discovery through the process of character development provides support for the premise that self-concept is positively impacted by drama participation.

Gardner (1993) is cited in deference to his popularity in current circles of educational discussion, and the obvious potential implications of his theory for an investigation of drama and self-concept development. However, his model is mentioned here only briefly, and is not invoked as a supporting rationale for the current study due to the lack of supporting empirical data. It is noteworthy, however, to consider that his model may provide future support for this and other studies pending the establishment of construct validity and empirical support for his premises.

### Research Regarding Arts Education

Although many statements have been made regarding the importance of arts education, systematic empirical investigations supporting these claims are difficult to locate. However, a growing interest in arts education and the role of the arts in non-arts

curriculum has spawned a special interest group of the American Educational Research Association, as well as an increased interest in research efforts in the field. In 1990s the *Journal of Drama Research* was formed, and there are a number of other journals dedicated to research regarding the benefits of arts involvement within the context of education.

McLaughlin (1990) composed an annotated bibliography of major research regarding arts education. He found that there were representative studies examining self-concept and the arts, but he notes that they are few. His review acknowledges the various statements by national agencies and contributors to the field of art education, but calls for additional research supporting the claims. His *Case Statement* reflects his review of the issues and the supporting research, listing 11 points which he believes call for additional research. Point 6 states that “The arts develop self-esteem and help students gain a more positive self-concept” (p. 12).

This section will review some studies investigating various implications of arts education in order to provide some context for the current proposed research. Although the majority of these research efforts do not examine self-concept, it is helpful to review the existing literature to gain an understanding of the dimensions that have been investigated for a discussion of the potential implications for the current research. The section will conclude with a review of research specifically examining self-concept and dramatic experience.

A study reported by the Alliance for Arts Education in Maryland, (1995) provides evidence of the positive impact of the arts on student achievement. In this study it is reported that enrollment in arts courses was linked with improved test results in the

Maryland Student Assessment Program in 1993-1994. Another study linking arts engagement to academic performance is found in a report entitled *Eloquent Evidence: Arts at the Core of Learning*. This document cites results from the College Entrance Examination Board indicating that, in 1995, students who studied the arts achieved scores on the verbal portion of the SATs that were 59 points higher, and on the math portion that were 44 points higher than students who had not studied the arts (Murfee, 1995).

Research with grade school children has examined the effects of drama experiences on dimensions including social skills, language, and academic skills. In her meta-analysis of research on classroom drama, Podlozny (2000) found positive effects of drama involvement reported for six areas of language development. De la Cruz (1995) found an effect for creative drama on social skills and oral language skills of children with learning disabilities. A study by Parks and Rose (1997) investigated the effects of a drama program on the reading skills of students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and found that reading scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills improved by 3 months over the control group.

The use of creative drama in middle school was the focus of a study conducted by Dont (1992). This author examined the usefulness of creative drama as a method for improving reading scores in a population of fifth graders identified as remedial in reading. For this narrow population of individuals, creative drama did prove an effective modality to increase reading scores. Relatedly, Moore and Caldwell (1993) found that writing in a drama context produced a positive impact on the writing skills of students in the primary grades.

In younger children, Pellegrini and Galda (1982) found that kindergartners and first graders participating in dramatic play gained significantly in story comprehension

versus a control group. Pellegrini (1984) also found that dramatic play improved the ability of kindergarten and first graders to use explicit language in retelling a story.

Extending the study of arts engagement beyond the effect on academic achievement and social skills, a study conducted by Luftig (1993) claims a positive impact of arts experiences on a range of dimensions including locus of control, creative thinking, academic achievement and, most relevant to the current proposed study, the dimension of self-esteem.

One of the more ambitious attempts to generate empiric support for the benefits of arts engagement is reflected in a study based on the U. S. Department of Education National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS:88) longitudinal survey of 25,000 middle school students. Catterall and colleagues (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999) summarize the results of the analysis by characterizing the findings as providing robust associations between involvement in the arts and achievement, persistence, and attitudes. A more careful look at this study reveals some of the details of the investigation.

The Champions of Change (Fiske, 1999) project was developed in cooperation with The Arts Education Partnership and The President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. The goal was to investigate the impact of arts experiences on children and adolescents, with a primary mission of examining the impact of participation in the arts on learning. As a result of this collaboration with The Arts Education Partnership and The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, seven teams of researchers engaged in an exploration of various arts education programs through the use of diverse methodologies.

Catterall, et al., (1999) participated in this initiative as an attempt to build on previous research by Catterall (1998), finding a significant effect of arts participation on student achievement. The 1998 study by Catterall indicated significant differences in achievement and attitudes between youths having high versus low involvement in the arts. Results included the observation that differences in achievement were significant for economically disadvantaged youths, providing evidence that achievement differences are not necessarily a result of differential parental income or educational level.

In summarizing the results of the 1998 survey of national data, Catterall proposed that arts experiences contribute to the development of cognitive skills, as well as offering alternative methods of representation in accordance with the range of intelligences proposed by Gardner (1993). Catterall also posits that engagement in the arts is a means of promoting a sense of community, with a resulting positive influence on the adoption of empathy and societal values leading to adult success.

The Champions of Change (1999) initiative included a follow-up study by Catterall and colleagues designed to extend the observations to encompass students through grade twelve (Catterall, et al., 1999). A goal of this more recent study was the attempt to distinguish more intensive involvement in an art form as an additional point of data to the previously reported work that surveyed students based solely on the number of and type of activities in which they were involved. The premise of this agenda was that engagement in a select art activity could render differential effects as the data hopefully represent a deeper level of engagement.

The first major finding in this extension of the research to encompass grades 10-12, was that student involvement in the arts steadily declined during this time period

(Catterall, et al., 1999). Although the level of participation in the arts declined across this subsequent time period, the investigators found that the trend of increased achievement persisted throughout the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Additionally, an increase over time was noted in the relative advantage enjoyed by the arts-involved students. In essence, those students who remained engaged in the arts throughout high school showed significantly increasing advantages over time as measured by multiple indicators.

Catterall et al. (1999) report that there continued to be a significant effect for socio-economic status negatively impacting the likelihood of arts involvement in the later grades of high school. Specifically, the probability of being classified with the high arts students was found to be almost twice as high for students from economically advantaged families, with the complementary finding of low arts involvement occurring about twice as often for students from economically disadvantaged families. The authors note, therefore, that investigations of frequency of student involvement in the arts will be likely caused by differential family socioeconomic status.

Data yielded from these studies provided a helpful context for the current study in regards to socioeconomic factors impacting access and participation in the arts.

Additionally, it is notable that participation in the arts has been found to decline with age in high school (Catterall, et al., 1999). Factors influencing engagement in the arts are an aspect to be considered in the current proposed study. The current study focused on drama students in college. It could be inferred from data regarding arts participation that students who remain engaged in drama or other arts are in some way qualitatively different from students engaging in the arts at younger ages. This college sample was

designed to include a more select group, based on the factors that facilitate continuing participation in the arts beyond high school.

Perhaps more relevant to the current study are the examples of research that attempt to explicate the positive contributions of theater in the high school curriculum along a variety of dimensions. The impact of theater has often been described relative to personal and social development versus the development of academic skills (Heathcote, 1988; Landy, 1982; Way, 1973)).

Danielson (1992) is an example of an author who attempted to generate support for the notion that drama experiences could improve the social skills of high school students. The study that he reports was conducted at a high school in Janesville, although the author declined to give further details about his sample in the report. He did note that the town in which the high school is located is primarily working class with a low minority population.

Of the 1500 students in the high school, Danielson (1992) selected approximately 43 students via convenience sample and had them complete a pre- and post-test questionnaire. There were no data provided in terms of the condition that occurred between the pre- and the post-test administration, other than a characterization of activities as theater games. The questionnaire contained questions reflective of self-perceptions, including several questions regarding the perceived perceptions of others. Additional forms of data collection included teacher logs of observations, student interviews, and video recording during class activities. In each case, little or no information was provided regarding more specific methods of data collection.

While his findings were inconclusive, Danielson (1992) states that he did find data to support the notion that drama is effective for creating a positive climate within the classroom. The author notes that drama instruction was found to influence social skills learning, as reflected in the positive comments of students following participation in theater games. Although fraught with methodological difficulties and a lack of supporting information in its published form, this study is included here in the context of a persistent lack of rigorous research supporting the value of the arts.

Kassab (1984) engaged high school students in an intense program of drama instruction and enactments and reports a resulting improvement in oral communication skills as well as enhancement of self-esteem and self-image. Horn (1992) studied students enrolled in the *theater institute* at a New York City high school and reported that the students showed growth in self-perception and various behaviors throughout the high school year. Among the benefits noted were an increasing sense of responsibility, collaboration, and subjective sense of leadership potential.

Other authors have stressed the notion that the nature of the drama instruction is influential in determining the degree and quality of benefit derived. Burgess (1985) states that, in addition to having an experience using drama, the student must also understand what the experience means. Burgess and Gaudry (1986) also offer a descriptive characterization of the experiential benefit of drama, “Students work imaginatively and creatively from their experiences of life to create the artificial and symbolic life of the drama” (p. 17).

In 1999, Yassa conducted a qualitative study to investigate the perceptions of high school students involved in drama. The focus of the study was to determine students’

perceptions of the effect of the drama involvement on social interactions. This study was chosen for inclusion in the current review due to the relevance of social interaction dimensions to self-concept, as well as in illustrate a qualitative study that is similar in intent and methodology to the proposed study.

Research methods used in the Yassa (1999) study included interviews and observations of students from two high schools in Ontario. Purposive sampling yielded two male students, four females and three teachers. The high school populations were characterized as primarily white and working class. All participants were involved in the drama program, which was elective in their respective schools.

Open-ended interviews were conducted and followed up with probing questions to add further clarification. Each subject was interviewed once for a time frame of 30-40 minutes. Observations consisted of the author's personal reflections in response to the data, as well as notes taken during observation in class. An effort was made in the notes to describe the milieu and the social context of the drama experience. The drama experiences were described as including warm-up exercises followed by improvisation and tableaux dramatic activities.

The researcher used constant comparative analysis to identify and refine emerging categories of data during the analysis. Context analysis was used to identify themes. A case study analysis was then conducted and followed by a cross-case analysis. A number of themes were identified as a result of these analyses. A primary theme that emerged was in the dimension of self-confidence. The author states that the majority of the participants reported a positive impact of drama activities on self-confidence and self-image. Other dimensions that were found to be impacted positively by drama included

assertiveness, regulation of emotions, communication, respect for others, empathy, tolerance, and flexibility.

Yassa (1999) concludes with the assertion that the most significant finding of the study was the clear connection between learning in a drama classroom and personality development. Specifically, he suggests that self-confidence as well as interpersonal qualities were positively affected by the drama experience. In his concluding remarks, the author asserts that drama activities have the potential to yield societal benefits through the facilitation of self-knowledge, self-confidence, tolerance, and ability to work cooperatively toward group goals.

While few, there are some examples of studies that have examined the impact of drama on dimensions of self-concept. Freeman (2001) studied the effects of creative drama activities on self-concept and other dimensions of third and fourth grade children. The random sample was comprised of 237 participants that were randomly selected and randomly assigned to control versus treatment groups. The treatment condition included participation in creative drama activities one day per week, 40 minutes per session, for a period of 18 weeks. The control group participated in music classes. Students were surveyed using the Student self-concept Scale as well as a social skills rating system, before and after the application of the treatment and control conditions. Results of the data analysis yielded favorable but insignificant results for self-concept.

A study conducted by Frehner (1996) used a symbolic interactionist framework and qualitative methods to investigate the effect of drama therapy for adolescents. Although the researcher did not specify and specific methods to assess self-concept, the evaluation of personality functioning and other dimensions was characterized as

indicative of identify formation, and therefore may be viewed as relevant to the current study. The author concluded that drama therapy was revealed as a *powerful tool* for addressing difficult personal issues of adolescence. It must be noted that drama therapy is quite different in scope and intention that the related academic domain of drama and theater. However, given the paucity of relevant research regarding drama and self-concept, this study is mentioned as potentially relevant.

In conclusion, it is noted that there continues to be a lack of systematic research investigating the potential benefits of engagement in the arts. Specific research examining the impact of theater involvement on self-concept is rare. Of the studies that have been contributed, there are criticisms regarding their rigor and the justifiability of their conclusions. One noted contributor in the field conducted a survey of available empirical support for the benefits of the arts in education and concluded that, despite the numerous claims of academic achievement boosted by the arts, valid bases for these claims were often hard to substantiate (Eisner, 1998). Based on his identification of methodological flaws and findings that he deems “statistically non-significant and...educationally trivial” (p. 10), Eisner call for continued investigation of the benefits of arts engagement, noting that such findings need to be predicated on sound theory providing rationale and explanation for the findings. The current study is offered as a contribution to this body of research.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This chapter will provide a detailed description of the context of the research, the selection of participants, and the methodology employed. The methodology utilized was that of a comparative case study, with the interpretation influenced by ethnography and phenomenology, therefore these qualitative traditions will be discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of standards of quality, including issues of validity, reliability, and ethical standards.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the nature of the experience of participation in theater as it relates to self-concept in college students. It is hoped that this study will contribute to existing bodies of research regarding the influence of drama and other arts on aspects of student development and achievement.

#### Research Questions

The guiding research question for the study is “How do late adolescents/young adults understand the experience of their participation in theater relative to their developing self-concept?” Subsidiary questions include:

1. What is the understanding of college students regarding the nature of self-concept?

This question was designed to provide a foundation of shared understanding prior to beginning the discussion of self-concept. As noted earlier, there are numerous definitions of the term self-concept. Therefore, it might be assumed that individual

participants may vary in their respective conceptualizations of the topic. Therefore, each participant was asked to describe self-concept, to relate the construct to a self-definition, and to discuss any other pertinent issues that emerged as they considered the term.

The resulting discussion and subsequent questioning were conducted in an open-ended fashion in order to maximize the freedom of each participant to respond in the manner most reflective of individualized ideas of importance. Relevant issues that emerged in the discussion were discussed as appropriate with follow-up questions.

## 2. What is the role of theater in the self-concept of college students?

The intent of this study is to gain an understanding of the participants' perspectives regarding the contribution of their theater experiences to their knowledge of themselves. Therefore, discussion focused on the ways in which the participants believed that theater experiences provided a unique opportunity for gaining increased self knowledge. While no previous research studies were identified that specifically support this view, the speculation of arts educators and others regarding the various contributions of the arts led to a reasonable expectation of an impact on self-concept. Discussion with the participants in the context of their various theater-related experiences thus provided an opportunity to investigate the proposed relations between theater and self-concept.

### Research Design

The investigation was designed as a comparative case study, augmented by interpretations consistent with the traditions of ethnography and phenomenology. It was felt that a blending of these typologies would create a context that would yield the most descriptive accounts with the greatest opportunity for a rich analysis. The influence of the various approaches on the data collection and analysis will be discussed below. The

following section provides a description of qualitative methods, focusing on the particular approaches to be invoked.

### *Overview of Qualitative Methodology*

According to Rossman and Rallis (1998), qualitative research can be characterized as naturalistic, interpretive, emergent, and evolving. Additionally, these authors note that qualitative researchers use multiple methods while conducting research in a context of respect for the humanity of the participants. Marshall and Rossman (1999) offer a general characterization of qualitative research as “a broad approach to the study of social phenomena” (p. 2). Miles and Huberman (1994) note that qualitative approaches have been the basis of research in some fields of social science, and they observe that qualitative methods have experienced a significant increase in application in recent decades.

Traditionally, qualitative researchers have engaged in inquiry described as naturalistic as they observe participants in the natural environments in which the phenomenon to be studied occur. Miles and Huberman (1994) further note that qualitative researchers tend to seek a *holistic* view of the context involved, and that the internal perceptions of the individual are a focus of study through attentive and empathetic data gathering. Data analysis is described as emergent with the outcomes being characterized as “A source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). Helpfully, those authors also note that data are most often found in the form of words.

The focus of the current study is a phenomenon that is inextricably interwoven with individual perception and interpretation. Although the development of self-concept

may follow a somewhat predictable path as detailed in the literature reviewed, the integration of various experiences as they contribute to self-concept is a rich and varied process. As such, it is best captured in terms of the significance attributed by those engaged in the process. Additionally, the stage on which the current investigation is set provides a rich tapestry of potential metaphor and meaning-making for those engaged in theater arts. The current study will attempt to invoke the essence of qualitative methods, allowing meaning to emerge through the perceptions and interpretations of the participants.

Creswell (1998) provided a typology for the characterization of various methods of qualitative research, describing five traditions that can be viewed as emerging from distinct and diverse disciplinary perspectives: biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Perhaps rightly so, Creswell makes the case that qualitative research has historically suffered from a lack of systematic approaches, leading to confusion and lack of clarity among those attempting to characterize and systematize their methods of research. His five typologies have become a useful tool of researchers in the qualitative paradigm to articulate the unique attributes of the various methods employed in qualitative research.

### *Case Study*

A case study is described by Creswell as an exploration of a case or cases “over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of data rich in context” (p. 61). Creswell describes a case study as a system bounded by time and place and with the case as the subject of study. The role of the researcher includes compiling a detailed description of the case and conducting an analysis of themes (Creswell, 1998). In

the current study, I gathered and analyzed data on four individuals, representing four distinct cases within the context of the theater department at a university. The study was bounded by the experiences of the participants during a period of time spent as a student enrolled in this university.

The study constituted an interpretive case study (Merriam, 1998), in that the focus of inquiry was the perception of the participants regarding the influence of theater involvement on self-concept. Inductive means were used to determine the meaning of theater engagement as experienced by the participants, including the notions of *how* and *why* theater involvement impacts self-concept (Yin, 1994). Additionally, the study offered the potential for comparison across cases, as the participants were selected to reflect a diversity of experiences and perspectives.

### *Phenomenology*

According to Creswell (1998), a phenomenological study “describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (p. 51). Creswell notes that a central theme in phenomenological inquiry is the search for the underlying meaning of the experience, while the investigator endeavors to set aside all presuppositions. Accordingly, the data collection in the current study was focused on obtaining rich, thick descriptions of the lived experiences of the participants, as well as the meaning ascribed to them. Therefore, the interviews were conducted in an informal and open-ended structure, as I attempted to encourage the participants to expound on issues of meaning as they emerged. The subjective experience of the participants was, therefore, granted the highest regard.

### *Ethnography*

As described, the study also invoked methods derived from the ethnographic research tradition. Ethnography is described by Creswell (1998) as “A description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system” (p. 36). According to Creswell, the focus of study of an ethnography is the pattern of behavior of a group, considered within the context of the culture of the social or cultural group. Observations of the norms and social structure of the theater department yielded the impression of a somewhat unique social and cultural dynamic existing within the group. It was felt that the idiosyncratic features of context provided a foundation for the experiences of the participants that was unique and significant. Therefore, while approaching the context as an outsider, I engaged in numerous and varied observation activities designed to garner impressions regarding the cultural features of this context.

These observations included attendance at numerous performances and productions, as well as informal observations while traversing the halls in the theater department or waiting for a production to begin. For example, it was observed that faculty in the theater department maintain an informal relationship with students. Observations of the interactions occurring between faculty and students during informal occasions yielded a greater understanding of the dynamic that emerged as a key idea in participant discussions. In addition, aspects of the context were integrated throughout discussions with the participants, in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the meaning attributed by participants to experiences as embedded within the environment. It was very helpful to have the observations as a context for understanding the perspectives

raised by the participants about this element of context. As a result, the defining features of the context are considered in the data analysis.

### *Investigator's Position*

I have been teaching college for the last nine years. I find that I am invested and engaged in witnessing the process of self-development in which my students are engaged during the time that they are in college. My passionate personal and professional interest has always been in the area of self-concept development. When I began using theater students in a collaborative effort to provide experiential learning opportunities for the students in the program in which I teach, I found that I was even more enamored of this group of students. In fact, I find that I am incurably curious about them.

While I do not mean to stereotype, it seems to me that theater students more willingly defy conventional norms regarding dress, appearance, and behavior. During my observations in the theater department, there appeared to be a unique culture in place. This caused me to wonder if theater students engage in the process of self-concept development in any unique or distinctive ways, as a function of the unique context of their lifestyle in theater.

The stage is a potent metaphor for me, and I relate to the notions of false and possible selves. The opportunity to actively craft one's self is of great interest to me. The notion of doing so while engaged in acting out characters, playing parts, donning costumes and masks, appeals to my curiosity as well. I entered the research with the desire to understand how these activities contribute to the students' developing sense of self. I wondered if false, real, ideal, and possible selves assume a certain salience for them.

As an occupational therapist, I am invested in the aspect of meaningfulness of activity. In regards to theater, I am interested in the potential meaning of engagement in theater activities as occupation for these young people. In particular, I hoped to gain some understanding of what the experience means to their development of self-concept.

Additionally, it is relevant to note here that my background includes a master's degree in clinical psychology with many years of relevant experience in counseling and psychiatry. This experience contributes to both my knowledge base and my interest regarding the psychological aspects of self-concept development. In addition, my counseling background heightened my awareness of, and attention to, the emotional aspects of self-concept development, especially as related to the individual interview process.

Although I realized that reflecting on aspects of one's self-concept and development might cause an emotional reaction in the participants, I felt confident that my experience and training would facilitate my ability to respond professionally and appropriately to any such reactions. In fact, several instances did occur where participants revealed emotionally sensitive and evocative material within the context of the interviews. In these cases, I provided emotional support as indicated, while endeavoring to redirect the discussion to the structure of the research interview.

In one such notable instance, Kate revealed to me some details regarding a prior suicide attempt. While maintaining my role as research interviewer, I offered supportive statements such as one might do when conducting a therapeutic counseling session. Following her accounting of the suicide attempt, Kate was easily redirected to continue the research interview. Recognizing that the date of the interview coincided with the one-

year anniversary of the suicide attempt, I asked her some questions at the end of the interview in order to determine her current emotional state and her resources for coping with potential emotional consequences. Her responses assured me that she was prepared to cope with the pending anniversary date.

### *The Research Context*

Consistent with the ethnographic approach to qualitative research, the salient aspects of the cultural context must be viewed as a backdrop for the research. As described by Bogdan and Biklen (1998), an ethnographic approach places the investigator initially in the stance of an outside observer. As such, the researcher may observe behaviors and discourse that is not understandable until the researcher is able, through shared experience, to engage with the participants in their unique context, to participate in constructing a shared understanding of the meaning of the aspects of the context.

In order to garner additional information regarding the context, I engaged in various observations of theater activities on a formal and informal basis. The focus of my observations included such features as the dress, hairstyles, conduct in the classroom, interrelationships among peers and faculty, and expectations for assumption of roles beyond those typically expected of college students. Therefore, an understanding of the elements of the specific cultural aspects of the setting of the study is an essential foundation for beginning the research. As noted, I engaged in observations of various aspects of college theater activities to provide an avenue for engaging the participants in discussion of the culture. In addition, the observations provided additional data regarding the sociocultural features of this context.

The study was conducted within the context of the Department of Theater Arts at Metropolitan University. Metropolitan University is a comprehensive university emphasizing undergraduate education. The university is located in a suburb of Baltimore, Maryland and boasts a current enrollment exceeding 12,000 students. Although the primary mission of the university is to provide a comprehensive, liberal arts undergraduate education, there are a number of Masters degree programs as well as a fledgling number of emerging doctoral level programs.

The Department of Theater Arts at Metropolitan University offers a major and a minor in theater, and provides a choice between specialization in acting, design and production, or general theater. There are no auditions for the major, distinguishing this program from others that require a competitive process for admission. In addition to requirements for the theater major, this liberal arts institution requires completion of a number of general-education courses representing various disciplines.

Students in the theater major are required to complete activities to support the production of plays, in addition to the coursework requirements. Therefore, students must engage in crew work for productions to earn required credits. Additional opportunities are available for stage managing and directing. The departmental website describes the major as “time-consuming and physically demanding.”

Productions are usually held in the main-stage theater, which holds several hundred seats, or a smaller studio theater that seats only about 150 patrons. There are typically four main-stage productions each academic year and a total of 10–15 studio productions. In addition to formal main-stage and studio productions, students are offered the opportunity to participate in a social action theater group, and various projects

interfacing with the campus and the larger community, such as the Theater Project of Baltimore and the Maryland Arts Festival.

Students audition for parts in Metropolitan University productions in a competitive, yet cooperative, atmosphere. The theater department requires all majors to participate in a large audition where each student prepares a monologue to present. This audition process adopts the term *cattle call* used by professional performers when referring to open auditions. All faculty who plan to direct plays for the upcoming year attend the auditions to select the cast members. In addition, other faculty often attend the auditions, offering feedback regarding cast selection.

The audition process was described by students and faculty as a cooperative process with dual goals. Although it was acknowledged that faculty directors seek the talented students for their respective productions, students and faculty stated that the intent was to provide acting opportunities for as many students as possible, as well as to distribute the most talented actors among the various productions. Therefore, casting decisions are typically made as a group among the faculty directors, who discuss the relative merits of each student throughout the audition process.

#### *Participant Selection*

The strategy used for participant identification is referred to as purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998) and is identified as an appropriate method for qualitative inquiry. The methods invoked in purposeful sampling involve the selection of participants likely to yield the most descriptive and informative data. Since the goal is to gain understanding and insight relative to the identified topics, the selection attempts to target participants from whom the most can be learned (Merriam, 1998).

In the current study, the sampling may be further characterized as utilizing maximum variation, as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Use of this strategy implies efforts to maximize the diversity of the sample in order to “represent the widest possible range of the characteristics of interest for the study” (Merriam, 1998, p. 63). In this study, recruitment of participants was conducted with the goal of achieving the greatest variation possible, within the selected context of a university theater department. Students of both genders are represented, and efforts were made to select participants of varying ethnic and racial backgrounds, age, and experience. This selection process was also designed to optimize the opportunity for comparison among the participants, facilitating the use of a comparative case study approach (Yin, 1994).

It is important to note that there is a valid assumption of developmental differences across the college career of the typical undergraduate. To this end, a priority of the sampling process was to include students at different points in their college education. However, it was decided that freshman students would not necessarily have gained enough experience in theater to provide the descriptive and informative data being sought. Therefore, it was decided to limit the sample to sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

The study was designed to include four students who identified themselves as theater majors at Metropolitan University. Consistent with the goals to gain the most descriptive and informative data while representing maximum variation, the participant selection process progressed in the following manner. Contact was made with various members of the theater faculty, requesting names and contact information of theater majors with a potential interest in participation in a research study. Faculty members were not given any additional information about the study, but were asked to provide the

names of students who were active in theater activities and who demonstrated a fair level of potential for insight and reflection. The goal of obtaining a diverse mix of gender and ethnicity was communicated to the theater faculty.

Two faculty members responded, after several reminders, with e-mails listing the names of students whom they identified as potentially willing to participate. Contact information, in the form of phone numbers or e-mails, was not consistently provided, but were available through the campus network. All students on the lists were contacted initially with a brief e-mail or phone call, requesting students to participate in a study of theater majors. No information was given about the study beyond the statement that approximately three interviews would be required.

Screening interviews were set with the first ten students who expressed interest via e-mail or phone message. Eight of the ten students followed through by maintaining contact and showing up for the screening interview. Therefore the pool of potential applicants at the time of screening equaled eight. Screening interviews lasted from 30 minutes to one hour and were designed to identify students who were willing to participate in the elements of the study, as well as to assess those who would offer the most diverse representation of perspectives for analysis.

Screening interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews began with a brief statement regarding the general goals of the research. Students were then questioned regarding their history of involvement with theater, the range of theater activities in which they had participated, and their future plans. Although the screening interview always covered these three areas, other topics were explored as they arose as I deemed relevant.

At the conclusion of the interview, students were given more information regarding the study, including my intent to observe study participants throughout the process of production of any plays in which they were acting at the time. Students were thanked for their time and informed that they would be contacted with either a request for participation in the study or with a statement thanking them for their time, but excusing them from the study. It was explained that all aspects of participation were entirely voluntary and that participation, should they choose to engage, could be terminated on their request at any time. Each screening participant completed the Human Subjects Informed Consent Form and was given a copy.

Following completion of the interviews, the transcriptions were reviewed in an attempt to identify individuals who could offer diversity, as well as a rich perspective through the interview process. Summary data regarding the participants were reviewed with a peer group of research students and feedback was requested from the dissertation committee members as well, regarding strategies for maximizing diversity among participants. One factor of consideration was the involvement of participants in current productions, offering opportunities for multiple avenues of observation and additional data gathering. Another factor included the follow-up efforts of the potential participants and the ease of maintaining contact with them. For example, several students were inconsistent in responding to researcher contacts. These students were eventually excluded out of concern that their unresponsiveness was possibly indicative of an ambivalence regarding participation.

The results of these considerations regarding participants yielded the participant pool of three males and one female. One of the males identified himself as African

American and one of the males identified himself as Jewish. Two of the participants were graduating seniors, one was a junior, and the final participant was a sophomore. All were acting in at least one play during the semester of interviewing and all reported that they would be very open to observations during rehearsals or performances as needed.

All selected participants appeared quite open to the interview process. They were each easily engaged in conversation and offered information freely regarding the topics discussed. Of the four participants and the multiple interviews involved, on only one occasion did a participant fail to attend a scheduled interview. On every other occasion, participants arrived on time, if not early, to the interviews.

Interviews were usually held in my office since the space represented a quiet place where interviews would be undisturbed with no chance of being overheard. However, on three occasions, it became necessary to interview participants in another location. In each instance, the location of the interview was changed because the participant noted difficulty finding the time to come to my office. It proved to be difficult to find undisturbed space in the theater department, although I was eager to accommodate the participants by meeting them there. Meeting in the theater department also provided additional opportunity for informal observations of the setting.

On one occasion, I met with John in the costume shop in the theater wing. This was the screening interview, and the setting proved to be challenging. Although the costume shop was a small room with a door that could be closed, the interview was interrupted several times by students attempting to access supplies or to ask John a question. About ten minutes into the interview, the choir began rehearsing a boisterous number in the adjoining room, adding a high level of noise distraction. John seemed to

take these disruptions in stride, laughingly assuring me that it was “business as usual” in the theater department. On another occasion, John’s busy schedule necessitated meeting him again in the fine arts building. This time we spent about 20 minutes traversing deserted hallways late in the afternoon searching for an open classroom in which to meet.

On one other occasion, I met Larry in the theater department for his screening interview. He had assured me that he was aware of a classroom that would be unoccupied at that time where we could meet. It turned out that the classroom was small auditorium where several other informal student activities were taking place in various corners. Nevertheless, we found a vacant corner in which to conduct a hasty screening interview. It turned out that the level of activity in the room, while distracting, prohibited anyone from overhearing our conversation.

#### *Time Frame*

The sample selection for data gathering in this study was further bounded by the time frame over which the study was conducted. The selection of a single semester to bound this case study was based on the assumption regarding the typical nature of the time frame chosen. Thus, as stated by Merriam (1998), a sample may be selected for its ability to reflect typical instances of the phenomenon under study. In this case, it was supposed that a single semester would represent a time frame that is typical in some ways of the preceding and the succeeding semesters in the life of a college theater student.

However, data collection continued beyond the initial planned boundary of a single semester. Although the interviews with two of the participants were completed during this time, interviews with the two remaining participants extended beyond the time frame. In the case of John, due to his busy schedule, two interviews were conducted

in the summer months following the interview semester. It proved necessary to schedule the final interview with Larry in the fall semester following the initial spring semester interviewing time frame.

### *Data Sources*

As planned, the primary strategy for data collection was a semi-structured interview process. According to Merriam (1998), interviewing is the technique of choice when gathering data on a small number of cases in an intensive case study. The flexible nature of the semi-structured interview was deemed appropriate in that I was looking for unique and individual responses to situations. A total of four to six interviews were proposed for each participant. The final number of interviews per participant ended up ranging from three to six. The variation in number of interviews occurred due to several factors, including scheduling considerations as well as the depth of responses that various participants provided to the interview questions. In each case, interviews continued until I determined that sufficient data had been accumulated to assume saturation. A protocol of potential interview questions was developed as a guide for inclusive and exhaustive interviewing surrounding the ideas of interest. The overall research question and the sub-questions provided the foundation and the rationale for the interview questions. However, the interviews were conducted in an emergent fashion, allowing for subsequent questions and sessions to expand on key ideas as they arose. In this case, the model of the probing question was invoked, with questions formulated during and following each interview as an avenue to follow up on important ideas as they arose (Merriam, 1998). Sample questions are provided in Appendix A.

Due to the necessity of grounding the investigation in the subjective experiences of the participants, individual interview sessions provided the foundation of the data collection for this study. However, in order to provide additional background regarding the context, data collection included observation of participants in various settings related to their theater involvement at Metropolitan University. Accordingly, I conducted observations of productions and rehearsals for productions, as well as informal observations while in the theater building.

During observations, I was attuned to the elements of the context that may influence the experience of the participants, in particular as related to their understanding of themselves and their self-concept. While conducting observations, I maintained an objective stance, sitting on the periphery of the activity and minimizing any interactions between the participants and myself. This stance was assumed, in part, to assure the anonymity of the participants. In addition, the observational perspective allowed me to focus on gathering and recording observations, rather than distracting myself or those engaged in the activity. However, despite my efforts, there were many occasions where I became involved in interactions with individuals in the setting, including faculty and students. Although the students and faculty were aware of my status as a researcher in the context, I did not divulge any additional information about my agenda and kept the conversations confined to neutral or incidental topics. During the observations, I attempted to retain my focus on gathering observations as a tool to increase my own understanding of the context, including its cultural features. Data gathered and questions raised during these observations were then addressed in subsequent interviews with participants when appropriate.

During observations, I took detailed notes regarding the features of the setting, the interactions that occurred, the actions and statements of participants, and my own thoughts and reactions. My focus on recording observations and reactions meant that I was virtually writing the entire time that I was in an observational setting. Since I always sat in the back or periphery of the activity, I managed to remain unobtrusive. Taking notes regarding observations was difficult during productions, since the lights were down. Therefore, I tended to confine my writing to the time before, after, and during breaks of the performance. Although this behavior may still seem to have posed a distraction to the environment, I found that other students were often in attendance at the various activities, engaged in taking notes as well. Therefore, I was often just another person jotting down notes during an activity.

I ended up including many of my thoughts and reactions along with the observations within the observation log. Maxwell (1996) refers to these research tools as analytic memos, and he notes that these memos provide an avenue for reflection and analytic insight. In my case, I found it most useful to record my reactions in the context of the observations, following up afterward with additional reflections.

#### *Data Base/Management*

The resulting database was comprised of transcriptions of tape-recorded interviews, along with field notes from observations, and a personal log of reflections and recollections garnered during the process of gathering data. The observation/personal log also served as a repository for recording emerging questions, and reasoning processes relevant to the analysis of the data. Analysis of data from observations and interviews

commenced with the initiation of data collection and proceeded throughout the data collection period in a process of “constant comparative analysis” (Merriam, 1998, p. 41).

### *Data Analysis*

As stated, I engaged in analysis of emerging key ideas throughout the course of the data collection in order to remain cognizant of the issues and topics that emerged as significant throughout the process. As key ideas or issues were recognized or articulated by the participants, I made notes reminding myself to explore further these key ideas with each of the participants in subsequent interviews. In this manner, I refined my own awareness of the themes of importance and structured the interviews to maximize opportunities for saturation of data collection along those themes.

Following the recommendation of Bogdan and Bicklen (1998) for new researchers, I reserved my most intensive analysis until the completion of the data-gathering stage. I engaged the services of an individual to type the transcriptions of all of the interviews, although I conducted accuracy checks frequently throughout the process. Following the completion of the transcription process, analysis commenced using the strategy of analytic induction, as described by LeCompte and Preissle (1993). Accordingly, the process involved “scanning the data for categories of phenomena and for relationships among such categories, developing working typologies and hypotheses on examination of initial cases, and then modifying and refining them on the basis of subsequent cases. (p. 254)

The overall procedure I followed in analyzing data is summarized in Table 1. After the completion of all transcripts, I listened to the audiotapes while reading the transcriptions. This step was taken for the purpose of checking accuracy, as well as to get

an overall sense of the key ideas with the benefit of the voice tone and emotional quality present in the interviews. The process of analytic induction guided my initial identification of categories of phenomenon and the potential relations among them. Accordingly, I identified the key idea of each section by conducting a line-by-line analysis of the text. I constructed a code to reflect the primary idea and wrote a note in the margin noting the code for each line of text (See Appendix B).

Upon completion of the initial reading, I reviewed the key ideas that I had noted in the margins and adopted a uniform code name for each key idea that occurred across interviews. For example, all participants discussed the phenomenon of typecasting, although they did not necessarily use the same terminology or focus on the same meanings associated with the concept. However, I chose to code discussions consistently regarding this topic as typecasting.

The next step of the analysis consisted of compiling a typed list of all coded key ideas that emerged in each interview arranged by participant and labeled by page number so that I could readily locate that section as needed. In this listing, a code was listed each time it appeared, in order of appearance. In this way, I could begin to see which key ideas emerged most frequently. After compiling the initial list, the key ideas were reviewed again, sometimes by referencing and re-reading the corresponding transcription, as I endeavored to collapse key ideas that seemed appropriate to group together.

Collapsing key ideas into sub-types, sub-themes and themes progressed according to the strategy of axial coding recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967). During this step of the process, I reflected upon the key ideas identified within each case, attempting to collapse ideas that seemed to reflect variations of a broader idea. In this manner, I

created categories of key ideas that were more inclusive. Key ideas that emerged as particularly pervasive and significant to the participants were identified as sub-themes.

Upon completion of the process of identification, coding, collapsing, and consideration of key ideas, I began to write an analysis of each case in terms of each of the identified themes, sub-types, and sub-themes. The process consisted of isolating which key idea arose in various sections of the interviews and integrating the discussion regarding each key idea into a narrative analysis of the treatment of the key idea by each participant. Although time-consuming, I found that constructing a narrative analysis of virtually every key idea that arose facilitated my analysis of the meaning of the key ideas as articulated by the participants and as related to my research questions.

After the comprehensive narrative analysis of key ideas, categorized by participant, I was able to determine the relative importance of the various key ideas as related to the research questions and the theoretical foundation of the study. I then collapsed key ideas into sub-themes, sub-types, and themes, further refining the list. From there, I spent a lot of time reading, re-reading, and reflecting on the narratives and the themes, sub-themes, sub-types, and key ideas as I considered their relevance and meaning in terms of my research questions. The literature review and supplementary theoretical background material were read once again in order to solidify the foundation for the continued analysis of the primary themes, as related to the research questions. Meanings emerged as the interviews were found to yield content that either supported or did not support the concepts of Mead (1934), Harter (1999), and Gressler, (2002), in particular.

Throughout this immersion in the data analysis process, I remained alert to ideas that arose as significant across cases. In an iterative process, guided by the theoretical

foundations and the questions guiding the research, I identified the primary themes. Primary themes were identified as the key ideas that appeared to be the most significant in the experiences of the participants, as well as the most relevant to the research questions under investigation. This process yielded the primary themes of motivation for theater engagement, the social features of theater engagement, and the influence of theater activities on self-concept (see Table 1).

Table 1

### Step-By-Step Process of Data Analysis

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#### Sequential List of Data Analysis and Coding Procedures

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Review of audiotapes while reading transcriptions

Line-by-line identification of key ideas

Construction of code to reflect key ideas

Notation of appropriate code in each line of text

Review of code for key ideas as noted in margins

Identification of consistent codes for identification of same key ideas

Compilation of list of all coded key ideas for each case and corresponding page number

Axial coding and collapsing of key ideas into more general categories

Identification of pervasive and significant key ideas as sub-themes or primary themes

Case-by-case narrative analysis of each identified sub-theme and primary theme

Reflection on sub-themes and primary themes in relation to research questions

Identification of themes through iterative process guided by research questions

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The remaining thematic material was either re-classified as sub-types of the primary themes or designated as idiosyncratic sub-themes, relegated to the case summary chapters. For example, although Kate and I engaged in a lively discussion of her costume for a production, that data did not appear to provide support or disconfirming evidence for any of the primary themes identified. In another example, John engaged in a lot of discussion about his role as director of a production during the semester of interviewing. This discussion was interesting and I facilitated it during the interview, since I thought that it might prove relevant. However, the analysis process deemed it relatively insignificant in the context of the research questions and the narrative was not included in the final analysis of the primary themes, as discussed in Chapter 8 (see Table 2).

Table 2

Example of Data Analysis Regarding Themes, Sub-Types, Sub-Themes, and Key Ideas

Key Idea	Sub-Theme	Sub-Type	Primary Theme
Boundary between self and character	N/A	Character development leads to self-reflection and awareness	Influence of theater on self-concept
Experience of racism	Experience of exclusion	N/A	Theater as community

Accordingly, the structure of the following chapters provides an in-depth exploration of the key ideas and subthemes of each participant, followed by a chapter analyzing the patterns across cases relative to the three primary themes. Therefore, Chapters 4 through 8 offer an idiosyncratic analysis of each individual case. Within each chapter, relevant background and details regarding the participant are revealed to provide a context for consideration of data related to the research questions. Key ideas, sub-types,

and sub-themes are identified, as well as data elements contributing to the identification of the three primary across-case themes.

The individual case chapters are followed by Chapter 8, which describes the patterns that arose across cases, resulting in the identification of the three primary themes. This structure was devised in order to grant sufficient importance to the idiosyncractic sub-themes that were not included in Chapter 8. Although data analysis yielded three primary themes, I felt that it was important to retain the presentation of the unique aspects of each case. Further, in the spirit of qualitative inquiry, I hoped to provide a picture of the individual participants as a context for understanding the significance of the primary themes, as well as a means of highlighting the idiosyncratic ideas that each identified as meaningful.

As noted, construction of Chapter 8 commenced with the integration of content from the case chapters surrounding the primary themes as follows: motivation for engagement in theater, the social features of theater engagement, and the influence of theater engagement on self-concept. Similarities among the experiences of the participants were identified, along with an analysis of the suggested meaning of the recurrence of the theme across cases. Differences between cases were highlighted as well, with special attention paid to information that was viewed as disconfirming. In a qualitative study of this type, relying on data from a small number of cases, disconfirming evidence is viewed as particularly significant, as they provide an essential perspective and minimizes the risk of faulty assumptions based simply on the confirming evidence.

Finally, the theoretical perspectives that provided the foundation for the research were integrated into the cross-case analysis chapter, as each theme was analyzed regarding relations to the primary theories identified. In some cases, I found that I needed to expand my review of theoretical notions that proved more significant than I had initially thought. In addition, I found that I needed to search for new literature regarding two themes that emerged unanticipated (ie: motivation for theater engagement and theater as community). That literature was then integrated into various chapters of the final document as descriptive or instructive regarding the emergent themes.

#### *Use of Observational Data*

Throughout the semester of interviewing and beyond, I engaged in a number of observation activities designed to supplement the data gathered through interviews. I made it a point to observe each of my participants on at least three occasions outside of interviews. I observed each participant in a formal production and I observed each participant in at least one rehearsal setting. Other opportunities for observation arose before and after performances, before and after rehearsals, and during breaks in performances and rehearsals.

As a result, I observed numerous plays and rehearsals and began to feel quite at home in the theater wing. The students, faculty, and department chairperson also became aware of my role of researcher and I was consistently greeted and welcomed by them. Due to the time spent in the building, often waiting for an event to commence, I was able to view the bulletin boards announcing auditions, results of auditions, newspaper articles about productions and actors that I knew, and various other notices that added to my understanding of this context.

Although I gathered copious notes throughout this process, as I began the data analysis it became clear that these data were neither amenable nor appropriate to include in the analysis procedure. It became apparent that my research was almost exclusively reliant on the views and perspectives of the participants. Reflective of the phenomenological influence on this study, it was the meaning ascribed to the circumstances by the participants that created the actual unit of meaning for analysis. Therefore, my observations alone, did not add data to the research except as interpreted through the meaning ascribed by the participants. Therefore, it became apparent that the observations were useful primarily as an avenue for familiarizing myself with the context and providing shared experiences to explore through the interview process. Thus, it was determined that the observational data gathered were not an appropriate source of data to be coded and analyzed in the process that was completed for the interview data.

That being said, the observations were extremely important, in my view, in terms of my ability to establish rapport, as well as shared ground, for discussion. For example, my observations of the dynamics between cast members and with the directors provided the foundation for a branch of questioning along those lines within the interviews. Likewise, my observations of the social interactions and the community atmosphere that exists within the theater department provided numerous opportunities for perpetuating discussion of that primary theme with the participants. As a result, that data provided an invaluable education regarding the context of the experiences of the participants and facilitated the knowledge to conduct informed interviews.

### *Standards of Quality*

Issues of reliability and validity must be addressed in qualitative as well as quantitative methods (Merriam, 1998). As stated so eloquently by Miles and Huberman (1994), “Qualitative analysis can be evocative, illuminating, masterful-and wrong” (p. 262). At times, the language addressing standards of quality may appear unique to qualitative methods. Terms such as soundness and trustworthiness are used to frame the discussion of the study and reflect, in essence, questions of reliability and validity.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to this process as establishing the *truth-value* of the study. Credibility, according to Lincoln and Guba, is established in terms of the extent to which the participant of study is accurately identified and described. To that end, I attempted to gather and report data about the context of the investigation via multiple observations in addition to questioning of the participants. Efforts were also made to provide a rich description of the data gathered in order to assure that the participants were extensively described and presented.

### *Validity*

Maxwell (1996) identifies three types of validity of particular concern to qualitative researchers. The first threat to validity occurs relative to the description, with the potential result of inaccurate or incomplete data. As noted by Maxwell, as well as Lincoln and Guba (1995), the validity of the data analysis is fundamentally dependent on the accuracy and completeness of the data description. Use of transcriptions of audio data is a primary strategy to confront this potential threat. In this case, accuracy of the transcriptions was significantly enhanced by the use of a digital audio-recorder and transcription software. The audio-recorder produced clear and audible sound recordings

that were saved to my computer and burned onto a CD. Transcription devices included a foot pedal and software for controlling the rate of the audio for ease of typing.

Validity may also be compromised if the investigator makes the error of imposing her own interpretation of events, rather than focusing on meaning as attributed by participants (Maxwell, 1996). This threat to validity was countered primarily by my awareness of the potential for making this mistake. Therefore, I consistently endeavored to refrain from guiding the interviews toward my own interpretations, and attempted to remain focused on the perspectives of the participants.

The most serious threat to validity, according to Maxwell, is the potential for the researcher to neglect to consider discrepant data or alternative explanations. This occurrence may manifest as researcher bias, whereby the researcher selects data, albeit inadvertently, that fits her preconceptions or the existing theory. Along these lines, I feel fortunate that one of the participants provided an alternate view of the benefits of theater. I was aware of my inherent bias toward assuming a positive impact on self-concept through theater engagement. Therefore, it seemed helpful to have John's comments that appeared to dispute the claim. His views added a very welcome perspective to the analysis.

Although it does not qualify as discrepant data, it seems appropriate to add here the fact that I was unprepared for the extent of Larry's focus on racial inequities within the theater department. I had attempted to recruit at least one minority student, with the view that such an individual would provide added perspective on the topics of interest. However, I have to admit that I did not think further about what issues might arise specific to someone of minority status prior to engaging in the interview.

After conducting numerous interviews where the cohesion of the department was stressed, I felt surprised when Larry immediately identified racism as his dominant issue within the department. However, while I did not have any forethought regarding how this issue might fit with my research agenda, I encouraged him to share his experiences and the meanings he attributed to them. He was clear that this was the most important personal issue for him as a theater student, and I was very pleased to have an additional perspective. However, I will admit that I was also disturbed by the key ideas of bias that emerged.

As noted by Maxwell, it is not the intent of qualitative research to attempt to standardize the researcher to achieve reliability. Instead, it is prudent to examine the values and potential biases of the researcher as they may impact on data collection and interpretation in order to achieve a fully informed interpretation. A strategy for approaching this task is for the researcher to note potential biases and to create a proactive plan to deal with them in the process of the research. Therefore, my position is described elsewhere in this chapter as a context for understanding the interests that I brought to the study.

Reactivity is an additional issue identified relative to qualitative research (Maxwell, 1996). This term is used to refer to the effect of the researcher on the context of the study. Although quantitative research generally invokes strategies to control for this type of bias, qualitative approaches, once again, seek to understand and use this phenomenon, rather than to eliminate it (Maxwell, 1996). While reactivity may not prove a viable threat to observation (Becker, 1980), in the case of interviews, the centrality of the interviewer to the evocation of participant response proves to be an unavoidable

influence. It is suggested that the interviewer attempt to avoid leading questions and to engage in reflection regarding the nature of the influence exerted by the individual interviewer (Maxwell, 1996).

To this end, I attempted at all times to structure the interview questions in an open-ended manner. At the same time, it was often necessary to modify my interview style to accommodate the response style of the various participants. John, for example, often responded to questions in a brief and pragmatic manner. I found that he needed encouragement to elaborate, but that he was quite amenable to that encouragement. Ian and Kate were quite forthcoming, in contrast, and often tempted me away from my line of questioning by providing tantalizing glimpses of introspection regarding topics that were actually rather peripheral. I soon found that I needed to refocus both them and myself during their interviews, in order to avoid going too far afield. Nevertheless, in all cases, I attempted to remain objective and to look for the meanings attributed by the participants to their experiences.

Triangulation is another strategy mentioned by Maxwell (1996) and others (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The term typically refers to the use of various methods and sources of data collection. The gathering of data from varied sources is intended to counter any validity concerns arising from biases associated with any one method. In this study, I had planned to gather observations in various contexts in order to provide additional data for analysis. As explained in a prior section, the observation data, while crucial to the study, were not used as data for analysis per se. Instead, the observations provided essential information about the context of the study. Although not directly contributing to theme identification

and analysis, these data did provide an alternate vantage point from which to consider the data collected. Therefore, the observations did strengthen the research design and alleviated some concerns regarding validity.

### *Reliability*

The notion of reliability refers to the extent to which it can be expected that results of observations will remain consistent across researchers or across a period of time when gathered by the same researcher. According to Bogdan and Biklin (1998), qualitative researchers approach reliability in terms of the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the data. In this context, reliable data constitutes an accurate representation of what was observed in the field, and are not expected to remain consistent across researchers or across different observations. However, in the current study, it is important to acknowledge that I collected all data and observations. Therefore, the issue of consistency across researchers was not relevant. Additionally, data was not expected to remain consistent across instances within this qualitative design. Rather, it was hoped that data would evolve in a cumulative manner, enlarging and expanding on previous accounts. With each successive interview and observation, I became more immersed in the context and rapport with the participants was strengthened.

Miles and Huberman (1994) describe several strategies for enhancing reliability or dependability in the context of qualitative methods. They suggest that the quality of research questions, a clear definition of the researcher's role in the setting, and an articulation of basic paradigms and constructs play a role in the dependability of results. Additionally, they note that data collection needs to occur across an appropriate range of settings and respondents, as suggested by the research questions.

It is felt that quality was achieved through the application of each of these strategies in the current study. The research questions were devised in collaboration with the dissertation committee. I was careful to clearly define my role. The theoretical basis for the study as well as the primary constructs utilized were carefully articulated throughout.

### *Ethical Standards*

Ethical considerations for the current proposed study will be discussed in the framework of Miles and Huberman (1994), who have provided one of the most comprehensive discussions on the topic as it relates to qualitative methods. An ethical issue identified by Miles and Huberman concerns the worthiness of the project. As pertains to the current study, a case can be made that an increased understanding of the self-concept of adolescents and young adults is a worthwhile and necessary contribution to the literature. As noted in the literature review, the study of self-concept has evolved greatly over the decades, becoming only recently more systematized. Qualitative studies of depth and rigor are lacking in the field, and the addition of this research to the ongoing quantitative approaches is both pertinent and important.

Informed consent is an issue of ethics, according to Miles and Huberman (1994). In the case of this study, Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from the University of Maryland, College Park, and Metropolitan University. A portion of the application process required the drafting of a letter and procedure for informed consent of participants. The dimensions of confidentiality and anonymity, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994), were addressed in the Institutional Review Board application process as well. Although anonymity could not be provided, as I was obviously aware of the

names of the participants at all stages of the study, precautions were taken to assure confidentiality. The identity of the participants was known only to the examiner and to two graduate students who completed the transcription. The graduate students were required to sign a statement informing them of their obligations to maintain confidentiality regarding all aspects of the data. All data were stored with care, with steps taken to assure that no one else had access to any written or auditory material.

Potential harm or risk to participants is perhaps the most important issue of ethics in this, as in any research inquiry (Maxwell, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the case of the current study, as presented in the IRB approval documentation, there was no apparent potential risk to participants of this study. It was anticipated that issues that are personal or sensitive to the respondents might arise, and, indeed, they did. In fact, issues of the utmost personal nature arose during some interviews. In those cases, the interviewer relied on her extensive experience in providing emotional support for psychological and emotional issues. In the most dramatic example, one participant shared information about a prior episode of depression that resulted in a suicide attempt and hospitalization. During the conversation, I realized that the anniversary date of the attempt was drawing near. Aware that such anniversaries may provoke difficult emotions and serve to be a very stressful time, I carefully questioned the participant about her emotional status regarding the anniversary. Although this may seem to be outside the parameters of the role of researcher, it happened that I have professional experience dealing with these issues and felt comfortable handling it. In this case, the participant was able to assure me that she was seeing a therapist with whom she had good rapport, that

she had an intact support system in place, and that she was aware of and emotionally prepared for the anniversary.

### Summary

In summary, this chapter provided an overview of the methods used to frame the current study. An overview of qualitative methods was provided, with the articulation of the traditions selected to guide the current study. The parameters of the study were defined, including the context, time frame, and participant qualifications. Procedures used for participant selection were described, followed by a detailed account of the methods used for data gathering, data management, and data analysis. Finally, standards of quality were reviewed, including issues of validity, reliability, and ethical standards.

## CHAPTER 4

### IAN, DO YOU LIKE ME NOW?

The premise regarding the potential impact of theater engagement on self-concept is supported in discussions with Ian. In fact, he characterized theater as “all about fixing yourself.” Noting that the first positive outcome of his own theater engagement was the adoption of a “niche” within the theater community, Ian indicated that the provision of a supportive social context was an important prerequisite for the self-exploration and self-development to follow. Additionally, he noted that the social support of the theater group in high school ameliorated some of his prior feelings of alienation.

On entrance to college, Ian found that the social community was recreated, assuming even greater levels of intimacy and connection. Within this supportive setting, he found that he was able to embrace the self-exploration opportunities that arose in the context of the academic courses and play preparation. As a result, he expounded on the resultant gains in his self-confidence. Comparisons of his reaction to performances across his years in the program provided Ian with a context for measuring his relinquishment of his “obsession” with acceptance.

However, indicators of his continued reliance on peer acceptance remain. Although Ian identified the inherent aspects of theater that prompted his involvement, he continued to evidence a preoccupation with garnering approval from an audience, as well as from his social context. His dependence on theater as a ready context for the establishment of friendships is apparent as well. In fact, Ian claims that he “does not know how” one would make friends without that context.

However, Ian's case represents an insightful glimpse into the self-reflective processes of a young adult. His professed interest in self-examination and his enthusiasm for the interview process yielded data from which to draw conclusions and inferences. Additionally, his perspective supports the central premise of the research.

### Background

Ian was the only participant to initiate discussion about the community in which he was raised. The culture of this neighborhood suburb and the social influences within the schools that he attended appeared to influence his sense of self as an adolescent. He appeared to experience this insular community as constraining and rejecting. He reports a resultant feeling of alienation in middle school that left him feeling isolated and hopeless.

Ian grew up in suburb of Baltimore that is populated by predominantly Jewish individuals. As Ian stated, "Like every Jew in the entire world, they're in New York, they're in Israel, or they're in P-----. And New Jersey." He described a close-knit community where he went to preschool, elementary school, and high school with the same people. According to Ian, this community demonstrates a "small town way of thinking" where "everyone knows everyone else's business." He further characterized the community culture as "close-minded" and "oppressive."

The effect on Ian was that he felt bound by the persona that he established early on. As he stated, "If you're not cool, you're progressively not cool and you stay not cool. There's no possible way you can get cool." In fact, Ian apparently found the climate so uncomfortable that he felt desperate and depressed by the time he reached high school.

As he recalled:

And it was an oppressive place to grow up, but at some point, probably in high school, after just years and years of just, I mean, middle school was just, I was

this close to just jumping off a bridge and slitting my wrist at the same time. It was just ridiculous the amount of abuse that was there.

It seems that Ian was facing feelings of social isolation by the time that he reached high school. Although he did not elaborate on the “abuse” that he experienced, his description reveals a young boy facing the experience of being ostracized from his community. Additionally, he related that he felt unempowered to do anything to alter the situation. Therefore, it appears that he experienced reinforcement through the social connections and the audience approval associated with his foray into the realm of theater.

#### Initial Interest in Theater

It seems that Ian’s interest in theater was triggered by several factors. Influences included his inherent interest in the venue, his apparently unfounded assumption that he was an “amazing actor,” and the reinforcement that he felt as he became involved in performance. These experiences coalesced to foster an interest that evolved into a passion.

Ian reported that he began to be seriously interested in theater during high school. Although he explained that he had “some interest” in theater prior to that time, he noted that it was in high school that he experienced a more strong desire to become involved. While stating that he “could never possibly explain” his very early interest in theater, he described “this odd, unexplainable draw to theater since I was like three.” He explained, “Because I was brought up, you know, movies, watching TV and that stuff. I guess I just wanted to be a part of that somehow.”

An influence on his interest in theater seems to be his perception that he was good at it. Although he noted that he had not really had the experience to warrant that

assessment, he had somehow gotten the impression that he was a good actor. As he stated:

I've just always had it in my head that I'm an amazing actor . . . once I got older I realized like, that was so unfounded, because I'd never done theater in my life . . . I just kind of went through this . . . assumption that I was really good at it.

Ian did admit that he was involved in one or two plays in his synagogue in second or third grade, although he described them as “really bad” and does not seem to think that his assessment of his acting prowess arose from those experiences. Nevertheless, he remembered that he felt as if he “had done theater” as a child and had some aptitude in it.

When reflecting on what aspect of acting is the most engaging for him, Ian identified the laughter and attention that he received from the audience. While he admitted that the audience attention is reinforcing, he appears to be somewhat ambivalent about acknowledging that as a primary motivating factor. For Ian, acting solely for the attention of the audience is an “empty” pursuit since an actor has no real relationship with the unknown audience, who is “going home after the show.” Therefore, acting must hold some other inherent rewards for him, with the audience appreciation to be viewed as a “fringe benefit.” As he explained:

The audience still loves me, so it's nice . . . I like the attention . . . that's not the whole reason I did it, because, you know, that would be really empty and stupid . . . it's a really nice fringe benefit . . . It's got to be more than that. It can't solely be that because that is just empty. I mean how would . . . how would 500 people who have no idea who you are coming up to you saying you did a really great job, that's great! I'm absolutely flattered by that. I'm thoroughly grateful for it. I just, I feel like, what's your relationship with those people beyond that . . . do you really know them at all? They're going home after the show. They're not, much beyond, you did a really great job, I was really impressed with you. Where's the conversation going to go beyond that? It's just, existing solely for, for the love of people, and for the love of the audience, probably isn't the best way to go about it. And in some ways I just, it's just, it's not everything. It's a fringe benefit.

As he reflected further, Ian stated that wanting people to like him was a strong motivating factor influencing his pursuit of acting. In addition, he identified the desire to “impress people.” In fact, a venue for impressing people and getting them to “like” him assumes even more import when he revealed that he hadn’t felt anyone had “cared about” or “even noticed” him previously. Having acknowledged the difficulty in achieving a “cool” persona after having established an “uncool” one, Ian seems to have found that his acting prowess gained him a change in status among his peers. As he stated, even those who had known him for a long time, seemed to express a positive shift in their opinion of him after seeing him in a play.

And I definitely, I *definitely* got into theater because I wanted people to like me, and enjoy me, impress people and stuff, because I want to impress people and I want people to like me. Yeah, 'cause I hadn't, I hadn't felt like anybody really gave a s---, or I hadn't felt like anybody liked me, or cared about me, or even noticed what I was doing. You know, and the fact that you had a audience full of people that completely notice you, and completely were nice to you and people in your classes that had been making fun of you for 10 years coming up to you afterwards and saying "Hey man you did a really nice job."

While the personal motivation of achieving attention and positive reactions from the audience and his peers seem to be primary motivators for Ian’s involvement in theater, he did identify another engaging aspect. Although he did not emphasize it, or mention it beyond this one instance, Ian did identify a desire to make an impact on people through his acting work by inspiring them to think a bit differently about the world and their actions. As he stated, “I like to make people think and I like to make people scared . . . scary like making people stop and think about what they do, and making people take a closer look at their world.”

In summary, it seems that several features inherent to acting influenced Ian’s initial involvement in theater. Apparently, some intrinsic features of acting called to him

in a manner that he could not necessarily explain. Also inexplicable is his assertion that he was an “awesome actor,” in light of the fact that he had no prior experience. While his initial childhood acting experiences were apparently not very reinforcing, Ian remained involved long enough to discover the pleasure of the attention from an audience.

Although he resisted classifying the audience accolades as a major influence, it appears that the laughter and attention do represent a meaningful aspect of the experience for him. For Ian, theater offered a forum where he could impress people and garner their attention and respect.

#### Experience at Metropolitan University

Although Ian chose to attend Metropolitan University, there were apparently other options open to him, including attendance at a conservatory. While he was quite definite that he would pursue theater, Ian chose the less competitive and possibly less prestigious school. However, his choice served him well as far as casting opportunities, allowing him many opportunities to appear in productions.

Ian stated that his choice to attend Metropolitan was based on his perception that the school had “a very good reputation” but that it did not have a “conservatory feel.” He expressed concern that the intensity of a conservatory would not be as “fun” and that “they would rip you apart” in that setting. Ian added that another incentive was a scholarship that he was offered by the chairperson of the theater department at Metropolitan after he observed an audition of Ian’s at a high school theater festival.

He appears satisfied with his choice, relating a very positive perception of the university and his experiences. Ian noted that the developmental progression of the coursework facilitated his ability to grow and to learn. Having weathered the initial

“weeding out” process, he progressed through the subsequent steps toward the attainment of performance success.

### Plans Following Graduation

Like other theater students interviewed, Ian expressed concern regarding the viability of a future career in acting. While observing that he is involved in a vocation that he “loves,” he noted that “alright, this is all cool and everything and you love theater and you love doing all this stuff, but you’ve got to make money somehow.” Although he appeared to hold some skepticism about his paying job prospects, Ian maintains a fantasy of his perfection situation, explaining:

You know my ideal situation with this would be . . . you know . . . working in this nice artistic little off Broadway theater . . . work that, to me, says something that I want to say or does something that I want to do . . . something like that.

In fact, one reason that Ian is considering a second major in English is to provide a backup career as an English teacher “if the whole theater thing does not pan out, which I’m hoping it will.”

The perpetual anxiety regarding career options arose at one point when Ian was discussing his jealousy about several peers getting a great acting opportunity while still in college. Although the individuals were some of his closest friends, Ian appeared somewhat dismayed to find that he harbored such jealousy about the opportunity that they received. While he admitted that he felt guilty about his feelings, he also felt that he “can’t help” but feel jealous as he thinks about the boost that such an experience would add to one’s career potential. As he explained:

It’s something that would have been a good experience. It’s something that would forward your freaking career like performing at the Kennedy Center in college. That’s ridiculous. Like, some actors do not get to perform at the Kennedy Center after 30 years. Like, it’s like, it’s an amazing thing to be had at this stage and I

can't help but feel slightly guilty of it, or jealous of it. There's that constant nagging thought of why couldn't this be me? You know, why couldn't I have gotten this kind of an opportunity? And I guess, that's shitty in a way. Because that's just utterly, utterly selfish. But, Like, there's a definite part of me that's like, why were they have chosen to do all of this? I was just like, there's still a part of me that's just like, I want to go to the Kennedy Center and get a good job and get lots of job offers and go have dinner with Joe C-----. Like, it's just one of those things that's you see all of these people doing it and I guess the success in this business is so uncertain at moment-to-moment.

In fact, as he continued to reflect on his reaction to this incident, the depth of his pessimism about successfully getting a job in theater is revealed. As he stated:

Theater is not a major where you're going to end up with a job at the end. You know, or anything like that. You just, and you see other people really succeeding and going somewhere and you can't help but be jealous. Because when you get out of here, what the f--- are you going to do?

Although Ian related a very positive attitude about auditioning for parts as a student, the anxiety that he experienced about employment after graduation appeared to conjure a darker side. Although he articulated a back-up plan in terms of a second major, he manifested a level of acerbity when faced with his skepticism regarding his future as an actor. In fact, his concern over this issue raises feelings of jealousy and bitterness directed at even his closest friends. Apparently his anxiety is not assuaged by his relative success in the college context.

### The Theater Community

#### *Theater as Family*

As noted with all participants, one of the most pervasive themes to emerge when talking with Ian about his experience of theater is the importance of the community that evolves among theater students. Having experienced periods of isolation and loneliness in the past, the communion engendered within the context of theater involvement represented a significant avenue of social support for Ian. His articulation of theater as

such a significant influence on his social adjustment lends support to the guiding premises of this investigation regarding the importance of this activity for self-concept. This section will explore the meanings that Ian attached to the social aspect of his theater engagement from high school through college.

Initially, it was in his school environment, where the “close-minded” and “oppressive” community left him feeling unnoticed and uncool, that Ian discovered a welcome “niche” among the artists. For him, this context offered him a place to feel supported and able to “find” himself. As he recalled:

I kind of felt that in high school and middle school and elementary school that I did not really have a place, my little niche, so to speak . . . I love being in an artist community. It gave me the ability to find myself and be around people who supported me, as opposed to just tearing me down . . .

This experience was apparently perpetuated for him on entering the theater major in college. Ian identified “friendship and community” as the primary areas of meaning for him, associated with being a theater major at Metropolitan. For him, “nearly all” of his friends emerged from this “big family.” In fact, he referred to this “really tight-knit group” as “one big collective friendship.” As he described:

What does it mean to me? It means, well, one, friendship and community. Those are big things. I mean, nearly all the friends that I’ve really made here have definitely been through theatre. All the friendships, you know, they’re there and it’s great and you get closer to each other as you go along just because you’re all there in this process and if you don’t, if you’re not immediately at the same place as someplace else...you can either ask somebody else who’s above you for advice or you know, or somebody below you, you can kind of reminisce and be like, oh, I remember Acting II. Just, there’s always some way of relating to somebody. And, it provides me with community.

A factor contributing to this community atmosphere seems to be the experience of spending a lot of time with the same individuals and getting to know them in various ways. As Ian explained, “We all hang out a lot. You end up working with the same

people. You end up getting to know a lot of the same people in different ways.” In fact, in terms of spending a lot of time together, Ian stated, “Most of us have no other social life beyond this.” This characterization seems to arise from the fact that theater activities consume a lot of time for theater majors. Ian explained that theater majors are often involved in various aspects of play production throughout the evenings and weekend hours, limiting the opportunity to engage in social activities in other contexts.

For Ian, the community aspect of theater serves to support his love of the art form. He credited the “dedication” to the community as a factor influencing his “dedication” to his “art.” The enjoyment of sharing theater with a group of individuals that share values, morals, and interests further reinforces his commitment to acting. As he described:

I mean, as much as I want to say that I’m dedicated to my art, it’s a lot easier to be dedicated to your art when you’re dedicated to your community. It’s a lot easier to be dedicated to anything when you’re dedicated to the community because you have that group of people that have sort of the same values and the same morals or interests or whatever. Just being around them keeps you that much more in it. If they’re positive people or you enjoy being with them or enjoy working with them or something. It makes the enjoyment of your art that much better. I mean, the enjoyment of your art would be there regardless, otherwise, there’s no point in doing it because you’re just selling yourself short to get some friends. But like, its, when you’re in a community that’s into it as much as you’re into it, it’s just a great place to be and makes you that much more committed to what you want to do.

Therefore, it seems that, theater has served as a social support for Ian ever since finding his “niche” among those students in high school. Embracing the socialization accompanying this big “collective friendship,” Ian finds that he rarely socializes outside the theater context. However, he does not appear to find the experience lacking, noting that he enjoys the intensity of time spent with this “family,” finding that the experience reinforces his dedication to the “art.”

*Comparing Relationships In and Out of Theater*

Like other participants in the research, Ian holds the view that the community culture of the theater department is somewhat unique among other majors on campus. Comparing the theater culture to other student groups appeared to reinforce for these participants the value that they ascribed to the connection that they felt within the group. Although the participants' observations of other student groups and majors were relatively uninformed, they appeared to garner support for their case from comments made by other students. In addition, Ian and other participants often remarked that their experiences in other classes led to their view that the theater department was more cohesive.

In particular, Ian characterized the theater faculty as more "caring" than faculty in other departments. In fact, he related the view that many students outside of theater feel "disillusioned" and out of touch with their instructors. Additionally, he articulated his perception of friendships among non-theater students as less intimate due to less time spent getting to know each other. As he observed:

Everyone talks about how much more caring it is in the theater department than other departments on campus. In other courses it is a matter of "I just go in and do my work and just leave and no one really cares." But here there's just, you're in an entire place where the teachers really care about you and want to see you succeed. And you're there with students who are just generally really cool and supportive and working with them, you get closer to everyone. I've talked to a lot of disillusioned, disillusioned people since I've been here. People who have come to our department and been like, "I do not understand this. My teachers do not even know my name and you're all like best friends with your teachers. What's going on"?

Drawing conclusions from his general observations and his experience in his liberal arts courses, Ian related, "I know people but I don't know them on that intimate

level of the theater department where . . . we've been with the same people for four years." As a result, he assumes "college must suck for other people."

In particular, Ian was interested in the comparison between the theater community and fraternities and sororities. Voicing a fairly scathing critique of these insular communities, he articulated his insight that he is applying a bit of a double standard in this regard. However, the fact that Greek Organizations typically charge various fees for membership facilitates his continued characterization of his own group as superior. He explained:

If I think about it, I always rail against these fraternity or sorority people because I'm just like you guys have your friends right there, you do everything with the same people. You have to buy your friends. And I'm sitting there going like "dude, you're doing the exact same thing, you're just not paying for it."

While he acknowledged that shared experiences may occur within other majors on campus, he still believes that theater offers a unique level of cohesion due to the number of and nature of the interactions. The amount of time spent together as well as the experience of seeing his peers at the "peak" and their "low points" contributes to the enhanced intimacy among this group. As he reflected:

I've been blessed because . . . I've always had theater . . . it's always been a community that's been there for me. And, I think a fraternity and a sorority kind of works in the same way where as instead of working together on a personal level or on a theatrical level, it's a community of people that just takes you in. And you soak that up and you soak it up socially and you whatever else they're willing to give you. And you make your friendships out of the community because you have that common bond because of the community.

And you've seen them all and they're at their acting peak and their personal peak and at their personal low and their acting low. You know, you've been around them so much and you have such a social life that surrounds them so much that you know the people and you know everyone in the department . . . But I think in other departments, it seems to me from the classes I take, I'm just like, how do people know each other. How do people get to be friends outside of this? Like, how does anybody get to make friends from their major? It just seems ridiculous to me . . .

In addition to the cohesion he attributed to the social network as a whole, Ian characterized the friendships and relationships formed within theater as “deeper” than those outside the realm of theater. He described his own pattern of friendships since entering Metropolitan, noting that it has been “hard” for him to maintain friendships with students not engaged in theater. Specifically, Ian seems to find his theater friendships to be more satisfying than the more superficial interactions with peers who happen to live in the same dorm. As he observed:

I made a lot of friends from my floor that I lived in . . . But . . . it’s hard to keep up with them, because . . . you’re all kind of there because you haphazardly live together . . . It’s not a matter of like a really deep friendship . . . it’s not the type of relationship where I could really open up and lay it all out to someone who’s on my floor. It’s just more of a relationship of, oh, we’re all on this floor together, so let’s hang out and you know, whatever, see movies or do whatever at some point.

Likewise, Ian has friends on campus that he knows from high school. Although he has spent time with them, he continues to draw a distinction from his theater friends. By way of example, Ian noted that he hung out much more with his best friend from high school in his freshman year at Metropolitan, seemingly only because he did not know how to meet anyone else. As he recalled:

We hung out a lot more in my freshman year. The first semester before I really I got into theater department. We hung out a lot more than we do now. Like, just cause, neither one of us had any idea, you know, how to meet people or how to have a social life or whatever.

As previously noted, Ian relies on the structure of the theater major as a ready context for forming his friendships, admitting that, “I don’t know how you go and get friends other places. That’s a foreign concept to me.” Nevertheless, while Ian stated that he has gained “most of my amazing friendships in my life through theater” he conceded

that he does maintain some friendships outside of theater. In fact, he seems to value the ability to avoid being too “immersed” and losing the ability to talk about “anything except theater.”

For Ian, the essential prerequisite for relationships appears to be the existence of shared interests and a feeling of connection. Although Ian is apparently able to experience these connections with others, he continues to maintain a belief that theater majors are somewhat distinct, and perhaps misunderstood by others. However, he acknowledged that, once he begins talking to people, that belief is “gone.” As he explained:

I still keep up with my friends. We still reminisce about the good old’ days. Talk about movies. Talk about the new Radio Head album or whatever. We still have things to connect with. It’s not so immersed in my life that I, you know, can’t relate to anybody about anything except theater. I mean, I certainly hold conversations with people about stuff. But, you know, it’s the primary thing in my life and in a lot of ways, I think like, if there’s not kind of a something that I can connect to other people that I’m talking to about it, you alienate them a little bit. There’s definitely that feeling that I do not want to talk to that girl. She does not understand anything about music or theatre or blah, blah. It’s going to be weird. There’s definitely that, that thought that, you know, oh my god, no one’s going to understand me. I’m a freaking theater artist and no one understands that because they’re all business majors or something like that. There’s always that thought in the back of your mind. But once you really get talking to people, it’s gone. But nonetheless, I still have friends outside of theater.

Therefore, it appears that Ian views the theater context as unique due to the unusually close relationships formed there. The degree of significance that the social network holds for Ian is evident as he described the community is a “blessing” and admitted that he wonders how anyone could even make friends without such a structure. In fact, it seems that he holds the view that this level of support should be the norm, relating that the notion of having to make friends without that social network seems “ridiculous.” Although he maintains friendships outside of theater, noting that he can talk

about other topics, he indicated that he feels most safe in the network of peers to whom he can truly relate.

### *Experiences of Exclusion*

Although Ian has characterized the theater community as a “big family,” indicating that everyone is unconditionally accepted, there are indications of feelings of exclusion arising among theater students at times. Some theater students have indicated an alternate view of the dynamic, refuting the claim of “one big family” articulated by Ian. Additionally, Ian indicated that he has felt alienated at times too. Although he placed the responsibility on the individual to manifest one’s own perception of the communion, he admitted that feelings of alienation and subsequent anger arise for him when he is excluded from certain opportunities in the department.

For example, Ian noted that the feeling of community is something that evolves as students progress in the program, and is not necessarily immediately available to freshmen. He noted that his freshman year was “kind of hard because there’s kind of that weirdness like I’m intruding or start inserting myself into a place where I’m not wanted.” Although he did not expand on this idea, he did say that he feels more sensitized to the experience of freshman as a result of his own feelings of being unwanted. As a result, he noted that he and his friends make it a point to welcome freshman and “try to be as inviting, definitely as inviting as we can.”

The discussion then turned to the fact that not all students interviewed had expressed the perception of a “big family” among theater majors. In reacting to this information, Ian defended his own perception of universal acceptance, while stating that he is aware that not all students share his perception. While acknowledging that some

students may feel like they do not “fit in,” he eluded to feeling similarly at first, as noted in previous comments about his freshman year. Ian indicated that he was able to “make his own way” by being “friendly,” but he added the caveat that, “it’s not my place to be offering other people solutions because the solution that works for me is not the solution that works for everyone.” Instead, he referred to the process of gaining inclusion in the social network as an “individual journey” that is “not for everyone.” As he explained:

I think to me, I feel like, everybody’s accepted there. I definitely know that’s not the case being on the other side of that. I know there are people who feel like they just do not fit in. And there is no real way for them to feel like they fit in. I, I definitely feel bad for them. But I can only, I think I can only answer for me and really make my own way. I mean, I, my way is not somebody else’s way. Like I, my way of getting in and getting friendly, it isn’t universal. It’s so personalized. It’s your own individual journey.

Returning to his own social philosophy, he affirmed that he tries to be nice to everyone in the theater department, going out of his way to initiate interactions with someone that he even “halfway” knows “even, you know, hang out with them and make plans with them.” In fact, it seems that Ian’s view is that the social context exists as “one big family” as long as one holds the perception that this is so. Additionally, he seems to be sensitive to any inference that he is not open to interacting with everyone, explaining:

I’m not a snob in the least. I’m like, the more the merrier. Like, just, I’m all about having people around and having new people and you know, when the freshman class comes in the fall, I’m like, ooh, new friends, new friends. You know, it’s nice. To me, it’s like one big family. I never see anyone as an outcast, per say. Having been an outcast, you do it to yourself, more than anything else.

It seems, therefore, that Ian prefers to maintain his perception of the community within the theater department as supportive and inclusive, regardless of contradictory information from other peers. When faced with evidence of alienation among theater peers, he appears to distance himself from the phenomenon, placing the responsibility on

the individual. Additionally, he seemed to hold no insight that a task of the community is to foster cohesion among the disenfranchised. As far as he is concerned, he does his part in welcoming everyone and, therefore, the community is one big family for him.

*Play as Mini-Family*

Within the theater department as a whole, there arise smaller cohesive social groups in the context of a given production. These smaller community contexts are described as even more cohesive. The heightened sense of intimacy and connection among these individuals both adds and detracts from the overall sense of cohesion within the larger context of the department. As Ian reflects, the communion of the cast may serve to strengthen the connections within the group, while producing a degree of alienation from those not in the play.

As Ian explained, “Plays kind of function as mini-families within the overlaying family of the theater department . . . and that’s in and of itself its own little tight-knit group.” The import of the social context of theater to Ian as a structure dictating the formation of relationships is apparent when he talks about being involved in a play with someone that he does not like. Apparently, for Ian, the context of play as a mini-family has served to facilitate his own relationships with people that he initially disliked. It seems that the shared experience of being in a play together can cause Ian to experience people differently and shift his initial perspective to a more accepting one. Offering his assessment of the phenomenon, he noted that “the thing is, you are able to get close enough to people to realize that . . . they are human beings.” As he reflected:

When you're in a show with people it's impossible to not at least feel somewhat connected to them, even if you completely hate the people . . . Like, honestly at the end of the show you'll be hugging each other and talking about how much fun you had during the show. The thing is that you met a lot of great people, you had

fun with a lot of great people. You started off thinking that everybody was a complete a----- and your perception completely changed.

On the converse, Ian noted that not being among the cast of any particular play could result in a feeling of disconnection and not belonging. He described his feelings of alienation, and even depression, that arose when he was not in the cast of a large main-stage play that included his closest friends. Although he was a member of the lighting crew, therefore in attendance for many of the rehearsals, he continued to feel as if he was “not a part” of the experience that his friends were having. As he recalled:

When I was working lighting board for *Servant*. Um, it was just depressing. Because the show was just f---ing amazing. And it was, the cast was made up of like every single one of my really good friends and people that I just genuinely have fun with. It was kind of a tease. It was kind of like you’re a part of this, but you’re really not a part of this. And that pervading sense of you’re really not a part of this was really evident to me. Because the cast had this entire bond that was, while you’re their friends, you’re not an immediate part of that cast. And right now, in the middle of that show, that cast is a family. A f---ing like tight knit unit, period. And it’s not a matter of them not liking you. It’s a matter of they’re tight. They’ve been through nine weeks of rehearsal together. They’re inseparable at this point. Like, and it’s just, it’s, it was sad to me to be watching that much amazing work with that many of your close friends and knowing that you were not a part of it at all. And that was just depressing.

It seems, therefore, that Ian’s sense of acceptance and social confidence is influenced by his level of involvement in a given production. Specifically, his self-concept appears to be affected by aspects of his theater engagement, with the potential for a negative emotional response when not cast in a given production. Therefore, although Ian characterizes the camaraderie among the theater majors as a positive influence, it appears that the same dynamic can negatively affect self-concept.

#### *Faculty in the Family*

Ian included theater faculty members in his characterization of the family. Like other participants in this study, Ian identified a level of interaction and caring between

faculty and students that appeared to set this department apart from others. However, perhaps because the boundaries are more permeable in this culture, he identified the power of faculty to influence his experience significantly, either negatively or positively.

He identified faculty attitudes as “caring” and as supportive of the community. He observed that the “faculty really want everyone to succeed” and “don’t give up on anyone, even if they should be given up on.” In particular, he said that it was important to him that faculty are so open to talking with him. In Ian’s experience, he was able to schedule meetings with faculty without any specific agenda and without concern for the time frame. As he described, “Like, if you feel a need you can totally go and schedule a meeting with a teacher and just talk to them about nothing for God knows how long.”

There was one faculty member with whom Ian identified a particularly significant relationship and high degree of positive regard. Ian described Peter as “amazing,” “brilliant,” and the “nicest man in the world.” He described feeling “so comfortable” with Peter, while acknowledging that he “will push you.” Ian further described him as “so positive it’s ridiculous” and noted “when I go into his office, I leave beaming. He makes you feel so good about yourself. He is a great director.”

While faculty members can contribute positively to the community nature of theater, Ian noted that a faculty member could have a significant negative effect on the community as well. He related an example of a particularly negative production experience for him that he attributed directly to the director’s inability to establish cohesion among the cast. Evident within previous dialogue is the importance that Ian places on connection among the actors. Therefore, one might predict that it is seen as particularly grievous to him when a director interferes with that process. As he explained:

The problem that I have with Diane as a director and I don't mean to talk to shit, but she, she does not do a good job of creating an ensemble in her cast. She just doesn't. She, if anything, makes cast relations horrible. Like, there's, there's something to be said in casting the person that will do the best job for the ensemble instead of necessarily doing the best job for the part. And she just has no concept of that. She does not create a cast of people who want to be together. They create a cast who are just volatile individuals with drama who all just want to get onstage and steal the show.

It appears that Ian counts on faculty directors to provide him with attention and acknowledgement as well. In the following anecdote, he revealed his anger with Diane for not giving enough attention to him and to his role. He recalled:

But it's just like, you don't feel appreciated for it. And it's not even the part. It's the fact that you don't get in her rehearsal process. She basically believes that the people with huge parts get their scenes worked to no end and you, you get on stage and I've got my two lines and I know I f---ed them up every night because I have no idea what I'm doing because she's given me no direction and it gets to a point where it's like, ok, um, is there any reason I'm sitting here for four hours to say two lines that you obviously do not give a shit about? It's, it's, just really disconcerting.

Therefore, it appears that the level of attention and feedback that he gets from the theater faculty also impact his self-concept. Additionally, the faculty director influences his enjoyment of his experience in a production. Once again, Ian indicates that his self-concept is reliant on a sense of caring, connection, and support from members of the community. While it is natural to feel more supported in this type of an environment, Ian evidences some difficulty integrating disconfirming evidence. In fact, he appears to become angry and resentful as a result. However, continuing his pattern of maintaining his superficial assessment of the context, he describes all faculty in positive terms, while subsequently articulating examples that both support and negate the characterization.

## Production Preparation

Various aspects of production preparation were discussed as relevant to self-concept. Thus, the views of Gressler (2002), regarding the influence of these activities, were explored. This section will describe the perspectives articulated by Ian regarding his experience in auditioning, typecasting, separation of self and character, and the process of *getting into character*.

### *Auditioning*

The process of auditioning and casting can represent an important aspect of the theater experience for many student actors. All of the theater majors interviewed and observed during this study indicated that getting cast was paramount to the experience of success in the program. While grades and coursework was almost never mentioned, the process of auditioning and casting was a frequent topic of discussion among the participants. In addition to providing an opportunity for feedback regarding one's talent for acting, experience in productions provided a chance to prove oneself and to gain items to list on a resume.

Therefore, it was noteworthy that auditioning and casting did not constitute a significant amount of the discussion during interviews with Ian. He explained that he has been consistently cast in productions each semester beginning in the spring semester of his freshman year. Although this chapter previously mentioned incidents of feeling "left out" of a play and a community theater opportunity, these incidents did not come about as the result of an audition process. When Ian was not cast in a production it was usually because he was in another play that overlapped in scheduling. Therefore, he did not have

much to say about the experience of not getting cast. In fact, he did not engage in conversation about the experience of getting cast either.

However, there was one exception where Ian did mention an audition experience. He described a negative circumstance that occurred as he engaged in the process of auditioning prior to coming to college. Apparently, Ian's assessment was that he performed a "really bad audition" at another school prior to coming to Metropolitan. He explained that he felt unprepared from his high school experience, where auditions were handled quite differently. In particular, he noted that he did not have a good understanding of how to choose a monologue to "show off my good points."

As a result, he recalled, "They wrote me this whole letter about how I shouldn't act, do not act . . . it was pretty bad. It was really awful." Although the negative tone of the rejection letter was quite upsetting to Ian, he appeared to feel somewhat mollified by his subsequent success in the program at Metropolitan, musing, "Sometimes I . . . wonder if U--- people come to see this show?" It seems that Ian wonders if the college would evaluate him differently now if they saw him acting in a play at Metropolitan.

As noted, Ian has been cast in a number of productions since he came to Metropolitan, stating, "I auditioned for everything because I knew from high school that the best way to make friends and get into the department is to do stuff." As a result, he related that he has gotten cast consistently each semester, including small walk-on parts in student directed productions as well as significant parts in main-stage plays. Ian joked that he was "the running sight gag of how to succeed in business without really trying," apparently indicating that he achieved this frequency of casting without much effort. However, he did then acknowledge that his casting success is also a reflection of his

“drive” to be involved. While still attributing some of his success to “luck,” Ian identified qualities of his “work” that are “good” and takes a bit of credit in that regard. In addition, he identified that being “a nice guy” and demonstrating “professionalism” contributed to his casting success. As he described:

I got in and started auditioning and eventually people picked up on me and I got lucky. My work’s consistently good, I think, and I try to be a nice guy, try to do my work, try to be as professional as I can possibly be and I guess people know that and cast me from that point.

Although he seems to remain fairly humble about it, frequent casting is the aspiration of all student actors. While joking about “not really trying,” Ian articulated an insightful and appropriate strategy for successful auditioning. As a result of his efforts, he enjoyed the most frequent level of casting success among the participants interviewed. It seemed therefore, that Ian’s positive attitude, good work ethic, and possibly a smattering of “luck” converged to create a climate in which he appears to be thriving.

### *Typecasting*

Typecasting was a key idea that arose in the interviews with all participants. Apparently, the phenomenon of typecasting offers both opportunities and limitations to student actors. Although it would seem that opportunities for typecasting would be limited due to lack of experience of student actors, the participants were cognizant of typecasting trends already forming for them.

Ian identified his typical “type” as a humorous character, noting, “Usually I play the big, comical, servente, comedia del arte things. I do that fairly well.” Although he relates that he performs these types of parts “fairly well,” he contends that he is not really aware of why he so often gets cast as that type. Musing on the possible source of his typecast persona, he stated:

I don't have any idea. I guess I'm just a funny person or something. I don't know, I'm just a . . . I guess I'm just ahh . . . got my little up-beat facade you know and my little . . . happy dappy crazy stuff, you know . . . I've got the, I guess I've got the face and the look and the general experience with it, you know, where I can do it.

Although he acknowledged that playing these types of parts does take some degree of effort, he described them as “not a real stretch for me” and “not as much of a challenge.” As a result, Ian confided that one of his professional goals is to be able to “break” himself of this stereotype and to play different kinds of parts. He explained, “I kind of wanted to get away from that a little bit. Like, I've wanted to give myself a challenge or play something else.”

During the semester of interviewing, Ian was cast as the romantic lead in a student directed production. This type of character was an example for Ian of a departure from his typical comedic role. Although he stated that he was “excited” about the chance to play a part of out of his stereotype, he seemed a bit fatalistic about his future potential of similar typecasting, noting that in the “real world” of acting after college, “you're going to get lumped into a certain thing.”

#### *Separation of Self and Character*

Related to the notion of typecasting is the distinction that a student actor draws between self and the character being portrayed. In acknowledging a stereotype, it seems that an actor is identifying aspects of oneself that lead to frequent casting in similar roles. Student actors seem to accept typecasting and “playing” one's “type” as an aspect of theater. Ian recalled, “And I got into this whole big discussion one day with my friends just about dude, all actors do that. They all play themselves essentially.” Accordingly, the parts in which student actors are cast, and their corresponding views related to the

distinction between character and self seem to provide a fertile avenue for increased insights regarding self-concept.

In fact, it seems that Ian finds little to distinguish himself from his character in some plays. As he described, some character parts are just a version of “being myself.” For example, he referred to the character, Huey, that he played in the romantic comedy, *Italian-American Reconciliation*. Ian explained, “Huey is a character that honestly I’ve played in my life. Many times over. Many, many times over.” The relationship between Ian’s perception of Huey and himself will be examined in a later section. First, it seems prudent to present Ian’s views and strategies regarding the process of getting into character as a helpful context.

#### *Getting Into Character*

Within the context of preparing for a play is the task of preparing to play the assigned character. This process is generally described as *getting into character*. This process was examined in light of the proposition by Gressler (2002) that self-examination is inherent in the process of character development, leading to an assumption of greater insight and evolved self-concept among student actors. Ian’s case, in fact, supports the notion that student actors engage in heightened levels of introspection. It could even be argued that he epitomizes the notion, as will be described.

While the director may guide the process of character development through the suggestion of particular activities, Ian indicated that actors also assume a great deal of individual and personal responsibility to “find” and develop their character. Ian apparently takes the process very seriously, describing various character development strategies that seem rather extreme. For one acting assignment, he attempted to access

feelings that he felt during an episode of depression in high school. Ian's assignment was to portray an individual with depression and he explained that he believed that accessing feelings of depression would help him to devise a realistic depiction. He recalled:

I had this whole method-acting thing where I, like an hour before I went I would spend in my room beating the crap out of myself . . . I made this depression mix CD of songs I used to listen to when I was in like seventh or eighth grade. . . . But that time during the depression thing I walked head down . . . Avoided all personal contact . . . in the least . . . I was just in this bubble, and I had my mix CD on, and the mix CD was these hard, depressing songs that I've been listening to for a while. And the last track I recorded on my computer. I took my microphone on there and screamed into it at the top of my lungs and put it on loop for three minutes. So, it was basically just a track of, of my blood curdling screams for three minutes. It was weird, it was cool though, I liked it a lot.

At one point while listening to the CD mix, Ian found himself spontaneously drawing swastikas on his arm. While he reported that he was able to observe this behavior objectively as he engaged in it, he recalled that he found it somewhat disturbing. However, Ian found that he was able to reassure himself by reminding himself that it was just an acting exercise. He described the episode:

And I sat there with this pen and just started drawing swastikas all over my arm which was w-e-i-r-d because like, I was sitting there going like, "Dude, you're drawing swastikas all over your arm. That's probably not good." But then there was another part of me going "Ian, it's cool. It's just an acting thing. You're not gonna kill yourself. It's alright."

He went on to describe the episode as a "cathartic" experience, in which he revisited feelings from that painful time in his life in an effort to "understand" the experience and inform his character. In fact, as he recalled the incident, he acknowledged that his reason for setting up this scenario was, in part, as a type of "therapy session" to see if he could "handle" feelings that might emerge. It appears significant for Ian that, had he ended up feeling depressed, he now can identify a "safety net" of friends that he

could call on for support. In addition, he found that he felt able to “delineate” between reality and acting in this situation, and related feeling “proud” of himself as a result.

And it helped me to get back that whole, hide under your rock, hide under your shell, hide behind your hair, you know kind of *way* that I got back in some ways, to just at least . . . understanding a little more of what that was. And understanding a little part of it, because I never used to cut myself or draw swastikas all over my arm. It was just, it was some kind of an added thing that I just wanted to experiment with.

And that was my entire reason for doing it in the first place. In some ways . . . it was a therapy session, in some ways it was to push myself to see if I could handle it. And I knew that if I couldn't handle it I had, you know, my antidote CD, of you know of my nice happy pop music, and I was surrounded by ten of my closest friends around here, and in an artistic community where everyone cared about me so if anything screwed up did happen I would have any number of safety nets. And so, which is why I gave myself permission to do it.

Like this I was really able to turn off and just really proud of myself because I could delineate between my world . . . my therapy . . . and my acting. Which was, which was nice. And that made me feel very good.

The prior scenario occurred as Ian was prepared to portray an individual with a mixed psychiatric diagnosis. Apparently, he felt that accessing his own prior feelings associated with depression would assist him in devising a realistic character portrayal. The episode seemed to evolve beyond his original intent, giving him an opportunity to reinforce his current assessment of his emotional stability, as well as his faith in his social support system. This depiction seems to support Gressler's (2002) assumption that character development is an avenue for self-exploration.

On another recent occasion, Ian related that he phoned an ex-girlfriend to get her perspective on their past break-up in order to assist his preparation for the role of Huey, in *Italian-American Reconciliation*. When he e-mailed her, he reported that he asked her to describe his “failures” in their relationship. As he explained, “And, she actually obliged me.” He described an ensuing 45 minutes (instant messaging time) where the girl “went off on me.” Ian's assessment of this experience was that “I asked for it” and also

that it “helped me to kind of, I guess, kind of connect to who I was four years ago.”

Again, he appears to invoke these memories as a strategy to inform and possibly get emotionally connected with the character that he is crafting. As he reflected:

It was helpful. Just cause it’s, it gave me things to think about, I guess, in the ways that he relates to her or maybe why the relationship failed or just things to play with during the character. Like the way he breaks up with his new girlfriend. The way that he treats his new girlfriend. Why maybe he treats her that way. It helped me make some of the justifications for the character a little more clean.

As noted previously, Ian found some similarities between himself and his character, Huey. Developing a character in the context of a play seems to involve the integration of some traits of self, as well as the awareness of the boundary between self and character. Ian referred to this somewhat fluid boundary between self and character by explaining that “to a degree, the character is you and to a large degree, the character is not you.” Although the degree of similarity between self and character appears to vary according to the part one is playing, Ian reflected that he particularly related to his role of Huey in *Italian-American Reconciliation*. He explained:

I just really identify with the character. I could literally get up there and be me and the character would work. And I wouldn’t have to put on this I’m acting guise and this is my character. I can literally get up there and be me and people would buy it and it would still be good.

Specifically, Ian related Huey’s experience to his own in terms of romantic relationships. As Ian explained, he and Huey each have a history of becoming “fixated” on a girl and then idealizing her in a “hopeless romantic syndrome.” Recognizing Huey’s behavior in this situation, Ian reported that he even resurrected some of his old love poetry from high school to read as prepared for the part. He pointed out that his past experiences and his own personality can inform his character development in this way at

times. However, Ian characterized the “hopeless romantic” in quite negative terms, and appears to view the dynamic as a misdirected search for self. As he described:

I think there’s been once per year where there’s been just that one person that I’m sickeningly, disgustingly, horribly obsessed with and just completely sacrifice my own happiness to just sit there and just pine away for them and driving myself insane. In short, the character basically is, he’s looking for himself and he’s looking for love and you know, the way he goes about doing that is he, he takes this girl who is supposedly in his mind, his dream girl and he puts her up on this mental pedestal . . . And I’ve done that. I’ve done that probably on a yearly basis.

In summary, it seems that Ian invests in character development to a level that perhaps exceeds even the hopes of Gressler (2002) himself. Articulating the parallels he finds between his character and himself, Ian appears to embrace them in order to inform his intrapersonal life as well as his art. Although these strategies arguable provide an opportunity for enhanced insight, the question remains whether his sense of boundaries between himself and his character are appropriate. Additionally, while he clearly engages in introspection, there is no indication regarding a positive outcome as a result. However, while seeming to minimize the painful nature of such activities, Ian characterizes them as “therapeutic” and seems to indicate that he finds them helpful.

#### Theater Engagement and Self-Concept

The views of participants were explored regarding the influence of theater engagement on self-concept. The following section presents Ian’s description of his self-concept, including his characterizations of different selves and the process of his self-development. Additionally, his perspective regarding the influence of his participation in various aspects of college theater is discussed.

*Participant Description of Self-Concept*

As with each of the participants, Ian was asked to describe his self-concept. The first word that came to mind for him was “quirky.” Aside from that trait, he seemed unwilling to commit himself to any specific characterization, choosing instead to define himself in terms of his interests and his values. In addition, he described himself through the identification of traits that he often described at either end of a continuum. For example, Ian noted that he can be “really introspective” sometimes and “utterly not introspective” other times. He said that he “downplays” himself at times and that he feels “confident” at some times, and “not confident” at others. Consequently, his description of himself as “genuinely middle of the road in a lot of things” seems to reflect his experience of the extreme expression of various traits. The phenomenon of viewing self in terms of extremes of the continuum of a trait exemplifies a developmental trend beginning in middle adolescence (Harter, 1999; Fischer et al., Higgings, 1991). Although Ian characterized this developmental level so clearly through his articulate description, he exemplifies progress toward differentiation as he identified higher-order abstractions representing integration more characteristic of his age.

Perpetuating his portrayal of a self-concept inclusive of polar traits, Ian stated that he values “originality and individualism,” while noting that he can also value “normality” and “genuine complacency.” He noted that he would like to think of himself as “more liberal than I am” and reported that his interests include the arts, film, music, theater, and “making art.” Further traits that Ian mentioned included a tendency to “always worry or at least think about what the world sees in me.” He also stated that he occasionally talks too much and has a “real habit of over-thinking things.”

*Different Selves*

An aspect of self-concept that consumed a significant portion of the discussions with Ian concerned his experience of himself as comprised of various selves. Invoking James' (1890) original conception of self so very long ago, Ian acknowledged the existence of "a range of Ians." He explained that the different personas arise as a result of varying levels of intimacy that he experiences in relationships. Apparently, Ian is most likely to open up to people who know about his past and are not necessarily likely to view him in what he may view as restrictive terms such as the "nice, smart guy." As he explained:

There are certain people that I'll open up to more than others, I guess . . . And there are other people that I exist more intimately with and you know, they know past histories and personal troubles and what I'm really going through and that I'm not always the nice, smart guy and stuff like that.

Consistent with his definition of his own self-concept, Ian identified a "range of Ians" that seems to represent polar extremes of various traits. However, his characterization of himself as "middle of the road" continues to be somewhat inconsistent with his continued use of the extreme ranges of various traits to define him. Interestingly, his characterization that he "shows the world" these aspects of self, evokes an image of acting out parts on a stage. The aspect of Ian that he chooses to express apparently depends on who is present, "certain things to certain people," as he explained. Further, Ian seemed quite willing to include the personification of seemingly negative traits into his range of "Ians" as well, including "idiot" and "over exuberant schmuck." His conclusion that "it's hard for everyone to know you" seems quite warranted in the context of his cast of Ians. As he described:

There's definitely a real range of Ian's that I show to the world. Sometimes I'm just the dopey, oblivious schmuck. Sometimes I'm the overly intelligent, overly articulate, you know, English major or whatever the hell it is. You know, there are some times I'm quiet and angry or whatever. It's certain things to certain people there are times when I definitely, I definitely know that I am consciously coming off to another person as an idiot or as an overzealous, over-exuberant schmuck, but it's hard for everyone to know you, I guess.

Although he initially articulated a phenomenon of “various selves,” Ian de-emphasized the distinctness of these selves as he continued to reflect on the experience. He observed that the experience is not so much a “different self” as a manifestation of “what I’m willing to show people in different situations.” What he is “willing” to “show” to people appears to be a reflection of his comfort level in the situation. As he explained:

Sometimes I don't feel comfortable showing my intelligent side in certain situations. Sometimes I don't feel comfortable showing my stupid side in certain situations. It's not necessarily me creating a different self per say. It's more of me showing or not showing or accentuating certain parts of myself.

At least one or more of these “sides” of self appear to be contrived in order to attain the approval of others. Ian's perception is that a “bubbly” persona is likely to be positively received by someone that he is meeting for the first time. Therefore, it seems that he adopts that persona in order to pursue the goal of being liked by “everybody.”

Acknowledging that this behavior could be a reflection of a preoccupation with “acceptance,” Ian appears to characterize it as a negative trait, noting that he used to be “worse with it.” As he reflected:

Like when I meet new people, I'm depending on how they are. I can be very bubbly. Like way more bubbly than I ever am on any sort of regular basis. And usually that, everybody loves that. And I used to be a lot worse with it, you know, back in like high school and a little bit during the early parts of college before I kind of got through my whole, obsession with acceptance phase. Just cause, I'd just be like, “Hey, how are you doing? Hi, my name's Ian. Blah, blah, blah.” And people would just dig it and it was weird. Because it was just one of those things that, I guess, a guise that I put up to, everybody will like this guy because he'll be great.

Ian believes that this behavior of presenting different “sides” of oneself to others is something that “everyone does...to a degree.” In fact, he appears to see this behavior as appropriate in the context of the various relationships in which one is engaged. As he explained, “You don’t talk to your mother the same way you talk to your girlfriend, the same way you talk to your best friend, the same way you talk to your worst enemy.” Therefore, he does not view this presentation of various aspects of self as disingenuous, explaining:

I don’t think necessarily it’s a façade . . . I think it’s knowing more where you’re comfortable and knowing situations where you can be one way and that also that knowing that with when you’re with other people you’re going to be a different way. And you shouldn’t beat yourself up for that for not being genuine if you act one way with someone, but don’t act one way with someone else. That’s just how it is.

However, he did acknowledge that presentation of edited versions of him results in a level of distance in relationships. Again, this appears to be the intention, allowing him to present himself to the extent that he feels comfortable with various individuals. As he described:

That level, they’re not seeing me. They’re seeing an outer shell. And that’s, I usually generally if I’m doing that, I’m keeping you at a distance. And there may be a reason for it. There may not be. I may just not feel comfortable with you. That’s just my way of dealing with it.

Apparently, Ian also felt that there comes a time with the façade has outlived its usefulness and needs to be abandoned. While he embraced his different aspects of self as appropriate in various interactions, there is a point at which the relationship demands a more genuine expression of self. As he explained:

And eventually there has to be a point where that strips away because otherwise you’re just putting up a front. And when people realize it’s a front, they realize it’s not really you and they’re going to get really disappointed.

Additionally, Ian reflected on relationships that he believes were negatively affected when he attempted to relinquish the “front” and be more “honest.” As he found, the “honest” side was not necessarily well received by the girls who had been attracted initially by the “front.” Although Ian appeared to have yearned for a more genuine relationship, he continued to use the “front” almost compulsively, describing the feeling of a lack of “control” as he reflexively assumed that surface persona. It appears that the superficial acceptance that greeted that persona functioned as a powerful reinforcer, and was difficult to relinquish. Ian recalled:

I think a lot of my relationships in high school failed because of that. Like my girlfriend relationships. Just because back when I really did not have control over it . . . And then I’d get into a relationship with people and people would be like, “You’re not trying anymore Ian. What are you doing?” And I’m just like, “What? What are you talking about? I’m just being honest with you. I have nothing to say right now. Is that ok? Can I, is there a point where I can say nothing? I thought we were on that level of a relationship where I can sit down and do absolutely nothing. Where I can strip away this bulls--- wall, this bulls--- front that you’ve been looking at for this month and a half and just be with you.” And then people did not get that. People thought that I was just giving up on them or giving up on a relationship.

Ian explained that he feels that he has grown in his ability to recognize and consciously choose whether or not to engage in the adoption of the bubbly persona. Although he continued to see a use for the bubbly persona image, he felt that he now has “control” over it. As a result, he chooses to engage in this behavior “sparingly” and when it is “warranted.” As he related:

I’ve definitely tried to not do that as much. I think, he comes out slightly here and there . . . I know when to turn the charm on and when to kind of keep it at bay. And when the bubbly, giddy Ian is perfectly comfortable and perfectly smart in a situation to use. I mean I, I usually have control over it. It’s not one of those things that just happens anymore. Like I don’t instantly turn and say, “Oh, hi. I’m bubbly Ian. What’s going on?” It’s one of those things, it’s, I use it sparingly. And

I know when it's warranted and when it's not and when it's a stupid time to be that stupid and bubbly.

Explaining his desire to grow beyond the need for the assumption of the "façade," Ian reflected that he equates the need for an assumed persona with a lack of "depth." While articulating the insight that this behavior, in the past, was a manifestation of the goal of feeling accepted, he identified a desire to be viewed differently now. However, he continued to embrace the various aspects of his persona, including the "ditsy, bubbly guy," noting that they are all "sides of me." For Ian, it is important to note that these sides of him are, in fact, genuine, since they typically reflect exaggerations of traits that are genuine. He explained:

I ultimately know that is not a representation of me. It's not, I don't want to be known as the ditsy, bubbly guy. Like, I'd like to think that I've got some depth to myself, somewhere. Like, it's something I used to put up a lot more. I would put up just to gain acceptance. It would be one of those things. Oh people will like this, "Hey, hey, hey everybody, what's going on? And there are times when I'm, there are times when I'm bubbly, ditsy, and stupid just for fun because I don't care. And that's great. And that's a completely different side of me. But I think that just that big, goofy, ditsy me is not always me. It's always . . . I mean, ultimately, yes. Is that a part of me somewhere in me? Yeah. Of course. Otherwise it wouldn't exist at all. But, truly more of an exaggeration than anything else. But, you know, all in all, there's some genuineness to it.

Ultimately, Ian stated he feels that he has made significant progress toward feeling accepted. He stated that, although "it took me a while to realize it," he now holds the belief that "I can just be me and people will accept it and people will think it's great because my heart's in the right place."

This dialogue provides support for the notion of separate selves, first articulated by James (1890), and further developed by the symbolic interactionists (Baldwin, 1906; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Ian exemplifies the phenomenon of the creation of different selves to meet various social expectations. However, he also exemplifies the integration

that Harter (1990) indicated would occur by late adolescence. For Ian, the distinct selves became assimilated as aspects of an integrated self. Ian, therefore, demonstrates a level of maturity and stability in his self-concept, as he is able to identify these aspects of self and remain cognizant of their influence.

### *Self in Romantic Relationships*

As he described his self-concept, a picture also emerged of the existence of distinct domains of self-concept, consistent with the views of Harter (1990). Ian identified a distinct self-concept that he attributed to the domain of romantic relationships. Therefore, not only does his case support the notion of a self-concept domain relative to social relationships, but of a more specific domain subsumed therein, dedicated to romantic relationships. Ian characterized himself as having a “low self esteem<sup>1</sup>” in this domain, complaining that he “does not understand dating.” In particular, he feels inept at maintaining a long- term relationship. As he stated:

I'd like to have a really long-term relationship. And I know how the beginnings of a relationship work, but there's like a part missing somewhere, where I'm like how do you really go about having a long-term relationship with somebody. People do it all the time, but I don't really understand how they do it.

His romantic downfall, in his estimation, can be traced to his tendency to become “fixated” on someone, and then to “idealize” her. The dynamic of constructing an idealized “façade” for his love interest seems to mirror his construction of his own “façade” to present to her. Ian admitted that the tendency to idealize a girlfriend impeded his ability to be genuine in the relationship and to “really see her.” Additionally, he acknowledged that he is not comfortable “relating” to his love interest because of his compelling need to try to “impress” her, or “be amusing.” According to Ian, “not being able to see” the set-up inherent in this dynamic led him to be “hurt” in the past.

However, Ian expressed his belief that he has learned from these past experiences and is now “ready for a relationship to happen.” Specifically, he reported that he is now more able to be “honest” in a relationship and that he is more skilled at identifying individuals who will support and accept him without a façade. As he explained, “I’ve got a sharper sense of who’s going to love me for the outer shell and who’s going to love me for... who’s just going to accept me for shutting up and not being funny.” Therefore, he appeared to relate his growing insight and development regarding different aspects of self to the impact of this phenomenon on his relationships. Noting that he has grown and integrated aspects of himself, he also identifies the need to relinquish approval-seeking behavior. Although he demonstrates fair insight as he processes this aspect of his personal growth, he continued to maintain the view that he had “low self-esteem” in relationships.

### *The Process of Self-Development*

Ian expressed a strong interest in self-reflection, stating, “I’ve always enjoyed that kind of stuff.” In fact, he characterized his interest as an “obsession,” explaining:

I’ve always kind of been obsessed with the how am I really versus how do I see my self versus how do I adhere to the world. And it’s just funny to see the differences. I always, if there is ever the opportunity, I always like to take it.

As discussed previously, Ian struggled with feelings of depression and alienation in middle school and high school. He characterized his depression at that time as “a lot of hatred toward myself.” Describing his self-perception throughout his early life as “a loser,” Ian recalled that he entered middle school with a very negative attitude about himself in relationship to his peers. As he described:

## Footnote

1 Although the terms self-concept, self-esteem, and self-image are defined at the outset of this paper for consistent use throughout, it was found that participants used idiosyncratic terminology to refer to the constructs. Therefore, participant use of terms in quotations is retained.

I just used to hate everybody because I used to think everybody used to hate me. So I used to be like I hate you, I hate you, and I hate you . . . cause I hadn't, I hadn't felt like anybody really gave a shit or I hadn't felt like anybody liked me or cared about me or even noticed what I was doing.

As noted previously, the extent of his social estrangement left him feeling desperate and alienated from his peers. However, in this context of mistrust and social isolation, Ian summoned the confidence to initiate his involvement in theater. Subsequently, much to his surprise, following his first experience acting in a play, students approached him to compliment him on his performance. In addition to feeling noticed for the first time, he felt that people were being “nice” to him, following his experience of being mistreated by those same people for so long. As he described:

The fact that you had an audience full of people that completely notices you, and completely was nice to you, and people in your classes that had been making fun of you for ten years coming up to you afterwards and saying “Hey man, you did a really nice job.”

This experience was significant for Ian as he reevaluated himself in the context of his new social standing. Interestingly, he did not seem to question the value of feedback from peers who had “been making fun of” him “for ten years.” Instead, he welcomed the sense of approval and began to integrate it into a revised view of himself. His new charitable attitude extended to his peers as well, as he reassessed them, finding positive qualities that he had seemingly overlooked previously. As he explained:

I thought of these people as complete and total assholes . . . complete jerks . . . you do this character analysis of them in your mind and you're just saying this person's an asshole, there's no good in them whatsoever. . . . Damn it! I'm just completely wrong. I have no ability to judge people. What am I doing? Like it's just, it's kind of helped me to realize that you can't really peg people. I mean you can peg people, but people are gonna do thing that... people aren't just good or bad, people are both. And its, its helped me to kinda have a lot of, a lot of empathy towards people. Which is, which is nice.

The significance of his acting experience and the resultant acclaim by his peers is evidenced by his observation of the concurrent shift that occurred in his self-concept. He stated that, by the time he entered high school, he began to realize “OK, I guess I am pretty cool.” He credited his theater experience for his shift in self-concept, stating “it was a lot of theater, it was mostly theater” that accounted for his improved self- image.

However, the continuation of improvement in his self-concept was not exactly a seamless process. Ian explained that, although he felt better about himself in high school, he viewed his social acceptance as rather tenuous and based only on his success as an actor. In fact, contradicting his previously positive reassessment of his peers, he adopted scathing critiques instead, alleging that they were “idiots” for thinking that he was talented. As he described:

You realize that you are better than you were before, but none the less, you still kind of have that loserly attitude of just like, oh, people don't really like me. They just think I'm talented or something. They're idiots. They don't know what they're talking about.

In high school, Ian continued to experience success in acting until he “rose among the ranks” to assume the role of consistent male lead. As he described, “In my senior year I was like lead synonymous with high school.” This recognition provided him a feeling of having found his “little niche, so to speak” and Ian found himself feeling supported by the community of other actors. Although his relationship with non-theater peers remained ambivalent, he experienced a sense of trust and support in the community of theater students. As he explained:

It was a place for me that I really got to find myself because I kind of felt that in middle school and elementary school that I didn't really have a place . . . I love being in an artistic community. It gave me the ability to find myself and be around

people who supported me, as opposed to just tearing me down. So it was a, it was a place I got to find myself.

As he graduated from high school and entered college, Ian stated that he found that he was “able to do more of the same, just keep experimenting and finding things” about himself. Ian explained that, since beginning college, he is improving in his ability to accept and internalize compliments from others as he attempts to stop “downplaying” himself and improve his self-confidence. As he described:

And then getting to college and realizing that no, people know what they’re talking about. You’re really cool. Why do you keep downplaying yourself? That’s been the big thing for me. And fully owning my confidence and I’ve done it incrementally just coming to the realization that I’m a good person.

An interesting aspect of his self-concept that arose as a topic in discussion with Ian, was the role of his hairstyle in his own self-definition. Ian had very long hair when this writer first observed him in an acting exercise. When he subsequently arrived for his first interview, his hair was quite a bit shorter, and he began the interaction with the comment that he had just gotten it cut. He offered an assessment of the past significance of his hairstyle in maintaining an image of an “artsy, sexy guy.” In addition, he observed that his hair had provided a type of “protection,” contributing to the “shell” under which he used to “hide” throughout middle school and high school. Ian described that he “needed” his long hair as an aspect of his self-concept. It appeared to be quite significant to Ian to recognize that long hair was no longer a significant contribution to his sense of himself. Therefore, he concluded that he should get it cut. As he explained:

I think my hair in some ways was . . . kind of that protection from it all, and just that way of being the art-sy guy, or being the sexy guy . . . personally I do not have to do any of that stuff. I needed the hair for the six years that I had it just because . . . I needed confidence, and I needed a sense of self, and I needed to be self-important. . . . The past two years have really been me, 'cause I've been wrestling with cutting my hair for a while . . . And once the idea was kind of put

in my head, and I was really able to really sit and think about it I just said it has to go, you've gotten all you've gotten from it.

In summary, Ian related a progression of development in his self-concept from his painful middle school years to the present. Consistent with the premises of the current study, he attributed much of the improvement in his self-concept to his engagement in theater. He articulated his initial elation as he discovered a venue whereby he could gain the recognition of his peers.

Although his latent skepticism and mistrust of his school peers eventually returned, he identified the community of theater students as an avenue of support. As a result, he was engaged with a group of peers with whom he felt accepted and trusting, perhaps for the first time in his school career. Not surprisingly, he embraced this community, and thrived somewhat in his “niche.” As he entered college, while still reliant on the support and the positive feedback of his theater peers, he found himself integrating most positive self-attributions and experiencing a growing sense of confidence as a result. Finally, in a gesture signifying his newfound sense of self-confidence, he relinquished the long hair that he had retained as a distinctive, albeit superficial, defining feature. Thus, Ian provides support for the notion that theater engagement can impact self-concept.

#### *Influence of College Theater*

Since his matriculation at Metropolitan University, Ian observed a continuation in the gains in his confidence and self-development. Specifically, he related that he is no longer as reliant on the sense of being “liked” by others, is more “confident” about himself, and feels less need to assume a persona. As he reflected:

I guess I'm more settled with myself. I'm not as in need of impressing people or feeling the need to really always be the sociable, likable guy... I'm not trying to be anything, I just am. And people like me, great. If they don't, f--- it. I used to be obsessed with people liking me and being able to say good things about me. And f--- it. Its mostly came out of more confidence out of myself.

As in high school, Ian attributed these changes to his experience as a theater major. As he described, his theater involvement provides a context where “You’re constantly learning new things about yourself and constantly putting them into practice or getting rid of things that do network within yourself.” In fact, Ian stated that he believed the theater program is unique in the opportunity that it provides to learn about oneself. He characterized theater as “all about fixing yourself” and noted that opportunities are provided for “changing” and “fixing” oneself that do not arise in the context of other majors. In fact, for Ian, the theater major has been the catalyst for the consideration of such lofty issues as who one is “in the world.” Additionally, he credited theater as an avenue for the exploration of one’s “history,” “habits,” and how one “relates” to others.

As he reflected:

What other opportunity are you given to really, in normal life to be just completely self-immersed about . . . it's all about fixing yourself and being . . . being able to have the opportunity to just change yourself and fix yourself, and, and discover things about yourself. I feel like, you know, a business major, not that I have anything against business major, but you know I really think they're given the opportunity to be like "So, who are you in the world? Where do you fit in the world? What in your past history makes you be able to do this? What are your habits? What are your bodily habits? How do you avoid conflict? How do you do this? How do you do that? What's your relation to other people?" You know, you're just really given the opportunity to just . . . find yourself. And change . . . you have an enhanced view on life . . . through participating in theater . . . theater gets people to step outside their bubble.

It seems therefore, that Ian's endorsement of theater as an exercise in self-development has been perpetuated and perhaps strengthened through his experiences at college. In addition to learning about and “fixing” himself, Ian asserts that he has attained

nothing less than an “enhanced view on life.” Therefore, his theater engagement seems to have played a significant role in Ian’s developing conceptualization of himself.

### *The Academic Program*

A significant feature of the learning opportunity inherent within in the theater major appears to be the academic program itself. Ian characterizes the structure of the curriculum as a “good progression” of learning that leads to “personal growth.” For him, the meaning gained from academic coursework was much more related to self-development than attainment of a grade. As he described:

Every single one of my acting classes for me, with the exception of maybe like one or two of the initial ones . . . they’ve been all about learning something. And if I personally haven’t gained something from the class I feel it was a waste, even if I did get a good grade. And that’s sad. I do not like to do that because there’s a lot that you can get out of these classes and nearly every single one of my acting classes, I can say I’ve been there for personal growth and not for a grade.

More specifically, Ian referred to particular courses that have the identification of habits and mannerisms as a primary focus. He explained that he found these courses to be a “great” opportunity to learn more about him and what “shuts him down,” interfering with the important ability to be “open” on stage. Although he did not specifically state it, it appears that the significance derived from courses such as Impulse Improvisation has much to do with the faculty feedback. As he stated:

There are pretty much certain classes where you're able to . . . where it's basically working on your habits, what you do, how you act on stage, what things shut you down . . . what things open you up . . . I took . . . Impulse Improvisation . . . which was a great class . . . literally it's what shuts you down . . . and working beyond that. It's great. It was a great class 'cause I learned so much about myself. cause like you'd get up on the floor and work and then he says "you did this, this, this and this. Why? This is what I noticed in your acting."

### *Acting III*

The course that was mentioned most frequently by all of the participants, including Ian, was Acting III. It seems that self-awareness was one of the objectives of this course and the assignments frequently evoked strong reactions from the students. As Ian stated, “I especially think that I blossomed in Acting III.”

There were a number of significant experiences that occurred in this course that Ian felt contributed positively to his self-concept. The first occurred during an introductory exercise on the very first day of class. Apparently he entered the course with a number of fears and insecurities, that he shared during the exercise. His peers responded with positive feedback and Ian related that he was able to accept the compliments and experience a positive shift in his self-concept as a result. His description of this incident is reminiscent of his characterization of his response to the positive feedback following his first major acting experience. Then, as described here, Ian appears to rely on and to accept positive peer feedback as confirmatory evidence of his standing as a “good” and a “cool” person. As he recalled:

My first day of Acting III, we had this thing where we went around the class and said, “What are you interested in? I like this, I like that.” Basically, you just had to fill in these sentences for the group. You know, I like this. I’m inspired by that. I fear this. And I had, my fear list was like I fear that I’m not an honest person. I fear that nobody likes me. I fear that I’m not interesting. I fear that I’m not a good actor, a good person. Blah, blah. And everybody’s response in class was like, “Ian, what the hell are you talking about? You’re like the most honest, cool person I’ve ever met.” And I was just like, “Really? I did not know that. Alright. Cool.” And I just kind of dropped it from there on out.

Another meaningful assignment for Ian was the requirement to do some scene writing, including several monologues. He maintained that he had not felt very confident

in his writing skills in the past, but the structure of the course inspired and enabled his writing process. As he explained:

I'm so proud of everything I did in there. And that gave me the utmost of confidence . . . That's what really got me writing. Just because I was so . . . I'd always look at myself thinking, do I really want to write? I can't write. I don't have any past writing experience. I don't know what I'm writing. I don't know how to write. I think if I had something that I wrote in the past, I think I would have the confidence to go on, but I don't know how the hell to write. So, fortunately, the class just gave me this opportunity and I came out with two or three monologues in my back pocket that I'm damn proud of.

The development of confidence in his writing illustrated an aspect of the course that positively influenced Ian's self-concept. Consistent with the idea identified in other aspects of his self-development process, Ian stated that a significant impediment to his writing had been his preoccupation with impressing everyone with his work. He described his assessment of his first attempt at writing a monologue for the course that would be perceived as really "cool" by everyone. He related:

And the first, my first stab at it was the most pretentious, hard piece of s--- ever. Just because I was so intent on being like, this is going to be so cool. I'm going to f---ing wig everybody out in the class.

Ian observed that the personal growth occurred for him as he realized that the motivation to impress others was the basis for the written piece. With this realization, he rewrote the piece and achieved what he felt was a more "honest" rendering that represented "speaking from the heart." He described how he tried to focus less on "making a statement" to get a reaction from peers and more on expressing something personally meaningful. As he explained, the revised version represented...

Listening to, saying what I really wanted to say. And not trying to doll it up and make it big. Or make it trying to make a huge f---ing statement. I mean, it made a huge statement. But nonetheless, I did not try to doll it up. I did not try to make it this huge, amazing, oh my god, that's f---ed up. How did you ever think of that? It was just something really honest from me, that meant something to me.

As a result, he noted that he was very pleased with the outcome, stating “It was the greatest thing that I ever wrote because it was just me, listening to my heart. Apparently the gains in confidence regarding his writing were manifested in his ability to write an assignment without public opinion operating as the driving force of inspiration. For Ian, writing a piece that arose from internal inspiration portrayed his diminished reliance on approval and his increased sense of confidence in his work.

It seems that the common thread among these experiences for Ian is the boost in personal confidence that he received in the context of that course. Ian has identified the side of himself that is preoccupied with trying to “impress people.” He identified this need as a “hurdle” and a behavior that he wished to leave behind. He reported that his experience at Metropolitan so far has helped him with this personal goal and has had a positive effect on his acting. As he described:

The big hurdle that I’ve been able to get over the last couple years of being here is really just this need to impress people and show people that I’m just this huge, big, great guy. I think I’ve gotten over that. I’ve really gotten over that. And I’m really, more or less, kind of fully gotten over that last semester with my Acting III class because I’ve gained a whole bunch of personal confidence and notes and outside opinions that just really, really helped me to just finally just let go of it and say f--- it, I’m a good person. I don’t care what you think of me. And, I’ve gone with that and I’ve trusted that and I think that in and of itself has kind of given me a new sense of self on stage.

Interestingly, the prior reflection seems to indicate that the “outside opinions” of others have contributed to his sense of “personal confidence.” However, Ian interpreted his experience as resulting in the view that “I don’t care what you think of me.” Although the meaning he derived from his experience seems to be the sense that his self-concept is less vulnerable to the interpretations of others, it appears that the opinions of others may remain more influential than he recognizes at this time.

*Life Lessons*

A topic of discussion in interviews with Ian concerned the extent to which his theater experience informs his life. According to Ian, there is a relationship between what one experiences on stage and in one's "real life." For example, he explained that exhibiting a quality in life, such as vulnerability, facilitates a level of "comfort" expressing that quality on stage. In addition, he believes that "holding back" one's "emotions" in life could result in the perpetuation of that quality on stage. As he noted: "What you do in real life really shows up on stage." Presumably, he is insinuating that one does not want to be limited in the capacity to portray things on stage because of lack of a comparable experience in life. As a result, Ian views theater as an opportunity to gain "life lessons." As he reflected:

You know, if I'm like, you know what, I'm going to be more vulnerable in my scene. It's got to go back to I'm going to be more vulnerable in my life because I think in a lot of ways that gives you the comfort level to be more vulnerable on stage and it gives you the confidence to be more vulnerable on stage because you've had your entire life being vulnerable to people. And I think once you rationalize it for yourself in a scene, you have to rationalize it for yourself in real life because the two mix so much, I guess, if you're really holding back your emotions to the people in your life then you're totally going to hold back your emotions on stage. To a degree, you really need to practice what you do on stage in your real life. Because you're learning a lot of life lessons. How to react to people because what you do in real life really shows up on stage.

In summary, Ian reflected on the fact that, for him, theater provides a strong incentive for personal change. Characterizing himself as inherently "lazy," he credited theater as the incentive for him to "push forward." As he stated:

I've always wanted to kind of push forward and change myself and do things and push forward and do things as a human being. But theater is kind of the thing that kicks me in the a-- and makes me focus on it. Because I'm a lazy man I just need somebody to be like, holding over me the whole time just being like "Change! Change! Change! Change! Change! Change!" And at some point I'll realize it and I'll change.

As a result, Ian concluded that his theater experience “has done wonders for me.” As he reflected, “The amount that I’ve changed in the last 3 years is ridiculous...I mean, in the last 3 months, for Christ’s sake, it’s a constant pushing forward and awesome.” He reflected that he entered Metropolitan University with no firm direction, observing, “I just think I walked in here just kind of haphazardly muddling through everything.” However, the one point on which he was clear was the passion that he felt for acting. As he described:

I knew what I knew and I knew that I liked to do it. And, I kind of did my whole crazy high school thing and I loved it for high school. And I knew I wanted to do it since forever.

Since that time, however, he has benefited from the self-development opportunities available through his participation in theater. Reflecting further on his own growth, Ian observed the difference in his response to performances that he gave at the end of his sophomore and then his junior year. The lead roles that he played in both productions, one year apart, apparently provided him a helpful context of comparison. As he explained, Ian recalled that he felt a lot of self-doubt following each performance of *Fools*, at the end of his sophomore year. Although he “loved” the play and felt “deep down” that he “really did a good job,” he was also cognizant of a level of preoccupation with the audience response to his acting. As he recalled:

And it’s funny. I noticed this actually while I was performing *Italian-American Reconciliation*, in comparison to *Fools*, which I loved but I left every night off stage feeling, not knowing how to feel while I was on stage. I knew deep down that I really did a good job. I just, I also knew that I wasn’t really in the scene the whole time because I was just so worried about, “Oh my god, there’s an audience there. What do they think of me? What do they think of me? What’s going on? How’s the scene really going? Am I doing good? They did not laugh. Why did not they laugh? That’s funny. I thought I said that funny.” You know.

He continued with the observation that, while he still experiences the “need” for “acceptance,” he felt less focused on it during the recent production of *Italian-American Reconciliation*. Feeling less preoccupied with audience approval left him feeling more “free” to “connect” to his partner, facilitating the critical attitude of feeling present in the scene. He explained:

And just, here, doing *Italian-American Reconciliation*, it was great because I was free enough to not be worried about that, so I could just connect to my partner. And there was an audience there and it was great when they laughed. But I wasn't, and there was still a part of me that's, you know, I my god, I need acceptance. Love me. But you know, I wasn't so focused on it that I was out of the scene. It's great to know that I've punched through that wall.

It seems, therefore, that Ian's experience of self-development in this context includes the sense that he is more self-assured in performance and less preoccupied with self-conscious reflections. In this way, he indicated that his experiences in theater have produced a significant impact on his self-concept, including his “confidence” and his “obsessive wanting of acceptance.” In fact, he expressed the view that he would have “never” attained some aspects of self-growth had it not been for his theater experience.

As he observed:

And I had this huge wall of accept me, accept me. You know, up and it just stopped so much. So much stuff. And I think once I kind of tore that wall down. Which I probably really did in the last year or so, that opened me up. I mean, just, and before that happened, it was kind of just this realization that the wall was there. And kind of set me on my whole path of, I need to get better. I need to get through this. I need to get better. I need to get through this. And along that path, just finding so much stuff. I just think it's just really boosted my confidence. Boosted my ego, which ain't too bad. Made me more aware of myself and the way I work. Like the whole over thinking. I never would have gotten that if I hadn't been in acting. Never would have even realized I had a problem with it until I was in acting. Really helped, really helped me to get over my just general obsessive wanting of acceptance and just kind of relying on, I guess kind of obsessive wanting for acceptance and I did not have confidence in myself. Relying on other people for acceptance instead of making myself feel good. Realizing that I already have everything that I need with me and I don't need to

perform for people. I don't need to beg for acceptance because I'm a cool enough person and I can just be, get accepted. I've kind of always had a personal project for myself every semester. Like, my personal project, I think my personal project last semester was to just get through my wall and write and have fun. And I did it and it was awesome. I think my goal for myself this semester was to just get really badass at scene work. And I still have a long way to go, but you know, nonetheless, I think I've definitely done that. And that, I couldn't have done without the last step. If I was still begging for acceptance, there's no way that I could have been in the scene because I would have been, "Guys, is that good? Is that good?" every second of the scene. And that's not good.

For Ian, therefore, it appears that the areas of growth that are most significant for him include the relinquishment of some of his reliance on acceptance, with the resulting sense of greater self-confidence. It seems that he attributes this development specifically to his theater engagement, supporting the premises of the current study regarding the impact of theater on self-concept. Although it appears that Ian continues to evidence the need for approval, it is important to recognize that his experience is that this reliance is much less extreme and pervasive than in the past.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the key ideas that emerged in conversations with Ian included the impact of theater on his self-concept, the social support that he receives in the context of theater, and the various avenues for insight that arise throughout engagement in the theater major program.

Characterizing the theater department at Metropolitan as "one big family," Ian indicated that the context was essential for him to establish friendships at college. Echoing his experience in high school, Ian indicated that he relied on the social network of theater to facilitate his establishment of friendships, remarking that he could not imagine how one would make friends otherwise. Faced with evidence indicating that the

universality of community is an artifact of his individual perception, he indicated that he prefers to adhere to his idealistic image of the community.

While noting that he felt supported within the community, Ian described the persistence of his reliance on the acceptance of his peers. Observing that he has experienced significant growth in self-confidence, he accedes that he continues to seek such acceptance. However, his experience is that of significant growth in this area.

Ian identified various aspects of the theater program as supportive of the reflection and experimentation that he deemed important for self-development. While he experienced much of the academic coursework as enlightening, Acting III provided a particularly valuable context for receiving positive feedback on his efforts from both peers and faculty. While enjoying considerable success in gaining parts in the productions, Ian identified casting as an avenue for self-reflection regarding the typecasting associated with his parts. Additionally, he noted that the process of character development inspired him to engage in creative avenues of self-exploration and reflection. Finally, the necessity of viewing one's self in relations to the character portrayed provoked additional self-relevant observations. As Ian observed, for him, theater is "all about fixing yourself."

## CHAPTER 5

### KATE, IT'S DRESS-UP

#### Introduction

Kate's assessment of the meaning of her participation in theater appears to support the notion that engagement in college theater facilitates the development of self-concept. Kate noted that she "made friends quickly" due to her theater involvement, which assisted her to "gain more self confidence." In addition, she found that "in theater classes, I learned a lot about myself." At other times she referred to the "safety" that she feels within a theater community, as well as the resulting "openness" that she displays in relationships. Therefore, her case seems to lend support to the notion that theater involvement can lead to enhanced self-concept in the areas of self-confidence, self-awareness, and social self-concept. However, it appears that the nature and extent of the impact of her theater involvement is not necessarily consistent in her accounting.

At times there is the hint of more subtle and disturbing trends lurking beneath the surface of this commentary. Kate's fear of being seen without her makeup "mask" and her reliance on a stage personality to express aspects of her self seem to reveal a preoccupation with a persona carefully crafted to avoid negative social evaluation. Elements of paradox reside in her story as well. Kate described a self who is "quiet and withdrawn," yet "everyone's friend" and one who "hates" the attention of older men at the pool, yet who wears a bikini every day. She is simultaneously ready to skip an entire year of high school, while acknowledging, "socially and emotionally I needed that extra time."

While crediting theater as an avenue for self-expression, she depicted it as a venue for the expression of traits that she was unwilling to own within herself, admitting that she “loves” the chance to play an “evil” character, while maintaining that this persona is a clear example of “playing against her type.” While establishing herself as articulate and analytical in her self-reflection, it may be that Kate remains on the path to self-integration, not yet as fully self-realized as she might hope to be.

### Background

Kate’s stated sense of self as a child appears to demonstrate the disparity that can exist between academic and non-academic self-concepts, consistent with the multifaceted nature of models of self-concept proposed by Shavelson, Bolus, and Keesling (1976) and further explicated in Marsh and Shavelson (1986). This discrepancy assumes added value in Kate’s case, if one adopts the notion of Vispoel (1995) that artistic self-concept emerges as a separate, albeit interrelated, aspect of self-concept. While describing herself as “intelligent,” Kate revealed a lack of social confidence in her self-characterization as “extremely shy.” While describing herself as shy, she recalled her early confidence in her acting ability, indicating a positive artistic self-concept. Apparently, in her case, a strong sense of self-confidence in one area did not preclude a significant lack of the same in other arenas. Kate appears to personify the complexity of a multifaceted self-concept (Harter, 1990), as she invoked terms and traits that may seem contradictory or lacking in personal insight.

### *Early Personal and Social Experiences*

Kate’s description of her self-concept as a child gave an indication of the disparity that existed between the various dimensions. She characterized herself as “intelligent”

and academically talented, recalling that her parents “always” told both she and her brother that they were “smart.” In fact, she noted, “from the time I was small, I believed that I could achieve great things academically, and I did.”

Her account of her social success, however, revealed less confidence in that dimension of her self-concept. Kate described herself as a child who was “extremely shy.” She felt so inhibited, in fact, that she recalled that she was “barely able to talk to my own friends and family.” She characterized the rest of her family as talkative and outspoken, perhaps contributing to a context where she felt unable to express herself.

As she entered middle school, Kate reported that she was quite self-conscious about her appearance due to a skin condition that left her with many facial blemishes. She began to use makeup at the age of 13 and referred to her makeup as a “mask” that she used throughout high school. As she recalled:

I can remember walking in, in high school, if I did not have my face fully made up, I would stare at the floor, head down and run to the bathroom. Until, I did not want anybody to look at me.

In addition to her facial blemishes, Kate also noted that her early physical maturation contributed to her self-consciousness. She achieved a height of 5’6” by the eighth grade, accompanied by full hips and breasts. Although she wore a bikini “every day of her life in the summer” as a result of her lifeguard job, she reported that her figure attracted attention from older males that was uncomfortable and embarrassing to her. As she related:

I hated it. I mean, I remember being 16, working at the pool and a guy who was in his mid-30’s using his 9 year-old daughter to ask for my phone number. And I hated that. And it makes you feel awkward and it makes you feel almost like there’s something wrong with you. Like you did something wrong. Why am I getting this attention from these people? Am I wearing something wrong? Am I

doing something wrong? Why can't I get this type of attention from people my own age?

Kate related that she felt fairly confident in terms of her social relationships in high school due to the friends that she had made through theater. However, she recounted that she had a "late start in terms of dating." Apparently recovered somewhat from her early shyness, she characterized herself in high school as "everyone's friend," while noting that she felt "left out" of the dating scene.

By the time she was a senior in high school, Kate recalled that she began to feel a more self confident overall, explaining that she had finally begun to "come into her own." She related that she began to realize that not everyone was "looking at her," and that she had "something to offer." By the end of her senior year she was dating a boy who did not attend her high school. The onset of dating was, for Kate, a welcome end to her experience of being "an outsider looking in, as far as love and relationships." As she stated, "once I started dating, I was just like every other kid."

Kate recalled that she had considered completing high school in three years instead of four, due to her academic abilities. Apparently her parents were interested in this option as well, although Kate related that she and her parents eventually agreed that she should complete high school in the traditional four-year format. In retrospect, Kate notes that it was a "good" decision due to her perception of her social and emotional development at the time. As she reflected:

I think, academically I could have done high school in three years. I probably could have done college in three years. But, socially and emotionally I needed that extra time. I really needed that extra time.

Overall, it seems that, while Kate maintained a sense of confidence in her academic abilities, her insecurity about her physical appearance and her inherent shyness

contributed to a lack of social self-confidence. However, she did develop a network of friendships due to her theater involvement, and her self-consciousness about her physical appearance was somewhat ameliorated through the use of makeup. Her social self-concept appears to have been further boosted as she began dating during her senior year, becoming “just like any other kid.”

### *Early Experiences in Theater*

Kate’s early success in theater seems to have provided her with an opportunity to feel confident while engaged in an avenue for self-expression that she enjoyed. As a result, her initial experiences evolved into a pattern of engagement in theater that spanned throughout her school career.

Kate dated her initial involvement in theater back to fourth grade. Apparently, the early opportunity to play the lead role in the school play contributed to Kate’s assumption of theater as a primary activity of choice, persisting through her childhood and into college. Having had less success in other activities, Kate appears to have embraced theater enthusiastically right from the start. As she recalled:

There was a drama program in my elementary school that, I think it was the speech pathologist started. Cause theater was kind of his passion. And I was never really good at sports or anything like that. But I got into theater and I loved it from the get go. It was fabulous. So, I started then and just continued to do theater through school, middle school and high school.

While achieving the part of a munchkin in the Wizard of Oz was a worthy aspiration in itself, Kate apparently did not anticipate that she would achieve the pinnacle of success in her very first attempt. She recalled the thrill of seeing her name listed under none other than the lead role. She recounted:

When the theater program was started in my elementary school, I auditioned and here I am this little fourth grader and I’m looking for my name on the list. And I

start, we were doing the Wizard of Oz, so I start looking among the list of munchkins. So, cause I'm thinking I must have a small part if I got in at all. And I did not find my name, so I start to think, "Oh, I did not get in." Well, no, it's just that my name was under Dorothy. I got the lead role right away.

While this early affirmation of her potential for acting may have served to reinforce Kate's interest in the venue, it provided the context for an event that she recalled as quite humiliating. As she stated, "...luckily it wasn't the first performance or it might have turned me off to theater all together." As she recounted, she was on stage playing Dorothy, when she had to run from the stage to go to the bathroom. She recalled her embarrassment:

I ended up having to run through the curtain, run off stage and go to the bathroom. And I'm crying, tears are streaming down my face because I'm so upset that I ruined the whole performance. The director comes out and he had to call this impromptu intermission . . . Everyone's like "What's going on? Dorothy's just running out, crying, sobbing . . ." So I come back on stage, I cleaned myself up and I finish the performance, and you know I'm singing the songs and I'm smiling. I've got this smile plastered on my face, tears are still rolling down my cheek.

However, this incident did not dissuade her from her continued involvement in theater. While her lack of success in sports led to her disengagement from that pastime, Kate remained relatively undaunted by the Dorothy episode, concluding instead that she had a talent for theater. While "playing pretend" is the natural realm of little girls, for Kate this activity translated into her perception of a natural aptitude for acting. As she related:

Theater came naturally to me. I mean, I was always playing pretend. And when you're really little, it's very hard to distinguish the two. You know, playing pretend and acting. It's the same thing. So, it came very naturally.

In fact, acting became a defining facet of Kate's childhood self-concept as a child. This seems due, in part, to her assessment of her natural aptitude. However, among all of

the various activities that she reportedly attempted, it was theater that proved to be the most “fun” and “exciting” for Kate. Perhaps most significantly for her, theater seemed to provide the “extremely shy” little girl with an avenue for self-expression that she relished. As she recalled:

It (theater) was a huge part, actually, of how I defined myself . . . I tried all sorts of different things, all sorts of different sports and other activities, but none of them ever really fit. I was never really necessarily really good at any of them, but then I also wasn't as interested. I was the kid out in the field making daisy chains while everyone else was playing baseball. I just did not care. But theater was so much fun for me. Because as a little kid I loved creative activities and I still love them. And it was the only way I could express myself cause you know, I'm not very good with painting or art or music, but through theater, I could portray other people and that was so exciting. It was also a way, I was extremely shy as a child, extremely shy. I would barely talk to my own friends or my family. But I could get up on stage in front of however many people and play a part and have and be fine. I wouldn't really fear that.

In addition to contributing to her definition of self, theater provided a social context for Kate. She explained that her friends were culled largely from the peer group also involved in theater activities. Apparently the enforced time together orchestrated by her theater involvement was a factor that reinforced certain friendships. Kate further characterized the environment as “safe” place to reveal herself and noted that it was “easy” to form friendships there. Although ease seemed to be the operative word initially, she also noted that she has managed to maintain those friendships for a long time, even when she and her friends are separated. As she explained:

We were always involved together and we had this sort of group and this common hobby, so it was very easy to form a friendship through that...all of my friends from middle school through high school we always had classes together and stuff, but we were doing theater together. So, we were constantly together and it was very easy to form a friends group. It was very easy to have sort of your social network through theater. And actually the friends that I made in elementary school (were through) theatre because we continued on in school together and we also continued in theatre together and they're some of the people that I'm still close to to this day. My best friend from home that I'm still extremely close with,

we met through girl scouts also, but really through theatre we kind of formed our bond.

In addition to the “ease” of forming of relationships within theater, Kate seems to have located a group whose morals were in line with her own. In the safety of this social net, Kate could retain her reserved nature, while sharing the stereotype of her “outrageous” peers. She could enjoy activities and parties with a large group of friends, without feeling that she had to compromise her values or her morals. She explained:

There’s the general stereotype of the weird theater kid. We really did not have those. Um, I guess we were kind of characterized as a bit more outrageous at times than other kids . . . I was always a little more reserved than some of my friends, but some of my friends would just be loud and did not care. We were one of the more sedate groups actually in my high school...we were calm, but without being nerds. That’s one thing. I had, I had a large group of friends, we would get together and we would have parties, but we never, there was never alcohol, there was never anything like that. And that was really important to me in high school. And so, it was this large group of like, moral kids. I guess moral, in the typical sense.

It is apparent through Kate’s accounting that her engagement in theater was a significant aspect of her experience as she was growing up. She identified theater as a venue for self-expression that she enjoyed, as well as an important context for the friendships that she established. As a result, she characterized theater as an essential aspect of her definition of self.

#### *Decision to Major in Theater*

Kate was the only participant in the research who did not hold a vision of a career in theater. Although she maintained a consistent interest in theater throughout her childhood, Kate explained that it was never her vocation of choice. Instead, she reported that she entered college with the aspiration to become a teacher. In fact, her decision to major in theater appears to have evolved from a desire to replicate the social success that

she enjoyed with her theater friends throughout her school years. According to Kate, her parents realized that theater was the avenue for her social connections in elementary, middle, and high school. It became her “social niche” in her words, and she noted that her parents wanted that to continue, recognizing that she enjoyed it and was successful in it. Apparently Kate concurred, and she chose to double-major in theater and history with plans to attend graduate school for teaching.

### The Theater Community

Consistent with her experience in high school, Kate found that her social niche manifested within the group of theater majors at Metropolitan University. In fact, Kate readily acknowledged that entering Metropolitan as a theater major perpetuated her experience of an “easy” context for gaining friends. As she said, “you walk into college and you are already in a sorority.” By the time she reached her senior year, she had a number of friends outside of theater as well. As she described, “about half of my friends are theater people and half aren’t.” However, she emphasized the importance of the social context of theater initially, stating “it was very important to me freshman year...getting in and having a group to identify with.”

While she did not describe the theater department as a family, as do some of the other interviewees, Kate did indicate a level of connection that is closer and more authentic, in her perception, than in other major groups on campus. As she reflected: “.. a place where I can pick up and come in and have real conversations with people much more quickly than you can with anyone else.”

In addition, her observation of the social group of theater majors at college mirrors her experience in high school that it is a “very safe” group for her to be in. The

difference in college, however, is that she attributed this safety more to the level of personal sharing that occurs among students, in addition to the sheer amount of time spent together that she noted in high school. In the college theater environment, she noted that personal sharing is almost a “necessity” in order to produce the level of “trust” needed in performance. It appears that the climate of shared time together, common interests, and revelation of personal matters contributed to an atmosphere that is in contrast to that found in other courses or other major groups on campus. Kate explained:

You can have a history class where you sit next to the same people all year long, and you know that you have the same people class after class even, you might strike up a chit chat conversation, do you go out to lunch, no, do you really tell these people anything about yourself, no. In theater, it’s such a communal thing. In some ways you have to share yourself. Also when you get to the point where not only are you in the same classes with the same people over and over again working together, you have to create a community of trust and knowing, just for performance purposes, someone can reveal themselves in performance, or reveal their character in performance, and cry and do all that stuff and its okay. You have to have this area of trust, but then, okay, you’re working on shows together, so then you’re in class together, and you’re together until 11 at night. And these are people with similar interests. Sometimes we’ll go out, we’re friends. So, it’s a very different major. For most people, their major isn’t a huge part of their social life. Also, looking at scripts or looking at characters leads to discussion about life and people in general . . . if I talk about, why do I think this character does that? People start to get more philosophical, or whatever, and you can get really draw in.

Kate also noted that theater majors in college have a somewhat stereotyped persona and unique culture, perpetuating the characterizations she identified in the high school group. While stating that she does not think that there is a negative perception of theater students at Metropolitan, Kate acknowledged her view that they are “definitely a little bit crazy...a little more odd-ball, a little more willing to take risks socially, to be out there and just not care what people think.” In fact, she viewed this latter quality of “not

caring about others' perceptions" as a trait of which theater majors are "proud" and one that is "cultivated" by them.

Kate appears to have initially felt a bit embarrassed by these public displays of outlandish behavior. However, it appears that she chose to continue to align herself with this social group, to eventually "get used" to their behaviors, and to begin to question her own attachment to a concern for what others think. In fact, she appeared to have relinquished enough self-consciousness to eventually find this type of behavior "fun" and to embrace the characterization of "oddball." For Kate, this aspect of self reflects a willingness to share sides of oneself that everyone has, but only some are comfortable enough to reveal. As she described:

In theater, you meet a lot of loud, bold, outgoing people. In good ways. And, so, most of my close friends, I don't know so much anymore, but growing up, most of my close friends were these loud, bold, outgoing people. And I've kind of gotten used to it through the years. A first I said, "oh my gosh, we can't make noise and we can't do this and we can't do that. And you want to do what? you want to be silly and stupid in public? We can't do that. What will people think?" And after a while, you get used to it. And you see that it's fun and other people don't care and they think it's fun too. And ok. I can do this . . . kind of just be ok with being stupid and playing around . . . and not worrying about what people think. . . . And people do get that perception that we're oddballs. And we are. We're just more willing to share that part of ourselves, I think, than a lot of other people. Why not? And you know, why do we care?

This characterization of herself in the context of her theater major peer group provides a contrast to the formerly "shy and withdrawn" child who relied on makeup as a "mask" throughout much of high school. However, for Kate, among these theater majors who are outgoing, bold, and not necessarily affected by others' opinions of them, she has found "a place I can go where I definitely belong. Where I've belonged from day one."

In addition to the close relationships that Kate described among her theater peers, she also identified what appears to be a more intimate relationship between faculty and

students that exists in this culture as compared to other departments on campus. She observed that the first indication of a different level of rapport was the norm of calling professors by their first names. In addition, she noted that students and professors interact outside of class, in the context of rehearsals, and in social settings as well. As Kate described:

It's a place where I know that I can talk to professors because they care about me personally. Not just about me in their class or me as a student. They care about me personally. And I have done that. I've gone and talked to professors about what's going on in my life and you know, just had chats . . . we go out together, we call them by their first names, that's one of the first things you could notice.

Kate's characterization of the faculty as caring and supportive is consistent with statements from other participants in the research. However, in Kate's case, one faculty member in particular appears to have played a very significant supportive role. Kate described an episode of personal crisis that arose for her when she was enrolled in a course taught by a theater professor named Diane. She recalled that she chose to share very personal details of her experience with Diane and, in return, she felt a great deal of caring and support. In this case, Kate was hospitalized for a suicide attempt and a week later came to believe that she was pregnant. She felt unable to complete an assignment that was due, so she approached Diane and shared her recent experiences. Kate recounts the conversation:

And I told her, I completely opened up to her and I told her exactly why and exactly what was going on, and she understood and said, you'll get to it on your own time. She was very helpful and very understanding. And she opened up to me about things in her life. They really were mentors, the teachers.

The combination of group support, increased intimacy of interactions, and close rapport with faculty appeared to coalesce into a social safety net that supported Kate as she faced some personal challenges during college.

## Production Participation

Interviews revealed that various aspects of participation in a play lead to experiences that affect self-concept. Key ideas that emerged in discussions with Kim included auditioning, typecasting, getting into character, costumes, and experiences during the run of productions. The following sections will explore the meanings attributed to each of these production elements.

### *Auditioning*

Interviews with each of the participants revealed that auditioning and casting are among the most significant experiences for theater majors at Metropolitan. For Kate, the moment of realizing that she has achieved a spot on “the list” is more significant than any moment on stage or any applause or accolades. Echoing her recollection of seeing her name listed as Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* in fourth grade, Kate recalled: “. . . looking at the callboard and seeing your name on the list. There’s that sense of accomplishment and excitement . . . I think that’s the most fabulous feeling in theater.”

In fact, Kate described her experience of auditioning for her final semester, surprising herself by how invested she was. Having just completed a run as a lead character in the main-stage play, Kate apparently tried to convince herself that the outcome of the next phase of auditions wasn’t very important to her. However, recent accomplishments notwithstanding, she once again succumbed to the “fever” of striving to obtain the prize of a successful audition, her name on the list. As she recounted:

It was funny because when I went into auditions in December, I guess it was. I had just come off, I had done *Three Sisters* in the fall and that was kind of my baby. And it was my show that I really cared about. It was kind of like I had done that and I knew this was my last semester and I was kind of like, I don’t really want to do a show. I’m done. I’m ready to move on. I had a good experience and I

wanted to leave on a good note. But then you get into auditions and it's like the fever hits you again.

On the converse, she also noted that auditions are anything but fun in and of themselves. In fact, she characterized the experience in rather strong terms, stating that she "hates" auditions. Apparently, her numerous previous experiences in theater did not preclude the level of anxiety that she experiences during auditions and in-class performances. As she described, "And it's funny because here I am someone who's done theater for so long and it's a part of my life but still for in class performances and auditions I will get nervous to the point where my stomach is upset, my hands will shake, my legs will be shaking, I can barely focus on anything."

She described the uncertainty regarding the outcome as well as the discomfort of having the potential directors watch and scrutinize her. Although any acting performance involves a level of public scrutiny, auditions invoke a level of fear reflected in her recollection of her private thoughts, "I hope I don't mess up. I hope I don't forget a line...because you don't want to look bad, you don't want to be judged poorly." According to Kate, the heightened level of anxiety provoked by the audition experience arises from the fact that the outcome of the judgment of her performance will determine whether or not she is cast, and whether or not she will find her own name on "the list" afterward.

Kate explained that the second stage of the auditions are less anxiety provoking for her, due, in part, to the fact that her audition performance was judged positively enough to warrant the "call-back." As she explained, "I guess call-backs are better than auditions... there's a little bit of sweat off your back, because you're like, at least I made it to a call-back."

Kate explained the prestige of being cast for a main-stage play at Metropolitan University, with the resulting higher profile and attention directed towards these productions. Although initially unaware of the culture of the department, I had quickly picked up on the emphasis given to main-stage shows versus performances in other venues on campus. Kate explained that being cast in a main-stage play is the most exciting because of the status associated with it. As she related:

It's made into a bigger deal. You have faculty directing it. It's a big deal throughout the department. You know, the costume shop is working on it. You get costumes, you get sets, you have a budget . . . there is a different value placed on the main stage.

Kate has been cast fairly frequently during her time at Metropolitan, although she noted that she has only a single casting as a major character in a main-stage play to her credit. Therefore, getting cast as Olga in *Three Sisters* constituted a significant achievement for Kate. Although she was not “desperate” to “prove herself,” this experience did appear to provide her confirmation of her ability as an actress. In fact, comments from her peers regarding her casting seem to indicate to her that her talent may have been previously overlooked, as an “underused” female among theater majors. As she explained:

I had never been on the main stage at Metropolitan and it wasn't something I was, it wasn't like a desperate need, but it was, I kind of wanted to show, you know, I can do this. I'm good at this. So, kind of getting cast as that role, I mean, blew me out of the water because here, I had never been on the main stage and then I'm a lead in the show. And I was like, “Oh. Oh my gosh.” It came out of nowhere. But it did kind of prove something to me. And it's funny because I get a lot of comments from my peers. They're very confident in me and that, you know, I always get comments about, “God, you're the best underused female that we have.”

In fact, Kate explains that there was a bit of an art to getting cast in the role of Olga in *Three Sisters*. In reflecting on her success in achieving the role, Kate explained

that her interpretation of the role might have been the key to her success in getting the part. According to Kate, the director explained to her later why she cast Kate for the part. Apparently her character of Olga was portrayed in the script as an individual who had taken the responsibility to guide her family through many difficult circumstances. In the context of tragedy and loss in the play, reflected in Olga's serious demeanor, Kate's approach was to find the humor in her character and emphasize it. As she related:

When I looked at the role . . . I also realized that she's got something to be happy about too. I mean, everyone can't be sad all of the time. I mean, even if you're depressed, you have to have some happy moments. So, I guess Diane kind of saw in auditions that I recognized the humor in her. And I did not just play her as the sad, dejected woman that a lot of people end up doing.

Illustrating the complexity of the levels of relationships that occur between directors and students, Kate acknowledges that the director, Diane, happened to know Kate quite well personally due to in-class interactions as well as a number of personal conversations outside of class. Kate explained her expectation that Diane's personal knowledge of Kate would lead to her getting cast as Olga, if she was going to be cast at all. However, the fact that they had a personal connection did not seem to lead Kate to think that she would receive any favoritism as far as getting cast in the play at all. Therefore, she was able to feel good about her accomplishment of getting the part on her own merits.

### *Typcasting*

Echoing the perspectives of other interviewees, Kate discussed the issue of typecasting as it related to her own casting experiences both in college and in high school. Typecasting refers to a tendency that may arise in theater environments, where one is most often cast as a certain type of character. This may occur as a result of

personal characteristics, or a past history of playing certain character types. While typecasting may provide a certain level of continuity for an actor as her or she plays familiar parts or aspects not foreign to one's own persona, it may also be viewed as a constraining factor, limiting the type and number of parts for which one may be successfully cast.

Kate presented herself as one who is not necessarily constrained by typecasting associated with her physical features. She related an assessment of her physical type as "average," which allows her to portray a range of character types. As a result, she noted that the costume shop rarely has to build a costume for her, and can generally modify existing pieces to suit her. Although she is pale skinned, she noted that she tans well, which, along with her very dark hair, facilitates her ability to play ethnic characters as well. In fact, "average" is the trait most often invoked by Kate as she described herself.

Aside from physical trait typecasting, Kate described a level of stereotyping that sometimes occurs in casting based on personality traits. She expressed surprise at finding herself cast in two comedic pieces during the semester of interviewing, explaining that she is generally cast only in serious, dramatic pieces. In fact, Kate stated that she has not viewed herself as particularly funny or able to play comedic roles. As she described:

I've always had this idea that I'm not funny. I'm not a funny person. That's ok. I have a lot of other good qualities, but comedy's not one of them and that's ok. But it was kind of nice to be told, hey, you can do this and it will work for you.

It is interesting to note that Kate views her casting in a comedy as an indication that she actually does possess humor as a personality trait. This shift in her assessment of her own self-concept as a result of a director's casting decision seems to indicate that her self-concept is significantly influenced by this aspect of her theater involvement.

Although symbolic interactionists (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) posited that one's self-concept represents an integration of the perceptions of others, gaining self-awareness via the outcome of casting decisions exemplifies the unique manner in which theater can contribute to self-concept development.

There are certain character types that Kate identified as most likely for her to portray in roles. She noted that she tends to play "strong women" and "serious characters." In addition, she noted that she could play characters that are older, stating, "I have a look that can be older, and a gravity that can be older." She related that her identification with these traits led her to predict that she would be cast as Olga in *Three Sisters*. As she stated, "You can kind of guess at what you'll be cast as. Out of the three sisters I'd most likely be cast as Olga...just because that is who I'm most like in real life."

There are also certain character types that Kate identified as least likely for her to portray. She noted, "almost never have I played a mean or angry character...and it's very fun because I have it in me and everyone has it in you. But I never get cast as that and I know that." A notable exception to this trend for Kate was the time when she was cast as the evil stepmother in *Cinderella* in high school. Apparently, the opportunity to express this side of herself was a welcome change for Kate, as she stated, "...she is evil. It was fun. I loved it. Because it was something different."

While emphasizing the power of typecasting in determining how one is cast, Kate also noted that actors do "play against their type all the time." It seems that she is clarifying that, while one is frequently viewed for roles in terms of established typecasts, there are opportunities to play characters outside of those limiting stereotypes. Kate

reflected that she has played both serious and humorous roles in the past, although she observed that she has rarely been cast as an angry or mean character. However, she did have the opportunity to “play against her type” in this realm when she was cast in the role of evil stepmother in *Cinderella* in high school. Kate recalled that she “loved” the chance to play that role and portray the mean and evil persona that is so unlike her in real life.

In fact, the opportunity to “play against her type” is one of the features of acting that Kate so often expressed was “fun” for her. It seems that the context of “playing the part” allowed her the freedom to behave without her characteristic concern about what others might think of her. In addition, the fact that the audience does not really “know” her and she does not have to “meet them” further facilitates the freedom that she feels on stage. In fact, this type of anonymity provides Kate with a level of confidence on stage that allows her to explore behaviors that can translate to her real life. For Kate, acting even seems “more natural” and assuming an acting frame of mind allows her to believe positive things about herself. As she observed:

It (acting) was a great way to explore options that I never would have explored. It was a great way to kind of let myself go and get to be different people and have fun with that. And just, you know, play. My family was always shocked with surprise. Because as a child I was quiet and yet, and people still comment and say, but you can go up there on stage and talk. And there’s these people who are very extroverted and they’ll go to a party and meet people. “Don’t ask me to go up on stage. Don’t ask me to get up and talk in front of people. I can’t do that. How do you do that?” And that to me always seems much more natural. If I’m playing the part, I can get out there and do things. And in a way, maybe, I sometimes use that in real life. Especially if I’m going out to a club or on a vacation. I can be more confident. I can be, I become more beautiful because I believe I am. There’s sort of that confidence that comes from acting like this isn’t me, so I don’t have to own up to this. There’s, these people are my audience. They’re never going to see me again. I don’t have to meet them. I don’t know them. I don’t care what they think, so I can be whatever I want to be. I can show whatever I want to show . . . And I was able to speak because I did not have to worry about. I mean, if a character was a little more assertive than I was or even mean, that was fine because that wasn’t me. So, I could be mean or I could be exciting or exotic

without any of the repercussions, any of the social repercussions of being that myself.

Kate recalled a specific example of a part that she did not have to “own up to” in the high school play, *City of Angels*. In this instance, Kate was cast as one of the prostitutes. As she recalled:

There I was. Up in front of my high school. You know, this is me. The girl who sits next to you in class. Who’s the smart chick. And I had the heels on, the seamed stockings...Hey, this is me and I can be attractive and I can be sexy and I can be fun. And so that was kind of fun because it was a role I never played. In real life.

While, in retrospect, Kate is able to recall the fun she had with the part, she also remembered the fear that she had before the performances that she would not be able to “pull it off.” At the time she was afraid that they would somehow see through the part and would not “buy it.” The result she feared would be laughter from the audience, perhaps reminiscent of her humiliating experience in fourth grade. However, in this case, she was relieved to find that there was no laughter and she “pulled it off” after all.

Although Kate appears to accept the challenge to play certain parts that do not resonate with her view of her “type,” there are also personas that Kate feels would be unlikely for her to ever play. She mused that it would be rare for her to ever play someone who is “overly stupid.” The complexities of playing the part of someone “dumb” according to Kate, include the fact that a dumb person does not see themselves as dumb and an actor assuming that façade must try to adopt the mindset that the individual might have about themselves, versus a characterization of dumb or otherwise.

### *Getting Into Character*

Once a student actor has successfully been cast in a production, the work begins of “getting into character.” This process is integral to a successful performance and

student actors talk quite a bit about how they go about accomplishing character development. This process begins with the reading of the script and continues as the character evolves throughout the rehearsal and production of the play. Directors provide some structure at times, which varies according to their own individual style. Actors may be asked to complete exercises such as a character background sketch or a questionnaire about various traits of their character. Student actors may also use various strategies of their own creation to devise their character.

The porter character that Kate played in *The Servant with Two Masters* was somewhat peripheral to the central action of the play. However, Kate noted that those peripheral parts could be significant when it comes to adding or detracting from the overall production. As a result, she engaged in a certain amount of character development even for this small role. In fact, she noted that found herself more reliant on director feedback in developing her character than in any role previously. At times, the personal traits of the actor become incorporated into the character. Kate recalled the incident that resulted in an aspect of herself becoming a key trait of her character.

Apparently her character was at the edge of the stage at one point, observing the action, and Kate found herself not sure what to do with herself. Following a habit that she herself sometimes has, Kate sat down and took a bit of a mini-nap, closing her eyes. Apparently the director noticed his “porter” sleeping as soon as she had a free moment and he thought it was a funny bit to add to the character. Hence, the “funny porter” was created.

With her main role in *Three Sisters*, Kate recalled that character development was a more complex process. In this case, she described that she related strongly to the

character from the initial casting, as reflected in her comment that Olga is “like me.”

However, she continued to engage in an ongoing process of character development throughout rehearsals. It is interesting to note how strongly the character is personified as Kate reflected on her evolving understanding of the fictional Olga. She explained:

Olga is a giver. But I kind of also tried to look for ways that she is supported. You know. Cause everyone needs something to lean on sometime. And so, I tried to look at that as well. That’s what stood out to me. Cause everyone always says she’s this, she’s this, she’s depressed, she’s unhappy. So, I guess because I was getting that message so much, the opposite jumped out at me.

Kate, like the other student actors, discussed the challenge of learning to distinguish between herself and her character during the process of character development. Kate related that she feels the need to form a “close bond” with her character in order to adopt the persona. According to her, it is important to feel “close” and “connected” to her character. As she described:

Because, in playing another person, you have to empathize, you have to become that person so you have to feel with them, so you have to connect, in some way connect something of yourself to that person.

To that end, Kate engaged in a certain amount of reflection about how she and her character, Olga, were similar. Identifying shared traits was a strategy that helped her to relate to Olga. As a result, Kate stated that she found that Olga was “close to her heart” and that they had several things in common. Kate noted that Olga was a teacher, mirroring Kate’s aspiration to become one, and that Olga was a mother figure to her sisters, reminding Kate of the role that she assumes with her own friends and boyfriends. She noted that she felt able to relate to Olga’s experience of being on the outside “looking in,” recalling her own late start in dating compared to her high school friends. However,

Kate also hastened to add that Olga was a “spinster,” a characterization that Kate is hoping to avoid herself.

On the other hand, Kate was also involved in playing another character during the semester of interviewing that she described as not so close to her own personality type. For her role of Aunt May in *Italian-American Reconciliation*, Kate related that she relied more on traits that she observed in other people in her life as she developed the character. Specifically, she used speech patterns and traits of her own Italian grandmother to incorporate into Aunt May. As a result, Aunt May ended up with a rather “bold and brassy” persona that Kate did not feel that she particularly expressed naturally herself, but that she was looking forward to portraying on stage.

An acting challenge identified by Kate, is the task of portraying a traumatic incident or intense emotion that one has not “personally experienced.” In this case, she explains that it is vital that the actor find a way to “relate to” the experience in order to achieve a “realistic” portrayal. As she described:

I can play a character who has been raped or abused, and I don’t have that personal experience, but I have to get there somehow. I have to understand their experience. So, I have to get to something in my past that hurt me.

Therefore, good character development, according to Kate, relies to some extent on the human trait of empathy. In her case, she identified empathy as a feature of her personality before she began acting. In fact, as described earlier, her natural empathy was a factor influencing her initial involvement in acting as a child. However, Kate believes that the venue of the theater requires and, therefore, enhances the development of the skill. As she described:

It’s kind of like I already had the empathy. But theater helped me to, I had to constantly practice it. So, like any skill, you become better at it the more you use

it. Well, I had to constantly use it. And as far as reading people goes and understanding people, that's what theater is. And so, the more you do it, the better you become. So, I think it's a skill that I had innately, but one that grew because of theater. And I think that's where you get your good child actors from. They have to be good at imitation, but also good at empathy. That's why people thought I was good when I was young.

### *Costume*

An aspect of character development is the crafting of the costume and the use of masks and makeup. As in the development of the personality traits of a character, the actor is the slate on which the character is drawn and, therefore, the physical features and clothing preferences of the actor influence the creation of the character. In addition, choices of costume and makeup provide insights about one's persona, and constitute significant attributes of both actor and character in and of themselves.

During the interviews, Kate talked quite a bit about costume, makeup, and physical features of her characters. Interestingly, these topics were all but absent from discussions with the male actors. Review of the transcriptions does not reveal how much influence the questions of the interviewer may have played on this focus of discussion. However, although all student actors were questioned about various aspects of their personal appearance and use of costumes, it is Kate's interviews that reveal the most reflection on this topic.

Kate became lively and animated as she related that she loves the use of makeup and costumes that accompanies acting. For her, makeup and costumes is another dimension of theater as a venue for assuming the freedom of some other identity. In fact, her characterization of makeup as a "face" that she gets to "put on" is reminiscent of her description of donning the mask of makeup as a teenager in middle school. However, even though that use of makeup held emotionally painful connotations of hiding her true

self, her use of makeup and costumes on stage connotes fun by contrast. She described the fun of experimenting with these various ways of being:

It's dress-up. What face do I get to put on? And it's not just am I made up or am in not made up. Really, what face do I get to put on? Do I put age lines on? How do I look as I'm old? How do I look as I'm young? How do I look as a clown? You know. And different costumes and a lot of outlandish things that you would never, ever wear, but it's just fun. Why not?

A particularly memorable recollection in this regard is that of the role of a prostitute that she played in a production in high school. According to Kate, this character was "mean and kind of loud and overbearing, lots of fun blue eye shadow and bright lipstick." This persona allowed her to express uncharacteristic traits, which she has previously identified as particularly enjoyable for her. However, in this case, the makeup became a tool for self-expression and the cause of a reaction from the other actors as well as the audience. Even the experience of unknowingly applying her lipstick haphazardly on stage allowed her to step outside of her usual reserve, such that the resulting laughter and jokes about the incident became part of the fun for her. As she reflected:

That role was just so freeing. It was so great because here I was, this quiet and shy little person and I could get up there and yell. And with the makeup, it was the same thing. The makeup became part of the schtick. I was putting on lipstick in this one part, really red lipstick, I was getting really upset, so the lipstick got all outside of the lines until I looked like a clown. I had almost a clown mouth on and then the other characters are noticing, but not wanting to say anything. Kind of laughing. And it became this huge joke that everyone could laugh at and it was fun and I looked silly, but it was good. It was in a fun way and I was getting laugh reactions which I never get. You know, so in that way, makeup was sort of, it was so out there that it was something new.

Although Kate identified how much she enjoys costumes and makeup, it was observed that she seemed to rarely wear any makeup or style her hair in other than a pulled back ponytail during the interviews or play rehearsals. Kate described a lessening of reliance on makeup throughout her college years. While she unfailingly applied it each

morning before class in her freshman year, she gradually slackened off until, as she said, “I really don’t care too much.” She related this progression to an increase in her self-confidence, explaining that she no longer has the “need to impress everyone around me.” She also observed that she no longer worries about what everyone around her thinks and asks the rhetorical question, “Why am I going to take the time to pretty myself up to go to a class with people I never even talk to?”

However, Kate apparently still enjoys donning her mask when she goes out on the town, noting, “I never bum when I go out.” Although she apparently feels comfortable enough with her every day appearance to go sans makeup and hairdo, she confided that wearing certain clothes and applying makeup become more important when she is in a setting where she wants to get attention, perhaps especially from males. As she described:

When I’m made up and I’ve got cute clothes on, I do have more confidence about guys . . . because I know I look my best. I know I look good. I know I’m going to catch at least some eyes. Am I going to turn every head in the room? No. That’s not the point. But, you know, people are going to look at me and think I’m attractive.

When she does decide to get “made up,” she noted that friends and peers give her the feedback that she looks like “an entirely different person.” With this observation, she eluded to the idea that donning makeup and “cute” clothes to go out is not so different from donning a costume and makeup to portray a different person on stage.

Kate indicated the differences in the significance of costumes and makeup for the various parts in which she was cast during her senior year. When discussing *Three Sisters* she laughed as she recalled the corsets required by the costume department. As she described, even though it was not required for the part, she and the other “sisters” made a point of competing to who could get their corset bound the most tightly.

In contrast, her next role was that of a male porter in *The Servant with Two Masters*. The costume in this case consisted of a black shirt, pants, and cap. Her makeup was comical, along the lines of the painted face of a mime. Although she was even mistaken for a male student when she was in costume and makeup, Kate seemed to find the portrayal to be funny in the context of the comedic play. She described:

In *Servant*, the makeup, always made me laugh. Because the way it was put on and my cap, so you couldn't see any hair and they had the big eyebrows and everything. All of a sudden, everyone who would see me would go, are you George (a well-known male acting student at Metropolitan)? Everyone was like, oh my gosh, I thought you were George. You look like George. You know, sometimes things like that are fun. And dressing as a man, was kind of interesting. That was interesting and fun.

In her final role of her senior year, she played Aunt May, whose costume evolved into an outrageous combination of skin-tight leopard skin pants, a low cut blouse, spiky high heels, and really big hair. In this case, Kate described how the final touches of her costume helped to solidify her character to the point of invoking a corresponding walk and body language. As Kate described:

It was almost like, the first time I put those gold high-heels on, that was it, right there. You know, sometimes the costume and the shoes really change your body and change the character. Like you can really, you know, you put it on and that's what it is. You know, I put on those shoes and all of a sudden the walk came about. Those little steps. Wiggling the hips. The walk came right out of it because that's how you walk in those shoes.

As I can attest, the costume produced a strong response from the audience when Kate's character made her first entrance on stage. Having seen her only in her low-key street clothes, with tame hair and no makeup, I was surprised at the transformation evident in Kate when she appeared as Aunt May. I noticed that others shared my enthusiasm when the audience laughed appreciatively at her entrance as I did.

For Kate, the reaction from the audience and her peers was perhaps the most significant aspect of the performance for her. She mentioned it immediately when she began to discuss the play and she appeared pleased and excited to describe everyone's reactions. Kate seemed to revel in the attention that was given to her appearance as she explained, "It was funny, I think, walking around in costume, I've gotten more attention in the past two weeks than I ever had before." In particular, she noted the feedback from males as she recalled:

But it did boost the ego a little. Because I got a lot of compliments. A lot of compliments on my performance, but a lot, a lot of guys . . . they're like, "Kate. So, like, wow. You look really good." Ok, guys. Alright. They saw me in that short skirt and those tight pants. And it was funny, actually. Matt, the guy who played Aldo. I've known him forever. Like, since 7<sup>th</sup> grade. And also, his older brother. Well, his older brother came to the show and I haven't talked to him...like Andy, my best friend from home is still close with Andy. But I hadn't talked to Andy in, like, years. And, he came to the show. And afterwards, I was talking to my friend from home and she said she was talking to him at the same time online and she starts laughing and she's like, "Guess who has a crush on you?" I'm like, "Are you kidding?" He's like a 28 year-old man. So, it was kind of cute in that way.

In summary, although Kate was the only participant to discuss the use of costumes and makeup, it appeared that the use of these tools were a significant aspect of the crafting of a persona for her. Noting that she is less reliant on the "mask" of makeup that she donned in high school, she clearly continues to enjoy the chance to dress up and assume another identity. Adopting an altered physical facade assists her to embrace her character and step into the role. In addition, costumes provide her an avenue for experimentation with her physical appearance. Thus, she has been afforded the opportunity to assume personas ranging from prostitutes to porters. Finally, Kate enjoyed the reaction that her altered appearances evoked from her family and the audience, especially male attention to which she is not necessarily accustomed.

### *Performances*

The culminating experience of the auditioning, casting, character development and rehearsal process is the run of the play. For Kate, performances invoke anxiety, although not as extreme as that experienced in auditions. To some extent, her experience of a production is dictated by the amount of investment she has in the play. Major productions, and plays in which she plays a lead character tend to engender the strongest feelings for her. A consistent idea that emerged for Kate was the reaction of the audience and her family to her performance.

Kate explained that she gets particularly anxious during preview night. Preview occurs the night before the actual opening night, with a cheaper cost for the tickets. Kate noted that the attendees are often students who are required to attend the play for one of their classes. Therefore, she characterized the audience as follows, “You have this captive audience and they’re not captivated, they’re captive. They have to be there. So, you’re like, oh great. And a lot of times they are your toughest audience.”

Another factor impacting her level of performance anxiety is the amount of speaking and the point in the play at which she first enters and speaks. Kate recalled that she was the most nervous during the play, *Three Sisters*, because she was the first to take the stage and begin speaking. During other productions she was able to wait in the cast room as the production began and listen to the performance over a PA system. Hearing the laughter of the audience affirmed their receptivity and helped to assuage her anxiety regarding her own entrance. Free from the pressure of entering and speaking first, Kate reflects that she feels more “excited” than “nervous.”

Kate's feelings about the play and her investment in its success appears to be qualitatively different depending on how significant she views her role to be. In the play, *The Servant with Two Masters*, Kate noted that she wanted the play to be good, but seemed more concerned about it for the sake of her friends who had more key roles. As she said:

And I really wanted, I really wanted to work my hardest so that the people who, like Ian who was the lead and others who this was their first really big show or this was, they had done other big shows, but this show was really, really in their hearts. So, they would have a really good experience like I had a good experience.

By contrast, she described a high level of investment in *Three Sisters* Describing the show as "my baby," she explained that it was "very important" to her. This was partially due to the fact that she had "a big part" and that the play held the prestige of the main-stage. As she described the main-stage play as "something I needed to do" before she graduated, she seemed to indicate that this was an accomplishment that she had identified as important to achieve during her time at Metropolitan. Having had the experience once, she explained that she felt more "settled" and that she did not necessarily "need" to have the same experience another time. Apparently accomplishing it once was sufficient to fulfill her expectations and it is "fine" if she does not get another chance to do so again. She explained:

When I say *Three Sisters* was my baby, I guess I mean that was my first time main stage at Metropolitan. So, it was a new experience. It was a show that was very important to me. It was a big part. I put a lot of work into that show. It just, it meant a lot to me. And also, I became very close to the other 2 girls who were playing my sisters. And so, just the relationships between the people and everything. I guess it was kind, it was something that I needed to do before I left here. You know, having that main-stage experience. And I saw it as kind of, and once I was done with that I was kind of more settled. I was like, I've been there. I don't necessarily need to get there again. I know I can do it. And so it's fine.

As noted earlier, Kate also had a positive reaction to her performance in *Italian-American Reconciliation*. She recalled previously how pleased she was to receive the attention from the audience and her peers regarding her costume and makeup. After the performances, she described her experience as the “performance high,” noting that she was “on cloud nine and running around and doing stuff.”

Like other interviewees, Kate talked about her reaction to having her family members attend a show. According to Kate, her parents consistently attend her performances. She explained:

They always come. Which is nice. They’ve always been so supportive of me. In high school, they would not only come, they would come to every performance. Every performance. And it’s nice. It’s nice for them to see. Because I know that they kind of like sharing in that. And they get excited about it too. It’s nice to know you have someone out there who came for you.

Additionally, she observed that it was particularly fun to have them in attendance for her performance as Aunt May, noting that that she enjoyed their shocked reaction to her character. As she recalled, “When I walked out, they were just shocked. And they thought it was the greatest thing ever.”

Therefore, it seems that performance, as well as auditions, evoke anxiety for Kate, relative to her perceptions of the interest level of the audience, as well as her investment in the production. The assumption of a lead role in a main stage play holds the highest level of prestige in this setting; therefore this achievement is most likely to satisfy her quest for the feeling of accomplishment. Additionally, the feedback of peers, faculty, and family is important to Kate.

### Self-Concept

Participants were asked to describe their current self-concept in order to provide a foundation for the following discussion of the factors that impact self-understanding.

Kate depicts her self-concept in terms of the improvements she has felt since high school. Evidencing growth from the insecurities that she described then, she presents a picture of herself at this time as fairly balanced. While describing herself as “average,” she indicates a level of acceptance of her current self-concept and appears to hold a positive view regarding the impact of her new confidence on her social comfort.

When asked to describe her current self-concept, Kate described herself in the following manner:

I see myself as an average person, caring, intelligent. I tend to be introspective, a perfectionist, always want more . . . I know I have certain strengths, but I always feel like I want more. I want to work harder, be able to do more . . . caring, and introspective, kind of focusing both on myself and other people. I like to mother people . . . I tend not to be judgmental; I care more about how they feel about themselves. Making people feel happy and wanted.

When asked to expand on her view of herself as “average,” Kate focused on her physical appearance, noting:

In looks I’m sort of your average height, average size, average you know, brown hair, brown eyes, stuff like that. I’m just your sort of average person. You can stick me in a crowd and I’m not going to stand out. I don’t think that is a bad thing. I think being average is OK . . . I always pride myself because I can go from group to group.

However, other aspects of her personality, identified as “intelligent” and “caring,” are not necessarily reflective of “average” standing. Although she identified the drive to “do better,” she appears to value her “caring” nature and her altruistic sensibilities. Perhaps Kate, while evidencing improvements in overall self-concept, continues to

demonstrate somewhat less self-concept with regard to her appearance. If so, this pattern echoes the disparity among domains of self-concept that she evidenced in high school as well.

Kate appears to have made significant gains in her social comfort level. Describing herself as “open and fluid,” she explained that she is able to get along with all types of people. In contrast to her previous reliance on theater as a social safety net, Kate seems to have developed the ability to establish friends outside of acting as well. She pointed out that she currently has friends who aren’t in theater as well as her “artsy” friends who are, describing it as a “50/50” ratio. In fact, she sees herself as being able to hang out with people who are “into just about everything.” She likened this quality to that of a “chameleon” and sees it as a result of her “acting” and her “personality.” As she described it, she “can go into different social situations, where it’s not necessarily my friends, but I can go in and I can have a conversation with just about anyone.” Although she reported that she can “still get shy at times,” Kate indicates that her own perception of her social self-concept is that it is “much better” than in high school.

Kate discussed romantic relationships as a distinct domain of self-concept. She related gains in confidence in this area as well, noting that she now knows that “not just my Mom and my best friend love me.” Although she reported several break-ups in college, including a very recent one, she observes that such experiences have broadened her “perspective.” However, her comments indicated her previous level of insecurity regarding dating relationships as she related that she has learned that break-ups are “not the end of the world” and that “it does not mean no one else will ever love you.”

Her current relationship, however, appears to belie her claims, as she described the dynamic following a recent break-up. Apparently the status of the relationship is fairly ambiguous, as noted in her description, “. . . dating each other ever since and we kind of just keep breaking up, sort of, but not really breaking up.” She related that she “tried for three months to get him to take me back,” observing that he responded with “mixed signals.”

It seems, therefore, that Kate has experienced gains in self-confidence since high school, particularly reflected in her social comfort level. Evidencing less reliance on the social safety net of theater, she presents a picture of balanced and rewarding friendships both within and without theater. She continues, however, to display indications of a disparity among domains of self-concept. Her assessment of her appearance is equated as average, and she appears to continue to lack confidence in the area of romantic relationships.

#### Contribution of Theater Engagement to Self-Concept

Kate credits the theater program at Metropolitan with contribution to her self-development in several ways. Avenues of self-development that she identified included the process of character development and academic coursework. Kate particularly acknowledged the growth experiences facilitated by Acting III. The following section reviews her perspectives regarding these experiences and the meaning for her in the context of self-concept.

#### *Character Development*

One avenue Kate identified for learning about oneself through theater involvement is the process of character development in the context of preparing for a

play. Apparently, it is crucial, in Kate's opinion, for actors to have a good self-awareness in order to engage in the process of creating a character. Therefore, she believes it is important for student actors to engage in self-exploration because "you have to know yourself before you can be anyone else." She explained further:

There are a lot of different reasons why you really have to know yourself to be a good actor. You have to know your own tendencies because everyone has their physical and vocal tendencies, things they do all the time, and that can't show up in their character. If I know I always do things with my hands, playing with my hands, I try to make sure . . . I know that about myself and I can't let that come out in my character. There's also knowing what you are and who you are, it helps you do characters like you, but is also helps you do characters not like you. You can say this is not me, and this is how it's not me. Or, self-exploration feeds creativity. My life, and my experiences, my specific personal history will inform what I create.

Apparently, one of the important aspects of self-awareness for acting includes knowledge of one's movement patterns. Body language is seen as a central feature of personality. Therefore, the task of the actor is to suppress one's idiosyncratic movement patterns in order to avoid intruding on the contrived persona of the character. Even though most individuals do not attend consciously to this aspect of self, student actors must attain this awareness in order to practice their craft. In addition, Kate noted that self-awareness facilitates the ability to separate self from character, and instructs the process of creating a character.

### *Acting III*

In addition to the self-exploration that accompanies one's development of a character for a play, Kate explained that the academic requirements of the theater major offer experiences designed to enhance self-awareness. As she observed, "so much of acting class is self-discovery." As noted, Kate's most significant experience in this regard occurred in Acting III.

According to Kate, the significance of Acting III resided, in part, in the requirements to write pieces that derived directly from “personal experience.” For example, she described an assignment where the students were required to write a “holiday myth,” drawing on one’s own experience of holidays. According to Kate, the myth is “going to have a big chunk of you and the class is going to see that.” Therefore, not only are students required to reflect on personally meaningful experiences, they are expected to share them with peers in the context of the class.

Kate recalled that the holiday myth assignment provided the context for a significant emotional experience for her. She explained that she was engaged in an enactment of a peer’s holiday myth that required her to portray a character that was raped and beaten. Apparently, the experience of cultivating an empathetic response to portray this individual triggered an emotional response for Kate that rendered her unable to focus and to complete a task. In addition to the lack of ability to perform the required action, the episode provoked embarrassment as her as her classmates were able to “see” a side of her that was unable to “function” and complete her task. As she recalled:

Unfortunately, I was scheduled to perform in another kid’s holiday myth right before mine when on and I was supposed to do the technical stuff for it. And this holiday myth, my character was raped and beaten. And so it was kind of, it was a very emotional, hard thing. And after that my holiday myth was supposed to go on and I’m supposed to play this tape recorder . . . and I hit play . . . in the middle of the performance . . . and no sound comes out . . . I just couldn’t figure it out and I was just so think, the closest thing to a panic attack that I have ever had. I just couldn’t function, I couldn’t move, I couldn’t speak.

However, while frightening and humiliating, the experience also seems to have reinforced Kate’s assessment of the theater environment as a “safe” context for showing oneself. The support from her peers and the director seemed to reassure her that her momentary lapse was “fine” after all. As she described:

Once again, like I was saying, there's kind of that safe atmosphere and people from the class came up and they fixed everything for me. And even Diane came up and she was holding me because I was just sitting there frozen, just shaking, and she came up and said it's OK and calmed me down and we went on and it was fine.

Another assignment in Acting III involved the journal entries based in part on exercises from a self-help book. Kate reflected that she found the exercises quite valuable and admitted that she continues to use this activity as a means of self-expression although it is no longer required. "Exposing" herself through this type of writing was experienced as "therapeutic" and "cathartic" for her. However, she acknowledged that she was only able to "reveal" herself in this way initially with the support of her friends and the teacher. As she described:

It really forced me to expose myself, which was very hard. I had to write something, and it was very tough for me, but I think it was a good thing because it was therapy for me. It was cathartic because I would have been going through this anyway and I can't imagine going through it without the fiends, without the support, without the teachers, without someplace to expose myself. Just go to class and go home, with no one except maybe a few close friends know, and I can't deal with it by, you know. I still use, the arts I guess. It's like a diary not in my own words. Whenever I feel happy, sad, whatever I have this little book that I draw things in or I write quotes in, and I solve lyrics and cut and paste pictures that I particularly like. Like I said, it's kind of a diary for me because you can see different things. I can point out different times in my life, but it's not in my own words. It is an art form; it's not about you.

As Kate continued to reflect on the growth experiences that she had in Acting III, and as the interviews progressed with an increasing sense of trust and rapport, she chose to share more personal aspects of her own self-development as related to her theater involvement. Kate prefaced this account by noting that, while the context of the theater work helped her to identify and work through the issues that arose, she feels strongly that she "would have had to do it anyway." Kate reflected that being introspective is an

essential part of her “nature,” indicating that the events would have unfolded in some manner regardless of theater.

By far the most intimate sharing that Kate offered was the revelation of her prior suicide attempts, as well as her struggle with depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Her account of her most recent suicide attempt and the aftermath serves to illustrate the level of trust and support that Kate felt with her acting teacher. Her attendance at her acting class the morning after hospitalization for a suicide attempt suggests a reliance on her theater community as a source of continuity and structure. In fact, a significant idea apparent in her accounting here is the role of theater in providing a supportive social network for her throughout her childhood as well. Following are excerpts from the exchange,

Kate: I was dealing with a lot of depression issues. OCD has been a problem before, but it isn't as much of a problem anymore as anxiety, but you know it's all related. But depression came to a point where I could not have not dealt with it and still be here.

Jenna: You were suicidal?

Kate: Yes, I attempted once in freshman year. I sort of dealt with it but not completely, and then part of why acting is so important to me is kind of self-discovery . . . I think I would have had to deal with it anyway . . . but theater has helped me, because it gives me the outlook for creativity. When I first came here, I was already depressed, but when I first came here it gave me a place where I can meet and connect with people . . .

Jenna: I'm wondering how supportive, or helpful, or not the theater connections you had were during your really low points?

Kate: I overdosed one night, the next morning I was released to my parents and I had class that day, and of course I couldn't miss class because you know, I'm crazy.

Jenna: So you went to class?

Kate: Yeah, I went to class, because we had an audition . . . I was shaking, my clothes were hanging off of me, and I was already thin so for me to lose 10 pounds probably wasn't the greatest thing. But I talked to her (professor) and it really helped that you could have that connection with a professor.

Jenna: Boundaries are different between theater students and faculty

Kate: Boundaries are very different.

Kate: I did not tell any of my other professors, I just missed class and that was fine . . . I completely opened up to her (theater professor) and I told her exactly why and exactly what was going on, and she understood and said, you'll get to it on your own time. She was very helpful and very understanding. And she opened up to me about things in her life. They really were mentors, the teachers.

Kate concluded that these experiences have provided her with increased insight about her personal qualities, including two important components. Specifically, she noted that she has learned that she has “a preoccupation with making plans.” Additionally, she identified the value that she gained from learning that “It is okay to be weak. It is okay to break down.” As a result of these realizations, she noted that she finds more aspects of herself to be “acceptable,” indicating a positive impact on her self-concept as a result.

In summary, it seemed that Kate embraced the opportunities for self-exploration inherent within the theater program. While acknowledging that character development necessitates self-discovery, she noted that the most significant experiences for her in this regard occurred within the context of the classroom. Specifically, the setting of Acting III provided her with the safety to explore difficult emotions that arose. However, she interpreted the outcome as nurturing due to the support and acceptance she received from peers and faculty. In addition, she observed that she gained important insights about herself in a “cathartic” and “therapeutic” process of growth.

Significantly, she recalled her reliance on the social support network of theater during a particularly dark and painful period of her life. Although she observed that she would have had to “deal with” her emotional issues “anyway,” she cited theater as a supportive context that assisted her to confront these issues. In particular, she appears to have relied on the support of one faculty member, with whom she had apparently fostered a very trusting relationship.

Although Kate related that she had experienced much growth in “dealing with” the emotional issues that preceded her suicide attempts, she also indicated a history of depression. The experience of depression, leading to two suicide attempts, represents a situation of extraordinary gravity. While Kate related that she is actively engaged in therapy, it is significant to note that she found a vital context of support in the theater community.

### Plans Following Graduation

Our interviews concluded near the time of graduation and Kate reflected on what her experience at college meant to her, as well as what the future might hold. As expected, she noted that her friends are finalizing career plans that will separate them geographically. While acknowledging the sadness associated with this transition, she related her sense of anticipation as she looks forward to the next phase of her life. As Kate observed:

It’s sad because like I said, everyone’s moving on. And seems like for me in a big way. Really moving away. Another close friend of mine is either going on tour, going to England, next semester. So, really kind of scattering. And that’s kind of sad because I was talking to my friend and he was saying there’s a lot of people that you just kind of know, that you’re never going to see them again . . . And, I feel kind of ready to move on to the next stage of my life . . . I don’t really have regrets because I think I did just about everything that I wanted to do. And some things that I did not want to do, but looking back . . . it was good that I did them . . . I’m ready to be out of here, to do more, to go on to grad school and teach.

As far as her future involvement in theater, Kate reiterated that she does not intend to pursue acting as a career goal, but will enter graduate school for teaching. As she noted, she is “more passionate about teaching, much more passionate.” However, she characterized theater as an interest that can be pervasive and somewhat compelling. She noted that she has many other interests and “I keep intending to other things.” However,

even though she even felt that she “hated” it at times, she keeps getting “drawn back” by the seduction of the audition call. As she reflected:

It just draws you back. It really draws you back. And it’s funny because a lot of people will tell you that. A lot of times the shows, you get into the rehearsals and are like, “Why do I do this? I hate this. It s----.” And then sometimes in performances, sometimes it’s great. But sometimes after a while I feel so tired. I just want to be done. I’m done, you know. And then the show ends and its like, I’m going to miss you guys. No matter how bad the show was or how bad the rehearsal process is, I’m going to miss this show. And you know, as much as you’re like, I’m done. I’m not doing it again. You hear that audition call and you just get sucked right back in. One more time, one more time. Because it’s fun, it’s fun.

She related that her future involvement in theater could take the form of acting in community theater. However, she noted, “I will have to take a break next year. I’m not going to be able to. My home is, I know I won’t be able to perform. I won’t have time to do outside acting at all.” Instead, she related her fantasy of incorporating her theater interest into her eventual teaching job, stating:

I’m really hoping that the school I get into has a theater program and I can go up to the director and say, Can I help out? You know, can I be involved? . . . and it will also be a good way of getting me into the school community, you know. So that more than just the kids in my classes see me and know me.

#### Reflections on the Meaning of Theater Engagement

In addition, she considered what the attainment of her theater degree means to her on graduation. Having acknowledged the personal challenges involved, she appeared to view them as worthwhile as she considered the sense of accomplishment she now feels. Although the degree does not relate to her career goals and will likely not impact her ability to meet those goals, she identified the personal satisfaction that she has derived from “sticking with it.” In addition to the fun and enjoyment that she had along the way, Kate recalled significant aspects of acting as far back as fourth grade when she found the

stage as a venue for expressing herself. Ultimately, it seems that she found college theater to be an experience of something in which she excelled, while enjoying the ability to express herself. As she explained:

As much as it's hard, I like it. I mean it's also a sense of accomplishment. I could have dropped it a couple of classes ago and just said I'll be a theater minor, I've got my history major, I'm fine. It's not what I'm going to do anyway. But there's this sense of accomplishment that I've started something and I'm going to finish it. It's fun; it's something I enjoy. It's something I hope to expose my students to, because I really do think it helped me develop. I think it helped me learn about myself. It helped me learn about other people, but it also helped me, like I said, I wasn't the jock, I was good in school but, so okay I'm can be a nerd, yes. You know what I mean? It was something for me to enjoy, to be good at, a way of expressing myself. I think it's been a very important part of me and how I grew up.

As a result of these experiences, Kate reiterated her assessment of her improvement in self-confidence as a result of her development during college. She identified herself as “confident” and appears to express a belief in her ability to meet future challenges. As she observed:

I'm a lot more sure of myself. I'm a lot more confident. I trust myself a lot more. I feel like I've really grown into myself . . . There's been a lot of personal growth. Now I know I can do a lot more than just school.

### Conclusion

In summary, it seems that Kate's case exemplifies the self-development aspect of theater that I had hoped to capture in these interviews. Although theater does not relate to her career goals, she chose to pursue the major, with her mother's encouragement, in order to further her own personal and social development. Kate clearly characterized her theater experience from fourth grade through college as a significant and formative context for her personal growth.

In particular, she acknowledged the importance of the social network formed through engagement in theater. In addition, she described the element of self-exploration that was emphasized in the theater program at Metropolitan as an important influence on her emerging sense of self-confidence. Faced with numerous personal challenges, Kate noted that she would have “done the work anyway.” However, she seems clear in her belief that her experiences in theater facilitated her successful confrontation with a number of personal challenging issues. Concluding her experience as a theater major in college, Kate reflected that she has “really grown into” herself, affirming that theater has contributed to her own process of getting into character.

## CHAPTER 6

### LARRY, ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?

#### Introduction

Larry seemed passionate about theater as he described the intensity of his drive and commitment to the activity in college. He characterized his involvement in theater at the college level as “like a dream” and related that he finds himself “always . . . wanting to do it or doing something related to it.” In fact, he likened acting to “a body part” or something that he cannot or would “not live without.”

Despite his initial shyness in high school, Larry responded to encouragement from friends to audition for choir. His success in choir opened the door to his aspirations for the stage. Feeling a lack of confidence in certain academic areas, performance provided Larry with an avenue for success and competence. As a result, the confidence gained in performance affected his self-concept overall.

Among the participants, the intrinsic features of theater were perhaps the most significant for Larry. He initiated enthusiastic characterizations of elements of meaning and emotional experience that were not identified by other participants. At the same time, he evidenced an appreciation for the accolades that accompany successful performance. All the while, Larry continued to emphasize the “fun” that he finds in theater.

Like other participants, Larry indicated a significant degree of social reinforcement accompanying his theater engagement. However, unlike other participants, Larry faced the barriers associated with his minority status. Therefore, he finds that his success in casting and his social connectedness are mediated by racial insensitivity.

However, Larry counters these forces with his own optimism and work ethic, noting that responsibility for his success ultimately rests with himself.

#### Initial Interest in Theater

Although Larry was not necessarily able to articulate the reasons behind his initial engagement in theater, it appears that he has been drawn to inherent features of the venue since he was young. As a college sophomore, he is able to elucidate aspects of theater that inspire his investment in the activity. Accordingly, he indicated that theater provides a means of making meaning from “mere words,” and creates a context where one can “be different things,” while facilitating the ability to make an impact on the emotions and the thinking of others. Not the least of the attributes of theater is the notion that he finds it “fun.” Finally, Larry acknowledged a “craving for attention” driving his involvement, although he minimized the impact of this factor.

Larry indicated that his interest in theater began prior to high school, perhaps influenced by his observation of his mother’s interest in movies. His entree into performing was actually in the high school choir, as he has a bit of talent for singing. Larry recounted that his shyness initially dissuaded him from trying out for either choir or theater. However, with encouragement from some peers in the choir, he was persuaded to try out. He did gain a spot in the choir and found that his self-confidence began to improve as a result. Eventually, Larry did try out for a play in high school and found that he felt some aptitude for the venue. Consequently, he determined to attend college and major in theater with hopes of becoming an actor after his graduation.

Larry indicated that his experience in college has served to reinforce his investment and provided him with confirmation that he has the necessary talent as well.

As a result, he related the conviction that acting in the only vocation in which he is interested. He explained:

I've had this belief for a long time but it's even stronger now that after doing something and doing good at it and seeing that I can do this, there is no way I can ever believe that I'd want to do something else.

Interestingly, among the participants, Larry was the only one to characterize theater as "fun." Although one might assume that enjoyment of the activity would be a determinant of engagement, that key idea did not emerge in interviews other than Larry's. However, as he described, he is fortunate that he discovered his passion early in life and that it is such fun for him. He compared himself to other students on campus, noting that he does not observe them having the kind of fun that he is. As he reflected:

I kind of learned . . . there are a lot of things that someone can do that is fun for them and I found my thing and lucky I found it early. And I've been able to do it for a while and I can't see myself doing anything else. I look at my friends in other majors and a lot of them don't have fun and I actually have fun doing this.

Larry admitted that he has other interests and noted that he considered other vocations before settling on acting. However, now that he has targeted theater as his vocation, he asserted his conviction that theater will never cease to be his "main goal."

As he explained:

I know, before I actually chose like, theater and acting as what I wanted to do. I had a bunch of stuff. I like computers, maybe if I had something I could do maybe with computers. I liked psychology, like maybe I want to do something with that. It kept leading to something else. Whereas, when I got here, nothing else has reached the top of what I could possibly want to do, so if something comes up, it can be incorporated into that, but it won't change, acting and theater won't ever change as the main, my main goal and as the main thing to do. So, that's why. I don't go a day without doing something related to theater.

Among the participants interviewed, Larry spoke the most about the intrinsic

aspects of theater as the foundation of his love for the art form. For instance, he described his fascination with the process of transforming mere words into a scene or an image, thereby infusing the words with meaning. As he reflected:

I love the fact that it's, you take something and you're able to, like take just words. And it can be great words or it can be horrible words or it can be words that make no sense. And you're able to take them and turn them into a scene or just an image and have that mean something to someone.

In addition to his appreciation of theater as a context for transforming words into meanings, Larry portrayed acting as a powerful means of changing someone's emotions or changing the way that one thinks. Part of the allure of theater to him is the possibility of causing someone to "leave the theater with something more than what they came in with." Recalling his emotional response to a recent episode of a favorite television show, he related the impact that the show made on him, stating:

And I saw one show last season and after it, I was like crying . . . And all it was, was one of the characters was doing something by himself and he was just, I mean, he just had a scene. And I was like, if someone is able to just do something and change your emotions and change what you think about something, that's really strong, really powerful. And to be able to do that, to take a message, take a simple, simple like words on a paper and transform them onto a scene or into your idea of what the words mean and have that change something in someone. And have them actually leave the theater or leave the movies with something more than what they came in with, that's just one of the most strong things that's out there. Just to be able to affect someone like that. And knowing that I could maybe do that. Maybe affect someone that way is just like really powerful and something that's really strong.

Another aspect of theater that appeals strongly to Larry is the ability to "be different things." As he explained, acting represents the "one profession" that can afford him the opportunity to do a number of things that he has "always" wanted to do, as well as provide a means of expressing himself in different ways. He explained:

I've always wanted to do several things. The one profession you can do several things is acting. You can do almost anything. You can be almost any type of

profession you want. Maybe it will only be a few months or however long you do that or in the movie or whatever. But you can do that. You can be different things. And, you can express yourself in so many ways and you can be different people.

Larry identified some personal qualities that he believes contributed to and facilitated his eventual decision to major in theater. In addition to his appreciation for the inherent qualities of theater, Larry noted that he exhibits a “craving for attention” that he thinks is necessary in order to pursue theater. He also identified a personal attribute in his “outgoing” nature as an element that contributes to his potential for acting. As he described:

I've always kind of had a...craving for attention...So I think you... you have to be a kind of person who wants attention, and almost needs attention because you want to be up there. So, I think you have to be a person who's outgoing and. Now occasionally there are people are very closed off and very shy and never speak a word, and they are some of the best actors. But for me personally I think you have to be someone who is outgoing and willing to do whatever they can...I've always been told these are things I'm like. Like if I go into a room and I'll just try to get to know everyone and make friends with people right off. Because that's my personality I guess. And for me, that's who I need to be to be accepted.

It seems, therefore, that Larry's passion for theater reflected his appreciation for a venue of self-expression that gives him the power to affect others, while providing him the chance to be “almost anything.” In addition, he finds that theater provides satisfaction of his “craving” for attention and an outlet for his “outgoing” nature. Finally, Larry observed that, for him, theater is “fun.”

### The Theater Community

Consistent with the themes emerging throughout the study, Larry identified the community culture of the theater department as a significant feature impacting his experience at Metropolitan University. He appears to view the culture as somewhat unique, observing that other majors on campus do not seem to exhibit the same level of

cohesion. Additionally, Larry finds a different quality of relatedness among his theater friends, arising from the shared context as well as shared interests and perspectives. For Larry, the social connections add to the “fun.”

Like other participants in the research, Larry described the theater program in terms of a “family,” noting that his college experience is “definitely more fun” due to the “family atmosphere.” However, he conceded an initial period of acclimation as a freshman, relating:

The only time I and other people did not feel soaked in is when you're a freshman. Because you don't even know anyone and nobody knows you so even if someone's like, hey do you want to come to a party. You're like, I don't even know you. Even though you might think it's the nice thing to do, its like I still don't know you.

However, Larry noted that he quickly assimilated into the culture. Since that time, he explained that he has enjoyed the social aspect of being able to “hang out” with “everyone” that he works with. Like other participants interviewed, Larry identified the cohesive nature of the theater major as unique among other majors on campus. As he described:

Especially with theater at college here, unlike any other major I know of, when you're like in a theater program like the theater program here, its like you kind of have a family too. Because everyone, I think the theater program here is the only major where everyone will go out and hang out afterward or something. Like all the majors will go and all do something afterwards or we'll hang out. And it's like a family atmosphere and it's made college definitely more fun because I get to work with people and then I get to hang out with them.

#### *Comparing Friendships In and Out of Theater*

Larry characterizes his friendships with theater peers as different from his other friendships. He explained that it has been somewhat more difficult to retain friendships from high school with friends who are not involved in theater. However, Larry still cares

for his high school friends, relating that he gives them a “hug” when he runs in to them, and noting that he is “trying not to lose contact with them.” In college, however, Larry finds that it is “so easy to lose contact” with those friends when he has little time to get together with them. As he described:

They were friends of mine in high school because we were in choir. And I don't see them as much. Every once in a while I see them “Hey, how you doing?” Give them a hug or whatever. I'm like we should get something to eat everyone now and then, but I'm trying not to lose contact with them because its so easy to lose contact with people. Cause I've already lost contact with people from high school. It's so easy to lose contact. And I go to the same school so there's really no excuse, but I only have a certain block of time to eat, so that's the time when I can see them, or whatever.

Larry added that an element contributing to his greater sense of connection with theater friends is the ease with which he is able to “relate” to them versus other friends outside of theater. He recalled an incident where he and a non-theater friend were discussing a movie that Larry regarded as “crap.” He was surprised to hear his friend praise the movie and the incident served to point out to him that theater students “understand more” about the things that interest him. This shared dialogue, based on common knowledge and interests, contributes to his enjoyment of these interactions. As he reflected:

And like this is like neat fun stuff. Even we'll go see movies or talk about different movies and like, just stuff around the area we're all interested in so it's just easier to know it.

#### *Play as Mini-Family*

Like other research participants, Larry identified a heightened level of camaraderie that forms among members of the cast of a particular play. His first experience of this occurred in *Our Town*, and he described cast parties after performances as well as some activities in which the cast engaged prior to performance to get “warmed

up.” It seemed that these social interactions with the cast formed much of what was significant and “fun” about the experience for Larry, as he described the cast as “the best part of the show.” As he recalled:

All of the productions were fun, we had like parties afterwards that we did not drink and stuff. We would all, like the guys, I don’t know what the girls would do, but the guys would, we would all like bring different CD’s and we would listen to music before and everyone would just like sing along and stuff with that. So, it was a lot of fun for us and right before we go on we all meet in like the (warm-up) room in a circle and we do like different stuff. John would give us ideas of some games and stuff, we would do different stuff and try and get everyone’s energy up and it was like, the cast was the like the best part of the show. Without the show at all, the cast was the best part because it was a great ensemble of people and we had fun together as a group.

Larry noted that the jokes shared among cast members and the time spent “hanging out” together were important contributions to the camaraderie that developed. His perception was that each individual was respected and viewed as important to the point that anyone who seemed to feel left out was purposefully meant to feel included by the rest of the cast. As Larry described:

I mean we would all like you know crack jokes and stuff, and stuff like that but umm everything was like friends we would get together like and just hang out and each person had an important part. It was umm, I don’t think anyone really felt left out and if somehow we did, we would bring them in and stuff so it was good.

In fact, Larry’s assessment of the social aspect of the experience was that this was a “dream cast to work with.” He explained that he had heard stories of conflicts among cast members before his involvement in this play, so was not sure what to expect. As a matter of fact, he reported that he purposefully kept his expectations low because of the stories that he had heard. However, this experience appeared to surpass his expectations, as he described:

And so I kind of expected maybe to have like some little problems like that or maybe we come and it would be like we would warm up and then we would just

go on or something, but so it was, my expectations were like...not as high as they were, I mean because when the final result there was just, it was like everyone's dream cast to be a part of. There were no problems, there were never any like fights and most people like brought some stuff so it was probably a little harder than I thought it was going to be. That is a good thing.

However, even in this context of diminished expectations, Larry found that the experience surpassed even his hopes. As a result, he felt an even greater level of connectedness among this group of peers. For Larry, this meant that the experience was even more fun.

### *Mentoring the Younger Students*

An additional dimension of inclusion in a community is the opportunity to assume valued roles within the group. Larry's experience of this occurred as he progressed through the program. As he explained, having been a student at Metropolitan for two years, he is looked up to for advice to offer to newer students. As a result, he has assumed the role of mentor to the younger majors. He appears to enjoy this new dimension to his role as a theater major, noting that he has the opportunity to "help" others and to "offer advice." According to Larry, that is pretty "cool." As he explained:

You're like the older people now. 'cause I'm a person who's been here for a while, I feel like I'm Excalibur...I mean, it was so easy for me to answer questions too because I could just tell them things and things that I knew that I could point out. I could say I noticed this about you. What was the mode behind that? And stuff like that. But it was just weird to have them ask me. It's cool because you can help someone and offer some advice. You can see one of things you did and say, oh and watch out for this and never do that... And just things you learned, try to help someone out. That's good. That's always fun to do. Especially to help someone. You can see that you're helping, that's cool.

Therefore, in this setting, the evolution of his role as a valued mentor contributed a positive dimension to Larry's self-concept. As a result, he felt valued in a way that was

new for him. Larry found that this opportunity to help others was “cool” and, of course, “fun.”

In summary, Larry articulated his awareness of the cohesive social context comprised by the theater department. Following an initial period of acclimation as a freshman, he quickly came to experience the social connectedness as “fun.” In particular, Larry appreciates the opportunity to “hang out” with people who have shared interests and perspectives. However, the detrimental aspect of his experience has been the sacrifice of other friendships. Although he continues to care about his high school friends, he found that he neglected those relationships by necessity, due to the intensive nature of the theater context. However, Larry clearly emphasized the benefits of the theater association, with his enthusiastic characterizations of his enjoyment of those friendships. The social community of the theater department has offered Larry additional new experiences as well. He related that he valued his inclusion in a highly cohesive small working group. Finally, he assumed the task of mentoring newer students, finding a fresh sense of meaning as the valued member of a social group.

#### *Experiences of Exclusion*

Although other participants described levels of exclusion from the family, Larry was the only participant to describe the phenomenon of exclusion due to race or ethnicity. As an African American male, Larry represents a distinct minority among theater majors. Larry broached the impact of his race and the associated dynamic in the theater department within the first five minutes of the first interview, when asked the question “Tell me what it is like to be a theater major.” The ensuing discussion revealed that

Larry's status as a minority constituted a significant context for each aspect of his experience there.

Larry characterized the racial mix in the research context in the following manner, "in the theater department, there are not many black people there at all. Like, there is none." In fact, the absence of diversity was apparent to him as soon as he began his first class in the program. As Larry described, "Well, I think I first noticed it, I mean definitely when I first came to the theater department and I noticed I was like, my first acting class, it was me and two other blacks in the class..." From his comment it is apparent that there are, indeed, some blacks in the department. However, the significance for Larry seems that there are so few as to render the minority number insignificant.

Larry explained that his first concern on noting the lack of racial diversity was the impact that it might have on his ability to be cast in plays. In fact, he found that his race was, indeed, a factor that limited his ability to get parts in the productions. He observed that:

It's been a learning experience, too, because some of the, like being a minority, not only in the college, but in the theater department, I find that sometimes I have to. I don't know, I don't think it's as easy for me to get a part, certain part or certain things as other people.

Larry explained that he initially attributed his inability to get cast to his freshman status and his lack of the requisite talent. As he recalled, "First semester I did not think I was going to get cast anyway because I was just like a freshman...And even though some freshmen were getting cast...I don't think I would have been cast even if was based just on talent." Apparently he retained some hope that his relative inexperience was the basis for his inability to gain a part.

However, Larry's fears of racial disparity in casting seemed to be confirmed through his subsequent experiences. He stated that it became apparent to him as he observed the play selection at Metropolitan that there was a bias inherent in the choice of plays by the faculty. Although he appeared hesitant to attribute the bias to racial inequity in his following statement, he acknowledged that he observed casting based on who looked like they "fit the role." He recalled:

But I think this semester I've noticed it because of the kind of plays that were picked and all I could think was, there's no way I could have a part in it because it was just look weird or be odd or something, you can definitely see a cast that is based on who looks right for the role and I'm not even talking about minority wise. Sometimes it's like, it can be two people of the same ethnicity and one of them just looks like they fit that role better, so they'll get it. I think that's how it goes sometimes.

In addition, Larry recalled a conversation with a faculty member that appeared to support his observations. Larry characterized this discussion as "kind of hard" and he referred to it as his "most difficult moment at Metropolitan so far." He related that the faculty member seemed to confirm the fact that Larry would face difficulty getting cast due to the fact that he is a "tall...black male." As he recounted:

One time I was talking to one of my teachers and I was like, "Yeah, I probably wasn't going to get casted for anything." And...they were trying to be honest. Because as far as Metropolitan is concerned, I'm tall, like black male and don't really fit in the categories of any of the characters in the plays you pick. And it was like, I mean, there was like hinting me that I don't fit the parts and I'm probably won't be in anything at Metropolitan. And like, that was kind of hard...

Although he maintained that he is not "angry" about this situation, Larry did indicate his frustration and his "wish" that the department would "try to make it more diverse." Describing his response to his growing awareness of the racial disparity and the resulting effect on his own ability to get cast, Larry stated:

If they cast on who looks right for the role, then most of the plays I'll probably never be in because I don't fit with the characters of the roles is. I'm not like mad at it, but I wish they would try to make it more diverse and cast based on talent, instead of just looks.

In addition to the inequity apparent in casting opportunities, Larry identified other manifestations of racism that he has observed in the theater department. One example concerns his perception of being somewhat overlooked in an acting class. As he described, in Acting I, he began to feel that he was not getting any feedback, as if his part did not matter. Although he did not receive any negative comments regarding his performance, Larry interpreted the response as a lack of any attention whatsoever. As a result, he felt insignificant compared to his peers, and he attributed the disparity to race. As he recalled:

Like in Acting I class, it was everyone was getting certain stuff, like criticism or something, and it was almost like I wasn't even, it wasn't like I was getting negative criticism, it was just like I was brushed off, like it did not. It was ok and move on.

Another experience in the same course contributed to his sense of racial insensitivity and a lack of consideration for his potential to contribute. Larry recalled that he was assigned a character for an in-class assignment, only to realize through the process of the exercise that his role seemed inconsequential and perhaps even contrived. He explained that his character was digging a hole in the piece, and was not visible to the audience. Therefore, he was advised to simply read his lines from the script. He recalled feeling "really bad" about the incident later as he realized that his performance had been treated as insignificant. The tone of his comments in the following excerpt reveal his frustration with the perceived slight. He recalled:

And I never realized it then, but it is like how was that acting at all? I was basically just reading lines, you couldn't see me at all and it just seemed like it

was just done to give me something to do, so I could have a final project and be done with the class. And I was like that was just crap. Because it was, I mean can you see me? I had the book and I was just reading the lines off... And it just seemed like they were just like we have to give him something to do. Let's just give him an African American play. And that's how I felt about it. And that was crap... It was just like... they have meet a quota or something. I felt really bad about that because... it just felt wrong.

On yet another occasion, Larry recalled that he was asked to join Catalyst Theater, the social action theater group on campus. As he described, he was initially flattered to be asked, but then realized that the impetus for invitation was the desire to do a scene featuring an African American actor. As he explained, "I thought it was a good thing. But then it was like, I guess I was in Catalyst because there hadn't been a black scene in a long time. And that was the reason more than me being a good actor."

Each of these episodes contributed to Larry's sense that, as a racial minority, he was viewed and treated as less significant than other students. Even when engaged in a theater activity, Larry looked beyond the surface circumstances, suspecting a basis of racial inequity. For him, the meaning attributed to some experiences was the representation of the disparity of his status as an African American. Such experiences undermined the "fun" that he had sought on entering this program.

Unfortunately, suggestions of racism were not limited to casting and acting opportunities. Although these episodes occurred within the structure of the academic program and the play production process, Larry recounted that he experienced evidence of racial bias in social settings with theater students as well. The incident that he described seemed to serve as a painful reminder of the pervasiveness of racial stereotypes, even among this "family" of theater peers. As Larry remarked, it is not "funny" to be subject to such negative stereotypes. As he recounted:

Like, we were playing this game called Mafia and it's this game you play where everyone sits around a circle and like everyone has their eyes closed. And like the person, like the leader of the town of all the people, like they have to most people have their eyes closed and they have to choose who they're going to kill. And then you open you're eyes and they say, ok, you're dead. You have to figure out who is in the mafia. And everyone was like, its Larry. I'm like it's not me. Why does it have to be me? They're like, ahhh, cause you're black. And I was like. And I mean, it was funny, but I was like, I did not care about it, but I was thinking like, sometimes I just want to say, that's not funny.

In this context of limited opportunities and racial inequity, an acting opportunity that arose for Larry in the second semester of his sophomore year was particularly meaningful to him. At this time, a retired faculty member decided to return to Metropolitan to direct one play. When the director was casting for the play, *Our Town*, he cast Larry in a major role, even though the play is set in a town where the population is generally assumed to be white. Larry explained that his character's wife was cast as a white woman, although such an integrated marriage would be an unlikely occurrence for the time period and setting of the play. Larry recalled that he was excited to get the part and that his initial reaction was relief that he was wrong to be skeptical about getting cast in plays at Metropolitan. However he recounted that his skepticism quickly returned as he wondered if this episode was just a fluke. As he explained:

And I was really happy. And then when I saw my name on the part, I was like, you know, wow. That's great because in a way, that kind of shuts down all of my thinking about what I was thinking, Oh I can't get cast for that part. But then I was thinking, this is like, maybe the reason I got this is because of who John is . . . and how he's not a teacher, he just came back to do this show. And like, after this, I probably still won't get cast.

As he continued to reflect on getting the part, Larry concluded that his casting was the result of the unique approach of this director, and his apparent mistrust of the rest of the faculty resurfaced. While Larry noted that he believes this director cast actors

“based on talent,” he revealed the extent of his skepticism regarding future fair consideration, as he explained:

Because John, he’s like a director who is probably, I think he’s a lot better than any of the other directors here, obviously because I mean, they think so too. Also, he picks based on talent and I kind of still don’t think I’m going to do well, like, I don’t think I’ll get any callbacks. And I could be wrong, I don’t know. But, I think he picked based on talent and I don’t see that happening any more. I mean it could, but some of the teachers I know, I’m like, I don’t think they’ll cast...

Larry also revealed his fatalistic view and resulting sense of powerlessness regarding this situation. He stated:

And as far as lead is concerned its new coming here, because its like sometimes I can go to an audition and I already assume that I’m not going to be in any of the productions. It’s kind of like you wish there was something you could do about it, but sometimes its like, they have the, they can do whatever they want, I guess. But I don’t know.

Larry noted that he does not feel very empowered to attempt to change this situation, expressing his conclusion, “I guess there is nothing that I can do about it.” In fact, he related a concern that he would make things “worse” for himself if he tried to bring the disparity to the attention of the faculty. Again, his level of mistrust for the faculty is evident as he revealed his concern that an attempt to bring up racial disparity in casting would be perceived as a slight against faculty. Larry’s perception of the outcome of such an incident is that it would be shared among faculty members who would then conspire to refuse to cast him. As he explained:

And one thing I was told in Acting I, is whenever you, its sometimes in a play not what you know, but who you know, and if you like do a member of the staff wrong, that’s going to pass on to someone else. And it will be in a department and they’ll be like hey, I’m thinking of picking this guy for the role or whatever. What do you think? Oh, I don’t know. That guy gave me trouble in my class or something. So, its almost like you can’t do any member of the staff wrong, because they’re like family. And if you do one of them wrong, in a way, like I just said. If you do one of them wrong, then it may affect you later on. So, its like, I

can't, if I want to say something, I don't want to mess up my whole career here, so its like, it is just good to take it.

In the absence of a sense of empowerment to change the situation, Larry appears to attempt to rationalize and minimize the effects of his undergraduate experience on his future career. As he reflected:

I don't let this four years dictate my career. After this, I just look around and take what I can from it. So, it's hard, but when you think about it, if there is nothing you can do, then its, there is nothing you can do. And I don't know, its not like I'm just giving up or anything, its just that I'm not like trying to look out for my own, kind of thing, you know. It's hard. It's OK. I mean, you just deal with it.

As a result, Larry explained that he has make it a point to begin to look for casting opportunities in community theater, rather than "limiting" himself to opportunities at Metropolitan. However, he continued to retain a certain skepticism about his chances for success, noting, "probably nothing will happen anyway." As he stated:

That's when I started making the decision that I'm going to try to do whatever I can outside of Metropolitan theater. I mean, like I'll still audition and hopefully get a part, but I'm not going to limit myself to just that. That's when I started looking at the callboard for more auditions around Baltimore and stuff. And, I mean, I think that's also good too. Because that just, when you do stuff with theater at Metropolitan it is just at Metropolitan. But when you do that, like a short film somewhere, that branches out and can go somewhere else. So, I think that is when I started realizing that yes, that's a bad thing and I wish it were different, but I'm not going to limit myself to just this. I'm going to just try the things that are just like . . . and probably nothing will happen anyway.

Larry concluded with the pragmatic viewpoint that he must focus on his own professional goals right now, versus focusing on trying to make a change at Metropolitan that may or may not benefit him in the long run. He explained:

I'm not going to just go and devote everything towards getting them to change the way they do stuff, cause that won't, I mean that may help, but it may not help me. And really college is about, it's all about you, you gotta think about what is going to help you out the most. So, I could get them to change something, but by the time it's changed, I'll be graduated. Or I could just go and try and find other work

in other places. I try to find the most positive thing or what helps me the most in each situation, I guess.

However, Larry did appear to retain some hope that his performance in *Our Town* would lead to more opportunities at Metropolitan. He reflected:

And I'm going to try to do the best I can up there. Hopefully, like maybe, when other faculty members see it, they'll say ok, well, I'm cast in a role that I normally wouldn't be cast in and I do a good job in it. That may have some influence, I don't know.

In fact, when Larry subsequently auditioned at the end of the semester for the following year, he did get cast as a major character in the main-stage production of *Hair*. However, this casting also raised issues for Larry regarding stereotyping and the phenomenon of casting based on looks rather than talent. Discussion of that incident will take place in a later section of this chapter.

In summary, although Larry initially characterized the theater department as a "family," he subsequently identified experiences indicating exclusion, disregard, and disparity of opportunities for acting roles. Entering the program initially, he revealed his skepticism regarding fair treatment for minorities as he observed the racial mix. A faculty member even concurred with his suspicions. By his junior year, Larry had attained a major role in two productions, representing good casting success for this context. However, his mistrust persisted, as he voiced his doubt regarding future fair casting.

His experience of racial disparity pervaded the classroom too, as Larry perceived that he was overlooked and that he received roles that were contrived. Unfortunately, racially biased comments and actions arose among his peers in social settings as well, reinforcing his sense that racial insensitivity was pervasive in the department. Although Larry did not indicate that the comments of his peers affected his relationships, he

articulated a deep sense of mistrust of the faculty. As a result, he continues to appear enthusiastic about the social support of the theater community, while evidencing suspicions regarding the intentions of the faculty.

#### *Faculty in the Family*

As noted, Larry related the observation that the faculty were part of the “family” of the theater department. Although he appeared to evidence mistrust of the faculty regarding racial sensitivity when it comes to selecting plays and doing casting, Larry described the faculty as supportive and open to interacting with students beyond traditional student-teacher boundaries. As he explained, “You feel like you can come to your teachers outside of them being your teachers.” In fact, he related, “They can be your friends.”

However, Larry also noted his disappointment that the only black theater faculty member is being let go from Metropolitan after this semester. He offered his view that she is being dismissed because the university viewed her as “too experienced” for the position that she held. He related that he thinks this is a “bad reason” to fire her and he expressed his wish that she was staying on so that there would be at least one black faculty member in the department. In addition, he wondered what the effect of her leaving might be in terms of the attention given to racial issues by the remaining faculty.

In conclusion, Larry appeared to evidence an ambivalent stance regarding the community nature of the theater department. While he described his view of the department as a “family” where students make a point of making everyone feel included, he appeared to present a parallel perspective of an environment where racial inequity and stereotyping are a pervasive influence.

## Production Participation

For theater majors, participation in a play is a significant aspect of their experience while in college. The students' approach and reactions to the process of preparing and participating in a production can reveal elements of acting that relate to self-concept. In Larry's case, his approach to preparation for a play is based on the values that he holds regarding effort and achievement. For him, preparation for his part in a play is a personal process that relies on practice and results in an outcome that one can attribute directly to the effort put forth. He related his philosophy that if one does not do the "best" one "can," there is only oneself to blame if things do not go well. As he explained:

If you get up there and you don't do the best you can or you don't practice all the time, and then you get up there, you can't blame it on anything but yourself. You just have to keep working or something.

Larry's participation in the play, *Our Town*, also provided an avenue for the receipt of feedback and attention that he found affirming to his sense of self. Of particular importance to Larry was the fact that the director paid attention to him and made him feel like a significant part of the production. This was a welcome contrast to his previous experience of feeling overlooked, and his suspicion that he was simply filling a "quota." As a result of the attention, he noted that he felt like he was "an important part" of the production. As he explained:

You know, when I was talking about how in Acting I, I felt like I was overlooked, like I said quota... This really feels more like... Like if I'm not doing something, John will stop and be like, Larry, what are you doing? Or do it more like this. So, I feel like I'm really an important part and that feels good to be an important part. What you do makes a difference. Like, if I weren't there any of the nights, like someone would have to read my part, but also, being really bad, it wouldn't flow as well. So that's important. To feel that important.

It appears that, although Larry values the personal effort put forth to make a performance successful, the approach of the director was an additional factor in his assessment of his own contributions. In this case, he felt good about his role in the play in part because the feedback and attention that he received affirmed the importance of his part. In fact, it appeared that faculty directors hold a fair degree of influence over Larry's experience of theater, as they orchestrate the casting and structure the rehearsal process.

### *Auditioning*

Like other participants in the research, Larry placed a lot of emphasis on auditions and casting. A successful audition, where one achieves a part in a play, appeared to serve as an affirmation of talent as well as the provision of an opportunity to practice acting skills and build a resume of experience. However, there are a relatively small number of parts to be had each year, with over 150 theater majors competing for them.

As noted previously, Larry feared additional barriers to his own casting success, due to his perception of his inability to get a part in a "white" play. However, he was also critical of his initial audition performance, claiming, "first of all...I did not audition good." He explained that he, therefore, assumed that he would not get a "callback" for a follow-up audition, and he described his surprise and excitement when he realized that he had.

I thought...I probably won't get any callbacks. And then I looked on the thing, on the call list and I still was assuming there wouldn't be any callbacks. And then I looked, I just glanced and I glanced so fast I did not even notice my name because I was assuming there wouldn't be any callback. And then Tony was like here.... And I was like Wow...

Larry continued with his recollection of how excited he was to get the callback, especially since this would be his first time getting cast in a play at Metropolitan.

However, he explained that he continued to be skeptical, especially when he saw the part for which he was called back. Noting that the play was set in a New Hampshire town, Larry revealed his own stereotyped assumption that the population of the town would be entirely white. In addition, he revealed his own bias that a black man would not be an appropriate actor in this play. He described his reaction thusly:

Like for me, more than other people I guess, because some people haven't been casted yet or this is their first time being cast are newly excited. For me, its like, I'm excited. And also, I saw the character, I know *Our Town*, Editor Webb. I'm like how the hell am I going to play Editor Webb? Like I'm definitely not, like I'm black and the whole play is about this New Hampshire town and I'm like, maybe I'm just getting a callback to get a callback. And I had no idea who John M----- was. I did not know he like, he was a really you know, actor-based. And not about who looked right for the character kind of thing. So, it was like ok, well, I was happy, but if it was anything like my last call back, I would just go and read and not get anything else. But I went to callbacks that night and I mean, I was going to do the best job I could do... And it just came off like who he wanted the character to be. And I read for several parts and it was just, I kept reading good and he would call me back and say like, and there would be other scenes, and he would say read this scene... And instead of calling someone else, he was like, um, why don't you go up and read with them. And I was like, wow, ok. So, I felt really good about it.

Larry recalled that he initially felt "really happy" as a result of the feedback that he got from the director and the fact that he got the part. However, he explained that his skepticism returned as he considered the possibility that this casting was the result of one director's unique approach. Larry concluded that it was unlikely that he would ever get cast again. He explained:

He just kept saying that was good work. He's like that's good, good. And I was really happy. And then when I saw my name on the part, I was like, you know, wow. That's great because in a way, that kind of shuts down all of my thinking about what I was thinking, Oh I can't get cast for that part. But then I was thinking, this is like, maybe the reason I got this is because of who John is and how he's not a teacher, he just came back to do this show. And like after this, I probably still won't get a casting thing.

Months after that initial casting experience, Larry was cast in the musical, *Hair*, slated for production the following semester. While he had initially voiced his concerns about his inability to get future parts due to his race, Larry was now faced with his perception that he was chosen because he is African American. This raised complex feelings regarding the experience of casting as a minority. Although he perceived that racial stereotyping worked in his favor this time, Larry related that he would like to get cast because he has “earned” it, not because of his race. As he stated:

And someone actually said that. Oh, you’ll get the part because you’re black. I’m like; I don’t the part because I’m black. I don’t the part because I have the look. I want the part because I earn the part and that’s why, that’s what I want. I want to be the best person for the part. And yeah, like now, I’ve gotten so, well at call back night, I wasn’t like hopefully I’m not good at all. But I’m like, I’m probably the best person for the part. I don’t the part because of my race. And that, I don’t want to not get the part because of my race. But I want it because I’m the best person for the part.

It appears that, although Larry was cast in two significant roles in major plays during the interview period, the issues of success and equity in casting continue to generate apprehension and mistrust for him. It presents as much of a conundrum to be cast because he is African American, as to be excluded because of his race. For Larry, casting would be most appropriate were it based on talent.

### *Typecasting*

Although all participants identified typecasting as an issue facing actors and aspiring actors, the issue for Larry is again framed in the context of race. As he noted, typecasting for him arises from assumptions that others make about his physical features, including his race. Larry is a very tall black male, and he has noted that others sometimes react to him based on these physical traits alone. For example, he recalled a recent

incident that occurred as he attended a concert with friends. Apparently he and his friend noticed that they were standing in front of some other people at a concert. When Larry voiced his concern about blocking their view, he recalled that his friend remarked, “Like, you’re a big black guy. They aren’t going to say anything.” Larry explained that, although he knows people are “joking” when they say these comments, he also feels that the comments reflect an “attitude” based on his physical presence. He explained that these assumptions are quite contrary to his nature, noting, “I’m not a violent person at all. But I guess I am intimidating...but... I’m not that kind of person.”

Larry explained that he has made attempts to “play against” the stereotypes that he believes are attributed to black males. In one case, he described an assignment where students were to select a piece of writing to recite in class. Larry selected a Maya Angelou poem, in part to counter assumptions that a male would not recite this “female” piece. As he recited, he noted that he “did not try to bring out the anger qualities cause...I feel it’s expected...I will do like the angry role if I was doing something black related.” As a result, he related that he was so “worried” about portraying an “aggressive” stereotype, that he received faculty feedback that he missed an aspect of the “power” of the poem. As he explained:

I don't want to do what people expect because they expect you take the whole black power role. And I don't like that at all because its like, it comes from stereotypes and stuff. So, when I did the poem, I did it so lightly that it was like, it was, you know, it did not even acknowledge the aggressive qualities the poem had because I was so worried about people looking at that. And I talked to my teacher and he was like, well, the poem has power in it. You don't have to that whole, it does not have to be about you're doing this because you're anger and black and whatever. Even though, it feels that sometimes, if I stuff has to be, I just have this feeling that when I'm giving something, that's what's expected, what I'm expected to do.

As noted previously, Larry also confronted what he considered to be typecasting when he was cast for a part in the play, *Hair*. He expressed dismay about his assumption that got the part simply because he is African American, noting that he would prefer to get the part on merit. In addition, the part, according to Larry, represents the “stereotypical black male.” However, although he rebels against some elements of typecasting, Larry appeared to enjoy the opportunity to play the “cool character” in this case. As he described:

He's a main character. It's like, the tribe is kind of a communal type of, with hippies whatever. It's like, he's like the black. I don't know. I play him like, he's the whole stereotypical black guy during the 60's but its like he represents their soul side, I guess. I don't know how to say what he really represents, but he's a cool character. Like, he has some cool lines and he's just, I don't know, a black character.

In the case of this character, Larry faced an overt confrontation with the African American male stereotype through a song that his character sings in the production. As Larry related, the song “names like almost every black stereotype, and he even says you can call me what you want but I’m still here kind of thing.” Larry explained that he was a little worried that he is “going to scare all these black people” with that song.

While reflecting on his views about racial stereotyping, Larry found that he is confused himself at times about his own opinion and about the “correct” opinion to hold in these matters. While voicing his conviction that “anyone can” and should be allowed to play any part, he found himself confronted with his own limits about what is possible when it comes to casting. For example, he attempted to identify his own parameters as follows:

I couldn't play a KKK member. Like, there's KKK members in this part because it's about what was going on in the 60's. I don't think I could play a KKK member because that's one of those things because only a certain person can play

this. And like, on the flip side, the 3 KKK members, like the things they're doing and saying, it's like even though, I believe that anyone can play the part. But I also think that, I'm probably contradicting myself in saying that, but those things, certain parts only can be played by certain people...but I'm contradicting myself because I still think anyone can play any role.

It seems that typecasting can represent both a barrier and an opportunity for Larry. He acknowledged that he appreciates the benefit of getting a part, even if it is due to his race, and he admitted that he enjoys the opportunity to portray some elements of a stereotypical character. However, racial stereotyping and typecasting continue to represent troubling issues for him, both personally and professionally.

#### *Getting Into Character*

Like the other students interviewed, Larry used the theater vernacular of “finding” a character to describe the process of getting into character. Also, like the other participants, he identified aspects of “getting into character” that can potentially reveal elements of the individual charged with portraying the part. While noting that, “sometimes it's really hard to find character stuff,” Larry explained that he often uses the strategy of selecting a model on which to base his character.

He observed that he likes to pick one or more people that he knows well to serve as a basis for molding his character. For example, he noted that elements of both his father and his uncle were incorporated into his character of Editor Webb in *Our Town*. Likening the process to “birth and growing up,” Larry noted that “I definitely saw like a whole birth of a character” in the development of Editor Webb.

#### *Separation of Self From Character*

Larry observed that the task of getting into character requires him to put himself aside and “become” the character. However, he pointed out that actors also often use their

own “qualities” as a “basis” for the character. In fact, he noted that, in some cases, the character is simply an “exaggerated version” of the actor. As he described:

I don't want to say its easier playing a role, but...in some cases, It's an exaggerated version of yourself. I mean, it can be totally different from who you are, but it could just be, like I said, taking that, your qualities, whatever you have that the character may have and just using those as like a basis and just taking and growing off of that.

For example, he recounted that the director of *Our Town* encouraged the actors not to “put too much into it” because the play is “an ordinary play about ordinary people.” As a result, Larry explained that his part consists of “basically, its just Larry reading. I mean, its Larry doing his thing and doing it in character and I'm not having to do too much.” Beyond the scope of this particular play, Larry revealed that it is his general notion that:

There's always got to be some part of you that's in what you do, I guess. Like, even somehow you're playing someone who's crazy, killer, psycho, off-the-wall type person, not that you have some of that in you, but you have to have something in there and I think to have something invested in the character.

On the other hand, he added that it is also important to retain a sense of self as separate from the character, explaining, “cause I really do believe there is a separation between what you do, like your character, and who you are.” He added that it is important to retain that sense of separation because an actor does not want to “become too involved.” Apparently, he believes that the outcome could be a situation where the actor is “thinking about it at times you don't really need to be thinking about it.”

When playing the character, Hudd, in *Hair*, Larry stated that he faced some challenges directly related to separation of actor and character. He explained that it was “fun to do” Hudd because he was a “cool character” who was “real smooth.” While he related that “its cool that I get to play these different characters” because “it is just stuff

I'd never do, he conceded that it can be "complicated" as well. As he explained, "Sometimes you have to let people know that some stuff is character stuff and not like me stuff." For example, he described one scene where Hudd makes physical advances toward a female actor. Larry explained that he felt that he had to tell the actress that the behaviors were just a part of "the character," but he expressed concerns that she still "did not get that."

In Larry's case, it seems that character development afforded him an opportunity for self-reflection as he considered what elements of his own persona to invoke in his portrayal of his characters. The two plays in which Larry participated during the interviewing process offered him two quite different characters to portray. Editor Webb had a wife and two children and functioned as the editor of his small New England's town newspaper. He wore a suit in the play and was characterized by Larry as "very intelligent." Editor Webb represented an exception to Larry's own stereotype regarding the unlikely scenario of a black man married to a white woman in a New England town in the mid 1900's.

Hudd, on the other hand, represented to Larry, some aspects of a "stereotypical" black male. He appeared in the play dressed in a loincloth, when not nude, and sang a song blatantly reciting common stereotypes. Larry also characterized him as a "cool character" who was "smooth" with the women. As Larry described, Hudd was "like fly like around with a lot of females" in a "free love" type of setting.

If, as Larry describes, the characters one portrays are based on one's own "qualities," and there has "always got to be some part of you that's in what you do," the opposite personas of his two major character portrayals provide an interesting lens

through which to view opposing attributes of Larry's own persona. As such, the characters also seem to provide an avenue of introspection for Larry, as well, as he contemplates the degree to which the character represents a "separation" versus an "exaggeration" of him.

*After the Play is Over*

Like other research participants, Larry appears to indicate that audience reaction and feedback contribute positively or negatively to one's self-concept as an actor. He described that he feels "good" at the conclusion of a production if he feels like he has done a "good job." Referring to his recent experience in *Our Town*, he added, "Like, Friday night, Saturday and Saturday matinee and Saturday night the audience was into it so all the time we were really enjoying it and everything." However, he also related one situation where some feedback from a peer about his performance left him feeling "preoccupied" on stage as well as "hurt." As he related, a peer gave him the feedback just prior to performance that he needed to work on his articulation. As he recalled:

So, I went out there and because she had just told me that, it was in my mind and like, right until the end of my speech . . . and I thought about it and like it mixed me up and I missed the word or whatever . . . I kind of wish she had told me that some other time or . . . in a different way or something. So, sometimes you get stuff like that. And it's not really helpful. It kind of hurts you. And especially right before you go on or something.

Like other participants, Larry appeared to value his family's attendance and support of the play. He described the night that his family attended as "the night that I was waiting for." And he recalled that he felt really "good" that they were so "proud" of him. However, as excited as he was about his family's attendance and positive comments, their praise was second to praise from the director. As he reflected:

Saturday my family was there and that was great. . . And they really enjoyed it, so I talked to them a long while and they were like, yeah . . . It was nice to hear people say they are proud of you or whatever. And oh, it was so good . . . because that was the night I was waiting for. You know, because everyone was talking about the night when their family's there and you know. It just, you feel better and you want to do your best and everything. So, that was like probably the best. I mean, besides the fact that John giving you a positive note and saying how proud he is of you.

In particular, Larry valued the reaction of his mother, since he views her as having some knowledge about the realm of acting. Based on her interest in movies, she was able to comment on specific aspects of his performance and her reaction made him feel "really good." As he described, "That was probably the best response I had." Larry also noted the positive reaction of his girlfriend, indicating that her feedback was very important to him as well. It seems, therefore, that the reactions of his family and girlfriend constituted a meaningful aspect of his performance. He recalled:

You know, there's a lot of loving stuff you can say, but like that seemed come off like really proud of me was really good. It was, like, it makes you feel good that you were able to, like even people who normally support you, just have them actually feel it and come away with something from the show makes you feel really good. So, that was really good. It was the best I could hope for.

An interesting downside emerged regarding the success that Larry felt with this performance. He described his concern that this success may give him an unrealistic expectation for future positive experiences in acting. He voiced the idea that perhaps this cohesive cast and supportive director provided a perfect context to facilitate Larry's own feeling of success and will not be easy to achieve in a different play in the future. He explained:

And I mean, each performer, each show, whatever it may be, is different from everything else because of different taste and stuff. But, it's kind of like, I mean, not that I set a bar and I have to keep myself there, but that it's a possibility.

However, Larry is ready to assume responsibility for his own performances in the future. He believes that he has proven that he can do good work with this play and that he can do so again if he works hard enough. As he noted:

I've done this type of level, this level work before and all I have to continue to do is have to like work towards it and work hard at it because that's what it is. So, all I have to do is continue to work hard and I will get. I will get a result that I'm happy with. If I don't work hard and the results not as good, there's no one I can blame but myself. But if I work hard and I feel the results' good, even if someone tells me he does not like it or whatever, I can still be satisfied because I've done what I can do.

In summary, it is apparent that positive feedback from his family and his girlfriend is extremely important to Larry. He reiterated several times that such comments really made him feel good. Feedback from the director is important, too, perhaps even more than from his family. However, it is also significant to Larry that he finds success to be the result of hard work. Although he acknowledged the importance of feedback, he appears to feel that the most important factor is the effort that he puts forth.

### Theater Engagement and Self-Concept

#### *Description of Self-Concept*

When asked to define self-concept, Larry defined it as “how you feel about yourself,” specifically the notion of being “content” with oneself and “being pleased and happy.” Having good self-concept, to Larry, means to “I guess just be in a place where I'm pleased with what I'm doing.” Another important aspect for him seems to be the ability to have “control” over and be able to “change” anything about himself with which he is not pleased. As he stated:

And know if it was something that I did not totally like, that I'm able to change it and able to control it. But if its something that I'm doing that's almost like you don't have control over or something like that you can't do anything about it, that can sometimes mess up your idea of what you want to be. And if I know there is

something I can change about myself to make it even better or make it to a way where I'm happy with what I'm doing, then good. But if I can't change it, then I guess you don't feel pleased, I guess.

In the context of his own definition, Larry appears to meet at least one of the parameters he identified for good self-concept, as far as feeling "pleased" with himself. He explained that he "feels pretty good" about himself, "especially after coming off this play." However, the question also evoked some consideration of personal qualities with which he feels less satisfied. In addition, he appeared to be unsure about whether or not he has enough "control" to make the changes in these behaviors that he might desire. As he explained, "If I could actually get past the procrastination and laziness and actually become a better student, that would be something that, one of the things that I could always have to change."

Larry also revealed a lack of confidence in academic areas such as mathematics and science, stating that he has "never been like the best student." In fact, he related his opinion that he probably would have "failed out by now" had he chosen a different major. It seems that Larry believes that he simply does not have the aptitude for certain aspects of academics. On the other hand, he also indicated that he believes he could put more effort into his studies. As he explained:

You know how people have the side of the brain that deals with artsy stuff and the side that deals with numbers and stuff like that? I'm definitely like over here. And if I have to do work like that, it's just something I can't do. It's not a part of who I am or who I've really ever been. Yeah, ask my parents. So, but the only thing with my self-concept as far as studying and stuff like that, maybe I could be a little more on the game on that, but I just, I don't know.

Larry apparently takes some consolation in the revelations of many successful actors that they were not necessarily successful in academic pursuits either. He related that he has concluded, from watching *Inside the Actor's Studio*, that it is acceptable to

evidence less skill in some areas. The comments of the actors seemed to reassure him that there is not something “wrong” with him because of his academic struggles. In fact, his acting skill can compensate somewhat for his lack of self-confidence in other areas. As he observed:

A lot of actors are not the best students. They weren't good at math and stuff like that . . . It makes you feel better like, ok, I'm not doing something wrong. I'm not, there's nothing wrong with me. It's just that, I don't function that way. So, I'm not totally upset with the fact that I can't study like someone else can or I don't study on a regular basis because like really it's something that I don't feel it won't like it won't work for me. Like if I were to do that, it'd just be useless.

However, Larry seems to struggle with how to integrate the fact that he sometimes does not do certain tasks on time. Although he noted that he would like to get rid of “those lazy qualities” within himself, he then stated that he does not really “think of myself as lazy.” He indicated that he has a hard time getting himself to do the “stuff that I do not want to do” but that he is trying to establish the habit of just doing it to “get it over with.” As he described, he understands the necessity of successfully completing the general university requirements and realizes that he must simply push himself to do the work, even when he feels the tendency to let it pile it up. It helps, he said, to keep focused on his goal of a degree in theater and to let that incentive motivate him to stay on track with all of his courses. As he explained:

And I wish I could get rid of some qualities. Those lazy qualities. But, I don't know, I don't really think of myself as lazy. I think of it as there is stuff that I want to do and stuff that I don't want to do. And you have to do things you don't want to sometimes . . . And just, just keep focusing on what my goal is. If I keep focusing on it, I'll keep working towards that. And, knowing that the only way I can like, as far as graduating and stuff like that. The only way I can do that is to do there other courses that have nothing to do with what I want to do. And there's no way I can get out of that, so I have to do that to achieve my goal. So, I guess if I have that mentality, then I can, that will help me a bit, I guess.

Overall, Larry noted that he retains a fairly positive self-concept in spite of the areas in which he would like to push himself. He noted that, even in the context of failures, he is able to maintain a sense of confidence. In fact, he characterized himself as “filled with confidence.” As he observed:

I’ve never really been not pleased with myself. I mean, I’m sure there have been times when I shouldn’t have been pleased with myself. I mean, I’m sure there have been times when I shouldn’t have been pleased with something I’ve done, but I just, I don’t know. . . . But I think you need a confident attitude and confidence. I’m always filled with confidence, I guess.

Larry also characterized himself as a “positive” person, and stated that he tends to feel positively about himself. One reason for his positive outlook seems to be his assessment of the choices that he makes. Making good choices appears to be an essential element of self-concept for Larry, as he related:

I always think I made good choices. I don’t ever think I’ve really made bad choices. I just don’t. I may go through just things and use common sense for things, just from like, just from like how I was raised and everything. So, I never make bad choices, so I have pretty good self-concept.

As a result, Larry concluded that his self-concept “has always been positive” and it “probably always will be.” He equated this to the fact that he has good intentions and tries “to do things that are good” and that are going to be “beneficial” for himself. He, therefore, concluded that he does not “have any reason to feel bad about” himself. He added that a key element to his “positive self-concept” is the fact that he is “always like working to better everything.”

Larry added that his self-concept includes his philosophy about life, explaining, “It’s all about enjoying everything. You know, enjoying the best in a situation. Just trying to find, just trying to find the good stuff, I think.” He explained that he learned this lesson through his experience in Boy Scouts as a child. He recalled that, although he “hated” the

scouts, he correctly predicted that his father would not let him quit. Larry explained that his response to this situation was to make a decision to make the best of the experience. He reflected that this experience led him to adopt this strategy from that time forward. As he described:

And the more I did not want to do it, the more I sulked about it and was like oh, this sucks and I really hated this, there was no way it was going to be any fun at all because I'm not allowing any fun to happen. Well, when I started to enjoy stuff, I realized I have to do stuff I don't want to do . . . And even now I talk about how much fun it was when I allowed myself to have fun and to find the best in it. And from there, I just have been able to find the best in all situations.

Larry also credited the lesson that he learned in that experience to his eventual assumption of leadership roles and the tendency of adults around him to recognize his leadership potential. According to him, adults in his life have since respected his ability to make the best of things and to think positively, rewarding him with leadership opportunities. He related:

From that experience of finding enjoyment in trying to make everything positive or whatever, other people who were adults were able to see that and then that was able to move me up like leadership-wise to where I got to a point that when I left, I was seen as a leader.

Therefore, it seems that, although Larry did not meet both of the elements of his own definition of good self-concept, there are enough personal qualities in which he feels “pleased” that he arrives at an overall assessment of his self-concept as “positive.” Although he continues to evidence some frustration at his inability to overcome procrastination or excel at certain academic activities, he appears to balance out these shortcomings with his perception of himself as a “positive person” who “makes good choices” and tries to “always find the good” in a situation. As a result, he is able to characterize himself as, “never really not pleased” with himself.

### *Development of Self-Concept*

Larry indicated that the essential qualities of his personality have been present since childhood. However, he revealed that he has changed quite a bit from the shy persona that he evidenced when he began high school. Larry explained that he has “always” been a “happy” person and was viewed in high school as a “class clown type person.” In fact, the following passage seems to reflect the pervasive aspect of the importance he places on having “fun.” As he said:

I think I was always like a happy type person or whatever. I always was in school like the class-clown type person, so I always wanted to have fun. And I think most people who always want to have fun, just seem like the kind of person you want to be around. And, I just have, I always want to have fun or want to like, I don't know. Positive comes from when I have fun and want to do things for fun and just like, what can we do to make it better and like how can we have fun?

However, Larry described a developmental trajectory leading to the confidence that he is now identifies. Although he liked to have “fun,” he also characterized himself as “shy” in high school, noting that his shyness led to a reticence about getting involved in certain activities. Although he identified an interest in theater in his freshman year of high school, he explained that he was “too shy” to try out for a part. A turning point occurred for him when he joined the choir at the encouragement of some friends. Larry related that the necessity to perform in front of an audience “brought everything out,” as he had to “get up there,” in spite of his apprehension. As a result, the experience provided a boost to his confidence regarding performance.

After he joined the choir, Larry found that he no longer harbored the same level of fear about rejection. As he explained, “Before, I always feared rejection, but I’d fear that I’d go to the audition and not get the part.” However, deciding to try out for choir represented a turning point. As he described:

That was sophomore year, at that point in high school, I kind of just got rid of all that stuff. It was almost like, my attitude was, it wasn't not caring. But not caring about being shy. Not caring about if I got the rejection or whatever. So, I just decided to do more stuff and felt better about who I was and wasn't scared to do stuff.

Since that point, Larry has felt his confidence growing, allowing him to interact with people in a variety of different social settings without feeling afraid. As he explained, "From that point on it just kept growing to a point where I could go do stuff or talk to someone that I really don't know and not be afraid to like not get along with him and stuff." In fact, a recent experience interviewing for his new job gave him the opportunity to observe just how far he has grown in this area. Larry explained that, in the past, he would have a lot of difficulty in a social setting with people that he did not know. It seemed like an example of how much his confidence has improved that he was able to enter the situation and initiate conversations with people. As he related:

Like, the job I got over at University Village, they had a big group audition. Group audition, I mean, group interview. And, I did not know anyone in there . . . But, I was able to just go in there and sit down and talk to whoever was next to me and start a conversation. Where as before, I'd just sit there and just like, you know. It wasn't like if some interaction came to me, I would totally shut down, but it was just where I would never start something. I would never try and initiate a conversation. Whereas now, I do it and not really worry about, I don't know, being like shot down or not worrying about negative things. So, that was when there was like a change. And I guess, that was one of the life changes that was for the best. To not be shy, I guess.

It seems, therefore, that performing in the choir constituted a transformative experience for Larry and a led to a significant change in his self-concept. Although he began high school feeling too shy to try out for theater, the eventual success of his friends in encouraging him to try out for choir led to a turning point. His portrayal of his resulting persona as "not caring about rejection" supported his eventual engagement in theater. In fact, he related the self-confidence that he gained in choir and theater to his

improved ability to relate in various social situations, including his “audition” for his recent job.

### *Influence of Theater Engagement*

Larry identified several ways in which he has been influenced by his theater involvement. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Larry’s initial performance experience was in the choir. He credits his involvement in choir as the basis for his confidence to begin to try out for school plays. As a result, he experienced success in theater that led to his continued involvement. Larry observed that, while involvement in theater can have a positive effect on one’s self-confidence, one must have some level of confidence to become involved in theater to begin with. As he explained, “If I wasn’t confident, I probably wouldn’t have been on stage.” In fact, he seems to purport a cyclical view of the relationship between the dimensions of performance and self-confidence. As he described, “I mean, you can develop more confidence from being on stage, but to get up there and actually do stuff, you have to already have confidence.”

In addition, Larry observed that he is more “open” due to his involvement in theater, stating that “theater has helped me to be more open and stuff and it’s one of those things where you have to be always open, always willing to receive something.” He identified an additional contribution of theater in terms of his ability to “take chances and take risks.” In fact, he identified that element as the most significant impact on his self-concept, noting:

Like, that’s the biggest way it’s helped me, as far as like confidence. To know that you have to take chances and hope for the best and just see what happens. And that will give you confidence too. Like to actually go on stage and do well, or do the best that I can and hope that...and even if it’s not, someone did not like it or whatever, I’m not going to be totally like, oh, well, I’m never going to do that

again. So, definitely is being open and the ability to take risks. That's the biggest thing. One big thing it's given me, I guess.

### *Learning About Self Through Acting*

Unlike two other participants, Larry did not identify any significant personal benefits from the academic courses that he has taken so far. However, he did indicate his belief that the experience of acting itself provides a unique opportunity for learning about oneself. Specifically, he noted that acting requires “using all of yourself and putting everything out there on the table.” As a result, Larry identified the necessity to engage in introspection and self-exploration, as one is required to “dig down deep inside of yourself and access things that you might not want to show or share emotions that you might have had deep down inside.” He continued with the observation that the profession of acting requires that one be “very open, very willing to take criticism and willing to put yourself out there.” Larry concluded that if one is not “open to being looked at and examined...I don't think theater is right for you.”

While observing that theater has not necessarily “changed” him, Larry noted that he believes his experience has caused him to be more “open” and given him a “different way of looking at things.” He also noted that acting “gets me thinking more” and facilitates his willingness to “take more risks,” “try more things,” and “not be afraid to do certain stuff.”

### *Life Lessons*

Larry noted that there are lessons that he has learned in his theater experience that apply to other aspects of his life. In particular, he explained that he has learned some ways of approaching people and attitudes to maintain that he believes will help him in his new job as a Community Assistant in the dorm where he lives. Although he is uncertain

about the actual demands of the job, he predicts that he will have to deal with difficult or conflictual issues with people. He recalled an actor in the play who was difficult to get along with, and noted that his experience learning to work with this person in the play might help him on his new job. As he explained, he learned how to look for the positive qualities in difficult people.

You have to think that everyone has those, something positive about them. And something that you can find interesting about them. And all you have to do is look for that thing instead of just looking for negative things. So, I'm sure that I will find something that I can deal with the residents there or they can completely annoy me or whatever. But there's got to be something good about them. So, as long as I know that and I keep looking for that, then hopefully that will make the actions between people better, I guess. That's probably something I learned that I can take away from outside the world the theater.

In summary, Larry indicated several ways in which his theater engagement has affected his self-concept. Taking the risk initially to audition for choir exemplified the genesis of his desire to relinquish some of the shyness that had defined him. The success of that experience proved reinforcing to him and established a foundation of confidence for his future efforts. As a result, Larry views performance and confidence as reciprocal constructs, as each facilitates the other in a dynamic and interactive exchange.

His subsequent involvement in theater has encouraged more risk taking, which Larry identifies as beneficial to his developing sense of self. The demands of college theater have further facilitated the process of self-exploration regarding personal traits and emotions. As a result, Larry identifies increased self-confidence, more comfort with risk taking, and a higher level of openness. Finally, he related that theater engagement has enhanced his social skills and provided valuable life lessons regarding interacting.

## Conclusion

It seems that Larry exhibits a passion and a commitment to theater. He described a passion for theater that drives his participation in college, even providing the motivation for him to persevere in the general education courses that he dislikes. The ultimate goal of a professional career in theater, therefore, provides a powerful incentive for Larry.

The inherent features of theater that are engaging to Larry are evident throughout his discussions. He articulated the appreciation for this venue that transforms words into meaning, thereby impacting the thoughts and feelings of the audience. Additionally, he acknowledged a “need for attention” that also drives his participation. As a result, the positive feedback from his family and the director constitutes a meaningful aspect of performance for him. Finally, Larry repeatedly emphasized the importance that he ascribes to the “fun” that he experiences in various aspects of his theater involvement.

His theater activities in college are consuming and provide a continuous context for his experience there. Larry related that his friends were formed through theater and that he is involved in theater activities to some extent each day. He indicated that the social connections thus formed were also an integral part of the experience for him. In particular, he appeared to thrive in the context of the cast of play. The environment that he described in his first major play was experienced as accepting and supportive. It seemed quite important to him that all cast members worked together to make everyone feel included.

However, his perception of a caring family is challenged by his experiences regarding racial insensitivity among faculty and peers in the department. Larry related several occasions on which hurtful and insensitive comments were made. Yet, he retains

his optimism and his idealistic view of the family that could be. Setting aside his frustration, Larry evidences a higher level of forgiveness for these perceived slights than he does for any lacking on his part.

Racial inequity within the theater department also poses a threat to Larry's acting aspirations. Although it is vital to Larry to be cast in as many productions as possible in order to gain the experience he will need in getting work in the future, he is faced with a poverty of available roles in the productions at Metropolitan. While he has been successful in getting cast in two productions thus far, Larry retains a skepticism that available roles will continue in the future.

In the face of this inequity, Larry retains a sense of purpose and drive, seemingly undaunted by the casting challenges he anticipates. Rather, he assumes responsibility for his own attitude and approach to the situation, while maintaining low expectations for the theater department. Larry seems to have resigned himself to do the best that he can under the circumstances.

## CHAPTER 7

### JOHN, THEATER GEEK

#### Introduction

Like Kate, John debuted in his first role as the lead in a play in first grade. Although he recalled that he enjoyed the experience, he did not have the opportunity to become involved in acting again until high school. At that time, as a socially marginalized class clown, John discovered that his talents were most appreciated in theater. He subsequently became “sucked in” to theater, assuming his place among the “geeks” and “dorks” in his high school. Fortunately for John, he “liked it there.” On attending college, he chose to major in theater, with aspirations to work as an actor. During the semester of interviewing, he graduated and got a job within a matter of weeks. Thus, he realized a significant step in the direction of making a profession of theater.

John represented the pragmatic and, at times, the dissenting voice among the participants. Although he was the only one to manifest actual employment in the field, he remained the most understated regarding his investment and the impact of his theater engagement on him. However, his discussions indicate that theater provided an important context for establishing his identity in high school, especially since he noted a difficult transition from middle school.

Nevertheless, it remains that John’s most significant contribution to the current study resides in his provision of the opposing perspective. While other participants evidenced ready support for the primary themes identified, John’s comments provided a helpful point of comparison. While other participants gushed about the “family” of the theater department, John remarked simply “they hang out” and “they party together.”

Other participants spoke passionately of the drive to “affect others” or to “be different things” through theater involvement. The inherent qualities of theater that appeal to John remain a mystery. When not emphasizing the intrinsic benefits, other participants acknowledged the drive for audience accolades or attention. John indicated merely that he “got sucked in.” Finally, other participants endorsed various elements of theater engagement as “cathartic,” “therapeutic,” and “all about fixing yourself.” John maintains that, maybe it could be those things, “if you make it.”

### Background

John recalled that he was not considered “popular” in high school. However, he described himself as “liked” and noted that people found him “entertaining” due to funny comments that he made at times. In fact, it seems that he made comments in class just to gain the attention of his classmates through their laughter. He observed that it did not even matter to him if his comments were “wrong,” as long as he was able to make others laugh. Although he did not seem to gain any friends, or even “respect” with this approach, at least people knew who he was. As he recalled:

I was liked in high school. Like, people, people liked me. And people thought I was entertaining. Cause I would speak up in like classes and stuff. And like, I don't know, when other people would just not know things and like keep their heads down and not speak and not know anybody, I'd say something even if I knew it was wrong. Just sometimes because I thought it would be funny. Just whatever the case may be. So, like, I think people found me entertaining and were just like, Ok. He's an all right guy. But like, I don't think I was popular. Like, nobody went out of their way to be friends with me. Or were just like, he's cool so we should respect him or anything like that. I was just sort of the guy in the corner of the class, you know. They guy who speaks out and says things that may you laugh occasionally.

Although he was not necessarily “cool,” John recalled that he was happy with the friends that he had and felt like they were “good people.” John reflected that he was not

one to place a value on “image” and “material things,” although he thought that “lots of” other kids did. As he explained:

I was definitely satisfied with the friends that I had. I did not care about the image that I had. You know, like, I mean, I don't know. I think I sort of did not want to be about image, you know. Like to a lot of kids, that's important. They have to have these certain clothes and...and stuff like that. And its like, that's expensive. And who really cares, you know? I don't know. I thought stuff like that was sort of trivial and unimportant. But I, like, I definitely was happy with the friends that I had. Cause, like, I don't know, they were good people.

As noted previously, John found most of his friends through theater. In addition to the fact that they spent a lot of time together, he also perceived that they shared his values. As he stated, “Like, since you were immersed in that all the time, that's where you met people. That's where you met friends. You know, and like, I guess everybody sort of had the same values as me.”

Although he recalled that he was happy with his social network of “good solid people that I could trust,” he did acknowledge that there might have been some moments of feeling left out of the group of “cool and popular kids.” In retrospect, he assumed that there were times that he wished for the popularity of the “cool” people, and felt jealous for the girlfriend that he thought he would have if he were in with that crowd. However, he maintained that “for the most part” he was happy with who he was in high school. As he reflected:

I guess there were times when like, I would look at, you know, other people who were like popular and were like, you know, had the girlfriends and people like them and this and that. And like, you know, there were times when I felt jealous and there's times when I felt like this isn't fair, but I think for the most part, I felt happy with who I was in high school. Like looking back on it, I'm definitely happy with where I was. But when I was there, I know there were sometimes when I felt this sucks. I'm not cool. They were not often.

By contrast, John recalled that he was “awesome” in middle school. He recalled that “Oh my god, yeah. Everybody loved me!” John’s middle school was smaller than his high school, possibly accounting in part for his different social experience. However, he also noted that his behavior, while perceived as “childish” in high school, was viewed as “cool” in middle school. As he reflected:

It was weird because some of the stuff that made you like the outcast in high school, people looked up at you for in middle school. Like I think it was just the right point in time where it wasn’t childish anymore, but it was still considered, or . . . it wasn’t considered childish yet, but it was still considered sort of cool . . . for some reason, that stopped being cool in high school. Those people did not put up with it anymore either. But I just remember I was the man in middle school . . . Me and my other 3 dorky friends in high school. We were like the coolest kids in class in middle school. I don’t know what happened.

As noted, John traced his initial interest in theater back to first grade, when he starred in the play, *Peter Pan*. He recalled that he was quite “serious” about the part, as he described, “Like, way too much so for *Peter Pan* in first grade.” He was apparently very invested in the part, explaining that he bought books about *Peter Pan* and carried them around everywhere with him. As he described, “I would read them when I wasn’t on stage and stuff . . . and I always had the script with me.” John observed that this behavior was likely a reflection of his desire to do what he was “supposed to” in the part, explaining, “Because like I got the part and was in the show and I wanted to like make sure I did everything I was supposed to do. I guess that’s what it was.”

Although he carried the *Peter Pan* books around everywhere, seeming invested in his role in the play, John stated that he does not recall being “nervous” about his first performance, nor does he recall being “proud” about it. As he reflected on the reaction that he displayed to receiving the part, he indicated that he did not necessarily grasp the significance of having attained a “lead” role. However, he recalled that, following his

debut, he felt that he “definitely wanted to do it again.” In fact, he stated that it seems sort of “weird” in retrospect that he did not pursue acting again in some way until the opportunity presented itself once more in high school.

John reported that there were no further opportunities to become involved in a play throughout the rest of elementary school or middle school. However, he described his high school theater program as “pretty good,” noting that they produced three plays a year. John recalled that he auditioned but was not initially cast. However, he became involved as a member of the stage crew and stated that he became “sucked into” continued involvement in the theater projects. As he recalled:

They did like a fall show that was pretty big. And then a musical. And then a spring show that was usually like a comedy or small cast type thing. And then the first show I did not get cast . . . and I was like, oh, it must be hard to get cast, so I’m just going to do stage crew and stuff you know. So, I just, there was a part of me that just really got sucked into it. Like, I got cast in a lot of things, but when I did not get cast, I would still help out and do stuff backstage and stuff.

As a result, he explained that he “got into the culture. I knew people. People knew me. Knew my personality.” From that point on, he explained that theater became a “consuming” activity. He recalled that there was a specific “group of kids” who were involved in theater and they tended to audition for every play. As a member of this group, he found that he, like the others, was busy much of the time after school with theater related activities. As a result, he characterized theater as “like, seriously, all I did in high school.” As he recalled:

So, honestly, a lot of the kids that did theater there never went home. Like, you know, if the rehearsals were at night, you’d like, from 6-10 or 6-9:30, you might stay after school during the day and like work on your pieces or whatever and then you know. Or sometimes, if you helped out with stage crew, that would happen right after school and you would stay and help out with that. And then you’d be at the rehearsals at night.

John identified a strong social stereotype associated with the theater kids in his high school. Identifying the “jocks” and the “cool guys” as the kids who “looked the best” and “were just likable,” John contrasted his theater peers as “geeks” who were “definitely not cool.” As he described:

Yeah, we were definitely the geeks. Like, yeah. I guess that’s the best I could describe it. Like, I mean, I guess most of the kids who were jocks were the cool guys. You know, cause they looked the best and they, you know, were just likable. People liked them. People thought they were cool. We were definitely not cool.

Although they appeared to be aware of their “geek” persona, John indicated that the stereotype did not bother his theater friends who did not seem to care about the opinions of their non-geek peers. Even though they were often the brunt of teasing by their peers, John reflected that he and his friends “were happy there.” As he observed:

I think we all knew we were geeks. But, like, we were happy there. You know, I guess we did not care about any sort of categories or hierarchy of things or whatever. We were just like well this is what we want to do. Whatever. I don’t care what other people think of me.

John added that, while the theater kids were identified as “dorks” and “geeks,” they did not necessarily get the labels because they were in theater. In fact, he noted that theater simply attracted students who were already identified by those stereotyped terms.

As he explained:

I don’t know that we were the dorks or the geeks whatever because we were affiliated with a theater program. Like I think that was sort of just who we are . . . we weren’t like the cool people were. And like, I mean, there were some people who were like that’s cool that you guys can do that. That you can get up on stage and act and stuff because I couldn’t do that. Like, that’s cool that you guys can. But, there were some people that it was like, Oh. You’re involved in theater. All right. And sort of made fun of you for that. Like, it was sort of half and half.

It seems that, for John, theater held an intrinsic attraction from the beginning. As he became more active, his involvement was further reinforced by the connection with

other theater students and the social network that evolved. Although he felt that he was not a member of the group of “cool” kids that others “liked” in high school, he seemed “happy” within the theater “culture.”

### Plans Following Graduation

An issue of imminent concern for John throughout the process of the interviews concerned his plans for after graduation. The interviews took place during John’s final semester at Metropolitan University and much of his focus during that time was oriented toward obtaining a job in theater. As a result, the interviews follow his thoughts and feelings during the process, providing a glimpse into the unique challenges facing graduates of a bachelor’s degree program in theater.

Our second interview took place right after John’s graduation. A significant issue that he brought up in reaction to graduation was the concern voiced by his parents regarding his employment prospects. He related that he feels that his parents do not really “understand” what he “went to school for” since they began to question him about immediately getting a “permanent” job. John noted that a “permanent job” is not necessarily a feature of his employment horizon. As he explained:

It’s weird. I don’t know. I think that no sooner did I walk across that stage and get the piece of paper in my hand that they give you, that my parents were like, “So, a job. Where’s your job?” I don’t really think they understand what I went to school for for four years. Because my dad’s like, “You ought to look for a permanent job now.” You know, and I’m like, “Dad, if I’m trying to act, I don’t think I’m ever going to have a permanent job.”

John described his frustration that he parents are “on my case,” noting that his mother is “pushing” him to follow up on a graduate fellowship opportunity that he regards as merely a “kind of half offer.” In the meantime, he had returned to his previous part-time job producing traffic reports. However, within his vocational domain, John also

related that he had assumed a position as an assistant stage manager for a small local theater company. Although that position allows him to work in theater, he was critical of the organization of the group and explained that he would only be involved for the brief duration of the current project, about three weeks.

John explained that he was engaged in interviewing, describing the steps that theater people take to find a job, including “sending out headshots and resumes and stuff.” He expressed some enthusiasm regarding an upcoming audition with the Local Theater Alliance, but noted that the process of finding a job as “harder than I thought.” In addition to having to request and then wait for letters of recommendation for some opportunities, John was not prepared for the rapidity with which auditions were filled. As he described:

And a lot of these things need letters of recommendation, so I've been trying to get letters of recommendation from people and they're like, alright, we'll have them for you soon. And I've got like half of what I need as far as that. And I've sent out a lot of stuff that does not need letters of recommendation and I haven't heard anything from anybody. There's some Shakespeare theatre in DC that was auditioning. And, I called two days after the thing was posted and I was like, “I saw you know, the auditions on the BTA thing.” And I was like, “Could I sign up for an audition space.” And the woman was like, “Well, we just filled our last one. Sorry.” And I was like, man.

He concluded that the lesson he has learned so far is that he needs to follow up on things quickly and that it is an even more competitive climate than he had anticipated. However, he remained optimistic, as he related, “I'm not freaking out and, you know, whatever, I'll work all summer and do whatever.” But he admitted that the stress of his parents pressing him about finding a job is a source of annoyance for him, stating “its just, I thought it was ridiculous that my parents sort of jumped on me as soon as I graduated. You know, and were like, job now. I was like ahh.”

While acknowledging that he is somewhat anxious about getting a job, John observed that he is able to “relax about things quickly” and that he is rather “excited” to resume his prior job doing traffic reporting. According to John, the traffic job is a way to “make some money,” while he continues to look for “real work.” While he noted that his parents are “breathing down my neck” to get a job, he also explained that the delay in finding a theater job is not unexpected to him. That being said, he does admit that it is difficult at times dealing with the ambiguity of not knowing what the future holds, explaining “Its different to not know that something is coming next.”

By the time of our fourth interview, John had gotten a job, putting an end to the speculation. The job was a stage management internship position at an east coast theater repertory. John related that he was “excited” about the position, although he was initially somewhat hesitant to accept a stage management position. However, he explained that he was persuaded by his perception that it is a “really good theater” and that a stage management position there would likely offer a “good opportunity for learning.”

Following up on the discussion about his parents’ investment in his future employment, John noted that his parents seem “happy” about it. As he explained:

They, it seems like they have something different to say about it every time. I think they’re happy about it. I think they’re excited about it. Cause, I mean, before, before I took the job, you know, they were sort of like, what are you going to do? You know, bugging me every couple minutes. And now there actually is something that I’m going to do. So, I think they’re happy about it. And you know, they went online and checked out the website and stuff. And said this looks like a good theater. So, they’re happy.

As a result, it seems that, although the challenge of finding a job in theater initially caused some anxiety for John and his parents, the issue was resolved more easily than he had anticipated. Although John seemed prepared for the potential delay in finding

employment, he was faced with the expectations and lack of understanding of his parents. Additionally, while he had anticipated some difficulty in finding work, he evidenced preoccupation and concern about it as the search progressed. However, neither John nor his parents had to speculate about his future for very long, as he was fortunate in locating the internship position. In the context of the competitive job market in theater, the acquisition of this position was, therefore, quite significant for John.

### Theater as Community

The experience of the theater department as a community was a prominent item of discussion with the other participants in the study. However, John represented the lone participant who did not emphasize this aspect of his engagement. While he did not describe the theater department as a “family” in the manner used by other interviewees, John did indicate a climate that he described as “close” among theater majors. He noted that any one of “those people” could be identified as a “friend” and that they “hang out all the time.” As he observed:

I think the theater department is a very close place. And, you know, I mean, you can call anyone of those people they're your friend, you know, unless you really don't get along with them. Just because they all hang out all the time and they all party. Like, it really wouldn't be weird for me to call somebody that, you know, I don't see a lot and say, “Hey, a bunch of people are going out. Do you want to come?”

### Social Relationships

To understand the meaning of the social context of the theater department to John, it is helpful to explore some of his views regarding his social connections in general. When discussing his social contacts, John revealed a level of reservedness cloaked as pragmatism. Although he has indicated that he is aware of the tendency to feel uncomfortable in new social situations, he resorts to rationalizing the distance he creates,

explaining, “I don't need to make new friends all the time. I mean, I don't need to grab everybody I see and be like, you know, I need you to accept me. Or I need you to talk to me or be my friend.” John also revealed that he is not particularly open to making new friends when he is in a situation that “will not last for long.” His comments reveal the opinion that he does not “need” additional friends, preferring not to “complicate” his life with more of them. As he described:

When I'm in a new place and I know I'm only going to be there for a couple of days, and people starting talking to me, I sort of just like talk to them because they're talking to me and don't open up any more that that because its like well, what's the point in really getting to know you because I'll be gone in a couple of days? I'm like, I don't care enough. I'm here to do this and then move on. So whatever. You know. And, I mean, I think that's sort of part of it that I don't, I don't really reach out to be to be my friend or do this when I don't need to. Like, I've got my friends. I don't need to complicate my life with more of them.

However, within the relative security of the theater department context, John related that he has a “lot of close friends,” because it is “a very close place.” However, on further reflection he adapted the characterization to specify that he has “only a handful” of “really close friends.” As he described, “only a handful of people that I would really trust with stuff and that I care to talk to about stuff.”

Although some of his closest friends are theater majors, John noted that he also has friends outside of the theater department, such as a group of friends from his film major. However, he observed that the other groups that he associates with are all connected in some way to friends that he met through either theater or film. Of his non-theater friendships, John noted that he appreciates associating with people outside of theater at times just to have a “change of conversation.” He explained:

And it's really nice because when you're in the theater department, like, everyone talks theater. Like, since we're like stuck around it all the time, like since we're always stuck in that building, like, it's just what there is to talk about in our

conversations when there's nothing else to talk about. And you sort of reach the point where you're like, man, I'm tired of talking about this. I wish we did something else, then we could talk about other stuff. You know. But, you know, when I go out with these guys, you know, it's a change of conversation, which is so nice.

John also identified a peer group from "back home" with whom he remains friends, but he points out that these are all friends that he met through his involvement in theater in high school. Apparently the similar context of the shared context of theater and the resulting time spent together, fostered his closest friendships in high school as well.

As he said:

And, then I've got friends from back home. From Jersey. Who aren't theater people, but I met them in theater back in high school. Cause it was the same deal then. We were a really tight group of people in high school theater and we still did everything together all the time because that's all we did. So, so anybody I know from high school, I met through theater too.

It seems, therefore, that theater has provided a relatively stable context for the development of friendships for John. As noted previously, the community of "theater geeks" represented a context of support and connection for him in high school. While John is admittedly reticent to engage in relationships in situations that may seem transient, the stability of the theater program in college provided a context of predictability. Although he is able to identify groups of friends outside of the theater department, he acknowledged that they are typically still associated with theater in some way.

Even though he did not resonate with the concept of "one big family" that appealed so much to Ian, John found that he was able to establish a "handful" of "really close friends" through theater. However, John did not emphasize the communion aspect of theater in college. In fact, his previous comments referring to the fact that "*they* hang

out” and “*they* party together” (italics added for emphasis) appear to exclude him from the context. Several factors may account for his seeming minimization of the community culture of theater, in contrast to the other participants. Perhaps the social context was simply not an important feature of his involvement in theater in college. However, it is also possible that the social community existed as a contextual backdrop for his experience that escaped his notice. It is also possible that his de-emphasis of this feature of his engagement in theater is a reflection of John’s status as a graduate. Since he was the only participant who had completed graduation during significant portions of his interview, his view of the culture could be impacted by his retrospective stance as a former member.

### Production Preparation

#### *Auditioning*

John does seem to share the perspective of the other participants regarding the significance of casting. However, he has the added perspective of a student director casting for his own production. Although his accounting sheds some light on casting from “the other side,” it also reinforces the notion that the fates of student actors are determined in large part by the results of casting decisions.

Although John had been cast in several productions during his tenure at Metropolitan University, the most significant casting experience for him occurred during his senior year. He described the unusual scenario that unfolded for him due to the fact that he participated in the auditions with the dual role of student director and aspiring cast member. As he described, “It was weird because I had to sit in on the casting and then run around and audition for the part, and then run back around like did I miss anything.”

Apparently the experience provided a glimpse into the dynamics that occur among faculty during auditions. As a result, John evidenced a heightened appreciation and respect for the agenda of the faculty members as disclosed behind the scenes. Conversely, his anecdote reveals the suspicions with which student actors view the casting process. John explained that he had a preconception that faculty were critical of his peers during the auditions, noting, “It was interesting because I got to sit in there while they were talking about my peers. I sort of expected them to be like this person sucks, like us kids do.” However, he stated that he was pleasantly surprised as he observed the faculty to be invested in the students’ best interests. As he explained:

I thought it was really cool that they would list the strengths and list the weaknesses, and say I think you should cast this person, because they never get a chance. I did not expect that. I see now that, yes, people want the very best cast, but they also want to do what’s best for the students. It was very refreshing to sit in on this audition, and watch the directors.

The audition incident was significant as well in that John ended up feeling that he had successfully negotiated a tricky situation because of his alternating roles. He entered the audition process as a director feeling very aware of his likelihood of getting “last pick” because the “faculty gets priority.” However, he “stuck to his guns” during the negotiations and ended up getting a lead actor that he wanted as well as a part for himself in the main-stage play. As John described in the following scenario, he initially “felt bad about it for a while,” but he essentially came out of the deal “smelling like roses.” The scenario is related in some depth here, as it provides a rare glimpse into the dynamic of casting decisions. John recounted:

It was difficult because they wanted to spread the wealth and no one was able to be in more than one show, except for my show and Peter’s show, because they were the only two rehearsal schedules that did not conflict. The only haggling that needed to be done was between myself and Peter, because we had the potential to

share actors.... This is actually how I was cast for *Servant*, because there was an actor that I wanted. I knew that I had to have alternatives for everyone that I was looking at, because the faculty gets priority, therefore I got last pick. I wanted a lot of people that Peter wanted. He was like “I want this person and that person” and I was like “That’s fine. I’ll take this person and that person.” I actually think I got a more interesting cast because of it. I did not pick all the stars of the department . . . but for the lead I got sold on this one guy, and I did not feel there was anyone else who could play the part. Peter also wanted him for *Servant of Two Masters*, and what wound up happening was Peter and Tommy and the assistant director went out and talked about it, and they came back in and said “We’ll give you Ian, because he’s a good student and a good actor and he should be able to work on both shows and keep his grades up, but we want to “spread the wealth” and the alternative for Ian was me. That was the weirdest decision I had to make because I was involved in the casting and the directing, and I sort of felt bad about it for a while . . . It worked out for the best, but I felt like a jerk for a few days. Everyone was also happy that I stuck to my guns about it as well because they felt like it was a good trade as a director. I was like a jerk because I came out smelling like roses. I got the cast I wanted, and I got cast in a show too.

John’s concern that he was “like a jerk” in this situation arose from the fact that he negotiated himself into the lead role in the main-stage play, when the role was originally going to go to Ian. The results of the negotiations left Ian cast in a lead role in the less prestigious student production directed by John. The statement that Ian would “work on both shows” referred to the crew position to which Ian was relegated in the larger production. Therefore, John felt like a “jerk,” albeit only briefly.

The scenario, therefore, reveals John’s perception that faculty do keep the best interests of students at heart when making casting decisions. Individual strengths and weaknesses are taken into consideration and the effort is made to “share” the student talent as well as to provide acting opportunities to many students. Casting is revealed as a humane process, while the attachment evidenced by student actors to the achievement of acting roles is illustrated. Also revealed is John’s perspective that an “interesting” cast is not necessarily comprised of the “stars” of the department.

### *Getting into Character*

A premise of the current study is that character development provides a context for self-exploration as student actors reflect on their own traits relative to the traits that they are attempting to integrate into a character. Although other participants indicated that the process provides insights that potentially lead to enhanced self-understanding, John emphasized the impersonal aspects of the process. Although he articulated his strategies for crafting a character, elements of self-awareness resultant from the process are absent from his descriptions. His recounting, while not supportive of the premise of the study, is presented as evidence refuting the claim of the impact of character development on self-concept.

John explained that, for him, getting into character begins with a review of the script for basic factual items that inform the character. From there, he begins to form a “mental picture” of the character in his mind, including attributes such as “how they look, how they walk, and how they talk.” Additionally, he formulates a story in his mind about the life of the character, adding details to give the character a “past” and make him “more real.” As John explained, the details of the character’s life may need to be created by the actor:

Like, even if it’s not mentioned in the play, just to make them more real to you. Give them a past. Give them a, think about their mother, their father, their sister. You know, you gotta come up with all this stuff, you know.

According to John, the character then continues to develop as he interacts with other characters on stage and incorporates feedback from the director. Accordingly, he noted that process includes “really getting to know” the character through “intensive” work. As he described:

All these characters need to be thought through and you know, really worked with intensively. You know, you want to come up with a background for your character. That's just basic stuff that you're taught to do. Like, it's just a matter of really getting to know this person and what they mean to you. And that's, I think, the only real way to form a character.

John noted that his role in his most recent performance provided a challenge when it came to “getting into character.” In devising his character in the comedy, *The Servant of Two Masters*, John noted that he “he tried different things with it” but continued to feel that he just “couldn't get it.” He explained that it was a “challenge” for him to play an “older man” and to grasp the correct “movements” for the part. Following some feedback from his director and peers about small habits that he could incorporate, he finally felt “comfortable” with his portrayal. At that point, he finally felt that he was really enjoying the play. As he recalled:

It was very difficult to build that character, but after I got it, like, it was just a really fun show. The first, like four weeks, I was like, what the c--- am I doing? Like, I'm awful in this show. And then like the last two weeks, it was just the most fun I ever had here.

It is evident that John's account of the process emphasizes the technical and intellectual steps involved in cognitively constructing a character. He revealed an awareness of a variety of strategies and techniques to use in forming this mental construction. However, he did not draw any parallels to aspects of self, nor did he mention use of a model. When faced with the challenge of adopting an unfamiliar movement pattern, he relied on specific feedback from directors regarding habits, mannerisms, and movements that he might incorporate. Therefore, his process appears to be the result of the application of external features versus the invocation of internal elements. At no point does he indicate that self-reflection entered into the process.

In contrast to other participants, John does not indicate any element of self-exploration while engaged in character development. In fact, his description of the strategies used resides in contrast to the highly internalized and personalized tactics used by Ian. As in his negation of the significance of the social context, the lack of such dialogue may represent the absence of that type of processing on the part of this participant. Perhaps self-reflection relative to character development occurs at a tacit level for John.

On the other hand, perhaps self-exploration and reflection exist as potential, although not necessary, complements to the process of character development. As such, the extent to which self-reflection accompanies character development may be a highly individual phenomenon. If so, it might be postulated that self-concept may or may not be impacted by the process of character development insofar as the element of self-exploration is invoked in the procedure. It may also be concluded that such self-examination is not necessary for the successful creation and portrayal of a character.

### *Typecasting*

John described his experience of typecasting relative to his frequent casting in humorous roles. Although he did not engage in much discussion regarding this phenomenon, he presented typecasting as the fortunate outgrowth of his talent and his interests. John noted that he had a particular affinity for comedy in theater, explaining that he had “loved that genre for a long time.” As he described:

I've loved shows where you don't really get a rest just in terms of the comedy. Where it's just one thing after another and there's crazy things and people diving behind things and you know, like, I mean, I don't know. That's just been something that's always entertained me.

He explained that he has also felt that he has always felt like he had a gift for portraying humor, perhaps “inheriting” his father’s “knack for telling funny stories.” John described that he has the “goofiest, most descriptive way to explain” a story “that will have everyone laughing.” As a result, he really enjoyed his experience in *The Servant with Two Masters*, noting that the “physical comedy” genre constitutes his “niche” in acting.

Other participants described typecasting as a potential limitation, revealing the desire to “play against type” for various personal or professional reasons. In contrast, John appears to have integrated his typecast persona and embraced it as his “niche” in acting. Therefore, in his experience, typecasting serves to structure the roles in which he will be cast. Additionally, he finds that the phenomenon reinforces his awareness of his traits, rather than offering new information. Typecasting, therefore, assures a comfortable fit with his roles.

#### Separation of Self and Character

The separation of character and self emerged in other discussions as a relevant topic when considering typecasting and character development. Consistent with the premise that character preparation facilitates self-awareness, other participants indicated that the consideration of self versus character invoked reflection. However, John minimized the relationship between these constructs.

When considering the separation of actor from self, John related his view that there are “always” elements of the actor in the portrayal of the character. In fact, John identified this concept as “the biggest thing to keep in mind” when considering the

process of character development. For him, the inclusion of elements of the actor's life lends authenticity to the part and "makes it fun to watch." As he explained:

Well, I think the biggest thing to keep in mind about that sort of, is you can never really completely distance yourself from a character. Its not, this is me in life and then this is me on stage and its completely different. Which a lot of actors, I think, have a problem understanding that at first. It's, you know, how did these things in life, feed into and develop this thing on stage. There's always going to be little bits of you in a character. Which is what makes it real. What makes it fun to watch.

When questioned about the relationship of self to character, John did acknowledge a connection. However, it is significant that this consideration did not arise during his discussion of character development, nor did he have anything to add to the brief comment related above. Although his comment presents superficial support to the notion that there is a relationship between self and character, this brief observation does not offer strong substantive for the notion.

### The Experience of Directing

Unlike any other research participants, John was active in directing during his time at Metropolitan. Although this investigation did not aim to explore the experience of directing, a brief overview of John's experience is presented here as additional context for understanding what is meaningful to him. Additionally, it was noted that his directing experience dominated the interview discussions to a greater extent than his experience as a lead actor in a main-stage play. His enthusiasm and investment in the process appeared to indicate that the experience was a significant and meaningful aspect of his theater engagement. Therefore, this content is relevant to the aims of the study to investigate the experience of college students in theater. Specifically, John related the significance of the transition from actor to director, as shall be described.

Reminiscent of his characterization of “getting sucked in” to theater in high school, John described his involvement in directing as the result of a seemingly coincidental series of circumstances. He explained that the completion of Directing I, along with his experience as assistant stage manager, made him eligible to apply to direct his own piece. Although he had expressed an interest in directing, he did not seem to be particularly driven to do it. However, as he described, the “opportunity” arose, and he took it. As he reflected:

I knew that I was interested in directing, so I sort of had it in the back of my mind when I was in my freshman and sophomore years. A lot of people don't take Directing I until they're a junior or senior, and I took it as a sophomore, and I assistant stage managed a show then too, because I hadn't gotten cast in anything, and there wasn't anything else to do...I wasn't like I have to do this now, but I was like the opportunity is here now, so I'm going to take it.

Directing exemplified the same type of “fit” that John described relative to his typecasting in humorous roles. He related his view that success in directing relies more on some innate personal qualities and experience than academic instruction. This rationale contributed to his decision not to take Directing II. As John explained, he does not “really think you can teach someone to be a director.” Instead, he observed that directing requires that an individual “have a plan,” to have a “vision,” and to “clearly know how to talk to people.” In addition to possessing these qualities, he observed that his experience as an actor, an assistant stage manager, and “other crappy little jobs” was key to his own confidence in taking on this task. As he explained, “I've done a lot of that work and I know how I want to do things and what I want to do and I do it.”

#### Transitioning from Actor to Director

Although he stated that he felt prepared for the challenge due to his prior experience, John acknowledged that there is a “transition” inherent in shifting from actor

to director. Although the change in role required a shift in the perception of his student peers, he indicated that their level of “trust” in him and their “professionalism” facilitated the transition. In fact, he seemed to be quite pleased with “receptivity” of the actors that has occurred as a result of his own directing style of fostering cohesion or “group effort.”

As he recounted:

As far as the transition from acting to directing, like, I mean, you know, it was just really a matter of changing gears, you know. Like all of those actors know me pretty well. At least, a majority of them, you know. And then, you know, just because I’m a student or their friend or you know, in class with them or whatever, like most of them are professional enough to know, all right, I’ve signed onto a show. I’m going to do the best I can do. This is my director. I’m going to listen to him because he’s the director, you know. I mean, a lot of, a lot of times when you get into a show and you don’t trust the director, you just sort of go on auto pilot. You’re like, well, I’ll listen to what they say, but I won’t like it. And I think this has been sort of a group effort enough that you know, I can listen to Ian’s input or Matt’s input about where they’re coming from and say, alright, I understand. Let’s try it like this. Or let’s do that. And they’re all really receptive about it, which is really cool.

It seems that, although the transition of shifting from an acting peer to the director of a production is inherently challenging, John rose to the occasion with a minimum of angst or stress. His matter-of-fact tone when discussing the shift supports his comments that seemingly indicate that he took it all in stride. Additionally, he apparently had gained sufficient respect from his peers that they were willing to take direction from him. It is notable that, as a director, he continues to focus on the aspect of social support and cohesion within a production, reinforcing the important placed on the social network throughout this paper.

### Self-Concept

John defined self-concept as “how you perceive yourself, what you think of yourself.” He felt that it was important to clarify that self-concept was not based on

evaluation, such as “do you think you’re a good person.” While he acknowledged that self-evaluation constitutes “part of it,” he views the construct more as “what persona do you think you display and...how it looks to other people.”

When asked to describe his own self-concept, John reflected initially on the perceptions that he believes others have of him. He pointed out that, although people tend to “like him once they get to know” him, he has been told that he “does not make a good first impression.” His perception is that others assume he is “a dork” or “lazy” due to the clothes that he wears. John explained that he “does not really care” what he wears and that his wardrobe consists mainly of “K-Mart jeans” and shirts that he finds “entertaining” to wear because they “say goofy stuff on them.”

First impressions and clothing aside, John goes on to describe himself as “very dedicated, very passionate” and “straightforward.” He noted that he “isn’t afraid to try things,” that he does things to the best of his ability and that he “does not give up.” However, he returned to his original comments that he does not believe that his essential qualities are perceived readily by others. In addition to his style of dress and the way he looks, he recalled an incident where a theater professor commented on his way of speaking. As he related:

But, I think I don't come off that way. Simply because of the way that I dress and the way that I look and the way that I speak. Like, Robin Q---, she makes fun of me. Like, when I go talk to her and she'd be like, you know, she's one of my professors and just in conversation, I'll be like, “Dude, listen.” And she'll be like, “Ok dude.” And you know, I don't know.

John seems ambivalent about his public persona. Although his comments may appear to reflect a concern for the disparity between his self-concept and the first impression that he makes, he stated that he does not emphasize conforming to social

expectations, and prefers to be genuine and accept the social consequences that result. As he explained, “I don't put much emphasis on trying to be proper or right or look good or present something a certain way because its like I am who I am and it's like you understand me or you don't.”

However, he noted that he makes an exception to this policy in some circumstances, pointing out that he is “not oblivious” and will “try to make a good impression” if he is trying to get a job. Still, he explained that he believes “that if you can't just be yourself, then, why even bother?”

### *Wardrobe Reflections*

In the context of discussion regarding his self-concept and the impression that he makes on others, John initiated comments about his style of dress. In fact, John initially characterized his wardrobe as a coincidence in much the same way that he described the happenstance evolution of other elements of his life. However, it was suggested that making a point of wearing only “K-mart jeans” and “Converse sneakers” still implies a certain level of choice. Reflecting on this observation, John acknowledged, “I guess I do think about this, but I say to people that I don't think about this.” As he considered his choice of clothes, he noted that he observes a pattern of adhering to a certain persona. As he explained:

I guess I sort of have never left that early 90's grunge period where its like ripped clothes and flannel shirts over t-shirts. I do that all the time. It's just comfortable and I, you know. I like cargo pants too because they're comfortable. So, like, and the other thing that like I've never been able to not wear converse sneakers. And like, yes they're cheap . . . But while I say that like, yeah, it's comfortable and cheap and that's why I do that. I know that sort of creates a persona, you know. At least that was the persona of that era that you know, ripped clothes and converse and the flannel. Like, they did not care. But, like, people did try to dress that way because you know, that was what was cool at the time. I don't know. Maybe I'm just living in the past.

It seems that, while initially writing off his wardrobe choices as a coincidence of comfort and cost, on further reflection, John acknowledged the intention of creation of a corresponding persona. Although he was not able to clearly articulate the meaning of his choice of appearance, he indicated that his look reflected a trend evident in his high school years, called grunge. Apparently the meaning attributed to grunge attire was an attitude that one “did not care” about clothes. It seems that the look was also perceived as “cool” at the time.

John’s reflections on this topic are somewhat reminiscent of his observations that he persisted in middle school behavior on entering high school, even though the behaviors were no longer reinforced by the majority of his peers. While grunge clothing does not cause him to stand out among the diversity of attire in the theater department, his choice of wardrobe does provoke some thought on his part. John expressed some concern about his image, yet he is intentional in perpetuating the look he had in high school. It seems that he is still attempting to balance the value of crafting an individual identity with the value of social conformity.

### *First Impressions*

Beyond the impact of his wardrobe and appearance on the first impression that he generates, John revealed additional aspects of the persona that he apparently initially projects to others. He admitted that he has received feedback from people who had a quite negative assessment of him at first. As he explained, “I’ve heard so many people say to me that they just thought I was useless or stupid or whatever when they first met me.” He recalled examples where he was “so insulted” by how he was treated by several directors and fellow students initially when he arrived at Metropolitan. However, he

seems to be somewhat reassured about this trend since a number of individuals have approached him since to say that they revised their initial impression after getting to know John. He observed that these individuals now say that they are “happy to work with” him and “trust” him with their theater projects.

John reflected that the misperceptions about him might arise from his reticence to “reach out” to people initially. He noted that he tended to remain somewhat withdrawn initially, so that it took a while for people to “warm up” to him. He observed that, once he is engaged in a context of working with people, others are able to get to know him better and they find that they like him. As he described:

I stay out of stuff unless I’m involved in it, you know. I don’t really, I mean, when I got to Metropolitan . . . Until I made friends and stuff, I was just sort of, speak when spoken to and do what you’re told type thing. And I think just sort of like the way I act and the way I dress and I’m sort of like goofy in this and that and that I really did not reach out to anybody and just sort of did you know, it took a while for people to warm up to me. And was like, I think people had to get to know me before they liked me. And I really did not let people get to know me just because I did not reach out to anybody, you know. I had to wait until I was in like a working environment until they really got to know me and they were like, alright, we like him, you know.

However, John characterized himself as outgoing when he is with a group of people that he knows. As he said, “When I’m out with people I know and hanging out, I’m not afraid to say what’s on my mind and I’m not afraid to talk about whatever and be loud or you know, make a nuisance of myself...but I don’t act that way when I’m not comfortable acting that way, I guess.” It appears that John may display a significantly different persona when he is with friends than he does in a new or unfamiliar situation.

In summary, it appears that John evidences concern about how he is initially perceived by others. Although John characterized himself in terms of very positive attributes, a discrepancy exists regarding the image that he projects. The disparity appears

to be the result of the distance that he maintains socially until he feels more trusting and connected. Significantly, this process is greatly facilitated in a situation where he is “working” with others. Possibly the structure of the work setting and the role expectations facilitate a context where he feels more comfortable in interactions. If so, the theater context may serve the purpose of providing a structured productive setting where John feels safe enough to begin to reveal himself.

#### Influence of Theater Engagement

Theater appears to have been such a pervasive aspect of John’s life that it is difficult for him to step back and reflect objectively on its meaning. His description of his theater activities alludes to the notion of theater as a type of consistent and enduring backdrop to his life ever since high school. Reflecting on his level of involvement in theater activities, he concluded that he would feel somewhat “useless” if not consistently active in them. However, while his comments seem to indicate that he feels purposeful due to the level of activity or “busyness” associated with his theater projects, the significance of the actual activity is not clear. Lacking comments about the nature of theater itself, it seems that engagement in any activity that kept him busy might have served the same purpose. As John described:

Ever since high school, that’s all I’ve done. I mean, even in college, I had classes all day and would go to rehearsals at night. And, you know, if there are two weeks that go by that I don’t have, where my schedules not like hectic, I’m like, what’s going on? Like, I seriously have gone from one show to the next to the next with a little breathing room in between. You know, that, I don’t know how to live any other way, you know? I don’t know what high school would have been like without theater. I know now that when I don’t have theater or when I’m not working on something, I sort of feel, I guess almost useless . . . I feel like sometimes if I’m just sitting around and not doing anything, that I’m wasting time . . . Cause I spent high school very much like always doing something. Always doing theater. Like I was there pretty much every night.

Therefore, it seems that the most significant contribution of theater engagement at some points in his life was the structure that it imposed on his daily activities.

Accordingly, it seems that the intensity of the immersion in this activity rendered theater the defining feature of his high school experience. Although he does not qualify what the experience meant to him beyond the productivity it engendered, he does indicate a pervasive influence. His assertion that he “wouldn’t know how to live any other way” reinforces the notion that he was unable to take an objective stance from which to judge it’s influence. He concludes that he would likely be “different” today if not for his theater involvement, reflecting that it constituted a “constructive” way to spend his time.

#### *Contribution of the Academic Program*

Like other participants interviewed, John identified certain courses in the theater program that are designed to improve student self-awareness. However, although he tended to acknowledge the potential for such an effect, he maintained that he did not experience any significant impact on his own self-understanding.

The only course that John identified as useful in gaining self-knowledge in his experience was Voice-Movement Integration. He noted that, in this course, he “discovered” things about his movement patterns. As he explained:

You’re taught to, discover the things about yourself first that makes you you. The way I walk, the way I talk. The way I move my arms. The way I hold my head. You know. Like, you know. There’s all these lists of things that you are supposed to like, try to discover. You know, your head-tail connection. Your movements. Is it stoking? Or shaping? You know, stuff like that . . . I can definitely pick out a lot of weird little things that I do that I might not have been able to do before . . . I know that I sort of do this thing with my head when I, at least when I’m acting. I do ’t know how much I do it in conversation.

John’s comments indicate that feedback is garnered within this class that relates to the essential aspects of oneself, with his characterization that these attributes are what

“makes you, you.” However, he pointed out that this course simply reinforced the awareness he already had, such as the fact that he “walked weird” and did “this thing with my head.”

What emerged as significant for John in the course was that, as a result of one of the activities, “everyone is always imitating” his walk. Apparently one exercise in the class required students to imitate another student’s walk. John recounted that everyone knew immediately when a fellow student “did his John walk” and the event was funny to everyone there, including John. He laughingly recounted the incident and said that he “accepted” his walk as a part of himself and did not feel bad about the teasing he received.

Acting III was characterized by two of the participants as a powerful and evocative context for self-exploration, resulting in transformative and cathartic experiences. Balancing their perspectives, John characterized Acting III as a personal growth experience only “if you make it one.” In fact, he observed that about half of the students seem to have a good experience, while the remaining half have a bad experience in the course. In describing his view of Acting III, John observed:

I would say that it’s a personal learning and a personal growth experience if you make it one. If you want it to be. Because like, Diane teaches, it’s hard to work with in a lot of respects, you know. I mean, I think she’s a good teacher, but like, you know she’s very no-nonsense, very confrontational, you know. And if you give her a hard time, and you act like you don’t want to learn, she’s going to make it hard for you. And you’re either going to learn more because of it or you’re going to hate it and it’ll just shut you off to the class, you know. I think in all the years that I’ve seen people come out of that class, it’s been pretty much 50/50 as far as that stuff. Like, there’s a lot of exercises where if you look at them at face value, it’s kind of like this is dumb, why are we doing this? You know. And if you go into it with that mindset, you’re going to come out of it with that was dumb, I don’t know why I just did that. But if you sort of look at it as a learning thing, a learning experience, and like what does it mean, then it’s kind of interesting. You know, a lot of it is probably stuff that you sort of find ways to

amplify, I guess, questions that you've sort of been asking me and making me think about.

Relating the course to him, John recalled an exercise requiring him to identify a character archetype based on aspects of his personal history. The archetype was then magnified as a sort of caricature and presented to the class. As he explained, "you just amplify them to the biggest stereotype you can and like see what happens when you make this character." John described his character:

So, like, for instance, mine was, I took a Shoobie, which is a South Jersey beach bum. And the whole like Italian type thing. My mom's side of the family is Italian. So, we had this like Mafia beachclub guy. And he's like out in the sand and you know, a little chair and umbrella and like a suit on. You know, eating a South Philly pretzel and some spaghetti and stuff.

John observed that while the exercises are "fun" and "funny to watch," it was also "pretty interesting" for him to observe the "big, broad stereotypes" and then "use them" later in character development. Therefore, while he initially related to the exercise for entertainment value, as in the John's walk exercise, he did find an application for the resultant material in subsequent character development.

Another experience in the course appeared to be meaningful to John, as he recalled that the director encouraged him to work on a personal issue that she had observed. He recalled that the instructor asked him to create a project where he would "stand up and own something." This guidance apparently arose from her observation of John's tendency to minimize his accomplishments as well as his reticence to get really invested in a project. As he explained:

Whenever we did stuff in class, I was kind of like, I don't know if I'm doing good. I'm doing this, but I'm not excited about it. You know and when like she found something I was excited about and she pushed me to do it.

John recalled that, although he “had no idea” what he wanted to do for the culminating assignment of a solo show, Diane targeted an interest area of his and then encourage him to pursue a project in that area. As he explained:

Um, it is weird because when I went into that class, I had no idea what I wanted my solo show to be about. And she was just like, well, you’re a, you’re in film. So, you’re probably more of a visual thinker, right? And I was like, I don't know. I guess. So, she gave me these little postcards with cartoons on it and stuff. And I sort of did not know what to get out of it really. And so I just started writing a solo show with cartoons.

John explained that the assignment evolved into a rather complex and challenging project. In fact, he stated that Diane initially cautioned him about the complexity of the project. As he recalled, “Like, cause, you know, I wrote the show and she was like, this is really hard. You know that, right?” For John, however, the complexity of the task appeared to provide him with a challenge that he viewed as motivating and inspired an uncharacteristic level of enthusiasm and investment. As he reflected:

But like, basically, once I decided how hard, once I saw that it was going to be difficult, I decided that I was going to do it. And I was going to make sure it was good. Like, you know, I mean, I put a lot of work into it in that respect. For me, it was more just about, I’m, at that point in my life at least. I’m creating something from scratch that I think is good. And I’m going to make sure its good. You know, cause then, I would sort of write stuff and I’d be like, this is crap. I don’t know what I’m doing. I didn’t have a lot of faith in what I created at least. So that’s what that was about.

The exercise also seemed to have enhanced John’s self-confidence, as he reflected on the outcome of his hard work. He seemed surprised at his peers’ enthusiastic reception to his work, culminating in their selection of his project for a showcase presentation at the end. Their approval of the project in which he had uncharacteristically invested himself, seemed to reinforce his confidence in his creative ability. As he recalled:

And when I wrote it, the class liked it. And I was just like, all right, this is cool. And we had to. And it really went farther than I even expected it to because

there's a big showcase thing at the end of the semester and everybody was like...we had to pick one thing from each class that's in and the rest of the class like, without even asking me about it first, was just like we should pick John's. So, like, you know. Sort of like I did not expect that and I did not. That wasn't why I wrote it. But in hind site, it sort of helped, I guess, to accomplish what I wanted to in that class. Just because you know, rather than just being like, ok, here's the project. I'm done. Give me a grade. It was more like, ok, here's this thing. I worked hard on it. You know, I worked very hard on it. I'm gonna do it now. And it was just like, all right. And you can do it here too. It was so cool.

In summary, although John minimized the gains in self-awareness that he may have reaped within the theater curriculum, he identified various examples of opportunities for self-development. These included the specific feedback he received regarding inherent movement patterns as well as the opportunity to create a caricature of himself. Both of these activities provided the prospect of enhanced self-awareness. However, John maintained the view that his theater engagement did not significantly influence his self-concept.

#### *Theater and Self-Concept*

Once again, John provided an added dimension to the views of the participants with his unique perspective regarding the impact of theater on self-concept. When asked to reflect on this potential phenomenon, John replied that he did not see a clear relationship. In fact, he seems a bit stymied by the question, admitting that he had not considered such a dynamic previously. As he responded:

Um. I, I honestly don't know how much it has influenced my self-concept or self-image or whatever. I, it's not something that I take into account when I think of myself or you know, what being me means. You know? I don't usually think of that.

John did note that there are certain things that he feels he has "learned" through his involvement in theater. However, his examples relate to factual knowledge that he

gained about topics while engaged in research for character development. As he explained:

I suppose it does influence who I am, having to make characters for different shows and stuff. If it's got anything to do with history or based in anything, you have to like study that and stuff like that. Like, I sort of got a whole other education outside of education because of theater.

In addition, John noted that theater has influenced him regarding “the kinds of stuff I pay attention to.” He added that he would not have met his girlfriend had he not been in theater. Reflecting further on the potential influence of theater, John recalled an example of a friend who wrote and acted in a play about the Columbine tragedy. He observed that his friend was “never quite the same” following the incident and that he developed “a little twitch” that he had never had before. John concluded:

And would you be a different person without theater? Like, I can't speak of the situation for myself, but talking to other people, I guess I could say that yeah, you could be a different person.

#### Substance Use

Although the study did not set out to explore the relation between theater involvement and substance use, the topic arose in conversations with John. Although not stated in preceding chapters, a tacit assumption was that engagement in a productive, social activity such as theater might have a positive impact on substance abuse in the college setting. However, this premise was not formalized, therefore supporting literature was not investigated or included. Additionally, no questions were included in the interview that related to this topic. Nevertheless, John initiated discussion of this topic, therefore the resulting remarks are included here for additional context. Additionally, John raised the suggestion that theater engagement facilitates substance abuse, indicating factors that potentially mediate positive effects of the activity.

John noted neither he nor his other friends from theater became involved in drug and alcohol use during high school. However, he views this outcome as a coincidence, rather than indicative of an influence of theater itself. As he observed, “They did not do it and they just happened to be in theater and I was in theater too.”

On coming to Metropolitan University, however, John observed that drug and alcohol use was common among theater majors. In fact, he explained that he moved into an apartment in his sophomore year with other theater majors and found them to be “the biggest bunch of potheads I have ever met in my life.” As he recalled, “Like that is how they started every day. And a lot of times, they would come to rehearsal stoned.”

John explained that there was a level of awareness of the substance use of students among the theater faculty and student peers. He noted that the faculty response to such behaviors varied, from faculty members who “looked the other way” to those who essentially “blacklisted” students who were suspected of substance use. As he explained:

It became common knowledge and some people were like, whatever, you can’t prove it. You can’t do this. But, you know, I know there are certain teachers who are certainly prejudiced and won’t cast people who they know have done that because they think it’s poor work ethic.

John offered his own assessment of the effects of substance use on his theater peers, noting that some students seem to evidence “enhanced performance” as a result, while others have “wrecked their brains.” From his dual perspective as student director and acting peer, he explained that he has observed a level of “apathy” in substance using students at times, along with an inability to grasp basic aspects of a script. As he stated:

And as far as their personal performance, like, I mean, sometimes it, I guess enhances it. Sometimes it’s cool. And sometimes I just see these people fail time and time again. And like, overall, I look at some of these people that I know go

stoned a lot to performances and rehearsals and stuff and like, the thing I can see overall is, like, its sort of wrecked their brain in weird ways. Like, like, and I'm not just speaking about when they're high at rehearsal, but when they pick up a new script and are like, alright, I'm learning this. I'm going to be this character. Like, there are lines and stuff that like just don't make sense. Its like they lose their ability to do things because they sort of like have fallen into this like really lazy, like, I can't describe it. It's just something I've noticed. Like . . . I think if they hadn't spent like half their lives on drugs, then there are things that might click a little more in terms of certain parts they're working on.

While adding proudly that he has never tried marijuana, even when he lived with a group of "potheads," he noted that, for other students, the culture of the theater major might actually encourage drug use. While other students described the cohesive nature of the theater major in positive terms, noting the benefits of social support and friendships, John alluded to a consequence of the social network that may be viewed as less constructive. If drug use is a norm within the culture, as John observed, students may be influenced by the group to engage in this behavior. As he observed:

I mean, yeah, I know plenty of people in college who, you know, that almost being theater keeps them on drugs because all their friends are in theater and also on drugs. You know, like, there are a lot of people in the department, theater department, who were probably seniors and juniors when I was a freshman, where that's how they operated. They all smoked weed. They all smoked weed constantly together.

Therefore, John once again adds a helpful perspective regarding the impact of theater engagement. Interestingly, he includes the observation that drug use can actually enhance performance at times. If so, this dimension contradicts elements of conventional wisdom in the health education of high school and college students, articulating only the negative implications of substance abuse.

Additionally, he cites a dimension of context regarding the role of faculty in this situation, with the suggestion that some faculty "look the other way," while others "blacklist" students thus engaged. The suggestion of such divergent views among the

faculty is indicative of a diversity of views that would presumably impact the cohesive nature of this context. Additionally, such diverse reactions to substance abuse provide mixed messages with which college students must contend. Participants have indicated a reliance on and respect for theater faculty in this context that renders their stance on this issue significant in the minds of these young people. Therefore, the issue of substance abuse in the theater department arose as a topic worthy of further investigation from the perspectives of students and faculty. If there is a culture deemed supportive of this potentially dangerous and illegal behavior, it is important to define the contributing features and the implications.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, John's case is unique among the participants in several respects. Significantly, he was the only senior and he graduated from the program over the course of the interviews. Therefore, his perspective was offered somewhat retrospectively as he was engaged in transitioning out of the department. It is also important to note that he was initially engaged in the process of seeking employment. As a result, during the interview process he was fortunate to attain an internship position in a theater reparatory. Therefore, he manifested the future that was only a dream to participants like Larry and Ian. John also gained experience as a director in his final semester, adding a valued perspective from an alternate student role.

Finally, John's perspective regarding his theater experience differed from his peers in several significant ways. Key ideas that emerged as prominent among the other participants were largely insignificant in his experience. Other participants emphasized the key ideas, sub-types, and sub-themes of incentive for engaging in theater, the social

community, and the opportunity for self-exploration inherent in the program. Conversely, these ideas did not emerge as significant for John.

Instead, his emphasis was on the transition to roles beyond the student actor. He was the most animated when discussing his search for employment and his experience as a student director. It seemed, therefore, that the meaning that he ascribed to his theater engagement was quite different than those of his peers. What emerged as significant for him concerned his transition to more professional roles and the impact of the impression that he makes on others. As a result, John offered a very valuable point of comparison and contrast for the premises of the current study. However, his remarks did not indicate support for the theoretical notions of Heathcote (1988), Way (1973), and Gressler (2002), regarding the positive impact on self-concept of engagement in theater.

John seems to indicate that the utility of theater engagement for self-development resides in the perspective of the beholder. Thus, he acknowledged that various activities in theater could constitute as a self-development pursuit “if you make it one.” Therefore, John offers a dimension of temperance with his assumption of a cautious stance toward attributing self-concept outcomes to theater engagement.

## CHAPTER 8

### PATTERNS OF EXPERIENCE ACROSS CASES

#### Introduction

The previous chapters presented a close examination of the perspectives of the four participants with regard to their theater experiences, highlighting the dominant themes, sub-types, and sub-themes that emerged for each. This chapter will explore the patterns in experience and perception that emerged across the cases. It is important to note that the intent is not to generalize the experiences articulated here as representative of the experiences of all students in theater. Rather, the aim is to generate an understanding of the perspectives of these participants in this particular setting, with a focus on the means by which they individually and collectively made sense of their experiences. Accordingly, the focus will be to reveal evidence regarding the nature of self-concept as understood and experienced by college students, as well as to explore their views about the role of theater in the development of self-concept.

The participant interviews yielded numerous themes, sub-types, sub-themes, and key ideas, including some that were idiosyncratic to a participant. For example, Kate expressed the significance that she attributed to costumes and makeup, drawing a parallel to her own use of these accoutrements in her daily life. These physical manifestations of character were, however, only minimally acknowledged by the other participants. The issue of racial inequity within the theater department comprised a significant amount of the meaning of Larry's experience, while the issue was not mentioned by others. Therefore, close examination of these sub-themes is limited to the case chapters for those participants for which the issues arose. However, the idiosyncratic sub-themes that

emerged were, at times, iterations of sub-types or sub-themes that arose as patterns across other cases. For example, although Larry was the only participant to discuss racial inequity, the experience of exclusion from the social community at one level or another arose across multiple cases. In these instances, the idiosyncratic sub-themes identified are incorporated within the analysis of common patterns presented in this chapter.

It was evident that several global themes emerged as paramount in the experiences of the participants across cases. Although the terminology used by participants to articulate these phenomena may have varied somewhat, each noted the influence of these issues. Therefore, these themes emerged as pervasive and significant.

Accordingly, it was noted that the initial impetus for engagement in theater, as well as the incentives driving further participation, was a topic of significance for each individual. The theme of social connections as facilitated by theater engagement arose as perhaps the dominant theme across the cases. Each participant initiated observations about this topic, and three of the four participants discussed it extensively. Finally, the third dominant theme to emerge concerned the perceptions of the participants regarding the impact of theater participation specifically on self-concept.

This chapter will present a discussion of the patterns of experience that emerged across cases as framed by these dominant themes. Related theoretical perspectives will be invoked to clarify the significance of the emergent patterns on self-concept. The first section will describe the impetus for theater engagement of the participants and discuss the implications for self-concept. The second section addresses the various views that participants held about the community of theater students, with implications for self-concept based on symbolic interactionism. The third and final section will present the

perspectives of the participants regarding the contribution of various aspects of theater on self-concept as relevant to the foundational theories presented.

### Motivation for Engagement in Theater

This section will discuss the dynamic links between the constructs of motivation and self-concept, as they emerged through discussions with the participants. Although there is a body of research dedicated to the investigation of the impact of self-concept on motivation, the current study was designed to investigate the impact of various factors on self-concept. Therefore, the emergence of content in the interviews regarding the incentives for theater engagement presented an opportunity to explore the relationships between these constructs. Comments of the participants appeared to support the notion that their respective reasons for pursuing theater were significant and relevant to their self-concept.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) has investigated the characteristics of intrinsic and extrinsic goal contents, as well as the resulting effects on both types of motivation on constructs such as social development (Kasser, 2002b), and well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). Although the scope of self-determination theory extends beyond the context of the current study, the postulates regarding the impact of engagement in activity due to intrinsic and extrinsic factors seems relevant. Intrinsic motivation refers to engagement in an activity for the experience of the inherent qualities of the activity itself. Extrinsic motivation refers to pursuit of an activity for the sake of some separate outcome. In conventional thinking, it is “more adaptive to be intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated” (Graham & Weiner, 1996, p. 78). Additionally, engagement in activity for

intrinsic reasons has been linked with positive outcomes on the dimensions related to self-concept, such as well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995), self-esteem (Kasser, 2000b), and self-worth (Kasser, 2000a).

Although the current study did not set out to explore the motivations of college students for engagement in theater, the issue emerged in the interviews. Participants related reasons for participation in theater that appeared to fall broadly into the categories of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Within the context of additional information revealed throughout the interview process, the reasons behind their respective decisions to major in theater added a dimension of understanding regarding what they felt were significant and meaningful features of their experiences. Therefore, the perspectives of the participants regarding their reasons for their initial and ongoing involvement in theater are described in the following section. The section will conclude with an exploration of the potential links thus revealed between motivation and self-concept.

#### *Intrinsic Factors*

Although each of the participants identified or alluded to some extent of intrinsic incentive for theater engagement, the experience and understanding of intrinsic features varied widely. Larry described an attraction to the power of making an impact on an audience, while Kate identified theater as a vital avenue for self-expression. Both Larry and Kate resonated with the intrinsic capacity of theater to allow them to “become someone else.” Both of these participants, therefore, identified these intrinsic features as influences on their participation. However, while the remaining two participants identified motivating factors that appear to reflect primarily extrinsic characteristics, clues emerged regarding the potential appeal of unarticulated intrinsic factors on their

engagement as well. This section will discuss the various meanings that the participants attributed to the intrinsic qualities of theater involvement, noting the patterns of similarity and divergence.

Among the participants, Larry evidenced the most overt focus on intrinsic elements in his discussion. For example, he articulated his appreciation for theater as a venue for the transformation of words into avenues of meaning. For Larry, theater provided a sense of meaning through the transformation of words and the subsequent portrayal of themes through a scene or images on stage. As he articulated, “I love the fact that...you take...just words...and turn them into a scene or just an image and have that mean something to someone.”

Larry further reflected that the meaning thus formed represents a “really strong, really powerful” avenue for creating an emotional impact on the spectator. Recalling his own response to an episode of a favorite television show, Larry reflected on the “power” of theater to “change” and “affect” people. He explained that he aspires to achieve the ability to make this type of an impact, expressing the desire “ Just to be able to affect someone like that. And know that I could maybe do that.” Therefore, it seems that Larry is attracted to the intrinsic potential of theater to transform language into meanings that have the power to impact the viewer.

Larry was also engaged by the intrinsic potential of theater to provide a context where he can “be different things.” He characterized theater as “the one profession” that provides the opportunity to participate in “almost any type of profession,” “be different people,” and “express” oneself in “many ways.” Therefore, it emerged that the intrinsic qualities of theater that proved engaging for Larry included the potential for transforming

words to meaning through an acting scene, the “power” to affect an audience, and the ability to be someone else. In fact, Larry appeared to have embraced the intrinsic aspects of the theater venue, referring to theater as a “body part” that he could not “live without.”

Intrinsic qualities of theater appeared to serve as a motivating influence for Kate as well. Among the participants, she placed the most emphasis on theater engagement as an important avenue of self-expression. Her articulation of this benefit of theater engagement may, thus, lend support to the claims of the Consortium of National Arts Education Association (1994) and the College Board (1983) that identified self-expression as one of the positive outcomes of the arts.

Describing herself as “extremely shy” as a child, Kate identified theater as “the only way I could express myself.” Reminiscent of Larry’s appreciation of the ability to “be different things,” Kate reflected that theater provided her with a context for acting outside of her normal parameters through the portrayal of characters that she viewed as “against her type.” She explained that it was great “fun” to portray a character as “evil” or “sexy” or “exotic” “without any of the social repercussions.” It appears that, for Kate, theater offered an avenue for self-expression through the enactment of impulses and actions that she enjoyed but did not embrace as acceptable elements of her more inhibited persona. As she explained, “There’s this sort of confidence that comes from acting like this isn’t me, so I don’t have to own up to this.”

Therefore, the intrinsic qualities of theater that emerged as most essential for perpetuating Kate’s involvement were the ability to “be different things,” as well as the potent avenue for self-expression. In fact, for Kate, these meanings are linked, in that the ability to “be different things” appeared to empower her to express aspects of herself

without fear of “repercussions.” Therefore, intrinsic features appeared quite influential as motivators for her theater involvement.

While Kate and Larry both identified inherent aspects of theater that contributed to their valuing of and engagement in the activity, the remaining participants did not clearly articulate such a relationship. Although Ian did refer briefly to a desire to “make people think about their world,” he made no other overt comments indicative of intrinsic motivation. However, both Ian and John alluded to experiences in theater that may indicate an unarticulated or unconscious influence of inherent features of theater, as the following passages will describe.

While John did not identify any cogent rationale for his engagement in theater, he did recall that, following his first acting experience in first grade, he found that he “liked” it and “definitely wanted to do it again.” In the absence of any specific recollection of audience applause or accolades, one could assume that the activity may have been inherently pleasurable or fun for John. On the other hand, whether he recalls it or not, one can assume that his first grade appearance was supported by the adults in attendance through applause and positive comments on his performance. Therefore, although the influence of motivational quality on his subsequent engagement remains unclear, it seems possible that John’s experience of “liking” his first acting experience was, indeed, indicative of the influence of intrinsic factors.

Ian’s interview also offers a glimpse of a potentially unexamined inherent aspect of his engagement. Although his dialogue emphasized the extrinsic rewards, Ian also recalled an “odd, unexplainable draw to theater since I was like three.” The feeling appears to escape his understanding as he observes that he “could never possibly explain”

this interest. However, he does note that he felt that he “wanted to be a part of” the movies and TV shows that he was exposed to as a child. Therefore, as with John, one might assume that inherent qualities of acting and performance held an unarticulated appeal for him. Perhaps John and Ian each felt drawn to theater by intrinsic qualities that they were unable to articulate, while they nevertheless proved a powerful incentive. Conversely, it is possible that these participants were motivated to engage in theater primarily for extrinsic reasons.

In summary, although the experience of the intrinsic features of theater involvement was verbalized differently among participants, each apparently felt the influence of these factors. Larry and Kate were able to reflect on this art venue and identify aspects that were appealing to them, such as the ability to “be different things,” to impact an audience, and to express oneself. In the cases of Ian and John, the inherent aspects emerged as a desire to “do it again” or to “be a part of” a performance craft. While manifested differently, the impact of intrinsic motivation, therefore, arises as a consistent feature across the cases.

#### *Extrinsic Factors*

As with intrinsic incentives for theater engagement, patterns of similarity and divergence arose regarding participants’ experiences of the extrinsic incentives. The extrinsic rewards associated with theater appear to have much to do with the audience accolades regarding a performance. Not surprisingly, most of the participants indicated that they appreciated and enjoyed the audience recognition as evidenced by applause, laughter, and comments following the show. However, the degree of emphasis placed on audience response seemed to vary among them. In fact, John did not identify any

extrinsic incentives for his theater involvement, nor did he discuss his reactions to the audience response to any of his performances.

Among the other participants, each mentioned the positive feelings that resulted from audience approval. Other extrinsic factors were mentioned as well, including the experience of being “liked” due to acting, positive feedback received about a performance, and seeing one’s name posted on the cast list. The following section will discuss the various extrinsic factors of theater involvement articulated by the participants, as well as the patterns of similarity and difference that emerged. Additionally, career plans of the participants will be discussed as reflective of job acquisition as an extrinsic motivating feature of theater engagement.

Among the participants, Ian emerged as perhaps the most influenced by the extrinsic rewards of theater. Describing his sense of exclusion in his middle school and high school environments, Ian related that theater provided a context where he felt liked and could impress people. As he explained, “I definitely, I *definitely* got into theater because I wanted people to like me, and enjoy me, impress people and stuff, because I want to impress people and I want people to like me.” However, he seems to hold the view that the extrinsic rewards of theater represent a feeble incentive as the sole reason for engagement in the activity. As he explained, “that would be really empty and stupid.” Nonetheless, he admitted that he found that “the audience...loves me” and he “like(d) the attention.”

Ian was also the most introspective regarding his incentive for engagement in theater, offering his assessment of the relative value of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. While he acknowledged his attraction to the extrinsic experience of audience

appreciation, he evidenced a fair degree of insight as he reflected that the accolades represent a superficial level of interaction. He observed that he is “absolutely flattered” and “thoroughly grateful” for the attention that his performances receive, but countered that there is no real “relationship” represented in that type of exchange. Therefore, Ian concluded that the audience attention and his change in status among his peers are best viewed as a “fringe benefit.” However, his rhetoric did not necessarily support this claim. While he did mention briefly that theater allows him the opportunity to “make people take a closer look at their world,” the majority of his discussion continued to emphasize his engagement for the extrinsic rewards.

Kate was attuned to the audience reaction as well, as revealed in her discussions. As she noted, the reaction to her performance in one production “did boost my ego a little.” In addition to positive audience reactions for her performance, Kate expressed her pleased reaction to comments on her appearance. As she recalled, “I got a lot of compliments on my performance, but a lot of guys...they’re like, Kate, so, like, wow, you look really good.” She reflected that it was also “nice to hear professors come up and say you do really good work.” Although she exhibits a similar value for positive feedback as articulated by Larry and Ian, she was the only participant to identify feedback regarding her appearance as reinforcing. Therefore, she exemplifies an added dimension of extrinsic reinforcement via positive feedback focused on her physical appearance.

Kate identified an additional extrinsic incentive for her involvement that was not related to audience acclaim. For her, one of the most compelling aspects of theater engagement is the sense of accomplishment that she feels when she attains a part in a play. As she reflected, “Looking at the callboard and seeing your name on the list.

There's that sense of accomplishment and excitement...I think that's the most fabulous feeling in theater." Although she first recounted this reaction to her casting as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* in fourth grade, the drive for this affirmation was apparently perpetuated throughout her college experience. As she recounted, her casting in a lead role in a main-stage production during her senior year also represented a significant achievement for her. As she recounted, "I kind of wanted to show...I can do this. I'm good at this...it did kind of prove something to me." Therefore, it seems that Kate's involvement in theater was primarily reinforced by extrinsic incentives, including audience acclaim and a feeling of personal accomplishment.

Although Larry emphasized the intrinsic rewards of theater, as noted in the previous section, he also identified an attachment to the extrinsic experience of audience appreciation. He acknowledged a "craving for attention" that is satisfied when he is "up there" on stage. In addition, he explained that he is reinforced by positive feedback from his family and from the director. Noting that he wanted to "do his best" on the night that his family was in attendance at a play, he explained that "It was nice to hear" that "they are proud" of him. However, his family's acknowledgment was secondary to that of his director in importance to Larry. As he explained, "besides the fact that John (director) giving you a positive note and saying how proud he is of you," his family's response was "probably the best." Therefore, it seems that he is similar to Ian and Kate in that he identifies a value placed on some extrinsic reinforcers as well as the intrinsic rewards noted earlier.

An additional, albeit implied, extrinsic feature associated with majoring in theater in college is the acquisition of a job in the field following graduation. Of the four

participants, all but Kate related professional goals to work in the field of theater. As noted previously, Kate's career goal was to teach in high school. She related that she majored in theater in order to perpetuate the experience of a social network that she found in high school. Although she mentioned that she would like to become involved in the theater program in the high school in which she eventually became employed, it appears that obtaining a job in theater was not an extrinsic factor motivating her involvement.

However, each of the other three participants revealed a desire to pursue theater as a vocation, indicating a value placed on that extrinsic reward. Two of the three also expressed the concern that it was difficult to gain steady employment in the field of theater. As a result, it appears that the goal of obtaining a job itself does not represent a sufficient incentive for pursuit of a theater major since students would ostensibly find it easier to obtain a job in another field. Instead, one might assume that theater offers intrinsic rewards that add to its attractiveness as a career option in spite of the challenges inherent in obtaining employment in this field. However, as noted, the current study was not designed to conduct a detailed exploration of the motivations of college students to pursue theater as a major. Instead, it was found that the incentives driving theater engagement arose as an unexpected theme that was explored in only a peripheral fashion. Nonetheless, this analysis of the patterns of intrinsic and extrinsic incentives for involvement in theater renders some potential conclusions relative to self-concept.

It appears that both extrinsic and intrinsic factors contributed variously to the incentives of the participants to engage in and remain engaged in theater. Intrinsic features of theater that were emphasized included the ability to "make meaning" from words to affect an audience, the ability to "be someone else," and opportunities for self-

expression. An additional intrinsic feature not explicated, but suggested, included the experience of enjoyment of acting. External features of theater engagement identified by the participants included feedback from audience and others, the experience of being “liked” by peers, the accomplishment of seeing one’s name on the cast list, and the potential for a career in theater following graduation.

Aside from Ian, participants did not describe perceptions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for engaging in theater. Instead, Larry and Kate identified the factors that influenced their involvement, without reflecting on the relative merits of intrinsic and extrinsic incentives for engagement in this art. As noted, the issue did not arise in discussions with John. While no research was found that explored the relative influence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in this field, related research in the field of motivation suggests the potential for a dynamic link with self-concept.

Specifically, evidence within the field of self-determination theory indicates that pursuit of an activity for intrinsic or extrinsic reasons is linked with positive outcomes in well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995), self-esteem (Kasser, 2000b) and self-worth (Kasser, 2000a). Additionally, engagement in activity for intrinsic reasons is thought to be “more adaptive” (Graham & Weiner, 1996, p. 78). Therefore, research in the related domains of well-being, self-esteem, and self-worth might suggest that engaging in an activity such as theater for intrinsic reasons would result in a more positive impact on self-concept.

It seems that the realm of performance presents the opportunity for pursuit of extrinsic rewards that are somewhat unique among activities. Sports occupations may represent the closest corollary, with the appreciation of spectators as an extrinsic feature.

However, research in the field of self-determination theory has primarily examined financial extrinsic incentives to the exclusion of other extrinsic motivators (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Srivastava, Locke, & Bartol, 2001). It seems that similar investigations of the outcomes of engagement in activities for spectator or audience acclaim would add to the understanding of the potential relationship between motivation and self-concept.

In the current study, however, participants did not express the perception of a link between motivations for theater involvement and self-concept. Instead, there are simply hints of the association to be found in the respective interviews. However, participants were clearly able to engage in discussion regarding the various contributions to their involvement, suggesting that further exploration of the topic in more depth would be fruitful. In the absence of other research regarding motivation and self-concept in the context of theater, this area of study seems to constitute a worthy avenue of future investigation. It is suggested that research based on the notions of self-determination theory could provide a foundation for the further exploration of the impact of motivation on self-concept as related to theater engagement.

#### Social Features of Theater Engagement

A dominant theme that emerged across all cases was the experience of theater as an important social community, both in high school and in college. Each of the four participants initiated discussion about this aspect of the experience of theater. Additionally, the social features of theater assumed a prominent role in the discussions, with participants emphasizing the meanings ascribed to the social support engendered by the community.

The significance of this attribution for the current study finds its roots in theories regarding the social influences on self-concept development. The influence of the social setting on the self was perhaps first suggested by James (1890) with his identification of the social-self constituent and the resulting manifestation of various social selves in response to perceived environmental demands.

It was the contributions of symbolic interactionists such as Baldwin (1906), Cooley (1902), and Mead (1934) that provided the foundation for future considerations of the reciprocal interaction between society and self. Accordingly, the self was presented as a social construction, arising from the views that one garners about the self through social interaction (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Baldwin, 1906). Therefore, one's perceptions of others' views of oneself (Cooley, 1902), insights gained through role-playing (Mead, 1934), and the recognition of traits in others prior to their internalization (Baldwin, 1906) are all thought to contribute to the development of the construction of the self.

The significance of the social environment was also emphasized by Erikson (1964) and subsequent proponents of identity development theory (Marcia, 1980). These theorists also implicate an essential role of the environment with respect to the development of identity of individuals. In fact, identity is conceptualized as a "social-psychological construct that reflects social influences through imitation and identification processes and active self-construction in the creation of what is important to the self and others." (Adams & Marshall, 1996, p. 433) As a result, contemporary notions of self-concept accept the premise, as noted by Damon (1983), that "The individual can only construct the self in the context of the relations with others" (p. 5).

Specific to the current study, such theories have identified the experience of *belongingness* and *connectness* as central features of the function of socialization (Adams & Marshall, 1996). While acknowledging the importance of establishing individuation, it is noted that the complementary status of integration within the social setting is reliant on the sense of mattering or feeling significant (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Therefore, the individual is thought to achieve “psychological and social well-being through feelings that the self is significant or matters.” (Adams & Marshall, 1996, p. 430) Additionally, it has been suggested that social environment mediates self-esteem via the experience of feeling significant to others (Rosenberg, 1985).

Therefore, the emergence of the theme of the significance of the social network provides support to the theories presented. Thus, the perspectives of the participants regarding the social environment and the meanings evoked therein, have an important role to play in the understanding of the development of self-concept in this setting. Accordingly, the following section will present the views of the participants regarding the various aspects of the social setting and the relative meanings attributed to them.

#### *The Theater Community*

Each of the participants identified the feeling of belonging within a community as an essential aspect of the meaning attributed to engagement in theater. While they each identified the beginnings of this experience prior to college, they all articulated the continuation of the importance of a sense of belonging as a central feature of their experience in college as well. Various dimensions of the social community were presented across the cases, as participants articulated the meaning attributed to different aspects of the experience. It was observed that the participants invariably described the

social context in positive terms, crediting the social network with their respective feelings of acceptance and confidence. However, undercurrents of alienation and mistrust arose within the discussions as well, indicating the potential for aspects of the social setting to provide an undermining influence on one's sense of belonging. Observations regarding the positive and the negative impact of the social context will, therefore, be described in the following sections.

As noted, all four participants described the experience of a theater community that emerged initially in their experiences in middle school or high school. Although their terminology differed, each of the participants identified a sense of a cohesive social group comprised of theater students in their respective high schools. For each of them, the community described appeared to offer a significant experience of socialization and support.

For Ian, the close-knit community that existed in his middle school and high school outside of theater left him feeling initially excluded. As he recounted, he was not perceived as "cool" and there was "no possible way" that he could "get cool" in that environment. As a result, he recalled that his feeling of isolation led him to the point where he was "this close to just jumping off a bridge and slitting my wrist at the same time." However, he related that it was within the "artist community" that he finally found his "niche." Among this social group that "supported" him as "opposed to just tearing me (him) down" Ian reflected that he was able to "find himself." Therefore, it seems as if the social network of the theater community provided an important avenue of support for Ian.

Kate also related her first experience of the community aspect of theater to her involvement in middle school. Although she was involved in theater activities beginning

in elementary school, the social support of her theater peers emerged as increasingly significant as she attended middle and high school. As she related, she found it “easy” to form friendships in the “social network” of theater. She explained that the amount of shared time together facilitated the formation of friendships, noting, “We were always involved together and we had this sort of group and this common hobby, so it was very easy to form a friendship through that... It was very easy to have sort of your social network through theater.” In fact, for Kate, the “ease” of forming friendships through theater led to her continuation in theater at the college level primarily as an avenue for perpetuating her social support. Therefore, the social support network of theater constituted Kate’s primary incentive for engagement in college.

John also identified a social support network within the group of theater students in his high school. As he recalled, “We were a really tight group of people in high school theater and we still did everything together all the time because that’s all we did. So, anybody I know from high school, I met through theater too.”

The importance of this social support network was revealed as John discussed his social transition from middle school to high school. John recalled that he was “the man” in middle school, due to the respect he gained from peers when he pulled various pranks and made jokes in class. However, he related that his social status unexpectedly dissolved as he entered high school. As he recalled, “Me and my three other dorky friends in high school, we were like the coolest kinds in class in middle school. I don’t know what happened.” As a result, he explained that he felt a certain amount of “culture shock” on entering high school.

John's experience echoes findings in the research regarding self-concept effects of the transition to high school. Research has indicated that adolescents experience a negative impact on self-esteem on this transition (Wigfield, Eccles, MacIver, Reuman, Midgley, 1991). Specifically, it was found that the social-ability perceptions declined following the transition, and did not regain their former level by the end of the transition year (Wigfield et al., 1991) Other research has suggested that prior levels of self-confidence are never regained following the transition (Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Simmons et al., 1973). Therefore, John's subsequent experience of socialization within the theater student group in his school may have represented an important factor influencing his future self-concept.

John explained that he became integrated with the group of theater students in his high school and came to identify them as his peer group. As a result, he related that, although he was not included in the group of "popular" or "cool" kids, he was "satisfied" with the friends that he made through theater. Although they were "definitely the geeks" in his high school, John noted that they shared values that were counter to the attachment to "certain clothes" and stuff that they viewed as "trivial and unimportant." He did acknowledge that there were times when he felt "jealous" of the "popular" people who "had the girlfriends," but that, "for the most part" he "felt happy with who" he was in high school. As he stated, "I think we all knew we were geeks. But, like, we were happy there."

It seems, therefore, that John's inclusion in the social community established among the "theater geeks" was sufficient to balance his disappointment regarding the loss of the social status he enjoyed in middle school. His characterization of his new social

network as “theater geeks” who adopted values that seemed counter to the “popular” crowd, brings to mind a comment by Adams and Marshall (1996). They note that the differentiation represented by adoption of a level of “uniqueness” may lead individuals to seek community with other *marginalized* persons, thus meeting their need for communion. John’s comments appear to indicate that he found a sense of *communion* among the *marginalized* clique of theater students within his high school.

Each of the prior examples appears to provide support for the notion that theater provided an avenue of connection for these participants in high school. However, the meanings ascribed to the experience of communion varied somewhat among them. As noted, Ian’s theater friends provided a welcome niche and a respite from the desperation that arose from his feelings of alienation. Kate found an “easy” avenue for making friends despite her “extreme shyness,” and John transition into high school was facilitated by his assimilation into the theater “geek” community.

Perpetuating their experiences noted in middle school and high school, all of the participants expressed a perception of a social network within the theater department in college. Three of the participants characterized the group of individuals involved in theater in college as a “community.” Two of the four likened the social context to a “family.” One student did not use the term community or family to characterize the theater department, but described the department as “close-knit,” apparently implying a sense of community. Although the terms that they used to describe the social context varied to some extent, the overall theme emerged of a group with a high degree of connectedness and social support. Additionally, the social network of peers seemed important to each, although the extent of the significance, once again, varied per their

comments. While the participants seemed to be primarily referring to their fellow student theater majors in this characterization, several of them indicated that faculty were included in the “family” as well. The relative experiences of the participants regarding this community and the meanings attributed by them will now be discussed.

For Larry, the social context of the theater department appeared to contribute significantly to his sense of belonging and enjoyment of his experience in college. He described the theater department as a “family” and noted that his college experience is “definitely more fun” as a result of that closeness. As Larry stated, “when you’re in a theater program like the theater program here, it’s like you kind of have a family too...it’s like a family atmosphere and it’s made college definitely more fun.”

For Kate, the social context of the theater department represented an “easy” avenue for establishing friendships, perpetuating her experience of the social safety net found in theater in her high school. As she reflected, “you walk into college and you are already in a sorority.” Ian likened the community to a fraternity or sorority as well, although he explained that he hopes that the theater students “aren’t as exclusive about it.” In fact, several of the participants characterized the dynamics of the theater department in contrast to other student groups on campus. Their view that the theater department represents a unique level of relatedness is exemplified by Larry’s claim that “I think the theater program here is the only major where everyone will go out and hang out afterward or something. Like all the majors will go and all do something afterwards or we’ll hang out.” Ian contributed his own colorful assessment of the distinctive dynamic, exclaiming, “college must suck for other people.”

In fact, for Ian, theater has served as the primary avenue for his social connections in college, as he reflected that “nearly all the friends” that he has made at college have “definitely been through theater.” As a result, he characterized the theater community as a “blessing” and equated his experience in theater with “friendship and community.” He revealed the extent of his reliance on the structure of this community with the query, “How do people get to be friends outside of this? Like, how does anybody get to make friends from their major?”

Although John described the theater department as “a very close place,” his comments about the social aspect of his theater involvement in college were fairly brief. The extent of his commentary may or may not reflect less value placed on the social aspect. Although the brevity of his commentary may indicate less value placed on the social network as compared to other elements of his theater experience, it could be that the social network represented a constant and pervasive influence that was not readily apparent to him. Additionally, it is noted that interviews with John spanned the time through his graduation and into the summer following. His minimization of the social connections could also represent a process of separation as he transitions to his move into a job in another state.

#### *Factors Influencing Community Culture*

Several circumstances appear to contribute to the characterization of theater as community in the view of the participants. All of them acknowledged that the nature of the demands on students in the program necessitates a large amount of time spent together within and outside the classroom. When not participating as actors in a production, students are required to engage in crew work such as lighting or stage crew

assignments. Rehearsals typically occur nightly for weeks prior to the production. A typical rehearsal night begins at 6:00 p.m. and does not end until 10:00 p.m. or 11:00 p.m. The production run often spans one or more weekends.

As a result, theater students find that they spend a great deal of evening and weekend time in the theater department engaged in some element of a production. As Kate related, “you’re working on shows together, so then you’re in class together, and you’re together until 11:00 at night.” The multiple avenues of interaction appear to contribute to the cohesion experienced among the students as related by Ian, who explained, “working with them, you get closer to everyone.” Larry echoed this sentiment, remarking, “It’s made college definitely more fun because I get to work with people and then I get to hang out with them.”

As well as shared time together in the structure of the theater activities, several participants pointed out that the theater majors “hang out” together socially. As John explains, “they all hang out all the time and they all party.” Perhaps because of the extensive contact that they share in the context of theater activities, some students remarked that their socialization took place almost exclusively among theater peers. As Ian observes, “most of us have no social life beyond this.”

In addition to the sheer amount of time spent together, participants noted that theater majors often seem to share similar interests and values, further facilitating the connections among them. As Larry related, “We’ll go see movies or talk about different movies and like, just stuff around the area we’re all interested in.” In fact, Ian related his concern that students outside of theater would not understand him or accept him due to the difference in interests. As he explained:

I mean, I certainly hold conversations with people about other stuff. But, you know, it's the primary thing in my life and in a lot of ways, I think like, if there's not some kind of a something that I can connect to other people that I'm talking to about it, you alienate them a little bit. There's definitely that feeling that I don't want to talk to that girl. She does not understand anything about music or theater or . . . It's going to be weird . . . no one's going to understand me. I'm a freaking theater artist and no one understands that because they're all business majors or something like that.

Larry also voiced concern about the disparity of interests as a factor in his relationships with non-theater friends. By way of example, he recalled an incident where he and a non-theater friend were discussing a movie. Larry felt that the movie was "crap" and was surprised when his friend praised the movie. Although it might be expected that differences of opinion regarding movies exist even among theater majors, Larry viewed this episode as reinforcement of his notion that his theater friends "understand more" about the things that interest him. Although it seems that shared interests help to foster cohesion with the group of theater majors, the potential for exclusion appears to exist also. The distinctiveness, attributed by some participants to their peer group, could indicate the potential for exclusion and alienation from the larger group of students outside of their major. Therefore, while the positive outcomes of similar interests were stressed, the potential for an ostracizing effect appear to exist as well.

An additional factor contributing to the unique level of relationships that the participants described among their theater peers was the quality of time spent together. Several participants remarked that the context of theater provided a venue for interactions that they perceived as "deeper" or more authentic. Kate related the enhanced level of relatedness to the necessity of forming the trust needed to "share" oneself in the process of creating a performance. As she described:

In theater, it's such a communal thing. In some ways you have to share yourself. Also, when you get to the point where not only are you in the same classes with the same people over and over again working together, you have to create a community of trust and knowing, just for performance purposes, someone can reveal themselves in performance, or reveal their character in performance, and cry and do all that stuff and it's okay. You have to have this area of trust...

The "community of trust" thus formed represents a "very safe" group for Kate. She experienced the level of conversation as more "real," stating, "it's . . . a place where I can pick up and come in and have real conversations with people much more quickly than you can with anyone else." This context of authenticity and safety contributes to an environment where Kate feels that she can "belong." As she described, the theater department is, for her, "a place I can go where I definitely belong. Where I've belonged from day one."

Ian attributed the level of relatedness, in part, to the experience of "seeing" his peers at their various "highs" and "lows." As he explained: "You've seen them all and they're at their acting peak and their personal peak and at their personal low and their acting low. You know, you've been around them so much and you have such a social life that surrounds them so much that you know the people." As a result, he noted that the quality of the friendships formed is much "deeper" in theater.

Ian also reflected that he finds the theater department to be a "caring" place. He recalled conversations with non-theater students who remarked on the unique level of relatedness in the theater department, in part as a reflection of the informal nature of the interactions with faculty. As Ian observed:

Everyone talks about how much more caring it is in the theater department than other departments on campus...you're in an entire place where the teachers really care about you and want to see you succeed...and you're there with students who are just generally cool and supportive. I've talked to a lot of disillusioned, disillusioned people since I've been here. People who have come to our

department and been like, I don't understand this. My teachers don't even know my name and you're all like best friends with your teachers. What's going on?

Kate also characterized the faculty as "caring," and indicated that it was important to her that faculty cared about her "personally." She recalled that she first observed the unique level of interaction between faculty and students when she found that the norm was to call professors by their first names, unlike other departments on campus. Kate also noted that faculty will "go out" to social events with students, which is unlikely to occur in other departments. Additionally, she characterized the faculty as supportive in that they are open to her coming to talk to them outside of class time. As she explained:

It's a place where I know that I can talk to professors because they care about me personally. Not just about me in their class or me as a student. They care about me personally. And I have done that. I've gone and talked to professors about what's going on in my life, and you know, just had chats...we go out together.

For Kate, the caring support of the theater faculty reached a heightened level of significance when she was hospitalized for a suicide attempt. She related that she attended her theater class the morning after her release from the hospital and that she spoke openly about the event to the professor. As she recounted, "I completely opened up to her and I told her exactly why and exactly what was going on, and she understood...She was very helpful and very understanding. And she opened up to me about things in her life."

Larry also commented on the relationships between faculty and students, including the faculty in his characterization of the "family" of the theater department. As he explained, "You feel like you can come to your teachers outside of them being your teachers." In fact, he related, "They can be your friends." However, Larry appeared to retain some ambivalence concerning his trust of faculty, as evidenced by his comments

regarding his perception of racial insensitivity in play selection and casting. These issues will be considered in a later section.

In summary, participants emphasized a level of relatedness that they experienced within the theater department. Factors that appeared to influence this dynamic included the amount of time spent together in structured and extracurricular activities, shared interests, a deeper level of interacting due to the context, and caring relationships with faculty. As a result of these factors, participants indicated a level of belonging that they characterized in positive terms.

However, comments by the participants also appeared to indicate negative connotations of such a community on the social development of individuals in this context. Specifically, it appears that the factors that serve to facilitate cohesion within the theater department also function to reinforce a sense of uniqueness and separation from the larger student community. Participants repeatedly noted that the relationships within the theater community were closer than those without, both with faculty and peers. In fact, Ian even noted that he would not know how to approach making friends outside of that context. Therefore, although the participants experienced the community culture of the theater department as supportive, it is possible that it undermines adaptive socialization in the broader context.

#### *Experiences of Exclusion*

Although the community climate of the theater department was generally presented in positive terms, there were indications of exclusion occurring at times within the community as well. For some students, achieving integration into the community as freshmen was not necessarily a seamless process. Larry recalled that it was difficult to

feel “soaked in” as a freshman, explaining, “Because you don’t even know anyone and nobody knows you so even if someone’s like, hey do you want to come to a party. You’re like, I don’t even know you. Even though you might think it’s the nice thing to do, it’s like I still don’t know you.” Apparently the flexible social boundaries within the department constituted a transition to which Larry needed to adjust in order to feel integrated.

Although John did not specifically discuss the process of becoming integrated into the theater community as a freshman, he did allude to some difficulty feeling accepted when he talked about the first impression that he made here at Metropolitan University. He related the view that he does not make a good first impression at times, explaining “I’ve heard so many people say to me that they just thought I was useless or stupid or whatever when they first met me.” As a result, he recalled several examples where he was “insulted” by the treatment he received from several directors and fellow students when he first arrived at Metropolitan University. Therefore, it seems that the close-knit community of which he was later a part, was not initially perceived as very welcoming.

Ian characterized inclusion in the community as a “process” that evolves as students progress through the program. He recalled that his freshman year was “kind of hard because there’s that kind of that weirdness like I’m intruding or start inserting myself into a place where I’m not wanted.” As a result, he explained that he and his friends in theater make it a point to welcome freshmen and “try to be as inviting, definitely as inviting as we can.” Recalling his initial discomfort, he appears to be attempting to facilitate a more comfortable transition for students new to the program.

Larry described the assumption of a similar role as he gained some seniority in the program, noting that he found that he evolved into a “mentor” for new students. In fact, the emergence of this role seems to have granted him a level of self-importance that contributed positively to his self-concept. As he reflected:

Because I’m a person who’s been here for a while . . . it was so easy for me to answer questions too because I could just tell them things . . . but it was just weird to have them ask me. It’s cool because you can help someone and offer some advice . . . That’s good. That’s always fun to do. Especially to help someone. You can see that you’re helping and that’s cool.

It seems therefore, that the community proved a bit difficult to infiltrate initially for some of the participants. However, once integrated into the social network, these students appeared to accept the transition as an element of the process of social integration. In turn, the context then provided for the emergence of social roles of greeter and mentor that some participants found to be rewarding contributions to their self-concept.

A dimension of the community that emerged in the interviews was the formation of sub-groups within the context of a production. Although the entire theater department was typically characterized as a “family” or a “community,” participants indicated that the cast of a play often functioned as a “mini-family” within the larger group. Inclusion in this social sub-group was noted to foster feelings of cohesion and belonging among the cast, as reflected in Larry’s experience in the play, *Our Town*. His reflections are presented here as an example of this phenomenon.

Larry related that, for him, “the cast was like the best part of the show.” He recalled that they shared fun activities in rehearsal and prior to the play, and that they “had parties afterward.” Larry characterized the group as a “dream cast to work with” and

explains that, “everything was like friends, we would get together and like just hang out and each person had an important part.” In the context of feelings of exclusion that are described later in this paper, the high level of cohesion and belonging that he felt within this group constituted a significant experience for him. He indicated the value that he placed on efforts to promote inclusion, as he reflects, “I don’t think anyone really felt left out and if somehow we did, we would bring them in and stuff so it was good.”

Conversely, not being cast in a production at any given time could result in feelings of being left out. Ian noted that, even though he was participating as a member of the lighting crew, he felt left out of the production of a play as he observed his closest friends rehearsing and getting closer through the shared experience of that play. He appeared to experience significant feelings of alienation as a result, reflected as he recalled:

When I was working lighting board for *Servant* . . . it was just depressing. Because the show was just f---ing amazing. And it was, the cast was made up of like every single one of my really good friends and people that I just genuinely have fun with . . . And that pervading sense of you’re not really a part of this was really evident to me because the cast had this entire bond that was, while you’re their friends, you’re not an immediate part of that cast. And right now, in the middle of that show, that cast is a family. A f---ing tight knit unit, period. And it’s not a matter of them not liking you. It’s a matter of they’re tight. They’ve been through nine weeks of rehearsal together. They’re inseparable at this point. Like, and it’s just . . . it was sad to me to be watching that much amazing work with that many of your close friends and knowing that you were not a part of it at all. And that was just depressing.

Perhaps the most significant experience of alienation from the community was that experienced by Larry. Although Larry was enthusiastic in his endorsement of the community climate of the theater department, he also described a degree of exclusion due to his status as a racial minority. In particular, he identified a disparity in the number of casting opportunities available to minorities. As he described, “Being a minority, not only

in the college, but in the theater department, I find that...I don't think it's as easy for me to get a part, certain part, or certain things as other people."

He attributed the lack of casting opportunities, in part, to the faculty selection of the plays to be performed. As he explained, "I've noticed it because of the kind of plays that were picked and all I could think was, there's no way I could have a part in it because it would just look weird or odd or something." Although Larry maintained that he was "not like mad about it" he did acknowledge his "wish that they would try to make it more diverse and cast based on talent, instead of just looks."

In addition, evidence of his mistrust of the faculty arose in his reflections about the possible outcome of any efforts that he might make to bring the disparity to their attention. He related his perception that bringing the issue to the attention of faculty might be perceived as a slight, resulting in a conspiracy among faculty not to cast him. As he described, "if you do one of them wrong, it might affect you later." Although Larry was cast in a major role in a traditionally "white" play, he explained that the incident did not alleviate his concerns about the availability of future roles. Instead, he attributed his casting to the singular approach of the retired faculty member who cast and directed the play. As he related, "Then I was thinking, this is like, maybe the reason I got this is because of who John is...and how he's not a teacher, he just came back to do this show. And like, after this, I probably still won't get cast."

In addition to the experiences of exclusion from casting opportunities, Larry related several incidents where he felt hurt by racial stereotypes that arose in comments among his theater peers. However, while acknowledging these incidents as hurtful, Larry appears to maintain his view of the theater department as a supportive family. Perhaps he

simply accepts a certain level of racial insensitivity as a type of social “baseline.” Or perhaps the inclusion that he feels within the theater department still compares favorably to other experiences in social contexts. At any rate, Larry continues to extol the virtues of the “family,” while he alludes to a degree of unexpressed frustration when recounting the oversights he has experienced.

### *Outside Relationships*

Although the participants indicated that many of their friendships evolved from the theater community, several also remarked that they make it a point to establish and retain friendships outside of theater. Such efforts may be reflective of the ability to foster connections with the broader social community and may be viewed as an adaptive step toward a stable self-concept across social contexts. Their perspectives regarding friendships outside of theater are presented here, as indicative of the meaning attached to those relationships.

Participants observed that they continued to seek and maintain friendships outside of theater. Kate noted that, while she initially relied heavily on the safety net of theater to form friends, she found by graduation that she had just as many friends outside of theater, noted that, “about half of my friends are theater people and half aren’t.” Ian commented that he “still keeps up with” his other friends also. As he explained, “We still have things to connect with. I’m not so immersed in my life that I, you know, can’t relate to anybody about anything except theater.”

John also related that it is important to him to maintain friendships outside of the theater department. He noted that, although he has a “lot of close friends” in theater, he also has a group of friends that are not in theater. However, he pointed out that they are

either acquaintances through his second major in film or people he met through students who are in theater. For John, it is “nice” to maintain these outside friendships in order to have something else to talk about. As he said, “And it’s really nice, because when you’re in the theater department, like, everyone talks theater. Like, since we’re like stuck around it all the time, like since we’re always stuck in that building, like, it’s just what there is to talk about in our conversations when there’s nothing else to talk about. And you sort of reach the point where you’re like, man, I’m tired of talking about this.”

It seems that, while the social connections formed within the theater department constitute the most significant community for the participants, other friendships remain important as well. In fact, several participants indicated that they make a specific effort to foster other friendships. Those efforts appear to reflect the desire to associate with friends with a broad range of interests, as well as a general desire to achieve a balance between theater and non-theater friendships. As noted, the ability to form friendships outside of the theater context is viewed as an adaptive step toward establishing autonomy balanced with communion, in the developmental process of identity formation (Adams & Marshall, 1996).

In conclusion, participants indicated that the social network of theater was a significant aspect of their experience in college. While they relied on it to varying degrees, each found that many of their friendships arose in the context of theater. In addition to the amount of shared time together, participants noted that theater students shared interests and were able to engage in a deeper level of relating in the context of theater.

Although the community is experienced as inclusive by these individuals, there was the acknowledgment of various levels of exclusion within the social context. While the experience of exclusion by freshman or by those not cast in a particular play may be viewed as temporary and relatively insignificant, Larry's experience of racial insensitivity and disparity of casting options is more troubling. Exclusion based on race may be indicative of a more pervasive, albeit subtle, undercurrent of an attitude of exclusion based on perceived differences. In contexts where perceived differences, such as race, are viewed as divisive, other divisive attributes may reside unexamined. However, it remains that, even though participants revealed experiences of varying levels of exclusion from the community, the overriding theme of a supportive social network remained the dominant perception among them.

Therefore, it seems that the elements of shared time together, shared interests, opportunities for authentic exchanges, and the perception of caring faculty coalesce to create an environment that is viewed as fun and supportive. As such, the social context assumed a high degree of significance for the participants when regarding their day-to-day experience of theater and the comfort level and enjoyment that was associated with the major. Although the participants did not articulate an awareness of the contributions of such a context to their developing self-concept, the theories invoked at the outset of this section provide for such an assumption. Accordingly, the assertion of Erikson While the contributions of the community to self-concept development may or may not be evident to the participants, the context exists as a pervasive and significant influence.

## Theater Engagement and Self-Concept

The central issue of focus in this study was the relationship between participation in theater and the development of self-concept. To that end, data were collected via interviews that covered a range of topics. From those aspects of the discussions, inferences and connections could be drawn regarding the impact of various experiences in theater on the self-concept of the participants. However, each participant was also asked to describe his or her self-concept and to articulate the extent to which he or she believed that self-concept was or was not influenced by theater involvement in college. This section will describe the key ideas, sub-types, and sub-themes that emerged during interviews that relate to these issues, and attempt to reveal the patterns that emerged.

### *Participant Descriptions of Self-Concept*

Each of the participants used trait adjectives to describe their respective self-concepts. Traits identified included “quirky,” “introspective,” “average,” “caring,” “intelligent,” “perfectionist,” “dedicated,” “passionate,” “straightforward,” “procrastinator,” and “lazy.” In addition to listing traits, several participants exemplified the ability to integrate the trait attributions into a cognitive self reflective of higher levels of differentiation (Harter, 1999). Accordingly, participants related qualities of self in relation to various contexts, such as the characterization that one is “not afraid to try things,” “does not give up,” is “not the best student,” or is “pleased with myself.” Three of the participants identified only positive attributes when describing their self-concepts. However, Larry identified only attributes that might be perceived as negative, such as “procrastinator” and “lazy.” Although he noted that his self-concept was “pretty good,”

especially, as he explained “coming off this play,” the question apparently evoked his assessment of areas in which he felt that he should improve.

It is interesting to note that Larry’s assessment of his self-concept was framed in terms of his experience “coming off this play.” Although he did not expand on this comment, it appears to indicate a relation between “pretty good” self-concept and his performance in his first major production in college. His characterization of his self-concept as an outcome of that experience suggests a relations between his self-evaluation in the domain of acting with his overall global self-concept (Harter, 1990). Larry’s interpretation of the relations of his play performance to his self-concept may also indicate support for the notion of Vispoel (1995), suggesting that artistic self-concept exists as a dimension of global self-concept.

Larry continued his critique of aspects of his self-concept, noting that the ability to “change” something that he “did not totally like” about himself is crucial to his self-concept. He then indicated that there are several qualities that he has not felt empowered to change. As he explained, “. . .if I know there is something I can change about myself to make it even better or make it to a way where I’m happy with what I’m doing, then good. But if I can’t change it, then I guess you don’t feel pleased.” In his case, he appears less than pleased about his inability to make changes in several of his traits. As he explains: “. . . if I could actually get past the procrastination and laziness and actually become a better student, that would be something that, one of the things that I could always have to change.”

Although he did not employ positive trait adjectives, Larry identified aspects of his attitude and his goals that he framed positively as elements of his self-concept.

Observing that he has “never really been not pleased with myself,” he related this to his “positive” outlook. He explained that he “has always been positive” and is “always . . . working to better everything.” As a result, he noted that his self-concept is positive and “probably always will be,” because he tries to “do things that are good” and that are going to be personally “beneficial.” In addition, Larry appears to value his assessment of the choices that he makes, incorporating a positive assessment into his self-concept. As he stated, “I never make bad choices, so I have pretty good self-concept.”

John’s description of his self-concept also included a dimension that was not noted by the other participants. Although he defined self-concept, as “how you perceive yourself,” he began his description of his self-concept with the observation that he does not make a good first impression and is sometimes viewed as “a dork” or “lazy” initially by others. The traits that he identified as he continued his description included “very dedicated, very passionate,” and “straightforward.” However, he quickly shifted focus back to the persona he portrays, noting, “But, I don’t think I come off that way.” John seemed to indicate a disparity between his sense of his self-concept and his view of the self that others perceive. In this way, his case appears to offer a contradiction to the view of self-concept as an internalized version of social evaluations (Cooley, 1902). Perhaps the disparity between internalized traits and the perceived opinions of others also serves to illustrate the complexity of relations among self-constructs as noted by Harter (1999).

A dimension of self-concept that arose in discussions with Ian was the view of different selves that emerge in different contexts. As he explained, “There’s definitely a range of Ians that I show to the world.” With this characterization, Ian appeared to exemplify the phenomenon posited by Mead (1934), as he reiterated the construct of the

multiplicity of selves first suggested by James (1890). Mead's assertion that "we divide ourselves up in all sorts of different selves with reference to our acquaintances" (1934, p. 142) is thus quite supported in Ian's experience.

Consistent with symbolic interactionist (Baldwin, 1906; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) premises, Ian related that these different personas are largely a reflection of the level of comfort that he feels in a given situation as well as a result of his desire to present a pleasing persona in social settings. On further reflection, he minimized the distinct nature of the various Ians, observing: "It's not necessarily me creating a different self per se. It's more of me showing or not showing or accentuating certain parts of myself." The integration of selves thus articulated is consistent with the developmental process espoused by Harter (1990, 1999). She expanded on the notion of integration of self as introduced by Mead (1934), describing the mature self as an adaptive entity able to meet the demands of various social contexts. Ian appeared to exemplify nicely the transition to integration, as he initially described himself as different selves, while revising this notion on further reflection to portray the selves as dimensions of the central self.

Ian concluded with the observation that he is more confident at this point in his life and less reliant on assumed personas. He explained that he has come to believe that, "I can just be me and people will accept it and people will think its great because my heart's in the right place." However, like Larry, he also identified one area where he believes that his self-concept is lower, supporting the notion of domain-specific facets of self-concept, as articulated by Harter (1990). For Ian, dating and relationships represent an area of his life where he maintains a "low self esteem." Ian apparently retains some

optimism about his growth in this area as well, noting that he is now “ready for a relationship to happen” and that he has a “sharper sense” of who is going to “love” and “accept” him for who he really is.

Three of the participants described a positive progression in self-concept from earlier points in their lives. Ian related that the process of his self-development included the ability to internalize positive feedback and adopt the “realization that I am a good person.” With this observation, he unwittingly adds more support to the views of Cooley (1902), who first described the process of developing a concept of self from the perceptions of the opinions of others. As Ian explained, “Getting to college and realizing that no, people know what they’re talking about. You’re really cool. Why do you keep downplaying yourself? That’s been the big thing for me. And fully owning my confidence and I’ve done it incrementally just coming to the realization that I’m a good person.”

Although Larry recalled that he has “always” been a “happy” person, he also reflects that his self-concept has improved since high school. He explained that he felt inhibited initially in high school by his “shy” nature that kept him from getting involved in some activities. Larry added that he “feared rejection,” which kept him from trying out for choir and theater, both of which he aspired to join. However, he responded to some encouragement from friends and raised the courage to try out for choir. As he recalled, “From that point on it just kept growing to a point where I could go do stuff or talk to someone that I really did not know and not be afraid.” Apparently the social experimentation and resulting reinforcement facilitated his development of self-concept,

in his view. Thus, Larry's case supports the importance of social context as a determinant of self-concept.

Kate rendered her assessment of her self-concept as "much better" than it was in high school. Also relating her self-concept to social competence she reflected that, while she can "still get shy at times," she has overcome the "extreme shyness" that characterized his childhood. In addition, she explained that she overcame some of her insecurity about her physical appearance that was manifested in her preoccupation with makeup in high school. For Kate, her initial dating experience in her senior year of high school marked the point at which she "came into her own" and began to feel that she was "like everyone else." It appears that, for Kate, increasing confidence in the domains of social interaction, physical appearance, and dating led to a heightened assessment of her global self-concept (Harter, 1990).

In summary, participants' characterizations of their respective self-concepts utilized, but were not limited to, trait adjectives. In addition to the employment of such adjectives, participants described self-concept in terms of actions, beliefs, and attitudes. Although many of the self-referent attributes could be characterized as positive, participants identified seemingly negative traits or aspects of self-concept as well.

Several indications arose of interrelations between domains of self-concept and a global self-concept construct. Participants identified various aspects of self concept, such as physical appearance or skills in romantic relationships, supporting the notion of a multifaceted self-concept incorporating various domains (Harter, 1990). Further, there were indications of relations between self-concept in the various domains and the global

self-concept. However, no direct inferences regarding the nature of the relations were derived from these comments.

Participant comments also reflected the theoretical notions proposed by James (1890) and Mead (1934) regarding the multiplicity of self. The tenets advanced by Cooley (1902) were invoked as well, as some participants articulated a relationship between self-perceptions and the perceptions of the social context. Finally, all participants indicated a positive developmental progression of self-concept, perhaps reflective of progress toward or attainment of identity achievement as articulated by Marcia (1980).

#### *The Influence of Theater Engagement*

Literature within the field of arts and education presents a very limited sampling of research regarding the benefits of theater on any aspect of self-development. However, within this literature, there exists a body of theoretical discourse supporting the purported relation. Among these theorists, Heathcote (1988) cited drama as a tool for personal development. Way (1973) also proposed that drama may provide a context for the facilitation of the process of self-discovery. More recently, Gressler (2002) has proposed theater as a tool for individuals to integrate knowledge about others and the world into knowledge of self. These theoretical foundations provided the basis for the consideration of the contribution of theater to the development of self-concept. The following sections provide a synopsis and analysis of the perspectives of the participants regarding the proposed relation.

Three of the four participants expressed the view that their theater experience in college had some degree of impact on their self-concept. However, the nature and the

extent of the impact varied among their accounts, as did the meaning attributed to the experiences. In addition, participants varied in their assessment of the relative impact of various elements of theater engagement on their self-concept. The factors that emerged as relevant included experiences in performance, character development, and academic courses. Each of these contributing factors will be discussed in terms of their relative contributions as viewed by the participants. Additionally, one participant expressed the view that his theater involvement did not have an impact on his self-concept. His views will be presented in the context of potential disconfirming evidence and the desire to present an alternate perspective.

### *General Observations*

Discussions with the participants revealed the view that the theater program offered various avenues for self-development. Participants described the experience of a theater major in general terms, relating the experiences therein to an enhanced sense of self viewed as necessary for the pursuit of theater as a vocation. Kate's comments, for example, appear to provide support for the theories of Heathcote (1988) and Way (1973), with her observation that self-exploration is a crucial task for college student actors. As she explained, "You have to know yourself before you can be anyone else."

Ian provided support for these premises as well, as he described a significant improvement in his self-confidence since beginning college. He credited his self-development largely to his theater involvement, noting that theater is "all about fixing yourself." Ian further explained that theater provides a context where one is "constantly learning new things about yourself and constantly putting them into practice or getting rid of things that don't work within yourself." Additionally, he observed that engagement in

theater at Metropolitan University provided “an enhanced view on life” and an “opportunity to just...find yourself.”

Larry acknowledged an impact of theater engagement on his self-concept, although he related the change and growth primarily to his high school experiences. This could be reflective of the fact that he was a sophomore at Metropolitan University, and had only experienced two years of the theater program. In addition, Larry had not taken Acting III at the time of our interviews. Since this course was identified by some participants as highly significant in the self-development process, his experience may have been somewhat limited, having not yet taken the course. An additional factor could have been the fact that Larry had only participated in one production, and was involved in his second as the interviewing concluded. Therefore, he did not have the extent of experience in acting that was represented among the other participants.

However, Larry did identify aspects of himself that have been influenced through his theater involvement dating back to high school. Specifically, he noted that theater has facilitated his ability to be more “open,” explaining “theater has helped me to be more open and stuff and it’s one of those things where you have to be always open, always willing to receive something.” Additionally, Larry reflected that theater has reinforced his level of confidence in taking chances and risks. As he explained, “Like, that’s the biggest way it’s helped me, as far as like confidence. To know that you have to take chances and hope for the best and just see what happens. And that will give you confidence too...So, definitely is being open and the ability to take risks, that’s the biggest thing. One big thing it’s given me, I guess.”

Larry also reflected that acting and preparing for a production requires a certain amount of self-reflection and self-exploration. As Larry observed, acting requires “using all of yourself and putting everything out there on the table.” As a result, he noted that an actor is required to “dig deep down inside of yourself and access things that you might not want to show or share emotions that you might have had deep down inside.” This process, he reflected, requires one to be “very open, very willing to take criticism and willing to put yourself out there.” In fact, he commented that if one is not “open to being looked at and examined...I don’t think theater is right for you.” Specifically, when relating this process to him, Larry noted that his theater experience has caused him to be more “open” and that acting “gets me thinking more.” These observations appear to support the supposition of Gressler (2002), who identified a process of self-discovery as a crucial component in the preparation of student actors.

In contrast to the other participants, John did not identify any significant impact of theater on his self-concept or any other aspect of self-development. However, he did note that he has been consistently involved in theater activities since high school, reflecting, “I don’t know how to live any other way, you know?” John did identify one outcome of his active engagement in theater as he noted that he feels “almost useless” when “not working on something.” As he reflected, “I feel like sometimes if I’m just sitting around and not doing anything, that I’m wasting time...cause I spent high school very much like always doing something. Always doing theater. Like, I was pretty much there every night.” It seems that theater constituted an integral part of the structure of John’s life, although he does not articulate any specific impact on self-concept as a result. Perhaps theater served as a structured activity to occupy his time, allowing him to feel productive

in much the same way that any other occupation may have allowed. In this case, he may be exemplifying the rewards of engagement in productive activity versus any benefit specific to theater engagement.

In summary, three of the participants articulated the view that self-development was an outcome of involvement in the theater major. Participants noted enhanced confidence as well as opportunities for personal growth and self-discovery. Creatively expressed by one participant, theater is “all about fixing yourself.” However, one participant maintained the view that theater did not provide a significant impact on his self-concept. For this participant, the most significant impact of theater engagement on his self-development was the sense of productivity that he gained as a result of his active involvement.

#### *Academic Coursework*

In addition to such general statements regarding the personal benefits of theater engagement, participants identified aspects of the academic program that provided opportunities for self-development. Acting III, in particular, emerged as a context where two of the participants identified significant experiences contributing to self-awareness and self-expression. In addition to that course, some participants identified other elements of academic courses that were deemed personally beneficial. This section will present these views, highlighting patterns that emerged among them.

Ian characterized almost all of the academic courses as venues for self-development, stating, “Nearly every single one of my acting classes, I can say I’ve been there for personal growth and not for a grade.” Specifically, he noted that certain classes are about “working on your habits” as well as learning “what shuts you down...and

working beyond that.” He characterized these experiences as “great,” explaining, “because I learned so much about myself.” Ian identified Acting III as an especially fertile context for self-exploration. As he stated, “I especially think I blossomed in Acting III...it gave you so many opportunities to really apply yourself to your work.”

A particularly meaningful experience for him in this course occurred during the introductory activity on the first day of class. The activity required students to relate a list of their fears to the class. Recalling his contribution, Ian explained, “my fear list was like I fear that I’m not an honest person. I fear that nobody likes me. I fear that I’m not interesting. I fear that I’m not a good actor, a good person. Blah, blah, blah...” However, he related that “everyone’s” response was “Ian, what the hell are you talking about? You’re like the most honest, cool person I’ve ever met.” Ian appeared to have accepted that feedback at face value, exemplifying the aforementioned reliance on social feedback for self-concept (Cooley, 1902) as he recalled, “I was just like, really? I did not know that. All right. Cool. And I just kind of dropped it from there on out.”

In addition to this experience, Ian noted that his theater involvement, especially in Acting III, has facilitated the development of his “personal confidence,” resulting in less reliance on the “need to impress people.” As he explained:

The big hurdle that I’ve been able to get over the last couple of years of being here is really just this need to impress people and show people that I’m just this huge, big, great guy. I think I’ve gotten over that. I’ve really gotten over that. And I’m really, more or less, kind of fully gotten over that last semester with my Acting III class because I’ve gained a whole bunch of personal confidence and notes and outside opinions that just really, really helped me to just finally just let go of it and say f--- it, I’m a good person. I don’t care what you think of me. And, I’ve gone with that and I’ve trusted that and I think that in and of itself has kind of given me a new sense of self on stage.

However, as noted, Ian's characterization of his lack of reliance on the opinions of others is attributed by him to the favorable opinions that he has gotten from his peers. His articulation of this process seems to exemplify the metaphor of the "looking-glass self" proposed by Cooley (1902). Cooley also indicated, however, that the vulnerable self of youth resolves into a more stable sense of self in adulthood that is less permeable to social feedback. Ian seems to exemplify a self who is still impacted by social feedback, not yet indicative of the mature, stable self posited by Cooley. Nevertheless, Ian described his experience as one of growth and enhanced self-confidence.

Kate echoed the views of Ian as she noted that the academic program of the theater major is designed to facilitate self-awareness. Additionally, she observed, "so much of acting class is self-discovery." Like Ian, Kate also identified Acting III as a venue for improving her own self-understanding, through assignments such as journaling and other self-awareness activities. She explained that Acting III assignments, such as the "holiday myth," derived directly from "personal experience" and incorporated a "big chunk of you." Such activities proved meaningful to Kate as a means to reinforce the safety and support that she experienced within the theater department. For example, Kate described the support that she received from her peers and the instructor following an episode of emotional breakdown during a performance piece in class. As she recalled:

Once again...there's this kind of that safe atmosphere and people from the class came up and they fixed everything for me. And even Diane (professor) came up and she was holding me because I was just sitting there frozen, just shaking, and she came up and said It's OK, and calmed me down and we went on and it was fine.

Another assignment in the same course required students to complete journal entries based on exercises in a self-help book. Kate characterized this activity as "hard,"

explaining, “it really forced me to expose myself.” However, she experienced the activity as “cathartic,” once again noting that the exercise was conducted with the “support” of her friends and the teachers in the program. Kate concluded that Acting III provided her with personal insights that she can apply to “real life.”

John’s views regarding the significance of Acting III represented a departure from the views of the other participants. According to John, Acting III can be a growth experience “if you make it one.” Additionally, he related his observation that it is viewed as a positive experience and a personal growth opportunity by only about half of the students who take it. In fact, he related the observation that the course can actually be a negative experience for students. As he explained:

I would say that it’s a personal learning and a personal growth experience if you make it one. If you want it to be . . . And you’re either going to learn more because of it or you’re going to hate it and it’ll just shut you off to the class, you know. I think in all the years that I’ve seen people come out of that class, it’s been pretty much 50/50 as far as that stuff.

In John’s opinion, the value of the exercises was reliant on viewpoint of the student, and could be experienced as either helpful or “dumb” and useless. He observed that, at best, with the proper “mindset,” the exercises may be perceived as “kind of interesting.” As John reflected:

There’s a lot of exercises where, if you look at them at face value, it’s kind of like this is dumb, why are we doing this? And if you go into it with that mindset, you’re going to come out of it with that was dumb, I don’t know why I just did that. But if you look at it as a learning thing, a learning experience, and like what does it mean, then it’s kind of interesting.

As far as his own experience, John recounted several exercises, in Acting III and in another course, Voice-Movement Integration, where he did gain some useful feedback. In Voice-Movement Integration, he noted that he got feedback about his “funny walk”

and other idiosyncratic movement patterns. As he related, “you’re taught to discover the things about yourself that make you, you. The way I walk, the way I talk. The way I move my arms. The way I hold my head.” He noted that this information is useful as he considers his movements when portraying a character on stage, with potential uses also for social conversations. In another class exercise, John related that he was urged by the professor to invest more motivation into a project and “stand up and own something.” As a result, he recounted that he worked really hard on a project that was difficult and complex. As a result, his project was selected by his peers for an exhibit, which John thought was “cool.”

In concluding his assessment of theater on his self-concept, John maintained his view that there was no clear relationship, although he acknowledged that he had not given the issue much consideration. As he observed:

Um...I honestly don't know how much it has influenced my self-concept or self-image or whatever. I, it's not something that I take into account when I think of myself or you know, what being me means. You know? I don't usually think of that.

Perhaps his view is influenced by his lack of reflection on the topic. However, his comments do seem to indicate that his theater involvement does not constitute an essential aspect of his self-definition.

As John continued to reflect on the question, he added, “I suppose it does influence who I am.” However, he was apparently referring to incidental learning that occurs in the process of preparing for a performance. As he explained, “like anything to do with history or ...anything...I sort of get a whole other education....” Relatedly, he then added his observation that theater has perhaps influenced “the kinds of stuff I pay attention to.” He concluded, “Would you be a different person without theater? Like, I

can't speak of the situation for myself, but talking to other people, I guess you could say that, yeah, you could be a different person." Apparently, the impact of theater on self-concept remains a hypothetical relation for John.

In summary, three of the four participants identified an influence on self-concept resulting from the academic coursework in the theater program. Courses apparently offered an avenue for confirming social feedback, the reinforcement of social support, feedback regarding unconscious movement patterns, and insights that one could "apply to real life." In particular, Acting III was identified by two of the participants as a "personal growth" opportunity, including the experience of the course as "cathartic" by one participant.

On the other hand, one participant did not identify any significant personal growth experiences associated with the courses taken so far in his second year in the program. Additionally, a graduating senior expressed the view that courses such as Acting III are not necessarily beneficial to self-development. Instead, he expressed the view that the experiences therein could just as likely lead to a negative effect on a student. It seems that perhaps John was astute in his observation that such courses are a self-development experience only "if you make it one."

### *Production Participation*

A premise that existed at the outset of this investigation was that the process of character development in the context of preparing for a play would provide an avenue for self-exploration that could contribute to self-understanding among theater students. This assumption was based on theoretical contributions of Mead (1934) who identified role taking in children as a facilitative process contributing to self-concept development.

Gressler (2002) provided additional support for the positive impact of character development on self-concept development.

However, consistent with the notions of Gressler (2002), other aspects of play preparation emerged as influential with regards to self-concept. Therefore, the premise was expanded to include the investigation of various aspects of play preparation on the self-concept of the participants. This premise was, therefore, not specifically represented as a research question, although it could be subsumed under the subsidiary question “What is the role of theater in the self-concept of college students?”

Along those lines, the predominant key ideas and sub-types that emerged in addition to character development included auditioning, typecasting, and distinction between self and character. Additionally, it was noted that all of these other activities are closely related to character development, suggesting a complex interaction of various features of theater participation leading to an impact on self-understanding. Therefore, each of these activities will be explored in the following sections, with attention given to the meanings attributed by various participants and the potential impact on self-concept.

#### *Auditioning.*

The first step in preparing for performance in a production is to obtain a part through the audition process. The process of auditioning and casting appears to offer some insights regarding self-concept among the participants. Although the process of auditions may evoke thoughts and emotions regarding one’s skills and viability as an actor, discussions with theater students reveal a variety of meanings ascribed to the audition process. While auditioning did not constitute a significant portion of the discussion for all participants, it was raised by two of the four.

The significance placed on auditioning for Kate was mentioned in Chapter 5. It was noted that Kate identified the “sense of accomplishment and excitement” that she feels on seeing her name on the cast list as “the most fabulous feeling in theater.” The investment that she places on creating that successful outcome apparently generates a high level of anxiety for her when faced with an audition. She observed that, even though she has “done theater for so long,” she still gets quite “nervous” during auditions “to the point where my stomach is upset, my hands will shake, my legs will be shaking, I can barely focus on anything.”

Kate explained that her anxiety is provoked by her thoughts during the experience, including the concerns, “I hope I don’t mess up. I hope I don’t forget a line . . . because you don’t want to look bad, you don’t want to be judged poorly.” Apparently, for Kate, the audition process represents an opportunity for social commentary and judgment on her performance. It seems that the mere thought of being “judged poorly” is enough to challenge her self-confidence and evoke a rather significant anxiety response. Perhaps her self-concept does not yet exhibit the degree of stability necessary to integrate disconfirming feedback without a resultant detrimental effect on her self-concept.

For Larry, the audition process offers a confrontation with his assumptions regarding racial inequity in casting, as noted earlier. In addition to racial issues, Larry revealed a concern about his perception of his poor performance during auditions prior to the semester of interviewing. As he recalled, “I did not audition good,” leading him to assume that he would not get a “call-back” to the second stage of the audition process. He described his reaction to his subsequent casting in the play, *Our Town*, recalling that he was “excited” and “felt really good about it.”

However, even success in an audition raises issues of racial inequity for Larry. Reflecting on the part in which he was cast in *Hair*, Larry noted that he was concerned that he was cast simply because the part called for an African American actor. As he recalled:

And someone actually said that. Oh you'll get the part because you're black. I'm like, I don't want the part because I'm black. I don't want the part because I have the look. I want the part because I earn the part . . . I want to be the best person for the part . . . I don't want to part because of my race. And that, I do not want to not get the part because of my race. But I want it because I'm the best person for the part.

It seems that, for Larry, it is hard to garner accurate feedback regarding his acting ability since casting is inevitably influenced by the lack of African American parts and actors at Metropolitan University. As a result, it might be inferred that the experience of auditioning presents a detrimental effect on his self-concept. This setting apparently presents a barrier to his potential for experiencing the positive reinforcement of a successful audition. Additionally, while the experience of getting cast may be affirming for others, Larry must interpret that achievement in the context of racial inequity that might have facilitated the attainment of a role that he perceived as undeserved.

In summary, it appears that the experience of auditioning evokes a range of responses among the participants, as related to self-concept. While successful casting may generate feelings of "excitement and accomplishment," the audition process engenders significant anxiety for some. Student actors observe that attaining a part can cause one to "feel good" about oneself, alluding to a complimentary experience of negative feelings when not cast. In some cases, parameters of a production, a character, or the venue may limit the ability of the student actor to attain a part. As a result, a sense of disempowerment may occur, as reflected in Larry's skepticism about his ability to gain

a part based on acting merit. Therefore, it appears that the impact of auditioning on self-concept is difficult to predict.

*Typecasting.*

An issue that emerged regarding auditions and casting was the notion of typecasting. This phenomenon was brought up by each of the participants when discussing casting and character development. Typecasting was the term that participants used to refer to a trend in casting, where they perceive that they exhibit certain character traits that make them more or less appropriate for certain acting roles. The assumption voiced was that actors are cast in roles that approximate their actual traits or personas.

Although each of the participants identified a level of typecasting associated with their acting experiences, they appeared to ascribe different meanings to this phenomenon. Regardless of the meanings attributed, the awareness of typecasting and the resultant opportunities for self-reflection and comparison with various character traits further supports views of Gressler (2002) regarding the impact of theater on self-concept. It will be seen in the following section that each participant was able to engage in reflection on aspects of their personas in relationship to character parts and typecasting. Additionally, patterns emerged regarding the relative meaning attached to the experience of typecasting.

Ian identified his type as consistent with comedy roles, explaining, “Usually I play the big, comical, servente, comedia del arte things. I do that fairly well.” He attributed the emergence of this typecasting trend to his nature as a “funny person” with a “little beat-up façade” and a “little happy dappy crazy” persona. However, for Ian, performing in these types of roles is experienced as “not a real stretch” and “not much of

a challenge.” As a result, an acting goal that he articulated was to “get away from that a little bit” and pursue the “challenge” or playing “something else.” It seems that the result of his reflection on self and character inspired him to seek characters that would allow him to expand on his repertoire of expressed attributes.

John also discussed the phenomenon of typecasting. He observed that he is typecast frequently in comedic roles. However, John described a nice fit among his interests, talents, and his casting experiences. He finds that he has an inherent gift for humor and that has always “loved shows where you do not really get a rest just in terms of the comedy.” Therefore, he characterized “physical comedy” as his “niche” and explained that he has had fun in the roles in which he has recently been cast. Apparently, John finds that typecasting serves him well as a natural reflection of his interests and talents. His typecasting, therefore, situates him in roles that he enjoys and in which excels. As a result, his reflection regarding typecasting supports his self-concept and provides parameters for seeking future roles.

Kate discussed physical attributes that contribute to typecasting, noting that she is not necessarily constrained by typecasting associated with her physical features. She relates an assessment of her physical type as “average,” which allows her to portray a range of character types. However, Kate did identify certain character types that she feels are more reflective of her typecast persona. Specifically, she stated that she is likely to play “strong women” and “serious characters.” Additionally, she expressed that she is able to play “older” characters, noting that she has the potential to portray the gravity and maturity of an older character. There are also certain character types that Kate identified

as least likely for her to portray. She noted that she rarely is cast as a “mean or angry” character, nor is she likely to be cast as the “pretty, young, love interest.”

Kate also noted that actors “play against their type all the time,” indicating that one is not necessarily constrained to established typecasts. In fact, the opportunity to “play against her type” emerged as a meaningful aspect of theater for Kate, allowing her to engage in certain behaviors without assumption of the associated persona or responsibility. As she explained, “It (acting) was a great way to explore options that I never would have explored. It was a great way to kind of let myself go and get to be different people and have fun with that.”

An additional dimension of the experience of typecasting emerged as Kate related her reaction to her casting in two comedic roles during her final semester. She explained that she did not view herself as funny, and was surprised at the outcome of the casting decision. As she described:

I’ve always had this idea that I’m not funny. I’m not a funny person. That’s ok. I have a lot of other good qualities, but comedy’s not one of them and that’s ok. But it was kind of nice to be told, hey, you can do this and it will work for you.

It appears that the result of her casting in these comedic roles was a shift in perception of her self-concept. Kate’s reaction included a shift in her self-assessment to incorporate the notion that she possesses humor as a personality trait. In this case, the decision of a casting director resulted in a direct influence on the self-concept of the participant. However, this reflection occurred during the semester in which Kate played those roles. It is possible that her self-concept remains flexible enough to react to subsequent feedback regarding her success in portraying humor. Nevertheless, her reaction further supports the potential effect of theater experiences on self-concept.

In summary, it seems that the phenomenon of typecasting represents a significant aspect of the experience of theater for the participants. Each of them could readily relate features of the personas in which they are most likely to be typecast, indicating a level of self-reflection regarding personality traits and features. Typecasting can be viewed as a limiting factor, constraining the roles available to a student actor. Participants, therefore, articulated the pursuit of roles outside of the typecast as a means of stretching their acting skills and broadening the scope of types for which they might subsequently be cast.

Playing roles outside of the typecast realm, therefore, facilitate the opportunity to “explore options” and engage in uncharacteristic actions “without the social repercussions.” Additionally, being cast outside of one’s typecast may facilitate the expansion of one’s sense of self through the integration of a more diverse array of personality features. Feedback gained through casting decisions may, thus, provide an expanded awareness of self or a validation of one’s existing self-perceptions. Finally, adoption of a typecast niche may be experienced as an avenue for the expression of traits consistent with one’s own skills and interests.

*Distinction between actor and character.*

Whether they perceived a character portrayal as consistent with their “type” or “against” their type, each of the participants revealed a consideration of the relationship between one’s self and the character that one portrays. Varying levels of relatedness were proposed, but each participant agreed that shared characteristics often exist. Views expressed ranged from the stance that one must remain distinct from one’s character to the observation that one can simply be one’s self in some roles.

The emergence of this idea supports the notion of Gressler (2002) that student actors engage in self-reflection relative to character roles. The opportunity to engage in this self-reflection afforded by the unique demands of the theater context provides the foundation for his assertion of theater as the “essential liberal art.” Participant reflections as described in the following section reveal that they do, indeed, engage in introspection as they consider the boundaries between self and character. The relative meanings ascribed to this reflection are presented in this section, and potential influences on self-concept are discussed.

John observed that there are “always” elements of overlap between an actor and the character portrayed. In fact, he described this as “the biggest thing to keep in mind” during character development. As he explained, “You can never really completely distance yourself from your character . . . There’s always going to be little bits of you in a character. Which is what makes it real.” Therefore, John expresses the view that the overlap between actor and character, while inevitable, is essential for authenticity. While he clearly engages in the process of reflection and comparison proposed by Gressler (2002), John appears to exemplify a clear notion of boundaries between self and character.

Larry agreed with his peers that there are elements of one’s self in the character that one portrays. However, Larry seemed to be less clear in the boundary between self and character. In fact, he draws a fine distinction between himself and the character that he played in a production that took place during the interview process. He noted that, while there has “always got to be some part of you that’s in” a portrayal, some parts simply represent “an exaggerated version of yourself.” In fact, he noted that his strategy

for portraying his character in *Our Town* relied heavily on “just getting up there and being myself.” On the other hand, he related the view that “there is a separation between what you do, like your character, and who you are.”

In another case, however, he indicated that it became very important to him to emphasize the distinction between his character and himself. When playing the character of Hudd, in *Hair*, for example, Larry felt embarrassed by some of the character’s sexually provocative behaviors. He recalled that it felt necessary to seek out and explain to a female acting peer that the actions were just part of “the character.”

Larry’s seemingly inconsistent descriptions of the appropriate relationship between self and character appear to reveal his uncertainty regarding the most effective way to integrate notions of self versus character. While he seems to enjoy the opportunity to express aspects of himself through various parts, he experiences discomfort when the boundaries are ambiguous. Larry’s lack of clarity regarding these boundaries may be a reflection of his relative inexperience in acting.

As noted previously, Kate found that some character parts allowed her to express aspects of herself that were reflective of her actual persona. However, she admitted that she enjoys the chance to “play against” her type through the portrayal of characters who are more “exotic” or “sexy” than she. For Kate, the process of developing a character also seemed to offer an opportunity to reflect on traits of self versus character (Gressler, 2002). In addition, she identified the enjoyment that she felt in portraying uncharacteristic parts, while adding the caveat that there were some types that she could “never” play. For example, she indicated that she could “never” play someone who was “really dumb.”

In essence, it seems that Kate benefits from the opportunity for self-expression (Heathcote, 1988; Way, 1973) and the ability to portray certain character types “without the social repercussions.” However, she appears to retain a safety zone of potential character portrayals that do not represent too radical a departure from her notions of acceptable behavior. In this way, perhaps she, too, remains a bit unclear of the separation between actor and character herself.

Ian viewed his casting as Huey, in the play *Italian-American Reconciliation*, as a welcome departure from typecast comedic roles he has played in the past. However, the role of a romantic lead in this play may not have represented the “stretch” of his acting skills that he was reportedly seeking. Emphasizing the similarities between himself and the character, Ian related that Huey exemplifies “a character that honestly, I’ve played in my life, many times over. Many, many times over.” In fact, Ian portrayed the character as essentially himself, noting, “I just really identify with the character. I could literally get up there and be me and the character would work. And I wouldn’t have to put on this I’m acting guise and this is my character. I can literally get up there and be me and people would buy it and it would still be good.” While Ian had the benefit of a significant amount of acting experience as compared to Larry, he seems to exemplify the same confusion regarding boundaries between self and character. However, it is important to note that his self-perception includes significant gains in “personal confidence,” with a resulting decrease in reliance on his social context for ego support.

It seems, therefore, that the participants’ experiences of the boundary between one’s self and one’s character represents a continuum ranging from “bits” of the actor within a character to the virtual reproduction of a facsimile of self on the stage when

enacting a role. Accordingly, the actors appear to engage in varying levels of introspection and self-exploration when preparing for their roles (Gressler, 2002). As a result, student actors are able to identify character traits and aspects of personality with which they do or do not identify. In fact, even when not engaged in vivid re-enactments of past circumstances, actors seem to engage in at least a modicum of self-examination as they consider the characters they intend to portray. As such, these participants may engage in more self-reflection than the typical college student representing a major other than theater. Although self-examination does not necessarily imply development of self-concept, it does provide the context for such growth to occur. Therefore, one might assume the potential for enhanced self-understanding as a result of immersion in the context of college theater.

*Character development.*

As noted, the process of character development emerged as a topic of importance among the participants. In the context of play preparation, this task evolves from the related dimensions of auditioning and typecasting. In fact, observations of participants regarding typecasting and distinction of self from character occur in the context of character development and are inextricably linked. However, an artificial boundary between constructs is imposed in this paper for the purpose of articulating the meanings attributed primarily to the character development process. Therefore, the following section will attempt to elucidate the perspectives of the participants regarding character development and the meanings found therein.

All four participants were engaged in rehearsal for one or more productions during the interviews, and they revealed that character development was a significant

aspect of their preparation for their performances. Participants related various strategies used in the process of getting into character for a part in a production. The strategies were often based on exercises assigned by the director or completed in acting classes.

Examples of activities included the completion of a questionnaire or character sketch devised to provide details and a description of the character. Student actors complete these assignments, using the script as a guide. However, they typically build on details given in the script to construct a more comprehensive persona for the character.

At times, participants identify “models” from their respective social contexts on which to base aspects of their respective characters. Examples include Kate’s selection of her Italian grandmother as a model on which to base her character in the play *Italian-American Reconciliation*. Larry articulated the use of models in his character preparation as well, noting that he invoked aspects of both his father and his uncle in his portrayal of Editor Webb in *Our Town*.

One participant related a repertoire of rather extreme measures undertaken for character development. Perhaps because Ian purports to relate strongly to the characters that he described in these interviews, he delved into his own past in order to invoke memories and emotions that he felt would help him understand his characters. From reading old love letters that he wrote in high school, to contriving an audiotape designed to revisit old feelings of depression, Ian created unique opportunities for self-reflection in the name of character development. He appeared to conclude that these activities were worthwhile, remarking that the experiences were “cathartic” and “therapeutic,” leading him to feel “proud” about his development of the ability to “delineate between” his “world” and his “acting.” It appears, therefore, that the activities involved in the process

of character development offer Ian an opportunity to explore the boundaries between himself and his characters in a self-reflective process that could enhance his self-understanding. In this way, the process of character development may, indeed, represent a valuable contribution to his developing self-concept (Gressler, 2002).

In summary, participants identified various aspects of play preparation that embodied meanings relative to the development of self-concept. The experience of auditioning provides a context for feedback regarding one's aptitude and skills in acting, shaping one's sense of self as an aspiring actor. However, it was noted that other factors might impinge on the clarity of this feedback, as reflected in observations about disparity of opportunity in available roles. As a result, some theater students are required to engage in a process of sorting confirming and disconfirming feedback in the attempt to factor out confounding contextual features.

Additionally, opportunities for self-exploration and reflection emerge as participants consider the meanings of typecast personas. Feedback is available through this context as well, as participants consider the roles in which they are typically cast and the resultant assumptions related to their actual persona. Casting in some roles even provides the opportunity to expand one's view of self to encompass or to exclude traits. Once cast, participants articulated the reflections undertaken while considering the boundaries between self and character. Thus engaged in self-exploration, participants indicated the opportunity to examine aspects of self as related to their character, in a seemingly unique opportunity among college students.

Finally, the process of preparing to portray a character necessitates consideration of aspects of self as they may be incorporated or purposefully excluded from the

portrayal. Participant perspectives in this regard appear to support the supposition of Gressler (2002), as he observed that the process of character development offers a valuable exercise in self-exploration. Consistent with Gressler's notions, participants supported the observation that that consideration of the aspects of one's character inspires comparison with attributes of self, lead to enhanced personal knowledge and insight.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the constellation of activities that accompany a major in theater seem to provide a particularly fertile context for self-exploration. The participants note, as does Gressler (2002), that the context of the theater major offers a unique opportunity in this regard.

As noted, Mead (1934) suggested that role taking among children plays holds a function as facilitator of the developing self-concept. According to Mead, children take on the roles of others and use aspects of those roles in the process of "building a self" (p. 153). He further noted that increasing facility in the process of role taking leads to an increasingly complex and integrated notion of the self. These theoretical postulates provided a foundation for the current study, as I endeavored to gain an understanding of the impact of role assumption on theater students.

In conclusion, this chapter elucidated the key ideas, sub-themes, sub-types, and primary themes that emerged as significant across cases. Although numerous idiosyncratic sub-themes emerged in the context of the research, the analysis of those sub-themes was largely relegated to the case chapters. In situations where the idiosyncratic topics appeared iterative of one of the sub-types or primary themes, the patterns of expression of the sub-themes were analyzed regarding the meanings attributed

across cases. Primary themes that arose included the incentives driving theater engagement, the significance ascribed to the social community in the theater department, and the participant views regarding the influence of theater on self-concept.

As noted, one theme that surfaced was the participants' identification of the factors driving participation in theater. Participants identified various factors that influenced their continued engagement in theater activities. Those aspects emerged as representative of two primary categories of incentives, reflective of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. As a result, intrinsic and extrinsic features of theater engagement were identified across cases. It was observed that some participants attributed their theater involvement primarily to intrinsic features, such as enjoyment of the art form, or the inherent ability of theater to transform words into meanings that affect an audience. Other participants appeared to focus primarily on extrinsic reinforcement, such as audience accolades or the attention gleaned from performance. Although participants tended to identify a mix of factors driving participation, there were indications of a trend toward valuing one type or the other across cases.

This observation was considered in the context of literature indicating differential effects attributed to the quality of motivation. Specifically, Graham and Weiner (1996) characterize intrinsic motivation as a more adaptive stance to engagement in activity. In other research, engagement in activity for intrinsic reasons has been linked to positive outcomes on well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995), self-esteem (Kasser, 2000b), and self-worth (Kasser, 2000a). Accordingly, it might be expected that participants who identified more intrinsic reasons for involvement in

theater would exhibit positive outcomes on the dimensions of well-being, self-esteem, and self-worth.

Another primary theme that emerged was the characterization of the theater department as a community by the participants. Each participant described the context in terms of a social network, although different meanings were attributed to this feature. Across cases, it was revealed that three of the four participants indicated a high level of significance placed upon the social community in theater. Two of the participants used the term “family” to describe the context and one participant referred to it as “one big, collective friendship.” The fourth participant characterized the theater department as “close” also, although the social context appeared somewhat less important to him.

Across the three cases where the social context was identified as significant, varying levels of meanings to the participants was observed. For example, one participant indicated that theater provided an “easy” context for making friends. This was deemed significant in that this participant characterized herself as shy and withdrawn in typical social settings. Another participant indicated that he didn’t know how other people make friends outside of the structure of the theater department. A third participant explained that the community nature of the social context made his theater engagement more fun and enjoyable.

These examples, as well as others provided throughout the chapter, reveal that the social context of the theater department constituted a highly meaningful aspect of the experience of being a theater major for these participants. The students indicated that many of their friendships evolved in this context and that it was a significant influence on their feelings of acceptance, safety, and enjoyment of the experience. As a source of

significant social support, this context appears to facilitate the connectedness deemed vital to the identity formation of adolescents and young adults (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Additionally, it appears that the context renders a positive effect upon self-concept through the provision of feelings of social significance (Rosenberg, 1985).

The third primary theme that emerged across cases included the perspectives articulated by the participants regarding the influence of aspects of theater engagement upon self-concept. The activities identified as relevant to self-concept included auditioning, typecasting, character development, and portions of the academic coursework. Three of the four participants stated that they had recognized an impact from these activities, although the fourth participant did not. As in the case of the other primary themes, the meaning attributed to the various activities varied somewhat among participants.

Auditioning and casting emerged as significant for each of the participants. Attaining a part in a production was identified as important for one's resume of acting experience, as well as the feeling of accomplishment associated. Typecasting arose as a related issue, as participants identified trends of casting that reflected impressions that others held regarding their respective personas. For example, one participant revealed that she had "never thought of herself as a funny person" until she was cast in two humorous roles in a row. The event caused her to reevaluate her personality as viewed by others. Therefore, typecasting informed her self-concept through the incorporation of attributes she had not previously considered.

Once cast in a part, participants indicated that the activities in which they engaged to develop a character evoked a level of self-exploration that was personally informative.

For example, one participant described various reflective activities in which he engaged in order to “get into character.” He portrayed the activities as opportunities for self-reflection that he deemed “therapeutic.” Thus, this participant provided support for the views of Gressler (2002), who declared that the activity of character development contributed to self-concept development.

An aspect of character development that was acknowledged by all participants as informative was the phenomenon of comparing oneself with one’s character. It seemed that all participants engaged in some degree of reflection regarding the similarities and differences between themselves and their characters. Three of the participants acknowledged that some character parts essentially constituted playing a “version” of themselves. The fourth participant, while exemplifying more clear boundaries between self and character, revealed the view that there are “always some parts of” oneself in one’s character. While only one participant clearly articulated the implications of this reflection on self-concept, the relation appears to exist on a tacit level for each. Therefore, the accounts do appear to provide support for this notion of Gressler (2002).

The final aspect of the theme of theater and self-concept to emerge was the influence of the academic coursework upon self-development. Two of the participants identified the self-development implications of the theater coursework, specifically citing Acting III. One of the participants articulated the general view that “theater is all about fixing yourself.” Three of the participants identified examples of activities in which they engaged in Acting III that resulted in enhanced self-understanding. Two of the three characterized the outcome as “therapeutic” and “cathartic.” However, the third participant, although identifying several meaningful class experiences, maintained the

view that Acting III is “if you make it” so. In fact, he characterized the experiences in such classes as beneficial only about half of the time. In the other cases, he noted that students may get “turned off” to such self-exploration as a result of the class exercises. The fourth student did not articulate any meaningful class experiences, although he is only a sophomore in the program.

In summary, it appears that theater engagement offers experiences that may facilitate self-concept through the activities identified by the participants. In this way, the views espoused do support the statements of Gressler (2002) regarding this potential benefit. However, it appears that the influence of aspects of the theater program is mediated by individual response and investment.

In conclusion, sub-types and sub-themes emerged regarding the significant of various aspects of the theater program as experienced by these participants. Although the importance of various elements varied among them, the meanings of the elements indicate the potential influence of theater on self-concept. Therefore, the theoretical postulates under girding the study received some support through the accounts.

## CHAPTER 9

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of the findings of this study regarding the contribution of theater engagement to the self-concept of college students. Conclusions will be drawn and recommendations arising from these observations will be articulated.

#### Summary

#### *Background*

The impetus for this study was the observations that I have made of theater students during my teaching career at Metropolitan University. Although I do not teach in the theater department, I have collaborated with the department to develop learning experiences for my courses in occupational therapy. As a result of this collaboration, theater students present experiential learning activities to my classes, and I coach them regarding the development of the character portrayals that they perform. The activity involves student actors portraying individuals with psychiatric disorders while the occupational therapy students attempt to conduct a practice clinical interview.

In my role as instructor for this activity, I attend one of more acting classes and engage in discussion to prepare the students for the roles that they will portray. My task is to give them some direction regarding the background of the psychiatric conditions to portray, and give suggestions for sources they could access to inform the portrayals. The students then proceed to develop the respective characters, calling on me for advice as needed. They typically take several weeks to prepare for the exercise.

My experience in this activity has always been quite positive. I find the day of the mock interviews to be fun and engaging for the theater students, the occupational therapy students, and myself. In addition, I found myself enjoying the preparatory activities that took place during my meetings with the students in the theater arts building. My enjoyment of these activities, my interest in the development of young adults, and my natural love for theater coalesced to formulate the idea for a research project in the context of the theater department.

I found that several aspects of the experience of theater students captured my attention. One consideration was my appreciation for the outgoing nature of the theater students, expressed in their spontaneity, unique styles of dress, and enthusiasm for performance venues. Additionally, my brief exposure to the processes of character development and portrayal fostered my interest in the possibility that such work could have an impact on students' understandings of human nature, with implications for enhanced self-understanding. Specifically, I observed that the acting students gained significant insights about personality traits respective of the characters that they portrayed in the exercise. Our follow-up processing sessions usually included some comments from the theater students about things that they learned through the process that were applicable to their own self-development. As I facilitated these discussions, I reflected on the unique opportunity inherent in the activity of researching a character type, assuming the character for a time, and then reflecting on the meaning of the experience. It seemed that this experience offered an excellent avenue for self-exploration resulting in an influence on self-concept; hence, my interest in the influence of theater engagement on self-concept in college students.

Qualitative methods were selected for the investigation because I desired to explore the perspectives of the participants regarding the potential influence of theater activities on self-concept. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary source of data collection. It was decided that observations of the context were important to enhance my understanding of the context and inform my interviewing. Therefore, I observed numerous productions and rehearsals during the data-gathering period.

The qualitative methods used in the current study added a dimension to the other self-report measures used to gather information about self-concept. In addition to providing an open-ended interview format with emerging questions, I was prepared with observations of the participants in various theater activities. Therefore, I was able to craft the interviews to encourage discussion about aspects of self that might not have been initiated by the participants. At the same time, our supportive interview climate allowed them to reflect in a manner that facilitated identification of the key ideas that most mattered to them. Participant responses were not, therefore, bound by limits imposed by methods of gathering data.

In this supportive setting, participants felt able to share with me the aspects of theater that emerged as most meaningful to each of them. Therefore, data were gathered regarding such issues as: the experience of continued attempts to resolve multiple selves, feelings of exclusion from the theater community, efforts to integrate disconfirming feedback from first impressions, and the experience of a suicide attempt during the school semester. Each of these experiences, as well as others, emerged as important dimensions of the experience of self embedded in this unique setting. As a result, a descriptive

picture of the participants evolved from their own thick, rich descriptions of self in context.

### *Findings Relative to Models of Self-Concept*

Participant reflections appeared to support the existence of various domains of self-concept, as well as the salience of the global self-concept construct. For example, participants articulated the experience of low self-concept in various domains, such as Kate's characterization of her low physical self-concept, Larry's lack of confidence in his academic skills, and Ian's identification of his low self-concept in dating. Conversely, participants also identified domains in which they enjoyed a higher subjective sense of esteem, such as Kate's reflection that she has always thought of herself as "intelligent." As such, participants seemed to clearly articulate a sense of varying self-concepts related to different domains.

Participants also voiced perspectives consistent with the notion of a global self-concept. While articulating various qualitative experiences of self-concept in various domains, participants also tended to characterize themselves in more global terms. Examples included Kate's characterization of herself as "average," Larry's description of himself as "a good person," and Ian's assessment that he is "pretty cool." As such, participants' observations seemed to support the notion of a distinct self-concept construct. However, it was difficult in the current study to ascertain the nature of the relations between domains and the global self-concept. Participant dialogue did tend to indicate a relation between the various domains and the global self-concept, as students characterized their self-concept as "better" in relation to growth in one or more domains.

However, the extent of these descriptions was limited in the study, impeding the analysis of relations consistent with the proposed model.

#### *Findings Regarding Motivation for Theater Engagement*

Another theme that arose was the significance of the type of motivation that influenced initial and subsequent engagement in theater. Although it was not my initial intent to explore the motivations driving theater engagement, participant discussions tended to include the articulation of intrinsic and extrinsic features of theater as exhibiting various levels of influence on involvement. Therefore, the theme of motivation for theater engagement emerged in the study.

Analysis of interview content in the area of motivation revealed a distinction between engagement for intrinsic reasons and engagement for extrinsic purposes. Although the participants evidenced a combination of each type of incentive, it was also revealed that they tended to emphasize one type of motivation more strongly than the other. Therefore, it was found that intrinsic and extrinsic features contribute variously to theater engagement, with individuals exhibiting a unique constellation of incentives. Further, three of these four participants evidenced a balance toward one type of motivation or the other as the driving factor of theater involvement.

Although these findings are interpreted to reflect a distinctive characteristic of theater engagement, it is possible that the observations regarding the nature of motivation would apply equally to any activity under investigation. The extrinsic incentives associated with theater, such as applause and audience accolades, may have corollaries in other activities that render these observations unremarkable. Thus, the experiences

articulated by the participants in this regard may simply be an artifact of this particular context for this particular group.

### *Findings Regarding Theater as Community*

The next area of findings concerned the significance attributed to the community characterization of the theater department. It was found that the social community emerged as a highly significant aspect of the experience of three of the four theater students in this setting. The theater department was consistently described in terms of a cohesive community, with two students referring to the context as a “family.” Additionally, each of the participants identified the feeling of belonging and connectedness in this context as a meaningful aspect of their experience.

Therefore, it was determined that characterizations of the social community in the theater department were generally positive. Participants credited the social network with facilitating friendships, as well as fostering feelings of acceptance and support. However, there were indications of the detrimental effects of the cohesive climate as well. Several participants noted the experience of exclusion that could arise from racial insensitivity or from being excluded from any given production. Additionally, one participant indicated that the culture of drug use within the theater department could facilitate continued drug use among students.

The issue of exclusion based on race appeared to be a significant factor in the experience of one participant. Although Larry expressed a number of positive perspectives regarding the context of the theater environment, he also revealed episodes of racially insensitive comments, as well as his experience of bias in casting. Analysis of data garnered throughout his interviews reveals Larry’s disparate responses to the theater

context. While characterizing the theater department as a “family” where everyone tries to make each person feel included, Larry also frequently referred to his skepticism regarding his ability to be fairly cast in productions.

Relative to the theories and research regarding ethnic identity, it appears that the contributions of this particular context to Larry’s self-concept may be multifaceted and complex. As noted in Chapter 2, Phinney (1990) indicated that ethnic identity is not necessarily a linear construct, with a predictable trajectory of development. Instead, the emergence of ethnic identity is embedded in the individual’s qualitative experience of relating to one’s social context. Accordingly, it seems that this context harbored the potential for multiple and even seemingly contradictory effects on self-concept, both facilitative and inhibitory.

Additionally, it may be that any social group or activity context in college harbors similar opportunities for experiences of belongingness or exclusion. Although these participants expressed views supporting a unique level of camaraderie in this context, those observations may be biased due to lack of experience of other social activity groups. Thus, participation in other activities would render an experience that is qualitatively similar to the theater context.

#### *Findings Regarding the Influence of Theater Engagement on Self-Concept*

Analysis of the content of interviews revealed that theater engagement was cited as an influence on self-concept for three of the four participants. The fourth participant provided the lone dissenting voice, stating that he was not aware of an influence on his self-concept as a result of his theater involvement. However, he alluded to the pervasive

nature of the theater context upon his life, noting, “I don’t know how to live any other way, you know?”

Among the activities in which student actors engage, the participants identified several that seemed particularly significant for self-concept development. Specifically, activities associated with play production were cited, including auditioning, typecasting, and character development. Participants related that the audition process provided feedback regarding acting talent, as well as perceptions of themselves by others.

In addition to feedback attained during the process of auditioning and casting, participants noted that they gained perspectives from others through the experience of typecasting. Finding oneself relegated to a typecast persona provided an avenue of insight, leading some to attempt to expand their repertoire by adding dimensions to the character qualities that they could portray. Once cast, participants noted that the process of character development required self-exploration in the effort to achieve separation from self and character. In addition to play preparation activities, two participants noted that academic coursework provided opportunities for self-exploration influencing self-concept. In fact, participants used the terms “cathartic” and “therapeutic” when describing such activities.

However, there may be other, unexamined factors contributing to the reported characterization of the potential influence of theater engagement on self-concept. For example, it may be that the theater venue attracts individuals who are more likely to engage in self-reflection, regardless of the activity context. In this case, the observations of this group may be more reflective of the traits of those who pursue theater engagement than an illustration of the inherent potential of the activity to influence self-concept.

### *Findings Regarding Disturbing Trends*

Additionally, two significant disturbing trends emerged from the data. The only minority participant revealed an experience of racial inequity that significantly influenced his experience in the theater program. He identified his experience of racial inequity as one of the most significant elements of his involvement in the theater department at Metropolitan University. This participant characterized the casting opportunities as limited for minorities. Additionally, he evidenced a lack of trust in faculty to expand their views of roles in which he could be cast. The participant also related several episodes of racial insensitivity among peers and faculty in the theater department. It is significant to note that a disparity in casting opportunities represents a serious impediment to his future success as an actor. It also seemed significant that the participant characterized these experiences as so pervasive and such an important determinant of his experience in this context.

Although Larry seemed to emphasize a significant presence of racial disparity in this context, the lack of corroborating comments or observations makes it difficult to draw conclusions about this issue. Although Larry seemed quite genuine in his depiction of his experience, there were no other comments or observations garnered about the topic. Therefore, it is possible that Larry maintains an idiosyncratic view of the attitudes of faculty and students regarding racial equity. In this case, further investigation tapping additional sources of data would be helpful to illuminate the issue.

The other disturbing trend concerned the revelation of substance abuse among theater students as an issue. Although substance use and abuse is present in the larger student community at this university, one participant characterized it as an issue specific

to theater majors. Also troubling was the participant's observation that this behavior had become "common knowledge," that faculty attitudes and approaches were inconsistent, and that theater engagement in this context may actually encourage drug use due to peer influence.

In summary, the preceding section reviewed the major themes of significance that emerged in the data collection process. Themes included the salience of self-concept development to this college population, the quality of motivation influencing engagement, the experience of theater as a supportive community, the aspects of theater viewed by participants as significant for self-concept development.

### Conclusions

Based on the summary of data provided, conclusions can be drawn from the research respective of the theoretical foundations supporting the study. This section will relate the conclusions in relation to the theoretical postulates outlined at the beginning of the research endeavor.

### *Models of Self-Concept*

Two competing models of the structure of self-concept were reviewed prior to the initiation of the current study. It was noted that Harter's (1990) correlated factors model emphasized dynamic relations between the various domains of self-concept, while rejecting the notion of a hierarchical structure with a superordinate global self-concept. This model was contrasted with the hierarchical model of Marsh and Shavelson (1995). It was noted that, although considerable research validating the model has been conducted since its inception (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985), the strength of the hierarchy was questioned by the authors beyond the stage of adolescence (Marsh & Shavelson, 1995).

The current study maintained an open stance regarding the structure of the self-concept, with the hope that data would shed some light on the viability of the hierarchical model for this age range. In addition, it was noted that Vispoel (1995) found support for an artistic self-concept domain. The study hoped to investigate participants' observations as supportive or not supportive of this extension to the hierarchical model, while examining the possibility of a distinct artistic domain.

As noted, analysis of participant reflections did appear to support the existence of various domains of self-concept, as well as the salience of the global self-concept construct. As such, participants seemed to clearly articulate a sense of varying self-concepts related to different domains.

Data analysis also revealed perspectives consistent with the notion of a global self-concept. Therefore, participants' observations seem to support the notion of a distinct self-concept construct. However, the current study did not illuminate the nature of the relations between domains and the global self-concept. Participant dialogue tended to indicate a relation between the various domains and the global self-concept, as students characterized their self-concept as "better" in relation to growth in one or more domains. However, the extent of these descriptions was limited in the study, impeding the analysis of relations consistent with the proposed model.

It appeared that participants experienced global self-concept as influenced by the experience of one or more domains. For example, Larry noted that his self-concept was, "good, especially coming off this play." Therefore, he seems to indicate that his success in the play influenced his overall self-concept. However, as noted, there was simply not enough data generated to make further inferences regarding the relations. In fact,

participants' reflections regarding relations between domains, and between global self-concept and the domains, are consistent with either the correlated factor model of Harter (1990) or the hierarchical model of Marsh and Shavelson (1985). However, it could also be stated that the absence of data indicating a linear hierarchy culminating in global self-concept is evidence of the lack of validity of this model for the population studied.

The provision of support for either the correlated factor model (Harter, 1990) or the hierarchical model (Marsh & Shavelson, 1984) of self-concept was not an initial goal of the study. However, it emerged as a topic of discussion in my preparation to undertake this research. At the conclusion of the study, I find that I have gravitated toward the correlated factor model (Harter, 1990), although not as a direct result of analysis of results of this study. Instead, an increased understanding of the scope of the model facilitated my understanding of the ability to capture and account for global self-concept, while retaining the possibility of many dynamic levels of interaction between the domains. I think that my research did support the presence of distinct domains, as participants articulated that experience as salient for them. References to global self-concept were in evidence as well, although no conclusions can be drawn regarding the nature of the interrelatedness among domains.

In retrospect, it appears that the identification of a structural model to guide the current study may not have been the most suitable choice, given the nature of the data gathered and the objectives of the research. Rather than an exploration of the structure of self-concept and the associated domains, the focus of the current inquiry was on the process by which the participants arrived at their respective understandings of self-concept, and the meanings attributed to the various contributing factors. Accordingly, it

may have been more prudent to identify a model emphasizing process features of self-concept development as a guiding framework for the study. Specifically, the model of self-understanding articulated by Damon and Hart (1988) would have been more appropriate, given my stated interest.

#### *Significance of Motivation for Theater Engagement*

Although not initially posited as a factor to be examined in the study, it emerged that participants' respective reasons for initial and ongoing participation in theater revealed aspects of self related to self-concept. Therefore, student comments in this regard were gathered and considered in the analysis of significant aspects of theater influencing self-concept.

Investigations within the context of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) have examined the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic goal contents upon various aspects of self-development. Accordingly, related research has investigated the relations between motivation and constructs related to self-concept, such as well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995), self-esteem (Kasser, 2000b), and self-worth (Kasser, 2000a). Findings in this research generally indicate a positive outcome in the noted dimensions, as associated with intrinsic motivation. Additionally, the premise has been generated that it is fundamentally "more adaptive to be intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated." (Graham & Weiner, 1996, p. 78).

The current study found that, although participants identified a combination of factors driving their respective involvement, patterns were observed regarding the relative influence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors among cases. Consistent with self-

determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and related research (Graham & Weiner, 1996; Kasser, 2000; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995) it might be expected that participants indicating a higher emphasis on intrinsic factors would exhibit positive associations on dimensions of self related to self-concept.

### *Influences of the Social Environment*

The current study was founded, in part, on theoretical postulates regarding the influence of the social environment on self-concept. Accordingly, perspectives of symbolic interactionists (Baldwin, 1906; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) were reviewed with respect to self-concept. It was noted that symbolic interactionists posited an essential role of the social environment on the development of self-concept, essentially characterizing self as a social construction. Factors cited as influences included one's perceptions of others' views of oneself (Cooley, 1902), the recognition of traits in others prior to their internalization (Baldwin, 1906), and insights gained through role-playing (Mead, 1934).

In addition, it was noted that the significance of the social environment in the formulation of self-concept was a fundamental premise of Erikson (1964), and the subsequent development of identity development theory (Marcia, 2002). Adams and Marshall (1996) further explicated the import of environment on self-concept, emphasizing the significance of experiences of *belongingness* and *connectedness* for the adaptive formation of self-concept.

Consistent with these premises, the social community emerged as a highly significant aspect of the experience of three of the four theater students in this setting. Describing the theater department as a "family," and "one big, collective friendship," most of the participants emphasized the cohesive culture in the context. Additionally,

participants noted that the meaning ascribed to the experience of community was reflective of the notions of Adams and Marshall (1996), as the experiences of *belongingness* and *connectedness* were emphasized. Although general attributions of the theater tended to emphasize the positive, evidence of some negative elements emerged as well. Several participants identified episodes of exclusion, including a participant who experienced racial inequity. Additionally, one participant indicated the belief that the cohesion served to encourage illicit drug use among members of the community.

### *The Influence of Theater on Self-Concept*

The theoretical foundation supporting the notion of an influence of theater on self-concept is derived from several sources. Specifically, drama has been characterized as a tool for self-development by Heathcote (1988). Additionally, Way (1973) proposed that theater facilitates the process of self-discovery. More recently, Gressler (2002) has invoked the premises of Heathcote (1988), Mead (1934), and Way (1973), to propose that theater facilitates the development of skills considered essential in a liberal arts curriculum. Gressler (2002) suggests that the theater curriculum typically requires a level of self-analysis and discovery that promotes self-development. In addition to academic coursework requiring self-exploration, he notes that activities associated with play production, such as character development, both require and facilitate self-growth.

The results of this study indicate that participant views provide support for the theoretical premises cited. Participants identified an influence of theater activities on self-concept, specifically in the areas of auditioning, character development, typecasting, and separation of self from character. In addition, two of the four participants identified elements of the academic curriculum as evocative of self-exploration leading to self-

understanding in processes they deemed “cathartic,” and “therapeutic.” As one participant noted, “theater is all about fixing yourself.” However, a balancing view was pronounced by another participant who related that caveat that the academic coursework constitutes a self-development opportunity “if you make it one.”

Comments such as these appear to offer support for the notions of theater theorists (Gressler, 2002; Heathcote, 1988; Way, 1974), as well as for symbolic interactionists (Baldwin, 1906; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Specifically, theater is revealed as a context for gaining feedback about self from the perspectives of others in a process contributing to self-awareness and self-development. Additionally, Gressler’s articulation of the benefits of various aspects of play production for self development is supported in this investigation.

Therefore, it follows that theater engagement does emerge as a useful tool in the self-discovery process, as described by three of the four participants. Although the dissenting voice is significant in this small qualitative study, it is important to acknowledge that John’s view does not negate the potential benefits of theater engagement. It may be that not all students engage in self-reflection as a conscious process that they are able to identify and articulate. Instead, such students may still benefit from the feedback and activities in such a setting, although in a less cognizant manner. As noted in Chapter 8, the symbolic interactionists did not specify conscious awareness of the social influences upon self-development as requisite to the process.

#### *Relationship to Arts Education Research*

Research regarding arts education was surveyed prior to the initiation of this study in an effort to identify arts literature supportive of the influence of theater upon self-

concept. The literature review in this area revealed that empirical investigations are lacking. Several studies were found that more closely approximated the aims of the current study. These included an investigation by Kassab (1984) that found an enhancement of self-esteem and self-image of high school students as a result of drama instruction and enactments. Yassa (1999) used qualitative methods to investigate the perceptions of high school students engaged in drama. He concluded that drama offers the potential to enhance self-confidence, as well as self-knowledge and other dimensions. Freeman (2001) investigated the influence of drama activities on self-concept in elementary school children and reported positive results. Finally, Frehner (1996) designed a qualitative study based on the symbolic interactionist framework to investigate the effects of drama therapy with adolescents. He concluded that drama therapy constituted a “powerful tool” for the process of identity formation.

Therefore, in the context of existing research, it is noted that there are few studies specifically investigating the impact of theater engagement upon dimensions related to self-concept. Although Frehner (1996) based his study on theoretical frameworks foundational to the current study, the modality of drama therapy used in his research is quite different from engagement in theater for the purpose of producing a play and achieving a major. Further, no studies were found investigating theater engagement among college students. The research of Kassab (1984) and Yassa (1999) stand out as the most relevant, with adolescents as the focus of investigation, and self-concept as a dimension of study. In light of the positive findings regarding the influence of theater on self-concept reported by these two studies, the current study offers support.

In summary, the current study offers much needed support for the notion of the potential benefits of theater engagement on self-concept. Specifically, participants in the current study noted that theater was an essential element of their identity, that the theater department provided a safe and fertile context for self-exploration, and that various elements of theater engagement provided opportunities for self-development.

### Recommendations

#### *Models of Self-Concept*

While Harter (1999) presents narrative analysis as an element of her research regarding self-representations, current contributions end at late adolescence. As proposed by the current study, the identity status and developing self-concept of young adults constitutes an important avenue of investigation as well. Additionally, the college setting provides a context for the observation of individuals engaged in choices and challenges that are significant for the developing self. Therefore, this study gathered significant data in a relevant context that has not received as much attention.

Thus, it is recommended that additional research focus on the development of self-representations characteristic of the stage of young adulthood. The current study highlights the potential utility of further qualitative research investigating the experience of young adults relative to domains of self-concept and an overall domain of global self-concept. This study was not designed to gather such data, and my questioning did not follow that path. Nevertheless, a study could be crafted to explore the participants' experience of these constructs, through additional questioning regarding understandings of self-concept. Questioning could commence in an evolving manner, with the interviewer tapping key ideas relative to the various domains for further questioning.

For example, I could have asked Larry to talk more about what he meant by the comment that he felt “pretty good” about his self-concept, as he noted, “especially coming off this play.” Although this statement appears to offer clues to his perspective regarding his acting performance related to his overall self-concept, I did not follow that line of questioning. In addition, Larry revealed that he experienced a lower sense of confidence regarding academic abilities. That topic could have been further explored as well, with the focus on his view of the relation of his self-concept across domains. In summary, although this study did not provide data supportive of either model of self-concept, the methods used show promise for potential application in later studies.

#### *Motivation and Self-Concept*

Theater, and perhaps other performance arts, appears to present a fertile environment for the investigation of intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing activity engagement. Extrinsic features, including applause, fame, and attention, are typically considered unique to performance and sports venues. Therefore, they represent powerful incentives beyond the financial motivations characterizing much of the investigations of self-determination research thus far. Thus, further exploration of the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation related to engagement in theater is recommended to contribute added depth to the existing body of research in self-determination theory as well as other theories of motivation.

As a freshman adviser, I have become concerned with the inability of many college students to identify areas of interest when making choices about a major. My observations include the sense that students sometimes are not able to identify activities in which they experience a subjective sense of enjoyment relative to the intrinsic qualities

of the activity. As an occupational therapist, I am interested in the qualities of activity that facilitate engagement, specifically activities that have been shown to be related to wellness. Therefore, I am invested in exploring the attributes of activities that are engaging for young adults, as well as investigating the experience of engagement from their perspective. For example, I wish to facilitate young adults' ability to identify activities about which they are passionate and that they enjoy, such as Larry's enthusiasm for theater. It is my belief that identification of such pursuits will lead to enhanced satisfaction in vocational choice as well as the adoption of healthy leisure habits.

I recommend, and hope to engage in, further research regarding motivation and qualities of activity engagement. Although investigation of many activities may be worthwhile, I suggest that theater engagement, in particular, may yield insight regarding the experience of passion and commitment related to activity choice. Although quantitative methods may garner important data in this regard, qualitative methods have much to add as far as gleaning the perspectives of the participants in an emergent process, engaging them in making meaning of their choices and desires and passions.

#### *The Community of Theater*

Participants emphasized the importance of the social community in the theater department for the facilitation of feelings of belongingness and connectedness (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Although there is increasing acceptance of the priority that young adults place on social acceptance, it is sometimes unclear how that agenda relates to the educational setting. In my role as an adviser, I am aware of statistics that indicate that an important factor influencing student retention is a feeling of social connectedness. Additionally, as an instructor, I am continually reminded that young adults are often most

influenced by the goal of social acceptance. Therefore, I attempt to integrate that experience with the academic goals through the facilitation of a learning community in my classroom. However, I do not think that the significance of social connectedness for our college students is embraced across the campus.

Yet, participants identified it as perhaps the single most meaningful aspect of their experience in the theater major. Accordingly, feelings of belonging and acceptance are influenced by the qualities of the social setting in the perspective of the student.

Therefore, a discipline that achieves a high level of cohesion in the eyes of the students is worthy of further exploration as a model for the facilitation of connections among students in other disciplines. It is my recommendation that the social climate of the theater department at this university be the subject of further study, in an attempt to identify the constellation of factors that render the level of cohesion noted by students. Such a study could involve quantitative and qualitative methods, although maintaining a focus on the perspectives of the students within the context. However, faculty input would be valuable as well, especially since it appears that the intent to foster cohesion resides as in implicit, if not explicit objective.

Observations gleaned from the theater department at this university might then be analyzed regarding the relevance of incorporating elements of this context into other departments as deemed appropriate. It is my belief that fostering a community context in the classroom would engage learners, provide a more meaningful context, and translate to the real world where social skills are inherent to most activities. As noted by these participants, the social setting of this theater department provided a context for such

meaningful activities as making friends, seeking support from faculty, taking risks, engaging in self-exploration, and having fun.

### *Theater Engagement and Self-Concept*

Consistent with the propositions of Gressler (2002), Heathcote (1988), and Way (1974), analysis revealed that theater engagement in college offers a unique potential for self-development through aspects of play production as well as academic coursework. This finding most closely fits the inquiry that sparked my initial interest in theater. Having worked with theater students to devise unique classroom leaning activities in my department, I became interested in the unique elements of the culture of their program. It seemed to me that some intrinsic features of theater engagement might facilitate self-concept, although I was initially unaware of any research. In particular, I considered the possibility that devising and portraying character parts could provide a context of self-exploration unique to theater.

As I visited the literature, I found the theories of the symbolic interactionists to be quite supportive of my premise. In fact, Mead (1934) explicated a process whereby children create and enact roles through play that facilitate their internalization of personal attributes. Once I was deeply into my literature review, I found the theories articulated by Heathcoat (1988) and Way (1974), regarding the therapeutic benefits of drama engagement. Later, I was thrilled to find the views espoused in the text by Gressler (2002) characterizing theater as the “essential liberal art” for the very qualities that I had proposed.

However, my excitement dissipated somewhat upon reviewing the text in search of relevant research. In fact, I found that there was virtually no research reported.

Although the notions of Gressler (2002) were very supportive of my research agenda and the theoretical foundation, once again I found that research was absent. Therefore, I was forced to conclude that my own modest study seemed to offer the first research support for these widely published theories.

In accordance with the theoretical notions articulated by Gressler (2002), Heathcote (1988), and Way (1974), participants indicated that various activities associated with theater led to opportunities for enhanced self-concept. Specifically, they noted that character development, as well as observations related to typecasting and separation of self from character all provided avenues for self-reflection. In addition, and unexpectedly to me, it emerged that the curriculum was designed to include elements of self-reflection in the coursework, ostensibly for the purpose of increasing insight relative to self as actor. Although apparently not published, these principles were incorporated into the theater curriculum. However, I did not design my study to investigate the curriculum and I did not include data sources that allowed me to explore that.

Nevertheless, subsequent informal discussions with theater faculty have revealed that the objective of self-development, sometimes inclusive of self-concept, is held among some faculty. In fact, key faculty rely on Gressler's (2002) book extensively as a reference, as I found each time I tried to access the two existing copies. However, my study was not designed to gather faculty input regarding the objectives of courses in the curriculum and the relevance to self-concept development.

It seems, therefore, given the emphasis on the theories purporting theater as a helpful medium, and the absence of supporting research, that my study represents an initial effort toward establishing a basis of research supporting these notions. My study

indicated that the theories seemed relevant and meaningful as manifested in the experiences of at least three of my four participants. The fourth acknowledged that the medium could indeed be powerful, while indicating the potential for a negative effect. I recommend, therefore, that additional research be conducted to explore the impact of the theater curriculum, inclusive of acting activities, upon self-concept.

If, indeed, it were shown that self-exploration activities in such a context are helpful in terms of self-concept, it would be important to consider where in the college context they could be provided. Therefore, such research shows import for future research agendas, supporting existing and emerging theory, and influencing practice. Future research should involve a survey of the theater curriculum, as well as the perspectives of faculty and students regarding the influence of theater on self-concept.

#### *Disturbing Trends*

The trends that I characterized as “disturbing” indicate that the theater department in this university may harbor influences that are potentially exclusionary or otherwise detrimental. The lack of faculty cohesion regarding racial equity and the drug use of students is indicative of a dynamic that could negatively impact theater students. Although the statements of two participants in this regard are not accepted as proof of any level of racism or substance abuse in theater department, the emergence of these perspectives initiated by participants in an open interview raise enough concern that the issue should be investigated further. Investigation should begin with exploration of the views of students and faculty regarding the existence of each of these phenomena. Although I do not intend to present these issues as holding equal weight or requiring the same treatment, similar initial efforts at gathering data could initiate the process of

investigating whether either phenomenon exists to an extent worthy of further study and intervention.

#### Alternative Sampling

Finally, it is recommended that future research expand and vary the sampling criteria in the effort to garner data reflective of the perspectives of other individuals regarding the identified research questions and emergent themes. Sampling in this study was purposeful and was designed to maximize variation in order to yield the most descriptive data. Accordingly, parameters for participant selection were limited to consideration of diversity of ethnicity and gender, representation of various educational levels, and the identification of participants who were able to reflect meaningfully on the questions presented.

Future research could target the experiences of minorities through the selection of participants so identified. Data thus yielded could shed light on the key ideas noted by the African American participant in this study as related to previous research regarding ethnic identity and the relation to theater engagement and self-concept. Additionally, further research could focus on the experiences of either gender or on participants of a specific educational level through the modification of selection criteria. It may also be informative to conduct a similar study integrating participants' relative experiences of success or nonsuccess in acting as a context for data analysis. Finally, future research could gather data from faculty, as well as student participants, in an effort to include these additional views regarding the potential influence of theater on self-concept.

Therefore, in the context of all of the stated findings, I believe that this study represents a significant contribution to the research regarding self-concept and theater.

Aspects of engagement in activities by college students were revealed that have implications for classroom management, curriculum design, and university life programs on this campus and potentially others as well. The investigation of inherent and extrinsic qualities of activity involvement constitutes a worthy area of continued study, as does the priority placed on social connectedness in college settings. Additionally, in light of the theoretical postulates put forward regarding benefits of theater engagement, research either supporting or refuting these claims is essential. This study represented one of the first such efforts and can, therefore, serve as a model on which to base future, expanded efforts.

## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. How did you become involved in college theater?
2. What is it like to be involved in college theater?
3. What are the different ways in which you are involved in college theater?
4. What does your involvement in college theater mean to you?
5. How would you define the term self-concept?
6. How would you describe your own self-concept?
7. What factors do you believe have contributed positively or negatively to your self-concept?
8. How would you compare the importance of those various factors as influencing your self-concept?
9. Do you believe that your involvement in college theater has had any effect on your self-concept? If so, explain why and how.
10. If college theater has impacted your self-concept, describe the various elements that produced these effects.
11. Do you believe that your college theater experience has an effect on your life outside of theater? If so, explain why.

## Appendix B

## Sample of Data Coding Process

Transcription	Coding Notes
<p><i>What is it like to be involved in college theater?</i></p> <p>What is it like?</p> <p><i>That's a real open ended question.</i></p> <p>I don't know. I take that a whole bunch of ways. I guess, community-wise. You're around a lot of the same people a lot. It's kind of like a big family, social group-type thing. Everybody's really tight-knit. I mean, even if they don't know everyone that well, everyone at least, knows each other and is on good terms with each other. We all hang out a lot. You end up working with the same people. You end up getting to know a lot of the same people in different ways. Really kind of looking deeply at your art and how other people relate to that art and how you relate to that art. Just constantly, on the working end of it, constantly reassess yourself. Reassess your values. What you hold true. Why you hold that true. What, you know, what, how those values reflect in your art. What you want out of your art. How you do your art. The basics and the rules and the regulations and the do's and don'ts and how you can break rules and how can push yourself and stuff like that. What else. On like the just factual side, there's usually like four plays a semester, maybe three plays, two plays sometimes. You know, those are like, they kind of function as like mini-families within the overlaying family of the theatre department. Um, and that's in and of itself its own little tight-knit group and kind of gets you out there and gets you doing stuff. And, I guess that's about all.</p> <p><i>This is similar, but worded slightly differently. What does your involvement in theater here at Metropolitan mean to you?</i></p> <p>What does it mean to me? It means, well, one, friendship and community. Those are big things. I mean, nearly all the friends that I've really made here I've definitely been through theatre. All the friendships, you know, they're there and it's great and you get closer to each other as you</p>	<p>community big family tight-knit</p> <p>all hang out working together</p> <p>relating to "your art" reassessing self and values</p> <p>values significance of "art" break the rules</p> <p>2-4 plays per semester</p> <p>play = mini-family play = tight-knit</p> <p>friendship and community friends through theater</p>

<p>go along just b/c you're all there in this process and if you don't, if you're not immediately at the same place as someplace else, as somebody else, you can either ask somebody else who's above you for advice or you know, or somebody below you, you can kind of reminisce and be like, oh, I remember Acting II. Just, there's always some way of relating to somebody. And, it provides me with community. It provides me with just a constant means of challenging myself. Something to do. Just a place where I can practice my art and grow and change and get better, hopefully.</p>	<p>getting close shared experience get/give advice Acting II? way of relating provides community means to challenge self practice my art</p>
<p><i>The social and community aspect is really important to you? That's the first thing that you think of?</i></p>	
<p>Oh yeah. It's, I mean, as much as I want to say that I'm dedicated to my art, it's a lot easier to be dedicated to your art when you're dedicated to your community. It's a lot easier to be dedicated to anything when you're dedicated to the community b/c you have that group of people that have sort of the same values and the same morals or interests or whatever. Just being around them keeps you that much more in it. If they're positive people or you enjoy being with them or enjoy working with them or something. It makes the enjoyment of your art that much better. I mean, the enjoyment of your art would be there regardless, otherwise, there's no point in doing it b/c you're just selling yourself short to get some friends. But like, its, when you're in a community that's into it as much as you're into it, it's just a great place to be and makes you that much more committed to what you want to do. And that's about it.</p>	<p>community increases dedication to the art community shared values, interests, morals group increases enjoyment of art enjoyment would exist anyway</p>
<p><i>I'm going to kind of go out on a limb a little bit and say that, let's say you hadn't been a theatre major for whatever reason and you weren't doing that here at Towson. You were majoring in something else, English, maybe. What do you think, how do you think you would have gotten those social community needs met or would you have? Like, what would you be doing with yourself, do you think?</i></p>	<p>community interest increases individual interest</p>
<p>Honestly, I have no idea. I made a lot of friends from my floor that I lived in at the Towers. But it was, like it's, it's hard to keep up with them, b/c they in and of themselves, they're, you're all kind of there b/c you haphazardly live together and you all. It's not a matter of like a really deep</p>	<p>friends outside theater</p>

<p>friendship. Like I couldn't, it's not the type of relationship where I could really open up and lay it all out to someone who's on my floor. It's just more of a relationship of, oh, we're all on this floor together, so let's hang out and you know, whatever, see movies or do whatever at some point. You know. It's, and I think there's the, I've got a couple of friends here from hs that I hang out with. Like my best friend, Jared, from hs goes here. And we hung out a lot more in my freshman year. The first semester before I really I got into theatre dept. We hung out a lot more than we do now. Like, just cause, neither one of us had any idea, you know, how to meet people or how to have a social life or whatever. In a lot of ways, I think I've met a lot of or gained a lot of amazing friendships or most of my amazing friendships in my life through theatre and it just kind of happens that way. I don't know how you go and get friends other places. That's a foreign concept to me. And I've gotten friendly with people in some of my classes and stuff like that. It's just a matter of, I guess, following it through. And, you find someone having the time to just be like, I'd like to get you know better. You seem really cool in class or something. I guess like that.</p> <p><i>Ok. How would you define. I might have already asked you this last time. Did I ask you to define self-concept? I think I did.</i></p> <p>Yeah, you did.</p> <p><i>I'm going to ask you to do it again.</i></p> <p>A couple of times ago. Yeah, self-concept. Um, I guess it would be how you see yourself. Things that you, I guess, view about yourself. The way that you feel that relate to your outside world or maybe how you just relate to yourself. Everything like your personality, how you carry yourself, your views, your interests and values and all that stuff. Then even the way that your world views you, but I'm kind of on the fence about that one. Maybe, maybe not. But, yeah.</p>	<p>hard to keep up</p> <p>living together d/n = deep friendship</p> <p>not as "open" in dorm friendships</p> <p>live together so they hang out together</p> <p>high school friends – less contact now</p> <p>freshman year – "no idea" re: making friends "amazing" friendships mostly through theater</p> <p>how else do you get friends?</p> <p>possibly some friends in classes – doesn't follow through</p> <p>defining self-concept how you see yourself how you relate to world/to self your views, interests, values</p>
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