UNDERSTANDING THEATRE'S POTENTIAL FOR FOSTERING EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

by

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EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes how live theatre can be used to foster greater empathy and compassion within contemporary society. I begin by defining empathy, compassion, and a variety of terms related to the two; next, I discuss other background information about empathy and conclude that empathy is a skill worth developing among people in our community. I present theory and prior research that explain how storytelling in general and theatre in particular can offer the potential to improve empathy and compassion among people who engage with them. Then, I discuss a quantitative research study I conducted that compares various empathy-related measures among three groups—one who watched a live theatre performance, one who watched a filmed performance, and one who watched a nature documentary. From here, I move to discuss the parallels in theatre and psychology, and I note in detail how the teachings of Stanislavski have direct implications on how training in performance can help to foster greater empathy and compassion. I then take the conversation beyond Stanislavski and conclude with an outline of curriculum for a potential workshop that would use theatre techniques from a variety of practitioners to encourage healthcare professionals to improve their compassionate skills.

Ask any theatre artist and they could share about a "moment" when they fell in love with theatre and the performing arts. Actors, designers, directors, and crew members across the discipline could tell in detail about a show they watched or performed in that flipped their perspective on the art form and made them realize they wanted to devote their life to it. For the most part, all of these moments hinge on a meaningful experience with the human connection, often through an inspiring encounter with a story or character. Many of these artists would also tell you that their involvement in the performing arts has made them kinder and more compassionate. Even those who would not consider themselves "artists" describe walking out of prominent shows with a new sense of understanding, compassion, and empathy for people of different perspectives and backgrounds. Examples include *The Color Purple*, *Angels in America*, and *Dear Evan Hansen*, each of which showcases individuals grappling with issues such as racism, homophobia, mental illness, and physical illness (including stigmatized ones like HIV).

Despite the deep conviction of many artists that theatre and empathy are intricately intertwined, research on the specific relationship between theatre and empathy has been minimal. Many draw a connection between these two concepts mostly based on personal experience from watching performances or living in the theatre environment. The anecdotal nature of this relationship certainly does not diminish the power, experience, and reality of this relationship, but it does make it more difficult for us as a society to discuss the relationship between art and compassion, and thus it makes it harder for us to reap the benefits of this connection and advocate for a more prevalent use of the arts in more varied contexts.

The following thesis intends to build on the work of other pioneers in this interdisciplinary examination of the link between the performing arts and empathy. I will first walk through existing research on empathy, compassion, storytelling, and the performing arts, then I will discuss a quantitative study regarding how engaging with live theatre affects empathy

in audience members, and finally I will conclude with a discussion of how participating in theatre and theatre-based activities can help to develop skills of compassion in non-artistic populations. To start, however, I will need to discuss the definitions of some of my crucial terms.

What is "Empathy"?

Empathy is a relatively vague term that many people use in a variety of ways in contemporary society. Similar to the word "love," people often use the word broadly to encompass a variety of other topics—such as kindness, compassion, helpfulness, thoughtfulness, and perspective-taking—that are not exactly synonymous with the word. Indeed, when we look at empathy as a psychological construct in the context of this inquiry, we discover that empathy is a complex term that contains a variety of constructs underneath its umbrella and also relates to a number of similar constructs.

Historical Background of Empathy

Historically, empathy, as with the field of psychology in general, is a relatively new area of study, having primarily developed over the last century and a half. The first mention of the word and concept in literature and academia was in 1774 in a publication by Johann Gottfried Herder in Germany. He introduced the concept in order to argue that we can have a better comprehension of the world around us if we try to comprehend another person's point of view by imagining the circumstances of their subjective experience (Cummings, 2016). However, the ties of Herder to German nationalistic ideas has kept his specific work from being particularly influential, and his dismissal by contemporary Immanuel Kant actually led the entire concept of empathy to be ignored for almost an entire century (Cummings, 2016). After ninety-nine years, Robert Vischer revived discussion on the topic of empathy, primarily to address the topic of aesthetic appreciation. Vischer argued that we want other humans to be involved in our emotional lives; we desire reciprocation. Empathy involves our attempt to move toward that by

using our minds to put ourselves into the other person, or even other object, and the result is our ability to actually experience the other person's or object's feelings. This is the manner he uses to explain how we are able to have emotional reactions to pieces of art. Toward the beginning of the twentieth century, Rosalind Cartwright began to channel empathy in a more familiar way. Beyond the application in art and aesthetic, Cartwright began applying the concept of empathy to interpersonal relationships based on the belief that empathy's interpersonal element—the part centered on connecting with others in a better way—was most significant (Riess, 2018).

Perhaps what is most notable about these origins of empathy is that they began in the context of art—the birth of empathy as a recognized construct seemed to be integrally tied to understanding the way human beings experience works of art. Thus, it seems appropriate that we would return to an examination of how to involve both the artistic and interpersonal aspects of empathy in contemporary society, especially in light of developments over the last century in psychological inquiry, social functioning, and artistic creation.

Defining Empathy

Before beginning to discuss how to channel empathy effectively in society, however, it seems vital to better define and dissect the complex elements of empathy. While there are a number of ways to break down "empathy" into subtypes, the most generally accepted way to subdivide empathy is into three distinct types known as affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and empathic concern (Riess, 2018; Zaki, 2019). In essence, each of these terms refers respectively to the feeling, thinking, and motivational aspects of empathy. *Affective empathy* refers to the ability to feel the emotions of others (Riess, 2018; Zaki, 2019). This is perhaps the most basic aspect of empathy as a whole, and it can be seen in situations such as when a person feels sad because their friend has become sad after being laid off at work. *Cognitive empathy* refers more to the idea of recognizing and mentally understanding the emotions of another

person (Zaki, 2019). This aspect of empathy relies on a concept known as *theory of mind*, which is essentially the ability to recognize that other people have different thoughts, emotions, experiences, and perspectives than oneself (Riess, 2018). A lapse in theory of mind ability can impair empathy significantly, as can be seen in small children and people living with dementia or autism. If theory of mind is intact, however, it allows people to employ the concept of *perspective-taking*, which is arguably the most important aspect of cognitive empathy. Perspective-taking involves the ability to imagine what it would be like to be in someone else's position or to understand how someone else views the world—it fulfills the "put yourself in someone else's shoes" aspect of empathy, and it epitomizes the elements of empathy more related to thinking and understanding abilities (Riess, 2018). Lastly, *empathic concern* refers to someone's desire to improve the situation of someone else, often prompted by an experience of affective and/or cognitive empathy (Riess, 2018; Zaki, 2019). Empathic concern is the motivational aspect of empathy that hopefully inspires positive action and some of the empathy-related concepts that I will discuss later.

Beyond these three primary aspects of empathy, it is also possible to divide empathy based on other elements. Along the lines of permanence, there exists both "trait" and "state" empathy. *Trait empathy* refers to the general utilization and strength of a person's empathetic abilities, and *state empathy* refers to the strength and intensity of how a person employs empathy in a given moment or situation (Van der Graaff et al., 2016). State empathy is considered to be very changeable, whereas trait empathy is more stable (though it can change over a longer period of time, as will be discussed later).

Other terms that fall under the empathy umbrella include motor empathy, emotional contagion, and empathic accuracy. *Motor empathy* describes a more physiological phenomenon whereby a person involuntarily mirrors another person's emotional state, particularly through

intonation of voice, gestures, and muscle movements in the face (Van der Graaff et al, 2016). *Emotional contagion* refers to essentially the same phenomenon, but it is a more holistic term that also includes the general unconscious acquisition of another person's emotional state (Westman, Shadach, & Keinan, 2013). As discussed by a study conducted by Westman and colleagues (2013), this concept is also distinct from the "crossover" of emotions, which describes a more intentional transferring of emotional state from one person to another that stems, rather than a subconscious mirroring of another person in a given moment. Lastly, *empathic accuracy* generally refers to the ability to correctly identify the emotional states of others, and it is also described sometimes more basically as "emotion recognition" (Alvi et al., 2020). Empathic accuracy can at times refer more generally to how well a person's empathetic processes and perceptions correspond to reality and the experiences of others. For example, Rosalind Cartwright coined the term "projective empathy" to refer to situations when people believe they have been empathetic but have instead allowed their perceptions to be clouded by their own experiences and thus may have misperceived, misunderstood, or discredited the position of the other person. This form of empathy is more focused on the self, rather than the other, and differs sharply from what many psychologists would call "true empathy" (Riess, 2018).

One final important element of the definition of empathy is that empathy, in itself is a neutral term. Despite the fact that most people typically use the term with a positive connotation, the processes described above are largely neutral psychological processes that can be employed for the benefit or the harm of others. For example, Warren Poland argues that empathy can be used in destructive ways, noting that "the con man, the demagogue, the exploiter, and the sadist all function best when their empathic skills are sharp" (Poland, 2007, p. 89). Furthermore, while the cognitive element of empathy seemed to help reduce sexual offenses among pedophilic men, both offending and nonoffending pedophilic men were shown to have higher affective empathy

toward children than non-pedophilic men, further demonstrating that empathy does not have to be a positive phenomenon (Schuler et al., 2019). Moreover, as I will discuss later, empathy has limits that can actually fuel bias and prejudice, and at times empathy for one group can lead to destructive behavior against other groups. This fact, in conjunction with the general neutrality of empathy as a human psychological phenomenon, led Paul Bloom to write an entire book entitled *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (Bloom, 2016; Zaki, 2019). This neutrality is especially the case for affective and cognitive empathy. While one could argue that empathic concern is inherently good to a slight degree, empathy as a whole (including empathic concern) is still ultimately an internal, mostly neutral process that must be extended beyond itself for the positive benefits of the empathy to become reality. Author Mick Gordon summarizes this eloquently. He defines empathy as "the ability to imagine the psychological and emotional circumstances of another" (Gordon, 2010, p. 39) and, in light of this definition, he mentions that empathy "in turn enables us to deliberately inflict either kindness or hurt on others by allowing us to imaginatively concoct specifically intentioned behavior" (p. 39). While empathy is certainly powerful, its potency can be enacted either to heal or to destroy.

A Succinct Definition

In summary, for the purpose of this thesis, I will define empathy broadly as the ability to recognize and prepare to respond to the emotional and situational states of another person. While empathy does prepare a person for a response to these states, it does not in itself involve a response or action. Instead, there are other action-oriented constructs that build upon empathy, and I will discuss those in the following section.

Empathy-Related Concepts

In addition to the numerous ideas that fall within the term of "empathy" itself, there are also a number of concepts that are related but not identical to empathy. The most important of

these is *compassion*, a term that in essence moves beyond empathy to include positive, constructive action. I will define compassion as action stemming directly from empathy that demonstrates care and works to improve another person's situation (Rakel & Golant, 2018; Riess, 2018). Noting that compassion moves beyond the aspects of empathy described earlier, Dr. Helen Riess (2018) remarks that "when we witness compassion, we know the circle of empathy has been completed" (p. 16). Compassion mobilizes empathic concern in a way that builds someone else up. True compassion also relies on the idea that the action truly does assist another person by taking into account the other individual's autonomy, feedback, and realistic state. I classify compassion, unlikely empathy, as an essentially positive concept. Furthermore, I also note that compassion relies on the presence of empathy. As suggested in an article by Hastings et al. (2014), empathy provides an essential foundation upon which compassion builds to create positive change and loving behavior.

Similarly, *kindness* is another empathy-related concept that is closely tied to compassion. Using Jamil Zaki's definition, I will define kindness as "our tendency to help each other, even at a cost to ourselves" (Zaki, 2019, p. 4). Although the difference between compassion and kindness is more negligible than the difference between compassion and empathy, the primary difference between kindness and compassion is that kindness is even more action-oriented than compassion. The focus of kindness centers entirely on action—specifically selfless action—whereas compassion lies at the crossroads between action and emotion. Compassion involves not only a caring and empathetic emotional disposition, but also action aimed at improving another person's condition, whereas kindness focuses more squarely on helping others (and it also adds a selfless element to the way one person supports another). Kindness is also related to the concept of *prosocial behavior*, which even more simply, specifically, and sterilely describes an action aimed at helping other people.

In addition to these two concepts, people also frequently discuss the topic of *emotional intelligence*, a concept identified by two psychologists Salovey and Mayer in an attempt to make sense out of an explosion of varied and often inconsistent ideas and measurements of empathy (Zaki, 2019). Mayer and Salovey's definition of this idea first includes several competencies included within the realm of empathy, such as correctly perceiving emotions in others and the ability to understand emotions. Beyond this, emotional intelligence also includes additional emotional competencies outside of the umbrella of empathy—such as the ability to employ emotions appropriately when making choices or the ability to manage and regulate one's own emotions (MacCann et al., 2020). Often this term has been used in analyses of other competencies relevant to work or school, as seen in the fact that Mayer and Salovey's concept of emotional intelligence has been used to predict scores of academic ability (MacCann et al., 2020).

Sympathy is another concept that people often confuse with empathy, but the concepts are very distinct. Sympathy describes the idea of feeling bad for someone else's situation and involves a greater sense of separation between people than empathy does (Riess, 2018). In empathy, a person to some degree takes on the emotions, thoughts, and perspective of someone else, but sympathy is mostly limited to a sense of pity for another individual. Sympathy recognizes a sense of injustice in another person's bad situation, but it is more limited in scope than empathy.

There are also a number of concepts that often look like they fit under the empathy umbrella but are neither empathetic nor compassionate in nature: people-pleasing, enabling, and helicopter parenting (Riess, 2018). It is important to describe each of these because we can better understand what empathy *is* by knowing what empathy *is not*. *People-pleasing* involves helping behaviors rooted in a desire to be liked or accepted. This type of others-oriented behavior often

leads to burnout and is not considered compassion, largely because it does not stem from empathy. *Enabling* involves acting in a way that might feel as though it helps another person, but it actually ends up making someone else's situation worse. This behavior *might* be rooted in empathy, but it does not reach the point of compassion because the enabling behavior does not ultimately aim at improving that person's condition. It instead aims to provide temporary relief for an immediate discomfort. This kind of behavior is often seen when people try to be kind to people addicted to substances—in an attempt to be nice, their behavior misses the mark of compassion because it makes the person's root problem worse. Lastly, *helicopter parenting* refers to a pattern of behavior characterized by overprotection and the attempt to solve every problem for another individual. This pattern of behavior ends up hindering that person from developing important self-sufficient abilities, and while in the short term it may solve a specific problem, it ultimately worsens the other person's state rather than improving it. These last two concepts—enabling and helicopter parenting—show that compassion does not necessarily involve "being nice"—it may involve action that makes someone else feel worse in a short-term moment in order to benefit them long-term. Nevertheless, compassionate action still (1) derives from a place of empathy and (2) aims at improving the situation of the other person.

Neuroscience of Empathy

Now that I have created a common ground by establishing the definition of "empathy," it is important to touch on a little bit of the neuroscience and biology behind empathetic processes. The gold standard and perhaps most iconic element of the neuroscience of empathy is the existence of mirror neurons—parts of the brain that activate when watching someone else perform a behavior or experience an emotion (Rakel & Golant, 2018; Riess, 2018; Zaki, 2019). A great example of this phenomenon in humans stems from a study looking at the brain activation of romantic couples through an fMRI. Researchers determined that the same areas of

the brain became activated in women when they were shocked as when they were aware that their partner was shocked. The brain activation differed only in intensity for the two situations, with the activation becoming more intense when actually being shocked (Riess, 2018; Singer & Decety, 2011). Scientific research has found that empathy has physiological elements to it as well; one study has found that watching someone plunge their hand into freezing water physiologically lowers the hand temperature of the observer (Cooper et al., 2014; Rakel & Golant, 2018). Other research also indicates that human connection can lead to synchronized heart beats (McCraty et al., 1998). One study in particular asked two people to personally connected with one another and then measured brain activation in a subsequent activity; they found that, in a fourth of cases, when one person was shown a light in a room separate from the other person, the second person's brain became activated despite having no direct interaction or knowledge of the light. This demonstrates that—in neurological terms—"empathy" and connection can stem across physical distance and happen automatically (Grinberg-Zylberbaum et al., 1993; Rakel & Golant, 2018).

Beyond mirror neurons and studies on the biology of the human connection, other neuroscientific research supports the distinction between cognitive and affective empathy, demonstrating that there are actually two separate and independent brain regions that control each function. Whereas the affective element of empathy came from the inferior frontal gyrus, researchers found that the ventromedial prefrontal cortex controlled the cognitive aspect of empathy, and they also determined that people with damage to one region could still proficiently perform the other ability (Shamay-Tsorry, Aharon-Peretz, & Perry, 2009). Given their separation at the physical level, this finding indicates the importance of distinguishing between cognitive and affect empathetic abilities in seeking to develop empathy.

The Plasticity of Empathy

While this neuroscientific research does indicate that humans are inclined and predisposed toward empathy, researchers also caution against allowing this research to imply that our empathetic abilities are fixed and unchangeable. Researcher Jamil Zaki seeks to dispel the generally accepted assumptions that empathy is only a fixed trait or an uncontrolled reflex—a combination that he coins as the “Roddenberry hypothesis” (Zaki, 2019, p. 15). Indeed, many believe that some people are more empathetic than others and that we are largely powerless to change our own empathetic abilities. Zaki seeks to dismiss the myth of “psychological fixism” that commonly dominates our idea about how a number of traits work, such as intelligence or empathy; such a myth ignores our adaptability as humans and the complex origins of our personal traits. He begins by noting that there *is* indeed a genetic component to empathy—although genetics certainly do not paint the entire picture, some people are certainly more disposed toward having a higher empathic capacity than others. Research indicates that approximately 30% of empathy boils down to genetics, thus indicating that there are many more pieces to the puzzle and that a person can certainly take steps to improve their empathetic abilities (Knafo & Uzefovsky, 2013; Zaki, 2019). “Nurture” and the way people are raised plays a big role in a person’s empathy level, too, as seen in research indicating that children with parents who demonstrate more empathy end up showing more empathy themselves (Spinrad & Gal, 2018; Zaki, 2019).

However, Zaki’s ultimate point goes beyond the complex origin of empathetic ability to argue that empathy can be *chosen*. He notes that while many choose to push into empathy when it improves their image or makes them feel happy, the same people often turn off their empathetic abilities when the empathy would make them uncomfortable or overwhelmed. One study in particular determined that individuals more commonly chose to hear a version of a story

without emotional and empathetic content when they anticipated being asked to sacrifice money for the sake of the homeless storyteller (Shaw, Batson, & Todd, 1994). Another study noted that students stayed farther away from a donation table containing empathy triggers such as poignant pictures or a person in a wheelchair than they did from a table with more neutral elements such as happy photos (Pancer et al., 1979). A very large and substantial body of research also indicates that people choose, in their minds, to lessen the humanity and emotional experiences of people whom they have harmed (Zaki, 2019). For example, after being told how white settlers murdered Native Americans, white Americans indicated a lower belief in the ability of Native Americans to feel some emotions than their counterparts that were not told about the killings. These researchers found similar results with other groups, such as humans in general rating the emotions of aliens (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006). This implies that we are less willing to empathize with people we have hurt (or even with people who have been hurt by those similar to us). All of these examples serve to demonstrate that people can and do reduce empathetic abilities when advantageous, and that they often lower this cognitive and emotional experience of empathy in order to diminish conflict or inconsistency when their outward behavior that does not fall in line with compassionate action and kindness.

However, research also indicates that people can choose to elevate their use of empathy. Perhaps the best way to examine this is through studies done with psychopaths—people with a clinical deficit in empathy (Zaki, 2019). Under normal circumstances, individuals diagnosed with psychopathy do not show activation of mirror neurons when viewing a picture of a person suffering, but when researchers asked the participants to empathize and feel the emotions of the people in the pictures, the activation of mirror neurons became more similar to that of the non-psychopathic control participants (Meffert et al., 2013). This finding indicates that something as simple as a prompt to empathize can increase a person's empathy and lead them to *choose*

empathy. Furthermore, beyond these short-term changes related to choice, there is also evidence that empathetic abilities can grow over time. For example, one study showed improved empathy—even in the anatomy of the brain—after a nine-month period of loving-kindness meditation training (Hildebrandt, McCall, & Singer, 2017). Another study showed that asking students to describe to other students how empathy is a learned skill improved the empathy of those students—an effect that held when tested two months later (Zaki, 2019). All of the above findings indicate that empathy is a skill that can be intentionally activated, purposefully deactivated, and gradually developed over time. This research bears significant relevance on the rest of this thesis because it tells us that, since it is possible for a person to become more empathetic, it *is* worth investigating what factors can aid in that empathetic development process.

Why Empathy & Compassion?

Even if we can develop empathy, why would we want to? Beyond the fact that empathy and compassion "feel good," are there any "objective" reasons why empathy is important? The answer is yes—there are a number of reasons why it is important for us to develop empathy and compassion both as individuals and as a society.

A benefit of empathy and compassion that many people recognize intuitively is that they are associated with better relationships. One study found an association between perspective-taking and both higher relational quality and social support; it also found an association between compassion and forgiveness, though this study's definition of compassion seems closer to this thesis's definition of affective empathy (Davis, 2017). Another study found that empathy for positive emotions in others was linked to both feelings of social connection and sense of personal well-being (Morelli, Lieberman, & Zaki, 2015). Along those lines, there is also evidence that people who express more empathy demonstrate more happiness and have lower instances of depression (Zaki, 2019). Physical health benefits of empathy and compassion are also evident, as

seen in a study finding that asthmatic children of parents who engaged in more perspective-taking (cognitive empathy) showed more favorable outcomes from tests for inflammatory markers in the blood (Manczak et al., 2017). Although not a causal study, this indicates that parental perspective-taking might have positive implications on childhood health outcomes. There are also implications for empathy and compassion in the business world, with studies showing that a caring work environment and caring behavior from leaders promote higher productivity and customer satisfaction levels (Scarnati, 1998).

Even the medical field—an area that has been historically averse to empathy—stands to benefit from the use of empathy within its realm. Medical journals from the mid-twentieth century instructed doctors to utilize "detached reasoning" in their practice; objectivity—not empathy—would provide the best results because it would prevent burnout and keep emotions from clouding judgment (Rakel & Golant, 2018). However, many researchers and clinicians have discovered that removing compassion and the human connection from healthcare practice hurts the entire process and becomes detrimental to both patients and doctors. In one sense, benefits of empathy and compassion extend to healthcare institutions themselves—one study in particular discovered that raising both empathy and responsiveness in healthcare contexts elevates long-term profitability and customer satisfaction (Ye, Dong, & Lee, 2017).

In a larger sense, empathy seems to have benefits for patients and for the physical health of human beings as a whole. Evidence shows that when healthcare workers treat patients empathetically, the patients often become more motivated to take measures to monitor and maintain their own health, as seen in a study finding that diabetic patients of more compassionate doctors had better control of their blood sugar because they more frequently took steps to mitigate high blood sugar levels (Hojat et al., 2011; Rakel & Golant, 2018). But perhaps what is more fascinating is that patients who are treated compassionately can actually *heal* faster than

their counterparts regardless of conscious effort on the part of the patient. Rakel and colleagues (2011) conducted a study with people suffering from a cold in which one group of patients were treated impersonally by the doctor, a second group was treated compassionately, and the last group did not see a doctor. As measured with white blood cells and other immune markers, those who were treated compassionately by the doctor healed from the cold more than a day sooner than those who received the impersonal treatment. This difference in recovery times could be observed physiologically, indicating that it did not simply stem from changes in patient behavior but that the immune system seemed to mount a different response after having a connection with a doctor. Furthermore, fascinatingly enough, patients not seeing a doctor at all seemed to recover a bit more quickly than those who received impersonal treatment, although the difference was not statistically significant. These results indicate not only the importance of using compassion and the human connection in the healthcare environment, but also that there might be tangible health benefits for regularly connecting compassionately with others in any context.

Limits to Empathy

As discussed earlier, "empathy" on its own is neither exclusively nor inherently a good phenomenon. I mentioned compassion as the solution to the general neutrality of empathy as a concept, but there are also a few specific ways that empathy can become limited or even dangerous. While certainly not exhaustive, the next few sections comprise a discussion of some of the major limitations to empathy. It will be necessary to understand these limitations for the later exploration of how to develop empathy and compassion through theatre and storytelling.

Compassion Fatigue

As noted earlier, one of the biggest concerns with introducing empathy into the medical field was that doctors may experience burnout due to the emotional toll of employing empathy with patients. This phenomenon of burnout—more formally known as "compassion fatigue"—is

certainly present in a number of caring professions, particularly in healthcare. A sizable amount of research has been dedicated to seeking to learn more about and minimize the negative effects of this so-called compassion fatigue, but two major ways of mitigating its effects stand out in the literature. The first is that the human connection and true compassion can actually act as the solution to burnout related to compassion fatigue (Rakel & Golant, 2018). Rakel and Golant (2018) argue for compassion over *empathic distress*—a term referring to the point where someone mixes their own emotional experiences with that of others and essentially fixates on their own negative feelings and discomfort in the situation. Rakel & Golant argue that compassion extends beyond empathy and, while acknowledging that one might not be able to fully change a situation, a person can offer their presence, connection, concern, and care. In this sense, a solution to compassion fatigue is actually compassion itself; by helping people to replace empathic distress with a healthy engagement in compassion and human connection, we can begin to overcome the issue of compassion fatigue.

The second way, as explained by Zaki (2019), argues for a concept known as "emotional granularity" (p. 112). This method encourages people to push into their feelings rather than against them, and it similarly seeks to solve the issue posed by empathic distress. Emotional granularity involves the ability to precisely and specifically identify one's feelings—specifically how other people and situations affect these feelings. This ability allows a person to better manage their emotions because they are more clearly identified (Zaki, 2019). Research indicates that emotional granularity promotes resiliency, less destructive behavior, and lower presence of affective disorders; other research indicates emotional granularity is not an inherent characteristic but can be developed as a skill, and it seems to offer a potential solution to issues posed by compassion fatigue and burnout (Brackett et al., 2012; Kashdan, Barrett, & McKnight, 2015; Zaki, 2019).

These principles offer a word of warning and a piece of advice for how all individuals can manage empathy and compassion in a healthy way. In one sense, it presents a counterargument to those who use compassion fatigue as a reason why empathy and compassion should not have a prominent place in the medical field. Second, it also provides insight into how actors and theatre artists can manage the often-intense emotional experiences that they may encounter while performing and working in their field. These principles are important to remember as I move forward in discussing how theatre can be utilized to promote empathy and compassion. Empathic distress ought to be avoided, and true compassion, connection, and emotional awareness can help to prevent burnout and promote healthy compassionate connection.

General Inhibitors of Empathy

There are a number of other factors that can reduce empathy. Several of them are related to the idea that greater distance naturally encourages less empathy and closeness, as discussed more extensively in the next section; thus, "proximal empathy" requires less conscious effort than "distal empathy" (Riess, 2018). This can be seen in the fact that our empathy lowers toward people and groups with whom we are less familiar and with whom we less identify ("identifiable victim effect") (Riess, 2018). Having more power may also lead to engaging in lower empathy, as shown in a study finding that those asked to recall an instance where they had a great amount of power demonstrated lower motor empathy than those asked to recall an instance where they were in a lower position of power (Hogeveen, Inzlicht, & Obhi, 2014). This indicates another form of distance that can inhibit empathy—"social" distance. Moral distance can also decrease empathy, as shown in the fact that people tend to have less empathy toward people against whom they hold a moral judgement (Riess, 2018).

Empathy has also been shown to vary based on certain circumstantial factors. For example, many individuals tend to display lesser empathy or helping behavior when they are overwhelmed or pressed for time (Zaki, 2019). A variety of other miscellaneous circumstances—such as "mood, hunger, sleep, and the level of responsibilities you carry" (Riess, 2018, p. 28) can influence the level of empathy a person demonstrates in a given situation as well. As mentioned to earlier, another barrier to empathy is that once a person has caused harm to a person or a certain group of individuals, that person tends to decrease their empathetic feelings toward that person and/or group in order to reduce the cognitive dissonance and discomfort that comes from inconsistency in their actions (Zaki, 2019). Thus, previous violence and harm against a group of people can actually serve as an inhibitor of future empathy. People also struggle to express empathy toward larger groups—people are better at connecting with individuals and the suffering of a small group of people than they are at comprehending the tragedy of mass death (Riess, 2018). This may offer a reason why storytelling can be effective at increasing empathy and at using the story of a specific person to seek to increase positive, empathetic attitudes toward larger groups—more on that later.

Prejudice

The second major limitation to empathy deals with a familiar and pervasive topic: prejudice. Because empathy is often associated with an understanding attitude and the ability to overcome differences, many might be surprised to hear that empathy can actual serve to *increase* prejudice; in its "natural" state, empathy can paradoxically serve to escalate conflicts between groups rather than decrease them.

The reason for this paradox stems largely from the evolutionary psychology behind empathy. From an evolutionary perspective, empathy proves to be very beneficial because it can promote acts of compassion, and those acts can in turn help to promote the survival of our genes

and of the human species as a whole (Zaki, 2019). Aiding helpless children and relatives not only has the potential to increase a person's specific survival chances but also to increase the odds that the person's genetic material continues to pass on. Additionally, in order to further aid survival, humans also have acquired a natural tendency to separate people into groups (Riess, 2018). In psychology, an *in-group* refers to the group to which a person belongs, whereas an *out-group* is a group to which a person does not belong. For example, for a white person, other white people constitute an in-group, whereas Asians constitute an out-group for that person. Survival instincts have promoted supporting the members of one's own group at the expense of those outside; aiding similar people historically would have best aided the survival of oneself and one's own genes, whereas helping "outsiders" could hurt survival chances by assisting competitors over scarce survival resources. This helps to explain why, in our natural state, people experience affective and cognitive empathy most strongly toward people who are very similar to them and most weakly (if at all) toward people of different appearance and characteristics (Riess, 2018). Naturally, greater similarity (and greater closeness—whether social or physical) leads to greater empathy.

A fascinating find from psychologists is that this deficit in empathy for out-groups can be found even in randomly and recently generated groupings. A classic example comes from a social experiment conducted by Jane Elliot in an elementary school classroom. She divided students based on eye color and, depending on the day, would declare that one group was superior. The young students quickly began to discriminate against each other based on this randomly assigned out-group that lacked a history of hate or difference (Peters, 1987). Other studies indicate a similar trend, such as one showing that after assigning people one of two armband colors, people view the members of their own group as more competent, good-looking, and nice (Zaki, 2019). These natural deficits in empathy toward out-groups become confounded

under circumstances of conflict, often because under these conditions people make the choice not to empathize with others. This can be seen in a study that indicated that, in light of conflict between their two groups, a group of right-wing Israeli individuals indicated a preference against empathizing with Palestinians—a preference that manifested in actual decreased empathy for a specific Palestinian individual (Porat, Halperin, & Tamir, 2016; Zaki, 2019). Moreover, because empathy plays such a strong role in compassion, obstruction to empathy for out-group members can lead to obstruction in compassionate behavior toward people of other groups, as shown in a study indicating that people were less likely to agree to an organ donation when the coordinator was of a different race or ethnicity (Riess, 2018).

An important thing to note about all of the above research, however, is that the issue seems to rest not in the breakdown of empathy altogether but in the lack or scarcity of empathy toward the out-group. Thus, in one sense, the problem is not that empathy has malfunctioned in itself; instead, people are not inclined and/or actively choose not to employ an equal amount of empathy toward members of out-groups.

Two major solutions to correcting this setback of empathy stand out in current literature. The first is to expand people's view of their in-group to include all of humanity rather than simply individuals of the same race, gender, religion, sexuality, and other identity markers (Riess, 2018; Zaki, 2019). In several circumstances, this reframing can quickly correct the way that tribalism limits empathy. One study discovered that by encouraging soccer fans to think about their identity as a soccer fan in general rather than their identity as a fan of their specific team, the percentage of people who stopped to assist people wearing a shirt of a rival team rose from 30% to 70% (Levine et al., 2005). This indicates that, perhaps by encouraging people to consider their identity as a human being rather than as a member of a specific group, empathy and compassion might be increased. One thing to note in particular is that this study focuses on

prosocial behavior and the action-oriented elements of compassion, indicating that the impact of the reframing correction seems to extend to compassion as well. Given the natural tendency of people to divide, encouraging people to reframe their in-groups and out-groups to overcome prejudicial trends can be difficult, but it is certainly worthwhile for the kinder society that could result. Dr. Helen Riess (2018) summarizes this imperative eloquently, arguing that "universal care-based morality must ultimately straddle older evolutionary motivational brain mechanisms that favor tribal and in-group preferences" (p. 69).

The second major way to overcome this setback is through connection. The body of literature points to the idea that people experience greater amounts of empathy when they have personal experiences with the specific person or the specific group to which that person belongs (Riess, 2018). Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that fostering personal experiences between members of different groups could help to bridge this empathy gap. But, while increased interaction can help to lower prejudice toward out-groups, it is important to note that this interaction must involve personal connection and cannot involve simply being surrounded by the group or person in question. One study demonstrated that when people saw (and did not personally interact with) members of a minority group on public transportation, their empathetic attitudes and understanding actually decreased after this encounter (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). In contrast, another study found that by engaging in more frequent quality interactions with people of an out-group, prejudice could be lowered (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Zaki, 2019). Thus, the personal, relational, and emotional interaction is key to the fruitfulness of this remedy to fractured empathy.

There are two additional nuances of this phenomenon that are important to discuss. First, with regard to interactions between minority and majority groups, balance and not equality when sharing perspectives is the golden rule (Zaki, 2019). People in the majority develop greater

empathy and compassion for members of the minority group by listening to the perspective of those in the minority; however, often the individuals in the minority group have already frequently heard the perspective of the majority group, and thus they benefit from interactions where they are able to be listened to more than they listen, as detailed in Emile Bruneau and Rebecca Saxe's "The Power of Being Heard: The Benefits of Perspective-Giving in the Context of Intergroup Conflict" (2012; Zaki, 2019). Thus, when attempting to create compassion and equality through connection, we should pay attention to which groups already have more power and a greater voice in society as is. The second nuance deals with connecting with self. In addition to the benefit of connecting with others, a growing body of research has discovered that becoming more connected with the past and future version of ourselves can help to lower prejudice, hate, and lack of empathy (Zaki, 2019). This indicates another way where we can seek to improve deficits in empathy and compassion on an individual level.

All of the research serves to indicate that empathy, when left unchecked, not only allows for and but even encourages prejudice. However, we can—and must—correct for this deficiency in empathy through reframing and connection. Empathy researcher Dr. Helen Riess (2018) takes the importance of refining natural empathy a step further, arguing that "without expanding empathy beyond our in-groups and borders, civilization as we know it will not survive" (p. 71). Clearly, in order to reap the benefits of empathy and compassion, it is important for us to encourage people to refine their empathy skills both in general and with respect to those different from them.

Developing Empathy & Compassion

Previous sections of this thesis have touched on both the potential and the necessity to improve the empathetic and compassionate abilities of members of our society. In addition, there is also evidence for the urgency of this type of training. Anecdotal evidence is full of examples

of the urgent need for more compassion, including racial tensions and nasty arguments between friends on social media. Empirical evidence also exists for the increasing polarization and decreasing use of empathy in recent years, such as a study tracking how upset Americans indicated they would be if their child married someone of the opposite political party (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). From 1960 to 2008, the percentage of people who indicated that they would be upset rose from 5% to 27% for Republicans and from 3% to 20% for Democrats. What perhaps is even more alarming, however, is the increase from 2008 to 2010; in just two years, the numbers rose to almost 50% of Republicans and more than 30% of Democrats. This happened even before what many might characterize as the polarizing effect that the Trump administration has had on American politics. Even with just this single example of the political ideologies leading to discord among people, there is clear evidence of an urgent need to address a deficit in empathy and compassion in our society.

In light of all the information up to this point, the rest of this thesis seeks to discover and describe how we might both increase and improve the presence of empathy and compassion in our own communities. There are a number of factors that researchers have explored for expanding our empathetic capacities. Compassionate mindfulness meditation—as championed by researcher Dr. David Rakel (Rakel & Golant, 2018)—and loving-kindness meditation as mentioned earlier are two very popular choices. However, as previously mentioned, this thesis will seek to explore how theatre might serve as one of those factors.

Storytelling

Perhaps the best way to begin our exploration of theatre's impact on empathy and compassion is by exploring how the broader idea of storytelling relates to empathy and compassion. Storytelling engages people in a way that piques their interest, and there is vast empirical and theoretical evidence for why it might be a successful tool for developing

compassion among people. Dr. Jamil Zaki (2019) notes that the strength of storytelling lies in part in its potential for "flattening our empathetic landscape, making distant others feel less distant and caring for them less difficult" (p. 76). One noticeable advantage of storytelling is that it offers the potential to create direct experiences with groups of people different from one's own. This can be particularly useful because, as noted early, people are more likely to engage in empathy and compassion for people and groups with whom they have a personal connection or specific past experience (Riess, 2018).

Storytelling also seems to have greater potential for enacting positive change than other popular solutions, such as active listening. Despite the potential of dialogue and interpersonal interaction to develop perspective-taking and empathy, there are many circumstances where hostility, frustration, or burnout is so high that people will simply refuse to engage in constructive dialogue to move toward compassion. For example, one study found that members of both the Democratic and Republican parties were willing to spend money to avoid hearing the perspectives of each other, indicating that empathetic and compassionate connections may not happen on their own without intervention (Frimer, Skitka, & Motyl, 2017). Storytelling offers a potential remedy to this dilemma—it allows a safer, lower-stakes environment where the perspectives of different groups can be seen. The diminished reality (or complete fiction) in the storytelling context may lower pressure and strain for individuals, allowing them to approach the situation with greater openness, vulnerability, and willingness to listen. One example where storytelling was able to do this centers around the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide; individuals on both sides of that conflict were very reluctant to engage one another in meaningful dialogue aimed at conflict resolution, but a radio program known as *New Dawn* allowed an increase in empathy for members of both groups associated with the conflict by telling a fictional story involving people from both sides of the tragic conflict (Paluck, 2009; Zaki, 2019).

Another reason why storytelling might be an effective way to build empathy deals with a concept that Zaki (2019) refers to as "untethering" (p. 74). Zaki mentions how daydreaming often encourages and lays the foundation for strengthened empathy skills, and he says that by disconnecting from reality in a healthy way, we are able to benefit. Because of this, storytelling could be a particularly useful tool to aid in the development of compassionate and empathetic skills.

One criticism of storytelling might be that it only focuses on one individual (or a small group of people), and in order to create positive change, one might argue, impact ought to be broader. While there might be issues with misrepresenting a group of people if individuals only listen to the story of one member of such group, evidence actually indicates that empathy for one member of a (marginalized) group can translate more broadly to increased empathy for all members of that group (Zaki, 2019). This can be seen in a study that found that people who empathized and heard the perspective of one individual suffering from AIDS demonstrated more care and more positive attitudes toward people with AIDS in general (Batson et al., 1997). In light of all of this, storytelling might be a particularly viable option for not only creating empathy broadly but also for overcoming the hurdle of prejudice in fostering empathy.

The body of literature supporting the ability of storytelling to positively influence the development of empathy is robust. One study conducted by Bui, Kalpidou, DeVito, and Greene (2016) sought to measure how disparagement humor and empathy were related. They had participants rate the funniness levels of videos containing disparaging humor before and after reading either a story designed to invoke empathy or a control story, and they found that there was a statistically significant decline in the amount of pleasure taken from disparaging humor in the group exposed to an empathetic story (Bui, Kalpidou, DeVito, and Greene, 2016). Another study conducted by Faver and Alanis (2012) sought to examine how a storytelling-based

program could foster empathy in children who have been exposed to neglect/abuse and in parents who seek to adopt these children. Based on reports from the parents, this study showed that the use of stories encouraged children to discuss the feelings of other people and helped the parents to take the perspective of the children (Faver & Alanis, 2012). The success of storytelling in fostering empathy within this context indicates that the use of storytelling through a theatrical performance may prove to be effective as well.

Beyond the general benefits of storytelling, there is also evidence that fiction in particular might provide a fertile breeding ground for empathy. Zaki succinctly says that "fiction is empathy's gateway drug" (p. 82), and the increased untethering and safety related to engaging with a fictional story might make fiction a specific form of storytelling that is even more potent. There are a number of empirical studies supporting effectiveness of literature at fostering compassion and empathy. One meta-analysis concluded that those who read more fiction (instead of non-fiction) for pleasure also tended to have slightly higher empathy than their peers (Mumper & Gerrig, 2017). A different study found that participants had more positive attitudes and affective empathy toward Arab Muslims (an outgroup for participants in the study) after hearing a full fictional story centered around an Arab Muslim than participants who only heard a summary of the story (Johnson, 2013). This study in particular not only points to the value of fiction but also to the fact that the immersive aspect of storytelling could prove valuable to the fostering of empathy. (As will be seen later, this may provide an indication for why theatre might be useful at fostering empathy.) It's not simply the conveying of a story that matters—how the story is conveyed plays a role as well, and it seems that when participants are "more transported" into the story via strong fictional storytelling methods (or what are commonly accepted as so), the benefits for empathy may be higher.

Another benefit arising from engagement with fictional storytelling stems from its potential to provide intrapersonal healing. When individuals have the ability to identify with characters in a story, they can learn about themselves, their actions, and their circumstances in new ways, as Dr. Zaki (2019) notes that "novels, plays, and fiction can help readers recast their own lives through the characters they meet" (p. 87). Fictional storytelling allows people to better discover their humanity—to more safely and constructively tackle their insecurities, wounds, misdeeds, and vulnerabilities. Fictional storytelling can thus help to foster greater self-compassion, which not only provides benefits for an individual in itself, but also has the potential to assist in overcoming hate and prejudice toward others (as mentioned earlier). One example of fictional storytelling successfully leading to intrapersonal healing deals with a project known as the Changing Lives project that paired repeat-offending criminals with a literature program. Inmates who went through this program became much less likely to reoffend (especially for violent crimes) than their counterparts, and many believe that this was because the program helped to develop empathetic skills among the prisoners (Jarjoura & Krumholz, 1998; Zaki, 2019).

Furthermore, art has also been noted for its capabilities of changing the perspectives of others. In her eloquent writing style that I have cited previously, Dr. Helen Riess (2018) remarks that "when a piece of art truly means something to us, we are not simply moved to a different emotion; we can be moved to consider a different perspective or action, and a shared emotional experience that unifies our humanity with those who are both like and unlike ourselves" (p. 145). Riess also mentions that just as empathy and compassion rely on the perception of various cues and responding to them appropriately, interaction with art relies similarly on the perception of meaning and an individual response to the message of the artist. Zaki (2019) also expresses his support for art and its ability to enhance empathetic abilities, noting that "it makes empathy safer

and more enjoyable, even in the hardest circumstances" (p. 93). This empirical research on storytelling and affirmation of the value of art in creating empathy leads me nicely into my next discussion on theatre in particular.

Overlaps of Theatre & Empathy

As alluded to earlier, even beyond the benefits of the broader category of storytelling, there is anecdotal evidence and a growing body of empirical research showing that the specific form of storytelling known as theatre can help to refine empathy and improve compassion.

Partial support for this relationship can be seen in empirical research on the concept of role-playing—a concept similar to that of performing in theatre but less comprehensive and intense in its scope. For example, some educational researchers have sought to develop ways of employing role-playing within a storytelling context to foster perspective-taking and empathy among children (Carlomagno, Di Tore, & Sibilio, 2014). Furumi and Koyasu (2012) also demonstrated that participants who participated in a role-playing activity performed better on a perspective-taking task than those who did not engage in role-playing. A more comprehensive study conducted by Chalmers and Townsend (1990) similarly found that a role-playing training program helped a group of young women increase perspective-taking, empathy, prosocial behavior, and skills related to addressing interpersonal conflict. Each of these studies demonstrates empirical evidence for the way that role-playing might pose a potential avenue for developing empathy skills, and thus they indicate that participation in theatre performances might have the potential to create a similar effect. A number of psychologists have also commented on how performing in theatre might have strong connections to empathy. For example, Zaki (2019) commented that using Stanislavski's techniques for acting "sounds like empathy's extreme sport" (p. 78), and he also mentioned that acting "reins in the costs that empathizing can impose, through the distance of fiction" (p. 81). In doing so, he brings up

fascinating points about the way that theatre can provide a safer breeding ground for engaging in empathy and perspective-taking techniques that can then be applied in "riskier," real-world situations.

There are a number of anecdotal examples of how participation in theatre can foster empathy, compassion, and other socioemotional benefits. Notable examples include the use of theatre to help prisoners in Latin America gain a better, more humanized self-image (Palau, 2018) and the use of dance to foster empathy among children in underprivileged communities in New York City (Yap, 2016). There are also a number of similar examples within my own local community. Moreover, the empirical evidence for how acting (and not simply role-playing) can help to build empathy has been growing as well. One fascinating study by emerging researcher Thalia Goldstein found that acting training (and not other forms of arts training) improved the empathy of both young children and adolescents after a year's time (Goldstein & Winner, 2012).

But there are also reasons why engaging in theatre from an audience perspective (and not just performing in it) might have potential benefits for empathy as well. Perhaps the strongest argument for why viewing live theatre provides one of the strongest opportunities to develop compassion is the fact that it is a visual storytelling medium that fundamentally involves human interaction. Because of this, theatre not only has all of the benefits of storytelling as previously described, but it also adds onto that storytelling the benefit of providing live empathetic cues. When audiences view live theatre, they watch performers display a variety of emotional signals to one another on the stage. They have the opportunity to actually *practice* reading a variety of empathetic cues and emotions from live human beings.

Empirical research on this topic has been minimal, and there certainly is no consensus among psychologists on this topic (though there likely is among theatre artists). Nevertheless, support for this idea is growing. Mick Gordon writes a significant amount of theory on this topic

and brings up the idea that theatre allows us the opportunity to understand how our decisions and emotional states can impact the people around us and our relationships with them. Gordon (2010) summarizes these ideas well when he states that "in the theatre we can both feel emotion *and* understand its social implications without our usual, self-interested, involvement" (p. 45). Research by Dr. Joe Devlin and others out of the University of Central London even uncovered that the heart beats of audience members synchronize when they watch a live theatre performance together—a physiological indication of connection that is typically only present between couples, teammates, and groupings related to one another in those types of ways (UCL Psychology and Language Sciences, 2017). This research indicates that engagement in live theatre from the audience perspective benefits people by allowing human connection not only with the people onstage but also with fellow audience members.

Furthermore, although the literature lacks empirical data identical to the question and study of this thesis, the literature does have a number of studies that indicate that experiencing live theatre may offer a unique and particularly strong way of developing various aspects of empathy. One notable study conducted by Omasta (2011) indicates a link between viewing theatre and a change in the beliefs and attitudes of middle school students. Omasta surveyed students before and after the watching of a performance and compared their levels of agreement to statements such as "The type of people you are friends with says a lot about the kind of person you are" (Omasta, 2011). Though not all of the statements had statistically significant changes in levels of agreement, several of the statements did, and this demonstrates the potential for theatre to influence the audience's attitudes, thus indicating that it might be able to influence audience empathy levels.

Additional research also suggests a tie between the fine arts and empathy. A study conducted by Stavrova and Meckel (2017) compared high and low-empathy individuals in their

ability to perceive the emotions of artists and experience these emotions for themselves while interacting with a work of art. They studied various artistic mediums, including music, poetry, photography, and visual art, and they found that those who scored higher on the empathy questionnaire (Toronto Empathy Questionnaire) were better able to identify and personally experience the emotions of artists within various realms of the fine arts (Stavrova & Meckel, 2017).

Perhaps more compelling than the above research, however, is a literature review conducted by Acai, McQueen, McKinnon, and Sonnadara (2017) that identified over two dozen studies that indicate that both the visual and performing arts can affect interpersonal skills (such as empathy, teamwork, and communication), specifically among members of the health professions. Their article asserts that "engagement in the arts can facilitate the interpersonal development of health professionals through the fostering of an 'empathic imagination'" (Acai et al., 2017, p. 62), and they contend that this can be done either through viewing art or actively participating in it.

A second literature review also found seven studies with evidence supporting that theatre influenced "peer interaction, social skills, and empowerment" (Daykin et al., 2008, p. 255) among young people aged 11-18. This same review also found seven more studies indicating that theatre influenced positive change in awareness, attitude, and/or behavior among this same age group on topics of HIV/AIDS, sex, alcohol, and drugs (Daykin et al., 2008).

What About Film?

One art form very similar to live theatre is film. Some might argue that film would have the same opportunity to foster compassion and empathy as live theatre would. I certainly agree that film has the potential to create empathy and compassion—particularly because it is a medium of visual storytelling. Furthermore, there is potential for video and digital media to

provide a number of benefits for encouraging people to seek empathy, particularly because film can be shared easily across physical distance (Zaki, 2019). However, I do not believe that film's capacity for fostering empathy matches that of live theatre. There are also many instances of the digital world serving to inhibit empathetic functioning as well, as can be seen in hostility on social media (Zaki, 2019). Moreover, while there seems to be no comprehensive study specifically comparing the function of storytelling in a live performance to a filmed performance, there are a number of additional reasons why I would hypothesize that films and filmed live performances do not have the same empathetic potential as live theatre. First among these reasons is that video and digital media water down empathetic cues compared to live theatre; it is more difficult to discern facial expressions, body posture, eye contact, and even vocal tone across the screen than it would be during a life interaction. Another, less scientific reason is that film inhibits the sharing of mutual energy between people in a shared space. Perhaps the most important distinction, however, is that in live theatre, a connection can be made between audience and performer. I believe that one of the most essential ingredients to healthy empathy and compassion is the presence of a human connection between two people in real time. Live theatre allows for this—although the interaction may not be as direct as a conversation, performers communicate with an audience in the same room, in real time, and with their actual, physical presence. Furthermore, audiences in live theatre provide feedback to performers, and this feedback often influences the performers and their performances in turn. In film, this interaction is minimized. I do still believe that all art—including film—involves communication between viewer and artist, as noted by Dr. Helen Riess (2018) in her eloquent assertion that "there is a collaboration between artists and their viewers that transforms sculptures, paintings, music, the written word, and performing arts into an emotional experience that is shaped by both sides of the transaction" (p. 144). Nevertheless, I believe that live, performing arts—and theatre

in particular—maximize this connection and collaboration in a way that cannot be matched by other art forms. In film, the film or filmed performance does not change based on audience interaction, and the performers are not actually present in the room as they communicate with audience members. Unlike in live theatre, the audience in a film is unable to connect with a live, actual *person* as they are watching the performance—they instead are connecting with images of that person. While there may be little psychological research present at the moment to support these claims, these reasons provide a basis for my hypothesis that filmed performance will not be able to foster compassion and empathy in audience members as effectively as live performance.

A Psychological Study of How Viewing Theatre Affects Empathy

As a result of the previous literature, I have prepared a study to examine further how theatre may develop empathy from an audience perspective. In order to study the impact of viewing theatre on empathy in an empirical way, I sought to create a quantitative research design to examine the impacts of viewing theatre on a variety of empathy-related measures. My hypothesis is that viewing theatre will increase empathic accuracy, state empathy, prosocial behavior, and empathetic attitudes toward groups represented in the theatrical performance.

Methods

Participants

I recruited 208 participants, all of whom were undergraduate students at TCU recruited through the SONA system through the Department of Psychology. Students were offered credit or extra credit in psychology courses for their participation in the study. Only 197 participants' data were utilized—I removed data of participants who knew the actors (n = 4), who indicated that they rushed through the study or did not answer honestly (n = 1), and who fell more than 2.5 standard deviations above the mean for age (n = 6). This last exclusion stemmed from concern that these participants could skew the data, in part because of research indicating that empathy

may vary with age (Weick & Kunzmann, 2015). Out of the 197 participants, 124 were female, and the ages of participants ranged from 18 to 26 ($M = 19.56$, $SD = 1.36$).

Procedure

After signing up for a session online via the SONA system, participants were invited to come to a computer lab on campus. Participants believed the name of the study to be "Media Mania," and they were given a cover story that the study sought to examine "how people respond to different forms of media based on their personality characteristics." Upon arriving, participants signed in, took a seat, and filled out the informed consent. Participants were assigned to one of three conditions: the live theatre condition ($n = 67$), the filmed theatre condition ($n = 63$), and the control (nature video) condition ($n = 67$). Differences in each condition are described below. After completing the condition manipulation, participants completed a series of surveys to assess empathy-related measures, among other things. Once all participants had completed the survey and the research assistant offered to answer any questions, participants were released.

Condition

Participants in the live theatre condition were then asked to watch two actors perform a ten-minute play titled "That Midnight Rodeo," which depicted a couple discussing their thoughts and feelings about the wife's desire to get an abortion in order to continue her career as a barrel racer. Participants not in the live theatre condition were given the instructions to begin the study on their computer after signing the informed consent, and participants in these sessions were randomly assigned to either the film condition or the control (nature video) condition. Those in the filmed condition watched a filmed performance of the same play ("That Midnight Rodeo"), and those in the nature condition watched a nature film of a similar length about the Caucasus Mountains.

Measures

After watching the live performance or one of the video conditions, participants completed a series of questionnaires and surveys. Participants completed a block about their initial reactions toward the performance/video and the actors, a questionnaire regarding their attitudes about media (in order to reinforce the cover story), a block of demographic questions, and a suspicion block.

Empathic Accuracy. Participants completed the Adult "Reading the Mind in the Eyes" Test that produces a score on the empathic accuracy of the participant (Barron-Cohen, 2001). This is a 36-question measure that presents participants with pictures of a limited section of a person's face showing only the area around their eyes. Participants were then asked to select the word that best describes the emotion that the person is displaying by choosing among four multiple choice options. Participants score 1 point for each correct answer and get a total score between 0 and 36, with a higher score indicating higher empathic accuracy.

State Empathy. Participants completed a 12-item State Empathy Scale measure to assess their levels of state empathy following their exposure to one of the conditions (Shen, 2010). For this measure, participants were asked to read a brief story about a man named Buck who shared his experience with depression, and then they answered a series of questions indicating the amount of empathy they experienced from the story. Participants responded to each question on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). The full 12-item measure (α = .843) breaks into three subscales (each consisting of four questions): affective empathy (α = .754), cognitive empathy (α = .700), and associative empathy (α = .801). This measure of empathy, in contrast to the trait measure described below, could be predicted to be vary between conditions.

Trait Empathy. I included the Basic Empathy Scale in Adults (BES-A) to assess trait-level empathy among participants (Carré et al., 2013). This questionnaire included 19 questions (α = .869) scored on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) and contains three subscales: emotional contagion (α = .763), cognitive empathy (α = .713), and emotional disconnection (α = .828). The emotional contagion subscale (consisting of 5 questions) could be considered a measure of trait affective empathy. The emotional disconnection subscale has 6 items, and the cognitive empathy subscale contains 8 items. Neither the full measure nor its subscales are predicted to vary between conditions because it is thought to be more of a generalized trait that is unchanging or slow-to-change.

Empathic Attitudes. I also asked participants to describe their attitudes toward 11 different groups or concepts on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*extremely negative*) to 7 (*extremely positive*). The questions of most importance from this block are "empathy," "people who get abortions," "people who oppose abortion," and "people who support abortion."

Prosocial Behavior. Participants also completed a nine-item questionnaire asking about their likelihood to engage in a variety of helping and prosocial behaviors, including donating to an organization, driving a roommate to the airport after a sudden death in the family, or donating to an individual experiencing homelessness. Each response was given on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*extremely unlikely*) to 7 (*extremely likely*). I intend this measure to give a glimpse of how the empathy created by watching the performance may lead to tangible action or compassionate behavior. Six of the nine items (α = .641) can be used as a general "prosocial behavior" score, and the other three items were not included in the total score because they are predicted to vary individually with the conditions. These items ask how likely individuals would be to donate to an organization seeking to help wildlife, increase the number of abortions, or decrease the number of abortions.

Personality & Prior Arts Exposure. I included two other primary measures in order to see if they might predict, influence, moderate, or mediate the effects of theatre on the empathy-related measures. First, I included the Big Five Inventory-10 as a measure of personality (Guido, Peluso, Capestro, & Miglietta, 2015). Using two-items for each subscale, this ten-item survey measures five different personality dimensions: agreeableness ($\alpha = .333$), conscientiousness ($\alpha = .444$), extroversion ($\alpha = .606$), emotional stability (often reverse coded as neuroticism) ($\alpha = .533$), and openness ($\alpha = .214$). I particularly thought that the openness factor might influence outcomes.

Second, I included a measure to assess participants' previous exposure and involvement in media and the arts ($\alpha = .663$). This 12-item survey asked participants to indicate how often they engage in each of a dozen arts-related activities, indicating their frequency on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*daily*). These items were intended to get a slight glimpse into how long-term exposure to the arts may impact some of the empathy-related measures. This measure was aggregated using a sum, whereas the other measures used a mean to calculate a total score for the scale.

Results

The following section includes numerous statistical results and analyses based on the data retrieved during the study. For readers less familiar with these statistics, please note that these results will be interpreted in the "discussion" section following this section on page 46.

Non-Significant Results Between Conditions

Empathic Accuracy. The data for the Reading the Mind in the Eyes (RTME) test within the three performance conditions failed to meet the assumptions tests to perform a parametric test (one-way between-subjects analysis of variance). The distribution of scores on the RTME test failed to meet the assumption of normality for participants in the live condition according the

Shapiro-Wilk test for normality, $p = .001$. I then ran the nonparametric alternative to a one-way between-subjects analysis of variance known as the Kruskal-Wallis test. This test indicated no statistically significant difference for scores on the RTME test between each of the three performance conditions, χ^2 (2, $n = 196$) = 3.21, $p = .201$. This indicates that empathic accuracy is not impacted through only one instance of viewing live performance (in contrast to viewing filmed performance or a nature video).

Prosocial Behavior. The distribution of scores on the composite prosocial behavior scale test also failed to meet the assumption of normality for participants in the nature condition according the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality, $p = .043$. Instead, a nonparametric alternative was run. A Kruskal-Wallis test indicated no statistically significant difference on the prosocial behavior scale between the live, recorded, and nature conditions, χ^2 (2, $n = 197$) = 1.65, $p = .439$. This similarly indicates that people's anticipation of engaging in prosocial behaviors does not shift after short-term exposure to a live performance, filmed performance, or nature video.

State Empathy. The distribution of scores on the state empathy scale met the assumption of normality for participants in all conditions according the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality, ps ≥ .285. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) examined the effects of performance condition on the state empathy measure. No significant difference was found ($F(2, 194) = .008$, $p = .992$) between the live condition ($M = 4.73$, $SD = .83$), the recorded condition ($M = 4.74$, $SD = .98$), and the nature condition ($M = 4.75$, $SD = .90$).

Empathetic Attitudes

Below is a series of comparisons for various questions on the Empathetic Attitudes section of the questionnaire between participants in each of the three performance conditions: live, recorded, and nature.

Abortion. The distribution of scores on the attitude measure for "those who get abortions" failed to meet the assumption of normality for participants in all performance conditions according the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality, *p*s ≤ .001. Instead, a nonparametric test—the Kruskal-Wallis Test—was conducted, which revealed a statistically significant difference for attitudes toward people who get abortions among the three performance conditions, χ^2 (2, n = 197) = 7.43, p = .024, with a mean rank of 108.39 among the live condition, 103.20 for the nature condition, and 84.55 for the recorded condition. Pairwise comparisons adjusted by the Bonferroni correction indicated that the live and recorded conditions differed from each other significantly, p = .028, but that there was no significant difference between the live and nature conditions (p = 1.000) and between the recorded and nature conditions (p = .125). To gain a measure of effect size, I ran a Mann-Whitney U Test to compare the live and recorded conditions only. This test confirmed the statistical difference between the live (Md = 72.97, n = 67) and recorded conditions (Md = 57.956, n = 63), U = 1610, z = -2.519, p = .012, r = .22. Since both the live and filmed performances centered around a person planning to get an abortion, this indicates that watching a live performance might positively affect a person's attitude toward the group of people represented in the scene in contrast to a filmed performance (but not in contrast to a nature video).

I then took this analysis a step further to create an Empathetic Abortion Attitudes scale, consisting of attitudes toward both people who get abortions and people who support abortion. I excluded a reverse coding of attitudes toward people who oppose abortion because, while this reverse scoring would measure a "pro-abortion attitude," it would not measure an empathetic attitude as it is based on having a negative attitude toward a separate group. The distribution of scores on the Empathetic Abortion Attitudes scale failed to meet the assumption of normality for participants in all performance conditions according the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality, *p*s ≤

.028. Because of this, I ran the Kruskal-Wallis Test and found a statistically significant difference on the Empathetic Abortion Attitude scale between the performance conditions, χ^2 (2, n = 197) = 6.99, p = .030, with mean rank of 106.90 for the nature condition, 105.45 for the live condition, and 83.74 for the recorded condition. Pairwise comparisons found significant differences between the live and recorded conditions (p = .026) and between the recorded and nature conditions (p = .018), where participants in the live condition scored higher on the Empathetic Abortion Attitude scale than those in the recorded condition. These differences became non-significant when adjusted by the Bonferroni correction (p = .53 and p = .79 respectively). However, when comparing only the live and recorded conditions using the Mann-Whitney U Test, there was a statistically significant difference between the live (Md = 72.29, n = 67) and recorded condition (Md = 53.28, n = 63), U = 1655.50, z = -2.18, p = .029, r = .19. As such, this finding indicates that live performances might increase positive attitudes toward groups represented in contrast to filmed performances.

A correlational analysis also revealed that the relationship between attitudes toward people who get abortions and stance on abortion (pro-life/pro-choice) differed between the live condition (r = .488, n = 66, p = .000), filmed condition (r = .773, n = 63, p = .000), and nature condition (r = .612, n = 67, p = .000). There was a statistically significant difference between the correlation for the live and filmed conditions (z = -2.23, p = .013, one-tailed).

An additional Kruskal-Wallis test also revealed no statistical difference between stance on abortion (answer to "How pro-life or pro-choice are you?" on a 7-point Likert scale) between the conditions, χ^2 (2, n = 197) = 3.42, p = .181. This indicates that the political position on abortion did not different between participants in the live, recorded, or nature groups.

Gender Differences. Analysis also discovered an interaction between the effect of gender and condition on the Empathetic Abortion Attitude scale. After splitting the file based on

gender, a Kruskal-Wallis test revealed a statistically significant difference in Empathetic Abortion Attitudes between conditions among both men (χ^2 (2, n = 72) = 11.18, p = .004) and women (χ^2 (2, n = 124) = 11.66, p = .003). For the purposes of this analysis, one participant who marked "Other" for gender was excluded because the sample size for this group would not be large enough for substantial analysis. After the Bonferroni correction, pairwise comparisons revealed that, among men, Empathetic Abortion Attitudes were significantly higher among the live condition (*Md* = 46.64) than both the recorded (*Md* = 31.14, p = .025) and nature (*Md* = 28.95, p = .008) conditions. Among women, the attitudes were significantly higher among the nature condition than both the recorded (p = .005) and live (p = .025) conditions.

Attitudes Toward Empathy & Related Terms. I then sought to compare differences on attitudes toward other empathy-related attributes between the three performance conditions. The distributions failed the test for normality based on the Shapiro-Wilk statistic for all three conditions ($p \leq .001$) for attitudes toward compassion, love, prejudice, and empathy. A Kruskal-Wallis test uncovered a statistically significant difference for attitudes toward compassion (χ^2 (2, n = 197) = 12.08, p = .002) between live (*Md* = 83.04), recorded (*Md* = 115.52), and nature (*Md* = 103.19) conditions. After adjusting by the Bonferroni correction, pairwise comparisons found the live condition to have significantly lower positive attitudes toward compassion than people in both the recorded (p = .002) and nature (p = .047) conditions.

The Kruskal-Wallis test also uncovered a similar statistically significant difference for attitudes toward love (χ^2 (2, n = 197) = 7.34, p = .026) between live (*Md* = 87.42), recorded (*Md* = 109.7), and nature (*Md* = 100.51) conditions. The only pairwise comparison that was found to be statistically significant after the Bonferroni correction was between the live and recorded conditions, p = .021, with the people in the recorded condition having a significantly more positive attitude toward "love" than those in the live condition. Another Kruskal-Wallis test

revealed a statistically significant difference for attitudes toward empathy (χ^2 (2, *n* = 197) = 16.26, *p* = .000) between live (*Md* = 78.39), recorded (*Md* = 109.90), and nature (*Md* = 109.36) conditions. Pairwise comparisons showed that participants in the live condition had significantly less positive attitudes toward "empathy" than both the recorded condition (*p* = .001) and the nature conditions (*p* = .002) after adjustment by the Bonferroni correction. There was no difference in attitudes between the recorded and nature conditions (*p* = 1.000). Lastly, I used the Kruskal-Wallis test to compare differences in attitudes toward prejudice. The test revealed a statistically significant difference in attitudes toward prejudice (χ^2 (2, *n* = 197) = 6.52, *p* = .038) between live (*Md* = 111.45), recorded (*Md* = 97.98), and nature (*Md* = 87.51) conditions. Pairwise comparisons indicated a statistically significant difference between nature and live conditions (*p* = .033) after adjustment by the Bonferroni correction, with participants in the live condition having a more positive attitude toward prejudice than those in the nature condition. No other pairwise comparisons were significant, *p*s ≥ .475.

Trait Empathy

The distributions of trait empathy across conditions failed to meet the assumption for homogeneity of variance (*F*(2, 194) = 3.36, *p* = .037. Because of this, I ran a Kruskal-Wallis test that found a marginally significant difference in trait empathy scores (χ^2 (2, *n* = 197) = 5.01, *p* = .082) across the live (*Md* = 87.46), recorded (*Md* = 109.70), and nature (*Md* = 100.48) conditions. Pairwise comparisons revealed a marginally significant difference specifically between the live and nature conditions, with *p* = .026 before the Bonferroni correction and *p* = .079 after the adjustment. Although not at the official significance level of *p* = .05, these results indicate that the difference in trait empathy between the conditions might be more than would be expected by chance. Because this measure is intended to assess general trait levels of empathy

that should not necessarily vary between the conditions, it is possible that differences in trait levels of empathy could have influenced results in some of the other comparisons.

Correlations Between Arts Exposure & Empathy Measures

I also examined the relationship between prior arts exposure scores and several empathy-related measures. Using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, statistically significant correlations emerged between involvement in the arts and many measures of empathy. There was a small, positive correlation between arts exposure and both state empathy ($r = .233$, $n = 197$, $p = .001$) and trait empathy ($r = .232$, $n = 197$, $p = .001$). Using Spearman's rho, there was also a small, positive correlation between arts exposure and both the RTME test ($r = .166$, $n = 196$, $p = .020$) and prosocial behavior ($r = .276$, $n = 196$, $p = .000$). Although these relationships cannot provide evidence of causality, these results may indicate that involvement in the arts is related to higher scores on some empathy-related measures.

I also looked at correlations between answers to the watching theatre and performing theatre questions on the arts exposure questionnaire and various empathy measures. Using Spearman's rho, I found a small, positive correlation between watching theatre and both trait empathy ($r = .180$, $n = 197$, $p = .011$) and prosocial behavior ($r = .160$, $n = 197$, $p = .025$). Using Spearman's rho, I also found a small, positive correlation between performing in theatre and the associative empathy subscale of the state empathy scale ($r = .146$, $n = 197$, $p = .041$). Though they indicate no causal relationship, these correlations show that involvement in theatre is related to higher scores on some measures of empathy.

Discussion

Implications

This study sought to investigate how a live theatre performance would impact a variety of empathy-related measures in comparison to a filmed performance and a nature video. I

uncovered a plurality of results that I will discuss below.

Perhaps the weightiest implication of this quantitative study is the potential for theatre to create shifts in attitudes not just toward the protagonist in a scene but also toward a general group to which that protagonist belongs. Although there was no significant difference between the empathetic attitudes toward "people who get abortion" and "people who support abortion" for the live and nature condition, this difference was present between the live and recorded condition. A possible explanation for this is that live performance fosters greater empathetic attitudes toward protagonists than filmed performance, and this could have implications on the importance to continue live theatre alongside the development of film and digital media. This finding also falls in line with previous theory indicating that live performance might be more strongly related to empathy due to the higher number of empathetic cues available. Further research should be conducted to assess whether the nature video served as an appropriate control. Some research indicates that nature may also influence empathy, and thus it may be important to assess whether this may have played a role in the distribution of results (Anzek, 2014).

An even more noteworthy element of this finding is that these differences seem most pronounced among an outgroup for people seeking abortions: men. What is notable about this finding is that male participants in the live theatre condition had more positive attitudes on the Empathetic Abortion Attitudes scale than both of the other conditions, indicating that the live theatre condition had the potential to increase empathetic attitudes among outgroups in comparison to both filmed performance and a nature video. This indicates that the potential for theatre to change empathetic attitudes is perhaps strongest among outgroups. This also corroborates Gordon's (2010) assertion that theatre has the potential to overcome prejudice and the prejudice-related empathy deficits discussed earlier. It also falls in line with other research

indicating that performing arts can impact attitudes and that storytelling can impact attitudes toward groups (Daykin et al., 2008; Omasta, 2011; Stavrova & Meckel, 2017; Zaki, 2019).

A very fascinating element of this finding in particular is that the change in empathetic attitudes occurs despite a lack of a statistically significant difference between the pro-life and pro-choice positions in each group. This serves to further emphasize that the difference lies in the attitudes toward the *people* involved—the *people* who get abortions and the *people* who support abortions—rather than affecting the politically-related issue of stance on abortion. This suggests that the differing attitudes on the Empathetic Abortion Attitudes scale indicate an empathy-related attitude toward human beings rather than a politically related position on abortion as a whole.

These findings have a number of implications on various aspects of society. Perhaps most notably is that it signifies that theatre could be used to overcome in-group/out-group differences and to fight prejudice and discrimination in society. It may also indicate the importance of using theatre and the performing arts in helping to foster empathetic attitudes among people. This could provide additional reasoning for increased performing arts education and the application of theatre in non-theatre work environments where there is a need for decreased prejudice and increased empathy.

One of the other findings worth noting is that many of the traditional empathy-related measures did not show statistical differences across conditions, including the State Empathy Scale, the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test, and the Prosocial Behavior Scale. However, this does not necessarily mean that viewing live theatre does not impact general state empathetic capabilities or empathic accuracy. One possible reason for the lack of a noticeable change in empathy measures is the short-term nature of the study; these tests—particularly the RTME and the Prosocial Behavior Scale—might not be subject to a great degree of variability in the short-

term, especially given the fact that empathy and compassion often develop as skills over time. Further research should be conducted to examine how these tests vary over time, and a within-subjects design would also be particularly effective at more clearly demonstrating theatre as the change agent in any variation in empathetic abilities.

An unexpected and fascinating finding in the data is the lower scores for participants in the live condition on some empathy-related measures. Perhaps most notable is the fact that the participants in the live condition had significantly less positive attitudes toward "compassion" and "empathy" than participants in the other two conditions (among a few other differences in attitudes toward empathy-related terms). Even more baffling is the fact that those in the live condition had marginally lower trait empathy scores than those in the recorded condition. I have no definitive theoretical or situational explanation for this finding. Furthermore, although participants in the live condition always participated in the study in the late morning (in contrast to the participants in the other two conditions who participated at various times during work hours), it seems unlikely that time of day would have such a significant effect on the empathy of participants, especially given the variability in the times for the filmed and nature groups.

One possible interpretation of the lower scores on some empathy-related measures among participants in the live condition, though, is that these differences may reflect a coincidental and unanticipated difference in the propensity toward empathy among the members of each group. It is possible that participants in the live condition may have a lower inclination toward empathy or lower development of empathetic skills before entering the study, especially given the fact that trait empathy scores would not be expected to vary across conditions. If this were the case, it would also be possible that this difference in propensity toward empathy might have impacted the other empathy-related measures, thus further emphasizing the need for additional research on this topic.

Perhaps one of the most hopeful findings from the data is the correlational relationship between arts involvement and several of the empathy-related measures. While I can make no causal conclusions from these results, they do corroborate some sort of connection between arts involvement and empathy. The finding that some of the measures specifically correlated with involvement in theatre provides further evidence for the link between theatre and empathy. Additionally, while there was a relatively low amount of empathy-related measures that positively correlated with involvement in theatre in particular, further research should be done to investigate this relationship more clearly with a sample of people more inclined toward participation in theatre. The sample size in the present study is likely not large enough to see significant relationships between involvement in theatre and other variables. On the 7-point scale described earlier, the descriptive statistics for performing theatre ($M = 1.29$, $SD = .77$) and watching theatre ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.21$) indicate that we might be able to better study the relationships between these variables and empathy-related measures by seeking out more participants who regularly engage in these activities. This is true for the watching theatre variable, whose average falls within the "less than once a year" category, and it is even more applicable for the performing theatre variable, given that its mean essentially falls into the "never" category. Nevertheless, that results between engaging in theatre and measures of empathy emerged even with these low averages indicates that there may be a positive relationship between engaging in theatre and empathy measures.

Limitations & Future Research

There are a few limitations to this study in addition to the ones touched on previously. First, I conducted this study entirely with college students, and further research should be done to investigate this relationship among other populations, such as children and older adults. Additionally, the controversial nature of the topic of the performance may have impacted the

results; a polarizing issue such as abortion often carries with it a lot of connotation, baggage, preconceived notions, and strong beliefs. Additionally, moral judgement has been cited as a factor that can impair empathy, and many of the viewers may have been impacted by carrying moral judgements toward one or both of the characters in the scene. While the increased possibility of moral judgement among audience members makes for an interesting study about how theatre might be able to overcome this hindrance to empathy, future research could consider assessing empathy based on performances dealing with a less polarizing issue.

Another noticeable limitation is the lack of a pre-test/post-test design. The results would be more salient, and I would have the ability to note actual changes in attitudes based on condition rather than mere differences between the groups after the manipulation occurred. Further research should utilize within-subjects designs to account for pre-existing empathy and attitude differences.

Another limitation deals with the inherent variability of live theatre performances. While the other two conditions had standardized videos that do not change between groups of participants, each performance of the live theatre scene differed slightly based on the energy of the audience members, the mood of the actors, the weather, and other uncontrollable factors. This study was also limited in its production quality. Participants did not view a theatre performance that included many of the trappings of a typical theatre production such as sets, costumes, lighting, sound, and a typical theatre venue. These various factors could have bearing on the way that theatre impacts empathy, but this study only assessed how the acting element (with limited props) of a performance affected empathy-related measures. Further research could explore how performances that include the other production elements may impact empathy.

Future Research

Moreover, beyond the additional avenues of research mentioned earlier in this discussion

section, there are a few potential areas where future research should consider investigating this topic. As mentioned earlier, a study tracking the development of empathy and compassion with greater longevity would be beneficial and provide clearer (and likely stronger) results on the long-term effects of theatre on empathy. Research should also investigate if there is a difference in the effects of exposure to different genres of live theatre, such as dramatic plays, comedic plays, classical plays, and musicals. Researchers could also investigate the link between performing in theatre with empathy (as will be done later in this thesis). Lastly, research should also seek to examine how theatre might lead to more tangible, compassionate action beyond "sterile" scales. Investigating the change in empathy and compassion among people who are exposed to live theatre from the perspective *others* would also be a worthwhile investigation that might overcome the disadvantages of self-report measures.

Moving to Compassion & Performance

In addition to examining how viewing live theatre impacts empathetic attitudes among audience members, I also desired to study how participation in theatre relates to the development of compassionate behavior. Thus, in the second half of the thesis, I hope to shift from how watching theatre influences audience members to how participating in theatre influences actors/artists. I also hope to shift focus from the simpler concept of empathy to the more complex and beneficial topic of compassion.

Historical Parallels in Theatre & Psychology

Throughout their histories, the disciplines of theatre and psychology have interesting points of overlap and influence on one another. The advent of traditional Western theatre dates back to Ancient Greece, most notably with Thespis and the Festival of Dionysus. Although modern psychology would not begin for centuries, philosophy thrived in Ancient Greece alongside the growth of theatre, and several of the topics and ideas considered by Greek

philosophers could be considered early psychological concepts, especially given the fact that modern psychology originates partially out of philosophy (Schultz & Schultz, 2011). The intersection of Greek philosophy and Greek theatre can be seen most clearly in the person of Aristotle, one of the most famous and prolific Greek philosophers. Aristotle not only wrote extensively on a number of prominent philosophical issues, as seen in his great works like *The Poetics*; he also wrote significantly on theatre, as seen in his writings about the six major elements of dramatic action. Pre-psychological concepts such as ethos, pathos, and logos also had influence and relevance to the growth of theatre and creating effects on an audience.

The biggest parallels between the two disciplines can be seen millennia later in the nineteenth century. Psychology as we know it today began in Germany with William Wundt in 1861. Wundt sought to explore topics such as processes, feelings, and sensory experiences, describing the new discipline as "the science of conscious experiences" (Schultz & Schultz, 2011, p. 72). Around this time, theatre as a discipline underwent a huge shift in style toward realism. Henrik Ibsen—who lived from 1828 to 1906—is often considered the father of realism, and other theatre practitioners such as Konstantin Stanislavski and Anton Chekhov further developed the trend in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Realism emphasized developing a deep inner life for the characters that are shown onstage; through this trend, the theatrical art form began to seek to portray characters as realistically as possible by analyzing the emotions, motivations, and thoughts of the character and allowing those factors to influence the actions and behaviors of characters. In essence, theatre practitioners began to add "introspection" and "the science of conscious experiences" to playwrighting, acting, and other aspects of the art form.

One could certainly argue that the advent of psychological research and the desire to understand internal human functioning had a significant influence on this progression within the

study of theatre. These parallels merely scratch the surface of the parallels between these two disciplines, but they set a historical precedent for why these ideas could be investigated together. It also sets an initial foundation for how participation in theatre might be channeled in a way that positively impacts our psychological lives in addition to our artistic abilities.

Stanislavski

In assessing overlaps between theatre practitioners and the psychology of empathy, there is perhaps no better place to start than with the work of Konstantin Stanislavski, who has been regarded as one of the most well-known and influential figures in the acting world. Stanislavski began his work at the Moscow Art Theatre toward the beginning of the emerging theatrical style known as realism, which attempted to shift from performative, heightened theatrical styles to a type of performance that more precisely depicted and reflected the real nuances of human life. Stanislavski brought to life the first "inner acting technique" (Moore, 1984) that focused on internal thoughts and emotions rather than external demonstrations. Furthermore, Stanislavski was a contemporary of Ivan Pavlov—perhaps one of the most famous psychologists who created the foundations for our modern understandings and models of learning and behavior. While there is no evidence of collaborations between the two of them, Stanislavski's seems to have become influenced by Pavlov's work, and the two share a mutual foundation on the value of behavior, cause-and-effect, and understanding the true nature of human behavior (Moore, 1984). Stanislavski has also notably studied the work of another psychologist of the time—I. M. Sechenov—particularly with respect to Stanislavski's development of the method of physical action and the connection between external manifestations and internal processes (Moore, 1984). These psychological influences can be seen in Stanislavski's method of acting, and it provides a viable explanation for why there is such a significant overlap between the development of compassion and participation in the performing arts.

The following section will attempt to analyze extensively the overlaps between the ideas of Stanislavski and the principles of empathy and compassion. I will draw heavily from the work of Sonia Moore, who created a notable summation of Stanislavski and his ideas in her book, *The Stanislavski System*. I will also refer frequently not only to the concepts of compassion and empathy mentioned earlier but also to the trademarked E.M.P.A.T.H.Y. tool created by Dr. Helen Riess to describe what sorts of factors can be used to create compassionate action and behavior both through Stanislavski's techniques and the insights provided by other theatre practitioners in the next section.

Overview of Riess's E.M.P.A.T.H.Y. Acronym

In order to allow the following analyses and comparison to make sense, I will briefly discuss Riess's trademarked E.M.P.A.T.H.Y. tool. This acronym represents seven different "keys" and skills that can convey empathy. Each of these ideas extends beyond the mere cognitive and affective elements of empathy discussed earlier to include tangible (although often subtle) actions that demonstrate emotion and care, and thus these elements also can be used to take people beyond neutral empathy to displaying constructive compassion (Riess, 2018). One important thing to note is that, in much of her book, Riess defines empathy more broadly than I have in this thesis; her definition of empathy often encompasses many of the constructs and ideas that I have associated with compassion. Thus, her tool often deals with the development of constructive, compassionate action, though she still refers to it as strengthening "empathy."

Riess's seven elements are eye contact, muscles for facial expression, posture, affect, tone of voice, hearing the whole person, and your response (Riess, 2018). Further research and information can be found in Riess's book called *The Empathy Effect: Seven Neuroscience-Based Keys for Transforming the Way We Live, Love, Work, and Connect Across Differences*. This

section, however, will offer a very basic look at the essential ideas behind each of these ways to increase empathy and compassion.

Eye Contact. Eye contact, as long as it does not reach the point of making others uncomfortable, first allows a person to better read the emotional states of others. Second, it can create connection, emphasize humanity in the connection, and demonstrate both care and concern by helping others feel "seen."

Muscles & Facial Expression. Muscles in facial expression also help to communicate the underlying emotional experiences of others, and even very subtle, tiny differences in the contractions of muscles can reflect different internal emotional experiences; research indicates that people who are more empathetic may be more sensitive to these differences (Riess, 2018). Muscles of facial expression also play a role in empathy in that people naturally mimic the muscle patterns in the faces of people they interact with, and this can serve as a trigger for empathetic emotional experiences.

Posture. Posture serves similar functions to facial expression—posture can reveal a great deal about the internal emotional experiences of another person (Riess, 2018). Perhaps even more so than facial expression, though, posture can be used to convey compassion by demonstrating attention, interest, openness, respect, and care. Connection between two people can also lead to mirroring of body posture and movements, and thus posture can be used as a way to both indicate and create connection between two human beings.

Affect. Affect refers generally to "emotion," but Riess discusses it in the context of recognizing the general emotional state and position of another person and considering that in reading the overall situation. For example, it is important to notice and identify that another person feels ashamed, frustrated, helpless, skeptical, etc. when seeking to address their situation and their state; this awareness becomes crucial in informing compassionate response.

Tone of Voice. Vocal intonation plays a huge role in communication, and pace, rhythm, and pitch of speech (collectively referred to as prosody) play a significant role in the way that people pick up on the emotions of others and craft an appropriate response. Sometimes a compassionate response requires a person to mirror another's tone, and sometimes it is best to contrast the tone of others; having mastery over all aspects of tone of voice can best prepare a person to engage in empathy and compassionate response.

Hearing The Whole Person. This term refers closely to the more commonly known term of "active listening," but it extends a step further. It involves turning down one's own threat sensors and listening to another person with openness; it requires identification of another's emotional state, compassionate response, and attentiveness. Furthermore, it encourages a person to see the root concern of another person rather than simply their primary problem. Addressing only an immediate issue may not address the larger issue at hand for the person involved, which might involve other implications from the situation or unstated anxieties or preoccupations. As Riess (2018) states explicitly, "paying attention to the problem at hand only gets you so far. Paying attention to the underlying issues that people deeply care about is where the golden experience of mutual empathy and understanding comes together" (pg. 56). Lastly, this concept involves taking into account the other signals indicated above when engaging with someone else.

Your Response. This factor refers not to the compassionate action a person should take in response to the development of empathy and concern; instead, Riess encourages us to be in touch with our own feelings to the actions, words, and presence of others. People subconsciously take on others' emotions, and thus noticing how others make one feel can help a person to understand how that person feels. Thus, intrapersonal emotional intelligence and empathy can promote interpersonal emotional intelligence and empathic accuracy.

Now that I have looked closely at a number of factors for how empathy and compassion can be enhanced, I will move into a discussion of the intersections between Stanislavski's teachings and both empathy and compassion.

Direct Connections Between Empathy, Compassion, and Stanislavski

One of the clearest overlaps deals with Stanislavski's emphasis on the importance of an actor developing their imagination. The imagination is a skill that Stanislavski holds high as a necessity for any strong artist and performer, noting that actors need to learn how refine subskills within imagination such as observing, noticing, comparing, and dreaming (Moore, 1984). He notes that in order to represent life most accurately and fully, actors need to be able to use imagination to complete the aspects of a character not provided by the playwright. He specifies further that proper imagination is rooted in logic—this will allow the character to best represent reality and will empower the actor to best make decisions that present the character as a full human being. Similarly, imagination has been noted by psychologists as an important aspect of empathy and compassion (Riess, 2018; Zaki, 2019). Since people cannot directly sense the feelings and thoughts of others, empathy relies heavily on a healthy ability to imagine what others are experiencing. Thus, to be a compassionate individual, a person needs to develop strong imaginative skills so that they can employ empathy in an effective way. Additionally, the more rooted imagination is in logical creativity and the more developed skills like observation and comparison are, the more likely a person's imagination is to result in accurate empathy and beneficial compassion. Because of all of this, the ways Stanislavski suggests for developing imagination through theatrical training techniques might be useful in helping people in developing better compassionate skills.

Perhaps one of the clearest, simplest, and most practical ways that Stanislavski specifically sought to apply the development of imagination in the training of his performers was

through his concept of the "Magic If." Stanislavski coined this term and technique as a means of encouraging actors to consider what it would be like to live in the invented circumstances of the play by asking what they would do if they were in the character's position. Stanislavski calls the situation of the character the "given circumstances," or the set of facts, events, and environmental factors found in the play that make up the situation of the character and contribute to the actions of the play. As Moore (1984) notes, Stanislavski taught that the Magic If "carries the actors into the imaginary circumstances" (p. 25), and thus it could be powerful in helping an actor to take on the behaviors and emotions of the character. The "if" acts as a means of encouraging a person to use imagination and thinking to bring a character to life on the stage, and thus it seems that this tool could be utilized as a means of spurring people to employ imagination and their minds to begin the process of perspective-taking and cognitive empathy as well.

One reason he used the hypothetical "if" (rather than aiming for a more concrete and definitive tone that could be created without the hypothetical) is because Stanislavski sought not for actors to fully buy into the actual reality of the events in the play; instead, he wanted actors to become sold on the *possibility* of the play's circumstances (Moore, 1984). In a similar way, when people engage in perspective-taking, they should be aiming to imagine what another person *might* feel like—we cannot and should not pretend to know exactly how another person experiences an event. This can lead to the dark side of empathy that leads to the smothering of another person, unkind action, and missed connection with the other human being. Remembering the hypothetical, as Stanislavski encouraged us to do, allows us to stay in a position of humility as we engage in empathy and compassionate behavior. Furthermore, just as it is important for an actor to check the way they create their character with the given circumstances provided by the playwright, it is also important for individuals to keep their empathetic perceptions in line with

the actual circumstances of the person with whom they are seeking to empathize. Additionally, in this real-life scenario, it is important to take this verification a step further. People ought to check the accuracy in their empathy perceptions with the other person in order to prevent the potential harms that come from "projective empathy" (as touched on earlier in this thesis).

In Stanislavski's discussion of imagination and in other aspects of his teaching, he also mentions a concept called "subtext." Subtext refers to the meaning added to lines that extends beyond what the words themselves communicate. Stanislavski tasks actors with adding meaning through subtext because an actual human being communicates with more than just words—they also use nonverbal communication and different motivations and reasons for saying the words. This also has become a term and idea in the field of psychology—"subtext of behavior" describes the overall meaning in what people do rather than merely what they say (Moore, 1984). By teaching a person to understand subtext through acting training, we can also help people to develop greater empathy skills as they learn how their communication and the communication of others extends beyond explicit verbal or written text. Seeing and implementing subtext in real-life situations can help a person to convey empathy and compassion more holistically. Learning how to use subtext in everyday life touches on almost all of the tools found in Riess's acronym—subtext can be created through eye contact, facial expression, posture, the way a person listens, vocal intonation, and affect.

Another clear interaction between Stanislavski's teachings and empathy centers around his concept of emotional memory. This is a topic that Stanislavski spent time intentionally researching, and it arose out of conversations and influences from psychological professionals, such as the work of a contemporary psychologist named Théodule-Armand Ribot who discussed the concept of "affective memory." In Stanislavski's theories, he describes emotional memory as the way through which performers should experience and display emotions onstage. Stanislavski

argues that though the experiences of actors should be rooted in reality and be communicated in a truthful and believable way, actors must have "stage" or "repeated" emotional experiences rather than primary or fundamentally real ones (Moore, 1984). Stanislavski argues that the full, primary experience of the events in the play would be overwhelming for the actor, but he also argues that forcing emotions can also be detrimental to both the quality of performance and the well-being of actors. Instead, Stanislavski argues for a technique that has been validated by psychological and neuroscientific research—employing emotional memory. When using imagination to live into the circumstances of the character, performers should recall the core emotional experience that they have experienced in similar (yet not identical) situations from their own lives. The recall of this fundamental emotion will not be overwhelming like it may have been when experienced the first time in real life. This "repeated" emotional experience by means of emotional memory becomes beneficial both "because it does not absorb the actor entirely" (Moore, 1984, p. 43) and "because it does not arise from an actual cause" (p. 42). Stanislavski encouraged actors to add to their emotional memory bank by drawing from both personal experience and observations of others in real life.

This is fascinating because this model follows *very* closely with a psychological description of empathy. As Stanislavski argues, psychologists hold that fully experiencing the emotional experiences of others would be detrimental to a person; it would actually counteract the benefits of empathy. Instead, empathy functions best when it is to a lesser extent than one's own emotional experiences; this not only prevents a person from being overwhelmed, but also allows them to have the energy, resources, and even objectivity to engage in compassionate action rather than being impeded by the overwhelming experience of the initial emotion at hand (Rakel & Golant, 2018). Furthermore, although even Moore's commentary pre-dates the discovery of mirror neurons (as discussed earlier), these ideas and theories from Stanislavski

match up nicely with the neuroscience of mirror neurons and the idea that the same regions of the brain that activate during primary emotional experience become activated during the engagement of empathy although *to a lesser extent*. This discovery emphasizes further how developing skills in Stanislavski's style of realism can translate to the development of compassion skills. As noted earlier, other aspects of this technique have been validated scientifically; the central nervous system does become influenced by emotional experiences, and the more general memory of the core emotion generated by a specific circumstance can become generalized to similar situations in the context of both acting and empathy (Moore, 1984). Holistically, therefore, Stanislavski's model of performing via emotional memory follows closely with a guide for how to employ empathy in a situation in which a person wants to demonstrate compassionate behavior. By considering the situation of another person and accessing the memory of the core emotional that one has felt in a similar situation, someone can engage in empathy in a way that avoids overwhelming firsthand emotional experience and instead allows the person to demonstrate emotion, move to empathic concern, and still remain unharmed personally and aware of the broader situation.

Another fascinating element of Stanislavski's teachings is that he not only advocates for the development of the inner life of characters but also for the strengthening of voice and body technique that will allow an actor and performer to convey this inner life most effectively. This indicates that other aspects of theatre training beyond the development of perspective-taking could be useful in helping to achieve greater compassion and empathy. Voice work—such as exercises posited by experts such as Kristin Linklater or Catherine Fitzmaurice—and movement training—such as yoga or Laban's Effort Actions—can be useful in training actors to accurately portray the internal experiences of characters on stage externally. It can also be useful in helping people outside of theatre to develop their own skills at conveying both their own emotions and

empathetic cues and signals toward others. Three of the seven elements of Riess's E.M.P.A.T.H.Y. tool—muscles of facial expression, posture, and tone of voice—could be developed through voice and movement training, providing further evidence for the utility of these aspect of theatre training in helping individuals to engage in compassionate behavior in all contexts.

More Inferential Connections Between Empathy, Compassion, and Stanislavski

Stanislavski's insights on performance and acting also provide insights into empathy and compassion that may not directly correlate with existing psychological literature. For example, Stanislavski speaks strongly about how actors should focus on "today, here, now" in their acting to keep performances from becoming sterile (Moore, 1984). Actors should seek for their performances to seem and feel as if the events of the play had not happened before the present moment. He reflects that, individual performances onstage cannot be replicated identically just as moments in life cannot be repeated or regenerated; furthermore, instead of mourning this fact, we should embrace the uniqueness of an individual performance and create a unique connection with the pre-existing canon of the production and with the people present in the performance at that given moment. This concept might be best summarized by Sonia Moore (1984) when she states that "when actors try to repeat what they did the night before, the theatre stops being art because it stops being alive" (p. 11). Similarly, true empathy-driven compassion ought to focus clearly on the present situation, interaction, and relationship with the other human being involved. Compassion that follows procedure, rather than adapting to the circumstances, emotions, and relational cues in the given moment, can become dead and ineffective. Stanislavski's emphasis on "improvisation through text"—or sticking to the predetermined script, blocking, and rehearsal experience while allowing new moments of insight and connection with both the audience and fellow characters—seems to provide a sort of prescription

for engaging in compassionate behavior. Perhaps compassion could be most effective when we adapt to the emotions and needs of an individual person with whom we are connecting while holding to a generalized pattern of compassionate response.

Along similar lines, Moore reflects on Stanislavski's idea that "it is the truth of the actor's behavior that will keep the audience's attention" (Moore, 1984, p. 14). This statement on its own has two implications on how theatre may be used to provide insight into empathy. First, it implies that communicating *true* concern and emotional concern toward another individual will be more engaging (and possibly more beneficial) than trying to conjure care; engaging in emotional memory to create a secondary experience that is truthful will likely create more a compassionate environment than seeking to force an emotion that comes across as fake. Second, training actors to communicate truth onstage in the midst of situations that are not tangibly real may correlate strongly with helping to train people to communicate true emotions and concern in the midst of a situation that does not impact them personally. Acting seems to provide a safe avenue for helping people to develop their perspective-taking skills and to allow those skills to lead to truthful empathy and compassion based on truthful connection.

Stanislavski also extensively discusses a concept that he refers to as "communion," which is a state achieved between actors when they enter into a state of "mutual influence" (Moore, 1984). Stanislavski argued that this connection should be made between the two actors (not simply the two characters on the stage); the two actual people on the stage should enter into a connection and relationship with one another. Communion occurs when two people become "aware of the other person's presence" (Moore, 1984, p. 35) and ensure that they hear and understand one another. They should absorb the other person, as well as their behaviors and communications; they should fully take into account the physical and psychological elements of another person's reaction and in turn should react fully in a physical and psychological way.

Actors should seek to influence each other reciprocally (Moore, 1984). While Stanislavski notes that this state is most effective at drawing in audience attention, there are also implications from this teaching on interacting with individuals in everyday life. If people learn to be in communion with other actors on stage, they can translate these skills to the way that they interact with others off the stage. Stanislavski's idea of communion seems to hit on seeking to achieve a high point of connection with another person—absorbing the cues from another, sending appropriate cues back, and sitting in the presence of the relationship. Furthermore, the "hearing the whole person" element of Riess's E.M.P.A.T.H.Y. tool relates to this idea of communion. By engaging in active listening and by fully connecting with another person rather than focusing only on their situation or the events in their life, greater compassion can be achieved. Actors trained in reaching a state of communion with one another may be better prepared to connect with others more fully and in a more healing and compassionate way.

Another fascinating element of Stanislavski's discussion deals with the application of "communion" to monologues and elements of plays that only involve one character. Stanislavski argues that monologues truly reflect an internal dialogue, and he argues that communion can be achieved internally with two aspects of oneself (Moore, 1984). This may have a number of implications on the idea of self-compassion and making healthy, connecting dialogue internal. Thus, helping actors learn to connect with the self in a state of communion through monologue acting training may have implications on internal healing and self-compassion.

This overlap dealing with communion relates closely to the lessons that can be learned from Stanislavski's similar idea about concentration of attention. Stanislavski generally advocated that actors should develop concentration skills so that they can avoid disruption from distractions or a break from focus on the production; despite his advocacy for concentration, however, Stanislavski did not advocate that performers ought to seek to forget that the audience

is present. Similarly, when engaging in empathy and compassion, it is possible that developing concentration skills will help people to focus on the other person in the situation and to avoid lukewarm interaction that is interrupted with distraction. Nevertheless, it is important while engaging in compassionate behavior to remember the rest of the environment and not to only get caught up with the situation and the person with whom we empathize. In this way, the complex type of concentration and focus that Stanislavski advocates for and that is often thought through theatrical experience seems to have implications on how to develop the complex concentration required for effective compassionate practice.

Lastly, Stanislavski's most fundamental theory about the method of physical action also has implications on the development of compassion. In this theory, Stanislavski argues that an actor should start with the physiological manifestation of his performance rather than trying to conjure emotional experiences first. Stanislavski argues for the interconnection of the psychological and physiological aspects of a person, and he explains that many physical actions are tied to emotional experiences. Thus, he advocates that an actor should spark an emotion first by doing the intellectual homework of noting the position and situation of a character and second by engaging in a physical action in a performance that can then help to trigger an internal emotional process related to the behavior and situation. What Stanislavski does not argue is that the emotional and cognitive elements of a performance are not important; actually, he says that a manifestation of a character through only the physical is empathy. Instead, he suggests beginning with the physical in order to spur those other elements to fruition. Stanislavsky's method of physical action was later validated from a neurophysiological perspective by Russian scientist P. V. Simonov (Moore, 1984).

This physiological-psychological connection advocated by Stanislavski and backed by other theatre artists indicates that one way of overcoming deficits in empathy might be through

engaging in compassionate behavior despite deficits in internal feelings of care and kindness. By engaging in actions that demonstrate love, it may be possible to achieve internal feelings of love, rather than relying on the feelings to create the behavior. This sort of behavior—one that might be developed through participation in this acting technique—may prove pivotal in helping people less inclined toward empathy to still engage in constructive, compassionate behavior.

Beyond Stanislavski

Other than Konstantin Stanislavski, there are a number of other theatre practitioners whose theories and ideas have fascinating implications and insights on the understanding and development of compassion and empathy. Bertolt Brecht, for example, and his creation of "epic theatre" provides a fascinating look at someone whose understanding of the workings of empathy led him to take a different approach to the creation of theatre. In the Brechtian style of theatre, Brecht employs what is coined "the alienation effect" in which certain elements are included in the play and production in order to remind audience members that they are watching a play (Davis, 2015). He also encouraged performers not to immerse themselves fully into the people they portrayed—instead they should demonstrate their actions less emotionally (Bertolt Brecht, 2020). The goal of this was to allow audiences to have a more objective view of the play unimpeded by emotional contagion and complete immersion in the story—elements he thought could distract viewers from thinking critically and learning appropriately from the story. In essence, Brecht believed strongly in the power of cognitive empathy and worried that affective empathy might ruin the good that perspective-taking could create. Similar to people like Bloom and his argument in *A Case for Rational Compassion*, Brecht seemed to be aware that empathy in itself is not necessarily a constructive force, and he feared that emotional influence could inhibit the benefits of empathy as a whole. Because of this, Brecht developed a way to use the theatre to encourage the development of cognitive empathy in isolation from affective empathy.

This not only further demonstrates the intertwining of empathy and compassion with theatrical performance, but it also shows how various theatre practitioners—even beyond Stanislavski—have sought to use theatre to create empathy in other ways (even in a way that rebels against the teachings of Stanislavski).

While there are a number of other practitioners of note, a comprehensive exploration of them would extend beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I sought to create a compassion and empathy workshop specifically designed for healthcare practitioners, and I will walk through the selected exercises for this workshop (from a variety of theatre artists) and describe how they relate to the development of empathy and compassion. While circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have prevented a planned pilot workshop in March 2020 that would have allowed for commentary on the effectiveness of these exercises at helping to foster compassionate behavior, I will still discuss my curriculum below and comment on the purpose of each exercise.

Using Other Acting Techniques to Foster Compassion in a Workshop Setting

Overall, I planned for this workshop to develop skills related to empathy and compassion gradually and through a variety of theatrical techniques and exercises. While some of the earlier activities may not initially appear to be "theatre," they are exercises commonly used by actors that aim to develop a specific skill that can be used in performance (and also in displaying compassionate behavior). This curriculum could prove beneficial to any individual, but the original intended audience was healthcare students because their field provides clearly identifiable applications of the exercises and offers tangible health ramifications for increased empathy and compassion, as discussed previously.

Linklater Exercises

The first exercise that I chose to include at the beginning of the workshop comes from

Kristin Linklater in her book *Freeing the Natural Voice*; I specifically planned to use selections out of her first two "workdays" (Linklater, 2006). Although these exercises are generally characterized as preparation for the voice, these exercises also provide a relaxing warmup that engages the body and can provide a sense of focus for the participants. The exercise not only activates the voice, but also the body and breathing muscles such as the diaphragm. Beyond the benefit of providing a great warmup activity, I also chose this exercise because, as noted by Stanislavski, becoming connected with one's voice and body is essential to effectively communicating empathy and compassion. Tone of voice, posture, and muscles of facial expression (and even some of the other keys to empathy as discussed by Riess) rely heavily on being in tune with the cues one is sending with their own body and voice. Moreover, becoming connected with one's own body—especially in a relaxing and somewhat meditative environment as can be created by this sort of exercise—may also have the potential to foster self-compassion among participants. This can be seen in a study finding that a mind-body course helped to increase self-compassion among medical students (Bond et al., 2013). Self-compassion not only helps to provide tangible personal benefits, but it can also help to pave the way toward compassion for others, as noted earlier in our discussion of research indicating that self-compassion can help to reduce prejudice (Zaki, 2019). Thus, beginning with Linklater's exercises, even briefly, will provide groundwork that will allow us to begin with a framework of self-compassion and come prepared with tools ready to communicate compassion toward others as well.

Viola Spolin Exercises

Second, I planned to dive into a number of exercises created by theatre artist Viola Spolin. Each of these exercises comes from her book *Improvisation for the Theatre*, and the purpose of each is to develop specific skills that Spolin considers essential to strong performance

and that I would believe are concurrently essential to the effective demonstration of empathy and compassion (Spolin, 1999). As indicated through the title of her book, Spolin's ideas are renowned for their work in improvisation and the way that these varied improvisation exercises can be applied to performance. Her activities and techniques have also been previously noted for their influence outside of the discipline of theatre, particularly in areas of the helping professions (Spolin, 1999). The first activity I planned to use was "Silent Tension #1," which asks people to get into pairs, decide on basic background (who, what, and where), and to play out a scene without speaking at all. This exercise will force participants to focus on and get in touch with nonverbal communication. It will force eye contact in order to allow for the necessary amount of connection and communication to complete the scene, and it will also prompt participants to invest more thought and intention into their posture and facial expression as well, since these unspoken cues will be crucial without the presence of words. Additionally, it may also prompt people to develop the 'affect' element of Riess's tool since the underlying emotion of each person may shine brighter without the overlay of verbal communication. Furthermore, not only will participation in this exercise help people to become aware of how they can employ these nonverbal techniques, but it will also demonstrate how *much* these aspects contribute to communication. Hopefully, this will prompt substantial discussion about the importance of being conscious of these different processes, not only in performance, but also in demonstrating compassionate behavior in our lives and in using empathy to identify the behavior and emotions of others.

A second Spolin activity I planned to include is called "Relating an Incident Adding Color," and I selected this activity for its emphasis on the development of listening skills. Riess discussed the importance of "hearing the whole person" and engaging in a holistic approach to listening. Additionally, other elements of earlier discussion also allude to the idea that listening

to another person and receiving the communication they send—whether it be emotional content, verbal content, nonverbal content, unspoken content, etc.—plays a huge role in empathy and the preparation for compassionate action. This activity would be intended to help begin the development of intentionally listening to others. It groups participants in pairs, and it asks one person to tell a short, simple story and for the second person to tell the same account but add colors to the story wherever possible (Spolin, 1999). Thus, this activity helps to develop listening by requiring participants to actively pay attention to and process what their partner says in a way that prepares them to not only repeat what the partner has said but also to contribute to the "conversation." It even adds elements of imagination (through the adding of colors) and storytelling (through inventing the story in the first place), both of which are also related to empathy and compassion (as discussed previously).

The third and final Spolin exercise I intended to use in the workshop is called "Mirror/Sub-Teams Reflect Feelings." It asks for participants to get in groups of four and then to further split into pairs. One pair in the group will then seek to mirror the feelings of the other pair within a given situation. Pairs then switch. The exercise is intended to take place in a situation that requires minimal movement so that the relationship and the emotional content of the mirroring becomes primary. The reason I included this exercise was to encourage the perception of empathetic cues in others rather than simply focusing on the development of these cues within the participants themselves. This exercise also helps to challenge participants to employ various empathetic cues that can be mirrored by the other pair within a realistic context, and this will allow the participants to gain further understanding of how a variety of signals can communicate different emotional content and information. Additionally, this exercise requires very direct and tangible employment of empathy in that it asks participants to notice another person's emotional state, to take it on, and to communicate it. Thus, this exercise will serve to strengthen these

empathetic skills in a safe setting. Discussion will allow participants to reflect on how they might be able to apply these new skills in practical ways in their field.

Stanislavski Exercises

The next major section of the workshop involves exercises created by Sonia Moore and derived from the teachings of Stanislavski (Moore, 1984). While I have already discussed the broader ways that Stanislavski's ideas and principles could help to develop empathy and compassion, I will here explain the specific exercises I have chosen for this workshop setting.

The first section of exercises stem from Stanislavski's Method of Physical Action, and I included them to begin to create an explicit connection between internal emotional processes and external manifestations. An example of an exercise from this section would be "walk to pass the time" and then "walk to annoy the people who live in the apartment below" (Moore, 1984, p. 23). These exercises can help participants to see how various motivations and desires can change a simple action in subtle ways. First, this encourages participants to look behind the superficial aspects of behavior and to search for motivation and underlying internal experiences. This can then lead to discussion about how participants can use this skill to notice the nuances of others' behaviors and allow this observation to lead to stronger perspective-taking skills. This exercise can also help people to understand how their own actions can communicate the compassion they wish to share with others in a way that is externally noticeable. Overall, this set of exercises can help participants to employ the skills they have developed earlier toward a particular goal.

The second set of Stanislavski-based exercises created by Sonia Moore that I am seeking to include deal with the concepts of imagination and the "Magic If." I would begin with exercises more generally encouraging utilization of imagination, such as "in your imagination, travel around the world" (Moore, 1984, p. 29). As noted before, imagination is a crucial skill for the development of perspective-taking and cognitive empathy. I would then move into a prompt

that more specifically applied imagination to a specific human circumstance and situation, with prompts such as "pack to leave for war. Think of people you know in real life whom you would leave behind. Think hard and build the imaginary circumstances which could arise in real life" (Moore, 1984, p. 27). This allows the imagination to work specifically in the context of how people behave, thus developing imagination of behavior. The next exercise would more directly employ the "Magic If" in order to arrive at a more tangible perspective-taking activity; an example of this is "you are on a train going to an important conference. What would you do if you suddenly realized that you were on the wrong train?" (Moore, 1984, p. 26). This specifically asks a "what would you do if" question that more directly spurs perspective-taking abilities. This entire set of exercises seeks to gradually build up perspective-taking skills among the participants.

The last set of Stanislavski-based exercises takes the previous set of activities a step further to develop perspective-taking skills in a more specific context and in a more holistic and challenging way. This activity comes not from Sonia Moore but from Leslie Abbott's book titled *Active Acting: Exercises and Improvisations Leading to Performance.* This exercise still finds its basis in improvisation; however, participants are paired up and then individually given a very specific set of "given circumstances," including a primary motivation and objective (or desired goal for the character) for the scene (Abbott, 1987). This exercise more directly immerses participants into taking on the position of another person—it requires complete perspective-taking and requires them to combine the earlier skills and simpler exercises. It is also the most identifiably "theatre-related" exercise up to this point, as it involves interactions between two characters separate from the participants themselves.

Uta Hagen & Text Exercises

Toward the end of the workshop, I would seek to have participants deal more directly

with drama and text. To do so, I would pair up participants, give them each a ten-minute play (not an excerpt from a larger play), and assign them a character in the short play. In order to facilitate the character analysis aimed at the development of perspective-taking-based compassionate behavior, I would then introduce many of the ideas and theories of acting practitioner Uta Hagen—a theatre artist whose work also has a number of implications on understanding human behavior and fostering empathy and compassion. Specifically, I would focus on Hagen's ideas about "objective," "obstacle," and "action" (Hagen, 1973). In Hagen's teaching, objective refers to the what the character wants and seeks after; it involves the broader, general desire of the character throughout the play as well as the character's specific desires in each scene and moment. Obstacle refers to what is keeping a character from achieving their objective—anything standing in the way of what the person wants. Lastly, action involves the things that a character does in response to and in seeking to overcome obstacles; actions involve tangible behavior, and they can also be broken down into levels ranging from the broader (the action of a character throughout the play as a role) to the more specific (the action of a character in a particular moment or scene). Among other things, Hagen describes these three ideas as essential to understanding a character, to analyzing their behavior in the events of the play, and to performing the character realistically and effectively. Furthermore, each of these elements provide significant insight into the understanding of human behavior both on and off the stage. In the workshop, after asking participants to read the scene, I would explain these basic ideas of Hagen and ask them to use these principles to analyze their character, seek to understand their perspective, and perform the scene with their partner in a low-stakes context. The goal in this exercise would be to challenge them to attempt to comprehend human behavior in a more complex way than the previous exercises and to ask them to fully take on the other perspective in

the form of performance. After the performance, we would discuss how the exercise has implications on perspective-taking, especially in real-world contexts.

At the conclusion of the performance of the Uta Hagen/text scenes, I would engage the participants in a discussion and debrief session about the workshop experience. I would offer to answer any questions and ask them about their individual experiences and what they had learned. I would then move into a more challenging element of the discussion and ask them to reflect and consider how the workshop and the exercises involved might help them to engage in more compassionate and empathetic behavior in the healthcare field and with their own interpersonal relationships with both friends and strangers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, theatre offers a number of potential avenues for constructing a kinder, more compassionate world. The storytelling potency of theatre combined with its visual demonstration of empathetic cues makes it a strategic tool for helping to develop empathy among its viewers, and my empirical study indicates that watching live theatre may lead to more empathetic attitudes than watching a filmed performance. The historical parallels between theatre and psychology are also numerous, and there are a number of useful ways to apply acting and performance techniques to non-theatre populations in an effort to develop compassion skills within those individuals.

Perhaps the greatest takeaway from this exploration, however, is the excitement and the hope that there is much more to explore. Further research can provide deeper insights into the psychological and neuroscientific bases for many of the phenomena that theatre artists recognize as essential to our work or fundamental to our purpose as artists. Additionally, continuing to create theatre techniques and apply existing ones in new contexts might prove to contribute significantly to fostering a more compassionate society. As Helen Riess (2018) notes,

"integrating the arts is possibly a way to humanize almost any industry, and could be a gateway to enhancing empathy" (p. 132). If we can channel live theatre appropriately, we can make every workplace and corner of our society a more compassionate and empathetic place.

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