



Applied  
Improvisation  
Network



# AI combats Ageism

# What is ageism?

- In short: the discrimination on basis of age of the person
- Causes are the stereotypes and the prejudices that are “internalized” personally and socially
- Those stereotypes and prejudices are invalid, scientific studies on olders shows!!!

# How big is the problem?

According to the WHO:

**“Half the world’s  
population is ageist  
against older people”**



**50 %**

**BAD NEWS**

# Stereotypes - Dr. Becca Levy



Yale University

**BAD NEWS**

## Older people (olders):

1	are unable to learn	8	have a inevitable declining cognition
2	experience dementia	9	are bad drivers
3	's health is entirely determined by biology	10	don't have sex
4	are fragile, so they should avoid exercise	11	lack creativity
5	suffer from mental illness that can't be treated	12	are technologically challenged
6	aren't effective in the workplace	13	don't benefit from healthy behaviors
7	are selfish and don't contribute to society	14	don't recover from injury

# Structural ageism - Dr. Becca Levy

**BAD NEWS**

## Area's:

Medicine	Advertisement Industries
Mental health care	Popular culture
Governmental system	Media
Education	Spatial issues
Workplace	Science

# Mental Health Care

Ashton Applewhite:

“Ageism in Health Care means:

- **less treatment**
- **worse treatment**
- **and often ... no treatment at all**

**BAD NEWS**

**BAD NEWS**

# What does ageism induce?

## Ageism:

change how we view ourselves

erodes solidarity between generations

devalues or limits our ability to benefit from what younger and older populations can contribute

impacts our health, longevity and well-being

- ❖ ageism is associated with earlier death (by 7.5 years)
- ❖ poorer physical and mental health
- ❖ slower recovery from disability in older age

having far-reaching economic consequences: e.g. health care in USA: US\$ 63 billion / year

increases risky health behaviors, such as eating an unhealthy diet, drinking excessively or smoking

reduces our quality of life

**Source: World Health Organisation**



GOOD NEWS

M.D., Ph.D. Gene COHEN - "The Mature Mind:  
The positive power of the aging brain"

- Describes unforeseen psychological development late in the life cycle:

***"Untapped wells of creativity  
and intellectual potential"***

- Likening to friendly metaphorical inner voices, saying,

***"If not now, when?  
What can they do to me?"***

- This gives people ***comfort, confidence and courage.***



App I = “**Chocolate to the brain**”

**Study Duke University:**



“older people use both sides of the brain  
in a more synchronised way”



**GOOD NEWS**

**Dr. Gene COHEN:**

“Older people move to ALL-WHEEL DRIVE.  
Any activity that optimally uses both sides of  
the brain is like

**CHOCOLATE TO THE BRAIN**

**Art (i.e. IMPROVISATION)** is like that.”



# More Resilient Brains - A. Applewhite

**GOOD NEWS**

**“Especially in the emotional realm,  
older brains are more resilient”**

The aging brain enables greater:

- **emotional maturity**
- **adaptability to change**
- **levels of well-being**

GOOD NEWS

# Cognitive reserve - Ashton Applewhite



the ability to build and maintain  
extra neurons  
and  
connections between them

## How to build cognitive reserve:

- challenging our brains
- maintaining social network
- exercising



**Applied  
Improvisation**

# Applied Improv combats Ageism

GOOD NEWS

Viola Spolin in “Theater games for rehearsal” p2:

“Intuition emerges in the right half of the brain. In the metaphoric mind, the X-area, the area of knowledge which is beyond the restrictions of

**culture, race, education, psychology and age;**

it is deeper than the survival dress of mannerisms, prejudices, intellectualism, and borrowings most of us wear to live out our daily lives.”

# Applied Improv combats Ageism bis

GOOD NEWS

## Viola Spolin:

Mirror / Give and Take exercises

Keep the FOCUS

Into the SPACE not into the HEAD

## Both:

The group's dynamics

Have your partner(s) shine

## Keith Johnstone:

Status exercises

Spontaneity

Storytelling

**SIDECOACH = AIN PRACTITIONER !!!**

privileged position

GOOD NEWS

# Combatting ageism with App I

Example Area: Independent/Assistent living communities:

training the **caretakers** to “impro-connect” with the olders



~~prejudices  
stereotypes~~


training the **olders** to build their resistance to ageism

~~low self-esteem~~



# Final thoughts

GOOD NEWS

- Examine your **own** stereotypes on elders!!
- Elders-population is 25% or more of our society 
- Working with them is EASIER and more SATISFYING
- ART-QUALITY is not AGE-related ➡ go for performances



# Sources on Ageism/Positive Aging

GOOD NEWS

- **Ashton APPLEWHITE** (listed in 100 most inspiring women who are committed to social change):  
Book: this chair rocks, a manifesto against ageism  
Website: <https://thischairrocks.com/>
- **Dr. Becca LEVY** (Yale professor, leading researcher - fields of social gerontology/psychology of aging):  
Book: breaking the Age Code
- **Margaret GULLETTE** (scholar at Brandeis University):  
Book: Ending Ageism or how not to shoot old people
- **M.D., Ph.D. Gene COHEN**  
Book: The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain

**THANK YOU!!!**



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## Applied Improv combats Ageism - AINx Talk Avila

Personal experience 1

improv sessions in a residential care center - the story of Maria

### Abstract:

Improvisation by Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone requires that as an "Applied Improv" player you drop all your stereotypes and prejudices in communication and playing together with others. That "mindset" makes you, as an Applied Improvisation practitioner, privileged to trigger the "untapped wells of talent" of the elders. In the "X-area" with the elders, all internalized stereotypes and prejudices of ageism dissolve. Their experience and non-competitive attitude make the elders the ideal candidates to work with.

### The experience:

I started giving improv sessions at the company "Zorgbedrijf" in one of their residential care centers. The first session I had 8 participants. They were between 70 and 95 years old, all of them were no longer able to walk and did the exercises sitting.

One of the participants, Maria - 87 years old, turned out to be able to play the piano. There was an upright piano in the rehearsal room, which was no longer used for a long time. I asked Maria if she could indeed play the piano and if she would like to show a piece. She replied: "Yes, I'd love to, but I suffer from chronic arthritis of the hands, I am deaf in my left ear, I had an accident a few months ago that caused my memory to malfunction, and moreover I have not been able to practice because I haven't had my own piano here for 1,5 years." I replied that despite all that, I was still interested in hearing her play, without exerting any pressure.

It also turned out that she could not read music, she had taught herself to play the piano on the basis of "numbers" that she had pasted on the keystrokes of her own piano. This from an early age on. She had memorized all the songs she could play! She had never been allowed to attend music school in her youth, but the intense love for music drove her to find out and memorize it all by herself... .

After the joint session we continued to chat. The participants left one by one but Maria stayed until the last. When I was alone with her, she drove her wheelchair to the piano. She opened the keyboard deck and gently began to press a few notes with the two index fingers. I was already very happy that she tried it anyway. That it didn't work didn't mind me at all. I accepted that it ended here.

But that was not the case... .

Afterwards I realized that she was also completely blind in one eye and the other eye was deteriorating. She was searching the pitch with her fingers to play the notes and tested her fingers to see if she could avoid the discomfort of the arthritis. That worked. It took about one to two minutes.

And suddenly she played the song.... .

She played the song "für Elise" by Ludwig van Beethoven. Ludwig van Beethoven - who wrote that melody when he was already completely deaf. Now how do you interpret a melody written by a brilliant composer who was completely deaf when he composed the song? Well, that's what I heard Maria do: she put a softness, a sensitivity in the notes that only disabled people can do, for example a blind Ray Charles or a blind Stevie Wonder. So I

## Applied Improv combats Ageism - AINx Talk Avila

heard Ludwig van Beethoven's song performed as he envisioned it when he composed "für Elise" and as he wanted it to be performed artistically. With the same sensitivity and expression that only a disabled person puts in her performance!

I was transfixed, my eyes went watery and I could barely speak anymore... .

Perhaps you will now think: "Yeah, but that was just a coincidence, you were lucky, this was a one-time event. What has this to do with Applied Improv?"

Well, yes, I was lucky, that's for sure.... but this did not happen "by accident". I had listened to everyone during the entire session "in the improvisers' way": this is listening with the whole body, with all the senses and at the same time "effacing" myself. That's how I ended up with them in the intuition-area, the X-area as Viola Spolin says and this triggered the "true self" of Maria. It was as if her half-deafness, her half-blindness, her being confined to a wheelchair, her chronic osteoarthritis discomfort, her memory problems caused by the fall and her "shame" of being 87 years old (because of the feeling no longer being counted in our society) evaporated in space and only her "true self" remained: an ordinary, but oh so beautiful human being!!

Afterwards I was unable to get her the piano of her own, because of "rules" of the residential care center.

But the story doesn't stop here: in the sessions afterwards I noticed that she could also sing well and could hear and maintain the right pitch excellently! She could sing almost forty children's songs (some were quite difficult!) by heart with the whole text and the right pitch without any problem .... .

She told me that she loved listening to music so much, Giuseppe Verdi and Mozart were her favorites. I then gave her a small hand-held speaker (11 euros) with an SD card containing about 10 hours of MP3 music, including the most important works by Verdi and Mozart.

Because of a doctor's prescription, she is also not allowed to attend performances anymore. If not, I would have asked her to assist in an improv performance as a guiding musician ... . Even after she will have become completely blind within a few months!

This is an example of how internalized ageism can lead an older to believe that she is not worth much anymore while she has "untapped wells of creativity and intellectual potential" - cfr Dr. Cohen.

Her disabilities do not prevent her from performing beautifully her piano and her singing - talent: it are the many internalized ageism stereotypes that prevented that! The slightest inconvenience is "projected" by her environment to her as an insurmountable **age** problem ... meanwhile her beautiful musical talent stays "untapped" .... ;-(

## Applied Improv combats Ageism - AINx Talk Avila

Personal experience 2

Impressive theater performance of elders after only one week of improv sessions!

### **Abstract:**

In one week a performance is made based on improvisation exercises with elders who are on average above 70 years old. The elders can bring a quality performance that gives the audience at least the experience of a performance by middle-aged actors/actresses and this even with a short practice period!

### **The experience:**

In April 2022 I registered for a week of an acting workshop for elders, aged over 55 years. The initiative came from Opendoek, the Flemish organization for amateur theater. A performance would be provided at the end of the workshop with a selected number of theater people as audience.

The organisation Opendoek aimed with this initiative to invigorate elders to practice theater.

I myself was interested how the training would be like in that week and what the artistic value of the performance was gonna be.

At 63 years old I was the youngest participant, the others were all in their early 70s. Three had never played a show. One of them was disabled (used a wheelchair and a guide dog). Two artistic trainers did put together the show: one was a theater teacher and used a lot of improvisation exercises in her classes, the second was a dance teacher and also used improvisation exercises for the visual effect of the scenes (in contemporary dance a lot of improvisation is used to compose dance phrases and complete performances!).

From the outset, the emphasis was on the fact that very little work would be done with texts, so that nobody had to worry. That was the reason improvisation exercises were used and two trainers with that experience were hired to guide the group.

Throughout the week, the trainers were looking for truthful scenes and how they could be “melted” together into a performance. It quickly became clear to me that the life experience and the non-competitive attitude of the participants made them an ideal group to create an artistically beautiful performance.

The training started on Monday morning, the show was performed on the next Friday evening.

In the audience were many people who are active in the Flemish theater world: actors, directors, ... .

I asked some for their opinion on the performance and they were unanimous: very beautiful, gripping scenes, very truthful... . One spectator with a lot of theater experience described one scene “as if it was a scene out of a ballet performance”, he thought it was that impressive. He asked me how long we, as players, knew each other? I answered: one week, on Monday it was the first time we met each other as players. He stared at me in disbelief ... .

**Applied Improv combats Ageism - AINx Talk Avila**

This experience shows that olders can bring an outstanding performance, based on improvisation exercises and with little training. This is because of their own life-experiences and their attitude of non-competition: it is the fun in their playing and the truthfulness of their scenes that is their main concern!

## Applied Improvisation counters Ageism - AINx Talk Avila

How did I get from improv to ageism? Through the path of coincidences.... .

In May 2018 I attended one of my ten-day improvisation workshops with Keith Johnstone. By then I had already taken a few small improvisation courses in Belgium and also started a biennial acting course.

Johnstone was a revelation to me: I had read and studied his two books and his newsletters from the iTi (International Theatersports Institute) very thoroughly several times. Compared to the local improv courses, Keith's ten days were truly a meticulous explanation of how improv theater can be created. His books do explain his techniques in detail, but when you see Keith himself demonstrate an exercise and then immediately emerge the result, the "words" and "sentences" become reality. The magic of which he speaks happened before my own eyes and ears.

I had also read the book "Something like a drug" by Kathleen Foreman/Clem Martini, two of his students and colleague professors at the Drama faculty of the University of Calgary, and for me also improvisation had become a "drug", something that you become addicted to and that you can't get out of your body anymore ... .

What was so special about Keith Johnstone?

First, his life story, as described in "Keith Johnstone: A critical biography" by Prof. Theresa Robbins Dudeck. He found himself a "misfit" in the English school system, then met a brilliant teacher who applied the "Lao Tzu" method, he himself started teaching children that no other teacher wanted and already then he developed techniques and exercises to counter classical education.

Afterwards he was invited to the RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art), the "Research & Development" organization of the English theater to teach the actors to act "more spontaneously".

All his exercises are imbued with a determination to let the actors be themselves, to "grow" a fearless confidence of their own intuition and spontaneity, and forge a rock-solid trust between each improv player acting together on stage.

This requires a sense, which has been sharpened over the years, to deal with the actors' emotions and repressed fears and also to "replace" them with positivity and cheerfulness.

His analysis of people's "status" behavior is very impressive. And in addition to that his exercises that lead the actor to recognize the "status" of his fellow actor and to adjust his own status accordingly. Johnstone's status analysis transformed me completely as a human being ... .

In the workshop in London was a Japanese improviser, Yurie Sonobe. She trained ladies over 80 years old. That stunned me: ladies over 80 who had never done improv before and



then take the plunge at an older age to do improv exercises? Yurie said that they were all very excited and were eager to start the session every week!!! This was a complete surprise to me: it didn't match my idea of the elders at all. Yurie showed me pictures of the sessions and the ladies were very enthusiastic indeed, laughing and yelling and the fun was on their faces!

I didn't go into it immediately, but it kept "haunting me", the idea that 80-year-olds still want to take plenty of risks, even after having lived a whole life in a "straitjacket". Japanese society is known as very masculine, so those ladies still come from a cultural period where they learned to serve in society. Was this only a Japanese phenomenon or was it also possible in our Western culture?

In 2019 I attended the annual conference of AIN, Applied Improvisation Network, in Paris for the first time. There I saw the exercises of Keith Johnstone and Viola Spolin being applied in fields other than theater. It was mainly the social sector that fascinated me. And once again I was surprised: the improvisation exercises were used very effectively in many areas to make people more resilient in their daily dealings.

In retrospect that makes sense: life is theater and whether you interact with others on a theater floor or in your daily life, the principles of communication, cooperation, connection, ... apply in the same way. Improvisation trains you in better communication and "standing up for yourself" so this training will also benefit you in your daily dealings!

Two workshops made a great impression on me: in both, the focus was on improvisation for youngsters. The results for both were spectacular: high school students who had completed several years of training, all passed the university entrance exam! However, they came from a socially disadvantaged background. An environment that I knew all too well from my own childhood: I grew up in a family of 13 children and I know what underprivileged is! So I understood very well that improvisation was a very strong instrument to make youngsters more confident and mentally stronger for their later professional life!

I have provided technique training in basketball to youngsters and adults for 20 years. I also had youngsters who grew up in deprivation. An encouraging word, a genuine support and respect did wonders for them. This made me recognize what Keith said about educating youngsters and the psychological aspects that go with it. His principles of total respect for the fellow player, cooperation, true self, status behavior, ... also apply in the coaching world of basketball! Viola Spolin also refers to this: see the importance of the side-coach that she describes in her books. The difference is that in basketball the muscles are also trained and the "muscle memory". But the whole mental, psychological framework for me is the same in basketball as in improvisation. Only improv is much more efficient in transforming the "right side" of our brains because there is no physical side to the practice of improv. Anyone, including physically less able people, can be excellent improvisers.

Viola Spolin had received her training from Neva Boyd who was an expert in learning through the experience of the game. Now basketball is a game too, just like the specific games developed by Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone! The same principles apply in the game of improv as in the game of basketball!

I linked improv to ageism when I temporarily trained a group of improvisers. One of them was a 73-year-old lady who had never played theater or improv. The others did have experience with improvisation in both performances and training. I applied myself the Keith Johnstone's techniques that were new to them. I noticed that the 73 year old lady understood the instructions much faster and better and carried them out the way I asked. After a few weeks she stood head and shoulders above the others in play, transparency, .... She reminded me of the improv sessions that Yurie Sonobe gave to ladies over 80 years old in Japan.

I therefore decided to give improv sessions to the elders in Residential and Services Centres. I wanted to put it to the test: my intuition told me that the elderly are quite good at improv and probably even better than the younger ones ... I started to delve into the mental toughness of the elderly and so quickly ended up in the world of ageism... If you look up information on whether the elders can still achieve high-quality artistic performances, you almost immediately come across sources that explicitly and even more implicitly express the standard stereotypes and prejudices about this.

Strangely enough, I found very little information in Dutch: both in Belgium and in the Netherlands, this form of discrimination is strongly underexposed. A simple test is the documentation on the Dutch dokuwiki and the English one: (<https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leeftijdsdiscriminatie>) versus (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ageism>). In the Dutch dokuwiki, ageism is, as it were, only found in the labor market and health insurance... .

So I delved into the English-language literature about this. Especially the positive side of aging was described in detail there and references were made to extremely professional, high-quality studies!

It was also a confrontation with myself because on closer examination I turned out to have a lot of stereotypes and prejudices still "anchored" in myself ... As an improviser I was used to regularly "running into myself", but this time I was surprised how much and how invisibly ingrained some stereotypes about elders I still carried!

But I also saw the positive side of the situation: improvisation has the tools to do something about this, on a micro-environment level but perhaps expanding to larger platforms? My improv sessions started in two residential care centers and three service centers. In my appendix "personal experience 1" I describe the story of Maria. She is proof to me that ageism is indeed very destructive to the living conditions of the elders and prevents them from showing their best talents. All stereotypes and prejudices about ageism are shattered by her story.

My experiences of working with other elders are similar to those with Maria: the elders do not want pity, they know very well that their time is limited, but that is precisely why they are motivated to "give something back to society". All of Dr. Cohen's claims in this regard are correct and I have been able to experience it myself in full exposure. Physical discomfort may occur. These can be the usual inconveniences of aging, such as reduced vision in the

eyes or reduced hearing capacity. It can also be worse discomforts: a rheumatic disease, a difficult progress due to a heavy profession in the past, .... . But the point is: the brain continues to grow through an activity that (cfr. Ashton Applewhite):

1 is challenging

2 is practiced regularly

3 is practiced in a social context!

Do we not as individuals and as a society have the task, indeed even the obligation (!), to provide our elders with the means to allow their brains to grow fully and to allow them to enjoy a full, meaningful life?

Improvisation is one means to that end and it is a privilege for me to use it for that purpose.

My ultimate goal is to realize a performance with the elders. Not like many theater organizations do “out of compassion” and “out of a collective, social sense of guilt” to offer them just an “occupation”, but to let our society experience that they can present a theater performance that can match artistically with one of professional theaters with middle-age actors!

In my appendix “personal experience 2” I show that this is absolutely possible and this even with a short practice period!

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