

I'mprovisation: Training in Theater Improvisation Skills and Its Effects on Clinicians' Attitudes and Psychosocial Practices

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Abstract

Introduction: Social work has been described as an “improvised performance” (Walter, 2006), with social workers constantly tailoring their approach to the idiosyncratic strengths and needs of the client. Moreover, researchers have found that flexibility, honesty, openness, exploration, and activeness contribute positively to the therapeutic alliance. Training in these relationship skills is important for social workers. Traditionally, such training has included didactic theoretical components, reading of manuals, audio and/or videotapes of demonstrations or treatments, as well as one-on-one and group supervision. In this dissertation I propose training in theater improvisation skills as a framework for developing attunement to self and other, as well as for enhancing relationship skills.

Theater improvisation skills are aimed at increasing spontaneity, animation, and co-creation with the other, while enhancing immediacy skills. This type of training not only develops theory of mind, but also improves the connection to the other in order to co-create the moment.

Advocates for an improvisational stance in clinical work describe benefits that include expanding professional repertoires, generating a sense of excitement, and expanding possibilities for interpretations and enactments.

As part of this action research, an experiential course called Improvisation Skills for Therapists was developed based on Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

principles (Kolb, 1984). The research examined the effects of such training on participants' perceptions and interventions in their subsequent clinical work. There is little research on the use of theater improvisation skills in therapy, especially in regards to the *I'mprovisation experience*; the subjective experience of clinicians as they improvise in the clinical encounter. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of the effects of improvisation in clinical work and to offer a more integrative conceptualization of the I'mprovisation experience as a unique change mechanism in the clinical relationship.

Objectives: (1) To measure the effects of improvisation skills training on social workers in relation to three specific key variables to alliance-building in psychosocial work: therapeutic presence, flexibility, and collaborative tendency; (2) to investigate how such training affects participants' practical interventions and perceptions of their work, as well as their self-perception as clinicians; and (3) to conceptualize and better understand the I'mprovisation experience and to incorporate this construct in existing clinical paradigms.

Method: A longitude mixed methods study presents the changes in perceptions and behavior of course participants. A total of three courses were taught in the years 2013 and 2014. Thirty-five participants took part in the quantitative study group together with 46 controls, completing questionnaires before, after, and at a three-month follow up. Seventeen course alumni from the three courses took part in semi-structured interviews three months after course completion as part of the qualitative arm of the study.

Main Findings and Discussion:

1. Qualitative analysis shows that following the course, participants experienced higher levels of therapeutic presence in regards to use of intuition, awareness in the here-and-now, and mindfulness. In addition, post-course reports of increased levels of animation, boldness, and self-disclosure are possible indicators of increased therapeutic charisma and therapeutic impact (Romanelli, Tishby, & Moran, 2017).¹
2. Quantitative analysis shows a significant increase in flexibility and therapeutic presence immediately following the course compared to the controls. This increase was not maintained at the three-month follow up. Triangulation with the qualitative data through the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985) suggests that the training contributed to changes in participants' attitudes toward improvisation in clinical work, yet longer training was needed in order to strengthen actual improvisational interventions (Romanelli & Tishby, submitted).²
3. The I'mprovisation experience shares characteristics of both peak experience and flow, yet has the unique features of a visceral, intimate I-Thou "communitas" encounter. Precursors for I'mprovisation experiences show that I'mprovisation can be an important change mechanism within the relational dynamics of therapy, as well as

¹ Romanelli, A., Tishby, O., & Moran, G. S. (2017). "Coming home to myself": A qualitative analysis of therapists' experience and interventions following training in theater improvisation skills. *The Arts in*

² Romanelli, A., Tishby, O. (submitted) "*Just what is there now, that is what there is*" A mixed methods pilot study of the effects of training in theater improvisational skills on clinical social workers.

an example of successful management of countertransference in times of boredom or impasse (Romanelli, Tishby & Moran, submitted).³

Overall, these findings suggest that training in theater improvisation skills constitutes an important addition to traditional training in clinical psychosocial work. Improvisation training expands participants' interventions as well as impacts professional self-perceptions and attitudes. A multi-dimensional conceptualization of the I'mprovisation experience adds to a deeper understanding of how improvisation contributes to the creation of peak change moments in therapy. These findings have several implications for clinical training and practice of social workers.

³ Romanelli, A., Tisby, O., & Moran, G.S. (submitted). I'mprovisation – The Therapist's Subjective Experience During Improvisational Moments in the Clinical Encounter