Experiencing relational thinking: Lessons from Improvisational Theater[1]

If you desire to see, learn how to act. (Von Foerster, 1984, p. 61)

A lynchpin of family therapy thinking is systems theory and cybernetic theory (Bateson, 1972, Gale & Long, 1996). Many family therapists often acknowledge the paradigm shift of seeing the world in new ways that occurred when they finally "got" a systemic epistemology. Similarly, the discursive and narrative turn of psychology (and family therapy) (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Harre & Gillett, 1994; Shotter, 1993: White & Epston, 1990) and a shift to postmodern incredulities, introduced another paradigm for practitioners to understand and explain social phenomenon. With these shifts come new practices for clinical intervention.

While there are a plethora of books and articles on systems thinking and the discursive perspective for therapists, it can still be challenging for practitioners to maintain a world view different than the dominant paradigm. This paper invites the reader to consider another form for maintaining an epistemology of relational discernment. That source of inspiration comes from the world of improvisational theater. While there are other papers and books that apply improvisational games to clinical settings (for example, Wiener, 1994; 2000), little has been written linking the theoretical premises of improvisation to clinical practice. This paper introduces the reader to improvisational theater and its history and proposes a conceptual framework for incorporating improvisational practices into therapy. Students, trainers and practitioners of family therapy to are encouraged to explore the improvisational theater literature (and to play with improv structures) in order to have another means for experiencing the world from an interactional framework. Additionally, improvisational structures provide a format for examining, practicing and discussing relational ethics.

Historically situating improvisational theater

Non-Scripted theater (NST), of which improvisational theater is one branch, has its roots in pre-literate oral traditions (Fox, 1994). The cultural practice of oral narratives is not a passive approach of the speaker presenting details of a story to another person. This storytelling practice is a shared accomplishment between speaker and listeners. Listeners actively participate in thinking through and understanding the story, as each listener often becomes another teller. The story is not composed **for,** but **in** performance. The narration did not exist as a static text, but was achieved in the sharing. The story is more than the words and the performance is a multi-sensory accomplishment that is always being re-created. In the oral tradition, knowledge is not independent of the story, but is intrinsically connected to transmission, the ritual, and ceremony of telling.

Stories of oral traditions provided cultural knowledge and were more than just entertainment. Anthropologists have noted how only reporting cultural oral stories as a literary text misses out on the important ceremonial and ritualistic practices that also give meaning to the

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[1] This paper is, in small part, adapted from Gale, J. (2002). Five (plus or minus 2) guiding principles of improvisational performance relevant to the practice, research and teaching of therapy. *Journal of Clinical Activities, Assignments, & Handouts*. 2, 2, 77-88.

narrative (Hymes, 1981). Some scholars, such as Rudolf Steiner, Walter Ong and Paolo Freire suggest that oral practices of story telling are primary and necessary in human development. Ong (1982) states that "the phenomenology of sound enters deeply into human beings' feel for existence, as processed by the spoken word. For the ways in which the word is experienced is always momentous in psychic life" (p. 73). Steiner proposes that for children under seven, oral experiences (stories and music) are preferred before secondary sources of experiences achieved through literacy are presented.

NST includes such approaches as experimental theater, educational theater, comic-satiric theater (improvisational theater), community theater, and therapeutic theater (which includes the work of J. L. Moreno, Jonathon Fox, and Augusto Boal) (Fox, 1994). The common thread of each of these approaches is how they achieve creative (and often innovative) productions through relational performances. While improvisational theater's pedigree can be traced back to commedia dell'arte, which emerged in 16th century Italy during the Renaissance, improvisational theater, as we have come to know it from *Whose Line Is It* and *Second City of Chicago* can be linked directly to the work of Viola Spolin.

Viola Spolin worked with Neva Boyd at the Hull House[2] in Chicago in the 1920's and 1930's. Spolin also worked on the Works Progress Administration (WPS) as a drama supervisor for recreational projects. Spolin developed theater games for encouraging creativity, self-expression and self-realization. These are not competitive games, but rather, games designed to help actors (both in the professional and personal sense) improve their ability to perform.

For Viola Spolin, to direct someone "to act" in a particular manner is an inhibiting request. However, to make a game out of it, the person shifts his/her focus to the relational aspect of playing, which can help reduce (or eliminate) one's self-consciousness. Rather than telling someone "how to behave," Spolin sets up contexts that allow the actor to arrive at an appropriate choice for her or himself. For Spolin, people learn through experience rather than have something spelled out. Creating new contexts allow for new rules of interaction.

As an example, Spolin one time in working with teenagers, found the young actors playing a romantic scene were shy about touching one another. Instead of giving the person directions such as, "Take her hand on such and such line" Spolin developed the game *contact*. For every line delivered, the person must make physical contact with the other person to whom that line is addressed, consistent with that scene. Through shifting their attention away from preconceived norms of social behavior (i.e. romantic touch), the youth were able to create and practice new ways of interacting. [3]

Viola Spolin's son, Paul Sills joined forces with David Sheperd in 1955 to begin the Compass Players, and in 1959, Paul Sills opened Second City in Chicago. Some of the players of Second City later went on to star in Saturday Night Live. During this period, while comedic, improv performances used topical political and news items in many of their skits to create socio-

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[2] Jane Addams (a social activist for peace and human rights) co-founded the social settlement known as Hull House in 1889. This innovative community program provided kindergarten and day care facilities for the children of working mothers; an employment bureau; an art gallery; libraries; English and citizenship classes; and theater, music and art classes.

[3] It can be seen how this example is very similar to the type of interventions that may occur in the MRI approach or strategic therapy (Fisch, Weakland & Segal, 1982; Haley, 1976). Spolin's way of working is consistent with an interactional perspective and I believe very influential in shaping improvisational theater as we know it today. It could be argued too that the games developed by Spolin (and the games of improve in general) invite second order change for the players. The new rules of engagement for a particular game create a new context that requires a new way of behaving.

political satiric performances. Since that time improvisational theater has spread to other venues across Canada, the United States as well as throughout Europe.

Several important conceptual themes of improvisational theater

The following themes are not meant to be an exhaustive list of all aspects of improvisational theater. These ideas have developed from my experiences performing in an improv group for nine years and attending a number of improv workshops. In improvisational theater, these practices were developed to help actors shift from an individualistic (and sometimes competitive) perspective on performance and success, to collaborative performances based on trust, acceptance and the shared accomplishment of meaning. The labeling of these themes comes from my orientation as a systemically trained, postmodern narrative informed family therapist and researcher. Also, the themes do overlap and merge. These themes offer a conceptual system that suggests how many improvisational performers orient themselves to their craft. These themes include: (1) Relational action; (2) Contextual sensitivity; (3) Problem Solving experiences; and (4) Narrative compositions. It is hoped that this conceptual system and some of the exercises listed[4] can be used for training therapists in collaborative and relational approaches of treatment.

Relational action. Improvisational theater is a relational activity and very different than stand-up comedy, which is based on individuals' performances. The relationships that are ongoing and relevant to the performance include the player-player relationships, the players-audience relationships, and the selves-of-player relationships. Each of these relationships is integral to the creation and sustenance of the scene. These relationships occur on multiple sensory levels and are more than the words spoken. Spolin (1963) states that "improvisation is not an exchange of information between players; it is communion" (p. 45). Paul Sills states, "you can only know you exist in an area of mutuality. That mutuality can exist between an individual and God, but the parallel to that is between man and man" (in Sweet, 1986, p. 20).

There are a number of methods used in improv to maintain relational activity. The *Yes, &* approach is a fundamental attitude and practice that almost all improv trainers emphasize (Halpern, Close & Johnson, 1994). *Yes, &* means that each player is always in agreement and supportive of another performer's proposal and creation of a stage reality. Suggestions offered by other players are accepted (the "yes" part), and then elaborated (the "&" part). If your partner introduces you as her husband, you are now her husband. You then can elaborate on your marital role and give roles to other cast members (children, in-laws, neighbors, therapist, etc.), or create a situation (you are roller skating, you are on your honeymoon, etc.), or create a tension (you can accuse her/him of having an affair), or do anything else that spontaneously arises. This rule of agreement allows a scene to move the action forward. If one actor says we are working in an ice cream store, then everyone agrees to this reality and quickly assigns (or are assigned) roles within that context. The next person may respond, "This is a hold-up, give me all of your pistachio ice cream or I'll shoot you," and the scene progresses. Each new initiation furthers the previous one, as each new reality is accepted and expanded.

While Y*es, &* avoids disagreements between actors' proffers of ideas, it does not eliminate conflict or the tension between people that can occur with disagreements. Being in

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[4] Also, the reader is encouraged to read improvisational texts for many other activities and exercises (some web sites that are helpful include: http://www.learnimprov.com , http://www.fuzzyco.com/improv/games.html , http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Improvisational%20theater, http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~ksawyer/improvisational_theater.htm

agreement does not mean there is not tension or conflict in a scene. And from a theater perspective, introducing narrative forms of conflict is often integral to making a performance interesting. Scenes can be created such as in "the robbery" when a person comes home to find a thief, or, "the last seat on the bus" where there is tension. What is typically interesting and central to an improv performance though, is not the conflict per se, but the **relationship** that is created between the protagonists over the conflict. As Halpern et al (1994) note, "the scene is the result of the relationship between the characters and the relationship that grows from those explored moments" (p. 74).

A second relational method that improv players highlight is that of maintaining *trust*. A point that Halpern, Close and Johnson (1994) make is that "the best way for an improviser to look good is by making his fellow players look good" (pp. 37). This collaborative relationship builds trust of yourself, and trust in your fellow performers and assists in one being spontaneous, while minimizing intervening critiques or judgments. This collaborative achievement of trust, and of being in the moment, also invites a surrendering of one's ability to control the situation. Being open to accept whatever your fellow actor presents makes it very hard to prepare (or mentally script) what will happen next. While you may be thinking of one direction for the scene, your fellow performer may take the action elsewhere. It is imperative to let go of your preferred (first) choice and go with the new direction (albeit, you can now further adapt the new direction).

Furthermore, there are no mistakes from this perspective, as "mistakes" are incorporated into larger patterns, and all actions become justified. Through *yes, &* of the action of the moment, and trusting the ensemble, something new must occur. So if a 'mistake 'does seemingly occur (and distinguishing a performance action as mistake is often a self-judgment of the person, not in the event itself), this narrative arc is woven into a broader context.[5] Another aspect of trust is being truthful. As Halpern et al (1994) note, "honest discovery, observation, and reaction is better than contrived invention." This means that the improv players learn to draw upon their own phenomenological understandings of experiences to create an *as if true* character. This is a complex notion in that it doesn't mean you "really" need to have had a particular experience. If you are performing the role of a baby orangutan learning to drive a truck, you engage yourself as if you are really that orangutan, rather than being an actor pretending to be an orangutan.

(2) **Contextual amplification**. This practice is related to many of the above points. Spolin notes "It is necessary to become part of the world around us and make it real by touching it, seeing it, feeling it, tasting it, and smelling it" (Fox, 1994, p. 84). Spolin calls this keeping your point of concentration or focus. This requires being in the moment and sensitive to your contexts as you discover and amplify your experiences. This amplification is not to make an event larger than life, but to go smaller and be specific. Similar to Geertz' notion of thick description, players present richer particulars of an event to flesh out the mundane aspects of an action or relationship. For example, if one is doing a scene at a dining table, attending to all of the details of the (collaboratively created) table, plates, foods, beverages, utensils, glasses, etc. adds a depth to the scene and the relationship between the players.

Doing improvisation means one is not script writing or planning a punch line. Planning ahead removes you from being attentive to what is presented in the moment. Your focus has been broken. In accepting what your fellow performers offer you, and trusting whatever is

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[5] This is common in jazz performances when an "off key note" is woven into the song in a new and creative way that instantly changes a mistake into an innovative variation.

presented, it is necessary that for each moment you remain focused with all your senses. This give and take of interaction requires a careful and full listening/feeling/sensing of your whole context. This can be like a meditation. This responsiveness to the context need not be an instantaneous knee-jerk reaction. Take the time to use your whole body to take in what is being said and done, and respond accordingly. Augusto Boal, in a workshop, said that there are four kinds of exercises to use for this practice: to feel what we touch, listen to what we hear, develop our senses and to see what we look at. When in the moment, there is a wealth of ideas that can be discovered, presented and elaborated. The gap between watcher and doer closes.

Being attentive to contexts includes attending to what your fellow actors are doing and saying in order to give and take, and keep the focus of the scene. Use what has been presented earlier (even reincorporating something from an earlier game) in new ways of connecting. Also, be aware of how your response shapes the other performers. As Halpern et al (1994) note, "A player's move is not complete until he see how it affects his partner" (p. 63). While it is also important to note what is happening in the audience in order to incorporate them into the performance, maintain responsiveness to your fellow performers, and not be character influenced by audience laughter. This contextual sensitivity also means staying abreast of social and political events so that these issues can be integrated into the performance. Finally, it also means being sensitive to your own body and experiences. Often ideas come and are presented without any logical awareness of why you are doing this action.

Fox (1994) states that spontaneity includes vitality, appropriateness, intuitiveness, as well as readiness for change. He goes on to say how this is produced in the whole body and that when one is in the moment, there is a loosening of rationality, and an increase of the spontaneous. An example of this in improv is freeze tag. In this game two people begin a scene with dialogue and activity. After a minute or so a third player shouts freeze. The other two immediately stop and hold their position. The third player (who may have his/her back to the actors, so as to avoid planning when to stop a scene) then tags out one of the frozen actors and takes that person's exact physical position. The two actors now start an entirely brand new scene while also justifying their physical posture. This game can go on for a long time, with repeated freezes, change of actors and brand new scenes. In doing this game, at times the actor changing position with another may not know what to say until he/she takes on the physical position. At that time it may be the body that informs the dialogue.

(3) **Problem solving experiences**. Viola Spolin states, "We learn through experience and experiencing, and no one teaches anyone anything" and this means "involvement at all levels [of experience]: intellectual, physical, and intuitive" (1963, p. 3).[6] Spolin, in her workshops, created environments for learning. Using the metaphor of games, each game had rules on how the players needed to work together in order to solve a problem. This activity required a community effort of creating new behaviors. Spolin states, "through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves" (p. 4). The only requirement of each game is agreement on the rules and objective of the game by all of the players. The focus by the group is on contest and expansion, not competition. Paul Sills states, "True improvisation is a dialogue between people. Not just on the level of what the scene is about, but also a dialogue from the being - something that has never been said before that now comes up... In a dialogue, something happens to the participants. It's not what I know and what you know; it's something that happens between us

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[6] Spolin's idea seems very similar to Maturana's notion of autopoiesis.

that's a discovery. As I say, you can't make this discovery alone. There is always the other" (in Sweet, 1986, pp. 19).

The problems that an ensemble solves are created by the interaction of audience suggestions with the rules of the game. Problem solving is giving problems to solve problems. The rules provided constraints on how the players would approach a scene. Such games (constraints) as: using literary genres; speaking in foreign languages; having to identify attributes of another player; speaking each line in alphabetical sequence; having to transform one meaning of an action to an entirely different meaning; incorporating lines from the audience into the scene; speaking in unison with others; and having to go forward and reverse in a scene, are each designed to have the players experience new ways of interacting in order to solve a problem.

In solving problems, each scene requires that players create a particular reality. This is often referred to as "being in your where," or physicality. Physicalization, as defined by Spolin, is being grounded in concrete experiences, and moves to a physical and non-verbal level of knowing. As a location gets more defined, keep the (space) objects present. Do not walk through a table that may now be in front of you. Hold the utensils in your hand as you eat a meal. A gun is not a finger pointing. Objects are treated as manifest and present. If your role is one of a child or a monkey, likewise, move your body into the posture of a child or chimpanzee. Become one with your environment. Be mindful of one's body and actions. An improv mantra is, "Do, don't tell." Improv is less interesting when actors are just talking heads. The more authentic actors can create a physical reality, the more compelling the performance. Paul Sills states, "Improvisational acting is required if one is to stay in reality," and "Now reality is not to be defined as what is real for you alone. Reality is shared. And reality of the moment can occur only with spontaneity" (in Sweet, 1986, pp. 16 &17). The players seek to invite the audience into their world as well as they also enter the world of the audience. In improv performances, the separation between actor and audience is often breached, as the stage/audience duality opens to collaborative interactions. Audience members are invited to share suggestions for scenes, and to even participate in some of the games. It is always important to respect your audience, and play up to their intelligence. Accept the other actors' reality - the audience hears and knows what the actors have said and done, so go with it (and not try to get the easy laugh).

There are no any absolutely right or wrong ways to solve a problem. Spolin states that the process is more important than success. She emphasizes the elimination of approval and disapproval as judgement blocks the person from playing the game, being in relationship and reduces learning. It is important to learn through direct contact with experience. When evaluating a performance (post improv show), this is treated as another game and is directed towards learning and growth.

Some examples of problem solving games include three genres and forward and reverse. Three genres is a game where the audience suggests three styles of story telling. For example, three styles could be film noir, horror, and Shakespearian plays. The performers then begin a scene. As the scene progresses, another actor off stage, randomly shouts out a different genre every 90 seconds or so. As each genre is announced, the actors perform their scene in that genre structure, while maintaining content and characterization. Forward, reverse is a game where two actors begin a scene based on audience suggestions. A third actor will call out every 20 or 40 seconds "forward" or "reverse." A yell of "reverse" means the performers must go backwards from wherever they are in the scene and do it in reverse. This includes both physical actions as well as dialogue turns. A shout of "forward" means the performers go forward in time from that

moment onward. The actors must work hard to remember both their lines and body positions in this game.

(4) **Narrative compositions**. As noted earlier, one goal of improv is to advance the game. *Yes, &* is a method that achieves this progression. However, to simply agree with another's statement (*yes*) with an additional add on (&) does not necessary make much of a story. It is also important to include narrative structures that highlight differences and connections. Developing narrative compositions can include such elements as crafting a plot, offering different perspectives and pattern connections.

In improv, constructing a plot is founded on the actions of the characters and their relationships. Each actor seeks to discover/create a character with clearly defined goals and purposes, making sure that this person's agenda has emotional significance to his/her character. It is very important for the improv actor to construct a 3-dimensional character. When this person's motivations, desires, and emotions are interpersonally accomplished (a relationship is created), a narrative begins to unfold. Tension then develops when the character is unable to satisfy his/her goal. This can occur through interpersonal conflict with an antagonist, clashing goals between characters, traps, opposing forces (fate, nature, society) or intrapersonal conflicts (one's own character traits or flaws) (personal communication in an improv class, George Younts, 1992).

To begin to develop skills in quickly discovering plots, Halpern et al (1994) talk about a game called three-line scene. In this game, two actors must discover a scene in only three lines. During this time they must create a reality and story, and reveal who they are, where they are, their relationship, and what the scene is about. Examples of this game from Halpern et al (1994, p. 68) are, (1) "Sign here." (2) "I've never been asked to autograph a women's chest before." (3) "Well, I am your biggest fan." And, (1) "Sign here." (2) "This makes it official." (3) "Yes, we're now legally divorced." This game is often done as a practice drill, with the actors continuously repeating starting over with three new lines. What is important to remember is that each actor goes into the scene with no pre-conceived notion of his/her character. It is important in improv for the narrative to develop very quickly. There is no stage time for preliminary developments of a character's identity. Improvisers must make active choices and *show, don't tell* (Halpern et al, 1994). This means not talking about what you will do, but to make choices and perform them.

An example of different perspectives is the game, "three views." Three actors get roles from audience suggestions (e.g. police officer, prostitute, dentist, gypsy, small child, etc.) and then a fourth actor orchestrates their telling of an event that occurred in front of all of them (the event too is based on audience suggestions). Each actor will tell the story from the perspective of how his/her character's role (e.g. how a police officer, prostitute, child) might perceive the event. The fourth actor orchestrates the story by selecting which actor will speak in which sequence, going back and forth between the 3 actors (such as what happens in a Kurosawa film).

Pattern connection means paying close attention to what your fellow improvisers are saying and remembering what has happened. Returning to previous themes can be a powerful move for creating a memorable narrative. For example in doing long forms in improv (from five minutes to encompassing the entire show) a popular game is the long structure known as the "Harold". In the long form of the Harold, players slowly create and introduce particular characters and scenarios. As the performance continues, typically over three parts, a culminating finale is created that incorporates and reconnects the characters, themes, and as many elements as possible from all of the scenes and games presented earlier. The creation of this meta-

narrative, through merging patterns, story connections, and re-incorporation of earlier scenes and relationships has been described by many improvisationlists as a magical process.

The key point here is not that improv players are scriptwriting stories, but rather, being in relationships, amplifying the context, and being in experience **necessarily create narratives.** Narratives are created in the moment: not planned ahead. Improv players touch upon human experiences in their performances, and these storied experiences generate entirely new narrative patterns.

Improvisation and family therapy

When we experience the boundary of our taken for granted rules, then what is real and what is possible blur. Improvisational theater presents a simultaneous multiple frame of meaning around performances. There become a blurring between "this is not real" and "this is real," as well as "this is me" and "this other is also me." Innovative connections and differences are achieved in unanticipated ways. When improvisers are in a groove they achieve a communion type experience. Relationships become the driving force of all action: and spontaneity, vitality, and readiness for change manifest in exciting and unexpected ways. Actions become easy and natural. This is a spiritual moment for many. As Paul Sills states, "True improvisation is a dialogue between people ... a dialogue of being" (Sweet, 1986, p.19).[7]

Improvisation also provides both a tool for practicing coming into being, as well as a medium for studying this process. For example, an exercise adapted from improv is the status game. Status is an important dynamic that is often used in improvisation as both high and low status is useful in developing a character's identity. Interpersonal conflicts built on status differences are a useful narrative tool. The status game, as I have used in classes, has four volunteers silently rank order each other in terms of power or status. Using status hierarchy ranging from 1-4, each person is to identify him/herself with a number as well as rank order the other three people with the other numbers. The rule of the game is that a higher number orders all lower numbers to do things, and a lower number must abide by the request of any higher number. Hence, if you give yourself a rank of 1, you can order the other 3 people to do things. If you give yourself a 3, you must abide to the requests of those that you ranked 1 and 2. You can order the fourth ranked person around.

After each player has silently selected a ranking for all four participants, people observing the exercise then selects roles for them and an activity. For example, selected roles can be a mom, dad and two kids getting ready for school in the morning. The four people then enact a scene and respond to each other by rank (status) rather than role. This means, for example, that a father (self-selected rank of 3) must obey his four-year old daughter (that he gave a status of 2), while the daughter (self-selected rank of 1 ignores all others requests), and mother (self-selected rank of 1) orders everyone else around. In this performance, all sorts of hierarchical rankings are possible, and various alliances and conflicts occur. There can be four 1's, four 4's, 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. After the scenario is performed, the observers discuss how they perceived the interactions and the rankings. Then the actors share their experiences. This exercise typically leads to discussions on the difference between roles and rules, and dynamics of power, coalitions, confrontation, escalation, symmetry and stability/change, and how these concepts are interactionally accomplished.

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[7] This notion is similar to theoretical concepts developed by Mikhail Bakhtin and Edward Sampson's (Sampson, 1993).

The practices of improvisation are useful in clinical practice. Relational action, contextual amplification, problem solving experiences and narrative compositions, provide clinicians with new strategies and techniques. In particular, these types of improvisational activities can help individuals better accommodate and adjust to the fluidity of rules and roles of daily living. Improv practices can assist people in experiencing the boundaries of familiar behaviors as they practice novel behaviors. People can learn that their identity beliefs are not intractable scripts, but composed in social performances. This view invites the celebration of the other (Sampson, 1993). Problem solving experiences (and consistent with ethnomethodology and discourse analysis) help people practice our culture's taken for granted rules and test their boundaries. It helps participants experience indexicality (Garfinkel, 1967) in terms of how meaning and understanding are accomplished in social interaction. An utterance has a particularly meaning because of the effect that is achieved in the interaction. New and shifting contexts are constantly being shaped and emerging through the interactions of the participants.

Contextual amplification exercises are useful for therapists in attending to the small mundane details of clients' lives that can have significant clinical benefit. When we can challenge our assumptions about what we (think) the client's world is, and engage them to create their reality in front of us through opening up and expanding the details of their daily lives, new possibilities of solutions and clients effective resistances against problems emerge. These types of details and stories often go by very fast in clinical (and non-clinical as well) conversations and are not acknowledged or even recognized. Learning how to slow down the talk by being in the moment and responsive and through amplifying these details can lead to rich interpersonal understanding. An improv game that can be used for this is secrets (from Halpern et al 1994, p. 113-113). Someone writes down motivations (I 'm going to commit suicide, I am a romantic and always fall in love at first sight, I can never keep a relationship, etc.) and each actor selects one motivation for his/her character in a scene. The purpose of this structure is not to be a guessing game, but to assist the actors in developing characters with a particular purpose and agency, and how this motivation may impact all of that character's behaviors.

Making pattern connections, as a part of narrative compositions, is an important skill as well. Through carefully attending to what has been said, past patterns can be discovered, and new patterns created. These types of discoveries (and creations) are very important for clients creating new social identities. These improv activities are also very effective in developing creativity and spontaneity and helping therapists resist burnout. A good improv structure for this is the birthday scene. This game has 3 to 5 players begin by portraying four years old celebrating a birthday. They do the same scene at five different ages of the characters (for example, ages 4, 16, 30, 45, 75), with the purpose being how these might characters be different and relate differently to one another over a 70-year span.

These improv practices are also useful in teaching, as well as developing researchers' skills (c.f. Sawyer, 2003). Observational research, clinical research and qualitative research in general all require skills in seeing patterns and interacting collaboratively with respondents. These methods are also effective for examining how power (and racism, and sexism, etc.) is performed and accomplished. Additionally, how family stories are constructed and passed on can be viewed from an improvisational perspective. The telling of family rules, values, histories, and the like follow interactional structures. These practices provide another way to view how some rituals are dynamic and liberating, while other rituals are static and oppressive

Finally, I believe that taking this performance frame for viewing human behavior also entails a careful consideration of ethical practices. From the perspective that who we are is a

relational accomplishment, it is important to view how our practices are culturally situated, as well as consider how each person is accountable for his or her behaviors. A relational ethics moves the focus from the individual to the social interaction. From this perspective, it is necessary to consider how cultural discourses on identity, race, gender, power, social class, etc. influence our performances (Hare-Mustin, 1994). It is vital that we not objectify other people's views (White, 1997) for how we interact determines how we come to assign and define what is real.

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