

Principles of Improvisation

A Model of Therapeutic Play in Relational Psychoanalysis

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What does it mean to be improvisational, and what does it mean to not be? An episode of the highly acclaimed NBC television series “The Office” gives us a hint. In it, the notoriously narcissistic boss, Michael Scott (actor Steve Carell) attends an after-office-hours improvisational acting class. Throughout the show’s first two seasons, fans of “The Office” became eminently familiar with Michael—recurrently being the buffoon—especially, through his grandiosely inflated self-perceptions. These include, among other things, that he is at heart a really great actor. It is in his improvisation class, however, that they see most clearly why Michael recurrently fails in work, in love, and finally, even in play.

Eager to act, Michael boorishly insists upon being in every scene, and when his teacher yields to his pressure Michael jumps “on stage” adopting the same character over and over. That is, he immediately becomes some version of a pistol brandishing law enforcement officer (e.g., cop, detective, or FBI agent), who within a matter of seconds responds to whatever his scene partner initiates by pointing his two-hand-clasped feigned finger gun while screaming, “Freeze! Detective Michael Scott!” And, no matter how his scene partners reply, he immediately shoots them, they compliantly collapsing to the floor, hand over “lethal chest wound.” Sometimes, Michael would really get carried away and begin shooting other classmates who are not even in the scene. Responding to his instructor’s withering plea for him to listen to his partner and be open to other dramatic choices, Michael argues

that the introduction of a gun in every scene is always dramatically commanding. “Far better,” he mutters, than the “boring scenes” his classmates introduce.

Then something truly improvisational happens. His instructor commandingly steps onto the stage and says, “Michael! No more guns! Gimme your guns! All of them!” Caught off guard, Michael begrudgingly starts to mime pulling out a huge array of imaginary pistols from imaginary shoulder, belt, pocket, and ankle holsters, handing them over one after another as his instructor correspondingly mimes taking each and every one, placing them aside on an imaginary table. In that rare instance, Michael, caught off guard from his more typical (invariantly narcissistic) character, is thrust into a moment of playing with rather than compulsively dominating the other.

This brief exchange captures a moment of improvisation in which the *complementarity* of the dominance and submission of the “doer and done to” (Benjamin, 2002) is broken. In other words, there is a shift from *subject-to-object* relating to *subject-to-subject* relating (Benjamin, 2004), or from “I-it” relating to “I-thou” (Buber, 19xx). Furthermore, their scene involves a cocreated “third” element to which neither Michael nor his teacher could claim exclusive authorship (Ogden, 1994; Benjamin, 2002; Aron, 2006).

This truly improvised scene requires both actors’ creativity, replacing the previous scene’s “negative thirdness” (Ringstrom, 2001; Frank, 2003), a quality that stifles both parties by virtue of one’s subjective world view *having* to dominate the other’s. All of these terms, along with many others, will be elaborated momentarily, but for now they are suggestive of the role of liberation that improvisation can hold for an analytic dyad floundering in stalemates, deadlocks, and impasses. Meanwhile, this brief vignette also captures something quintessential about how play can fail miserably as well as what needs to happen to restore its improvisational nature.

Being improvisational in analytic treatment is both a synonym for cultivating the play that Winnicott (1971) admonished us to create in psychoanalytic treatment as well as a system of guidelines for how to conceptualize and practice playfully. Improvisation is the mode of play that Winnicott failed to articulate—especially in adult treatment—though surely it is evident in his brilliantly improvisational “squiggle technique” for child psychotherapy. What Winnicott did not have in his conceptual toolbox is that improvisation is the type of play that translates “declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge” (Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008, p. 182).

In contrast to improvisation, the constraint of play in psychoanalysis will be seen as involving something of a different process, one that will be described in further detail as a process of “mutual inductive identification.”

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This idea, to be elaborated upon in greater length shortly, corresponds largely with the relational construct of enactments, as well as bidirectional modes of projective identification. The comparison of improvisation with “mutual inductive identification” takes up the rich and largely unsettled question in relational psychoanalysis of the relationship of “enactments, projective identification, and interaction” (Aron, 1996, 2003). At the root of these ideas is the question: When, where, and how can the analytic dyad play with thoughts, feelings, and interactions that arise both within and between them?

Cultivating improvisational play in analytic treatment involves an implicitly radical if not even—some might argue—“subversive” paradigm for therapeutic action. That is because it is in contradistinction to the history of efforts in psychoanalytic treatment to mitigate the influence (e.g., contamination) of the analyst’s mind upon the analysand’s. Historically, these were understood as the three pillars of technique *abstinence, neutrality, and anonymity* (Mitchell, 1997; Hoffman, 1998). Improvisation takes up the mutual, ineluctable influence that both the analysand’s transference has in contextualizing the analyst’s countertransference* and vice versa in what can become an inevitable “Möbius loop” of interactivity (Mitchell, 2000; Ringstrom, 1994). Improvisation grasps how both implicitly and explicitly the minds of the analytic participants meet and coauthor a quality of “relational unconscious.”

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The idea of the relational unconscious (Zeddies, 2000; Gerson, 1995; Harris, 2004) is by now canonical to relational psychoanalysis, exemplified in many ways such as “the psychoanalytic third” (Aron, 2006; Benjamin, 2002; Ogden, 1994; Ringstrom, 2000). But what has been missing thus far from relational psychoanalysis is a model of therapeutic action that informs and legitimizes the complex process of cultivating the relational unconscious. This is a process whereby the analytic dyad struggles as it teeter-totter back and forth between the radical implications of either instantiating or negating “thirdness.” And this is always occurring in relation to the composition or organization of each individual’s personality (e.g., will, agency, organizing principles, schemas). In short, improvisation is the melding or interface of the characters of each player while reflecting how each participant’s character influences the other’s either in ways that playfully open their analytic exploration or constrictively shut it down.

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The radical evolutionary position improvisation entails for psychoanalysis and psychotherapy is noted by Stern (2007):

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* Countertransference is seen merely as a way of discussing the organization of analyst’s transference as it is stimulated in the context of working with the analysand, much as the analysand’s is stimulated in working with the analyst.

An improvisational view is a logical next step in the field. In the last decades we have seen the application of chaos and complexity theory, along with dynamic systems theory open up our clinical eyes to various features of the therapeutic situation, such as: the emphasis on process; the approximate equality of the contribution of patient and therapist, i.e., the notion of co-creativity; the unpredictability of what happens in a session from moment to moment, including the expectance of emergent properties; a focus on the present moment of interaction; and the need for spontaneity and authenticity in such a process. (p. 101)

It is the ambition of this project to put the “flesh” of a clinical treatment model on the sterile bones of complexity, chaos, and nonlinear dynamic systems theory.

Elements for Cultivating Improvisation in Psychoanalytic Treatment

There are a multitude of elements involved in cultivating improvisation in psychoanalytic treatment. Improvisation entails states of mutual playfulness and curiosity between analyst and analysand. It constitutes a process that is both mutually regulatory while allowing for both implicit (nonverbal, often unrecognized) and explicit (verbal) elements of mutual recognition* to arise. Improvisation reflects a kind of mutual attunement that rather than necessarily being directed upon one or the other instead produces “emergent relational moments” of the “heretofore unimagined or even imaginable” (Ringstrom, 2007a). Such states are present in an analysis when there is openness within and between the two parties to play with what arises in terms of their respective feelings, thoughts, impressions, associations, reverie, and so on.

To optimize this open and mutually influential process, the customary role of attunement in improvisation is not restricted to the empathic-introspective tradition. Improvisation does not adhere to any particular analytic tradition of inquiry but is focused more upon the playful emergence of a “relational unconscious” between the two parties. In this sense, improvisation is truly a two-way version of intersubjectivity in contrast to the empathic/introspective tradition which is reflective more of a one-way or unidirectional mode. Thus, improvisation occurs around the players capacity to engage in a quality of *yes/and* communication (Nachmanovich, 2001; Ringstrom, 2001b), wherein each takes something of what is spoken or gestured and mirrors

* As Aron (1996) notes, that while mutual regulation and influence are inevitable, mutual recognition is lost and found while never being taken for granted in human relations including the analytic dyad. The point of improvisation is that it so facilitates the lost and foundedness of analytic treatment.

recognition of it adding something to it. Back and forth the players are both mirroring one another while also marking their differences. Hence there is both matching and a little mismatching—the latter, according to Coates (1998), lends to the emergence of a creative spark. This process is captured in the following case illustration

“I think that I am angry with you over last week’s session,” my typically nonconfrontational 45-year-old Eastern European engineer patient, Sami, tells me. In his mannered style, compensating for his self-consciously thick accent, he continues, “I think that I am angry that you were suggesting that I should have more feeling about my mother being hospitalized after her heart attack. I am wondering,” he continues, “Who do you think you are to tell me how I should feel? Or, that I should feel anything when I don’t!”

“Who am I indeed?” I ponder aloud.

Sami ignores my question and continues, “And, besides, what good is it for me to feel?! How is that supposed to solve my problems—the problem I came to you for, like my procrastination?”

“I am not sure,” I venture, “but tell me more about my telling you how you should feel?”*

“It’s not very good psychoanalysis, you know. It’s not ‘exploring my core issues.’”

“So, it looks like I am being more Dr. Phil[†] than Dr. Phil.”

“Or maybe it’s because I am not as important to you as some of your other patients.”

“Why?” I inquire.

“Because they are more successful than me, you care about them more. They are more important to you.”

“You mean like my rich Hollywood celebrities?”

“Yea, like ‘George.’”

“You mean George Clooney?” I ask wryly.

“No, more like George Hamilton. You would only see B actors whose careers are mostly over.” We’re now smiling at one another as if engaged in a wicked game of ping pong.

“Now is that because I practice in the Valley instead of Beverly Hills?”

* So far as I recall I never told Sami anything about how he should feel. This raises an interesting question, one Mitchell often introduced, which is what might I have been unwittingly revealing nonverbally about a range of feelings I was wondering that Sami might have, or could have, or might have difficulty experiencing, and how might that be insinuated in my facial expression as an implied directive?

† Dr. Phil is a television celebrity psychotherapist who, after minimal exploration of his guest patient’s issue de jour, instantaneously dispenses the pabulum of daily advice sandwiched between commercial breaks and the show’s end credits.

“Maybe,” he retorts. “Just the ‘has-beens’ live in the Valley.” Then he stops abruptly and questions aloud, “Where is all of this coming from?!” as if he is channeling a demon heretofore never given voice.

“Let’s not worry about that now; just keep going,” I encourage.

Sami says, “Yeah, so no truly successful actor would come to see you! Actually, they wouldn’t come to see anyone in L.A.”

“Why?” I wonder.

“It’s too nice here, the weather is too good, it’s too sunny. You’d have to go to New York for a good psychoanalysis, where it’s cold, and rainy, and dark, and gloomy, and depressing, where the analysts would all be depressed and understand you.” Then Sami’s expression shifts markedly to one of sadness. “I feel like crying. I won’t, not here, but for the first time, I feel like maybe I could, maybe someday, maybe here too.” Six months later, Sami was able to finally cry freely.

One of the first most important points that this illustration captures is that *improvisation is more than just being spontaneous*. One can spontaneously cry out “Yahoo!” without anyone else playing off of and with this gesture. It is in the ensemble work of improvisation, the playing off of and with what is being spontaneously generated by both parties, that improvisation is quintessentially relational. This underscores that the mentalizing process of analysis occurs only in the interactive processes of the “here and now” (Allen et al., 2008). What emerges in the participants’ play is surely about the unconscious mind of each, though not seen in isolation from one another. Instead, such moments, such “beginning, middle, and end” episodes (Stern, 2004) constitute configurations of the co-creative, relational unconscious, the kind of “thirdness,” in which both parties are paradoxically both distinctive authors while also inextricably coauthors. Hence, neither one may lay claim to being the sole author of their improvised moment. It is from such moments, that blossom things heretofore unimagined or unarticulated.

Thus, in our improvisational moment, Sami and I faced a challenge, though one that was knowable only in retrospect. To access Sami’s complicated grief over a mother for whom he has had a very tormented and bitter relationship, a grief that remained unformulated (Stern, 1997) and unarticulated—an “unthought known” (Bollas, 1989)—Sami and I had to first engage in a kind of sadomasochistic play. That is, we had to engage in a kind of playing with his aggressive defensives, the ones keeping us from recognizing his more obscure thoughts and feelings. In doing so, however, we discovered ourselves engaging in a “scene” in which we both had to be able to encounter themes of our respective feelings of inadequacy. Sami had to be free to spontaneously enunciate his need to see me as profoundly lacking, and I had to be able to sincerely play along with his challenge. To do so we had to both accept the stereotypical charges of our respective second-class citizenships. He had to face feeling like an “eminently ignorable

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immigrant” and I a “comparatively inferior psychoanalyst.” And for this play to be experienced as real there had to be some part of each of us that could feel our second-class status without it destroying either of us. What enables the analyst and analysand to engage in such a manner that inoculates their respective narcissistic injuries? I submit that it is the cultivation of a play space, similar to the one that children naturally convene, and that it is one in which “Bang, bang, you’re dead” can be taken deadly seriously without anyone really dying.

Now, several points follow from all of this. Improvisational moments arise when the “characters” draw from something real within themselves along with who they are “casting” each other to be. This form of engagement, of course, must also be prereflectively spontaneous, indicative of the subjective unconscious minds of both participants. So, while there were undoubtedly many ways to illuminate Sami’s psychic reality, playing improvisationally facilitated this illumination in a very enlivened and relational way. It gave access not only to his unknown grief but also to a pattern of aggressive defenses that he might otherwise have had to disavow to avoid shameful self recrimination. Meanwhile, the cultivation of play in improvisation puts to rest the myth of the perfectly analyzed analyst not only as impossible but also as both unnecessary and undesirable—a point seminal to the entire relational canon (Mitchell, 1993). In short, something of the analyst’s own subjective issues necessarily becomes creative fodder for the analytic couples’ play. Thus, becoming improvisational isn’t about perfecting performances on either side of the couch. It is about playing, though taking play deadly serious.

Working improvisationally carries forth some other relationalist assumptions. First among these is that each of us experiences ourselves as “feeling like one person, while being many” (Bromberg, 1998; Davies, 1998; Harris, 1991). In improvisation, we prospectively have much greater access to our multiplicity of self-states, allowing each to come onto the “stage” of our discourse. Bass (2003) provides an exquisite example of how multiple self-states can be played with improvisationally. In his discussion of Black’s (2003) work with her patient Lisa, Bass writes, “The tumbling kaleidoscope of self- and other states rush back and forth between them as though Black and Lisa were characters in a comic farce in which the performers each play multiple roles rush offstage to make lightning-fast costume changes to appear magically a second later in a different role” (p. 671). When, we can play with the multiple parts of our character, we are also much better equipped to play with the multiplicity of parts in others. We are also far more creative as well as resilient in terms of adapting to the vicissitudes of human existence.

Improvisation also relies upon our engagement in states of “implicit relational knowing” (Stern, 2004). In other words, improvisation relies heavily

upon moving beyond the explicit realm of language, long valued in Freud's history of "the talking cure." Improvisation takes up, much as the interpersonalist tradition has for decades, that our psyche is as much "worn on our sleeve" as it is reflected in our verbal discourse (Ehrenberg, 1992). Indeed, it is in the schism between the meaning that language conveys and that which actions confer, that elements of everyday intrapsychic conflicts become ripe for the picking. Often, these reveal themselves in what is "implicitly relationally known" (Stern, 2004) to each partner.

"Implicit relational knowing," as evident in an improvisational exchange, involves sets of unarticulated assumptions about human nature that begin to structure a story mutually told. It is a story about something with which both are grappling analytically, though neither is necessarily aware of what the other is grappling with so much as playing non-self-consciously with it. Supportive of this idea, I often encourage patients to join me in "flummoxing" that is, in playing around with what is emergent between us without concern over its immediate correctness or fit. That "fittedness," when ready, will come. This sense of "fit" corresponds to cocreated, heightened states of affectivity, a resonating sense of mutuality, a deepening of understanding, and a promulgation of further associations. This is illustrated in the case of Sami. Thus, in improvisation, we can be more spontaneously ourselves, as we unconsciously inform and direct one another by virtue of what we each implicitly "believes" to be true in human relationships.

Improvising on a basis of this "implicit relational knowing" cultivates a field in which the subsymbolic can get played with in a manner lending to it becoming mentalized. As such, improvised scenes can become "model scenes" (Lichtenberg, Lachmann, & Fosshage, 1992, 1996) later explored or referred to as the analysis moves along. Meanwhile, all of this occurs so non-self-consciously that it can be experienced as vitalizing, and refreshingly authentic. In a sense, each party's implicit relational knowing is the transitional overlap of play that Winnicott (1971) averred.

Moments of improvisation ultimately involve moments of mutual *surrender* (Ghent, 1990; Benjamin, 2004) to the creation of "thirdness" (e.g., the "improvised script") versus submitting to the other's domination (see later discussions of "split complementarity" and "dominance and submission"). Nevertheless, this mutual surrender becomes "interaffective" (Gendlin, nd).

It is out of all of such moments that improvisation "courts surprise" (Stern, 1998) and gives rise to the heretofore unimaginable, or unarticulated (Ringstrom, 2007a), while involving experience that as Gendlin writes, "comes from underneath" (i.e., revealing the implicit of each parties' unconscious). This form of subject-to-subject relating creates moments of mutual recognition (Benjamin, 2004) that, even when not necessarily explicated, get implicitly played with, laying down a foundation of trust and relationality

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instrumental for secure therapist–patient attachment that lends itself to greater mentalization (Wallin, 2007).

Equally noteworthy, however, is that improvisation often entails ruthlessly playing with the other as “object” (i.e., as a functionary to one’s play). In other words, the play, at times robust and aggressive, does not necessarily evidence mutual recognition, though it sets an implicit stage for it. This is because when the two parties can play with one another as “objects” they intrinsically reveal something about themselves as subjects, hence, intersubjective mutual recognition implicitly follows. We reveal ourselves in play.

Because of this mutual instantiation of spontaneous engagement, improvisation tends to be fresh and most authentic, that is, not rehearsed or “scripted.” It necessarily compels us to “lean into” our experience (Ringstrom, 2006) and not away from it. Indeed, this is part of why it is so initially “scary” for both analysts and analysands, because it does not allow the defensiveness of “secondary process” reflection, or intellectualization. As Hoffman (1994) intones, there are “no timeouts” in psychoanalysis. Consider this vignette of Sara.

“So at any dinner party, no one wants to sit next to me, since I am in the weak seat,” lamented Sara, a 37-year-old woman with whom I have worked multiple times a week on the couch for several years. Following a meaningful termination, marriage, and the birth of two lovely children, she intermittently returned to see me over the years regarding subsequent crises with miscarriages, infertility, and developmental issues regarding one of her offspring. The following illustrated session occurred approximately a half year into her return to once-a-week psychotherapy.

“What does the ‘weak seat’ mean?” I asked.

Sara elaborated, “It’s the one that no one would want to sit next to, that others would avoid,” followed with the same explanation she had shared many times before that its because she is less funny, less smart, less entertaining, and less interesting than the rest of her family members. This contradicted a strong impression I held about Sara, because in my mind, she could be very witty, smart, playful, and fun to engage—all qualities I deeply value and for which I have my own aesthetic sensibility. Still, equally noteworthy is that Sara also engaged in what I had come to refer to as her “behind the curtains” peek, a disconnection from the immediacy of the moment wherein she “peeks out” to evaluate how she is being received.

“Well, I trust that that is how you feel and clearly what you believe,” I remarked, “but I think that if I were at a dinner party with you, I would want to sit next to you, and in fact, I believe that Marcia (my wife) would too.” Sara had met Marcia at a social occasion and Marcia had also treated a family member of hers a decade earlier. Reflecting on my comment now, I believe that I spontaneously added Marcia, because I wanted to add some weight to my point.

Sara said, “So you want to know what I think about that?” To which I playfully said, “No!” and then nodded of course, which sent Sara reeling. Instantly recomposed, she said, “I think that you say that only because you want me to feel better, because you’re just trying to be nice.”

I said, “Seems you annihilate both of us with that.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, you wipe out my gesture, my point of view about you, while wiping yourself out too.” To which she hastened, “Don’t think that I am going to let you get away with being all Pollyanna on me!” I fired back, “Okay, now you’re being a *bitch*, and I don’t want to sit next to you.” We both burst out laughing.

“But seriously,” I added, suddenly flooded with a poignant but familiar sense of sadness, “this reminds me of our conversations about your foster child identity.” Sara noted my sad expression. This moment, I believe, entailed one in which through play I was able to gain access to a dissociated affect. My playing involved a spontaneous association of my own to some of our past discussions—something of an intuitive grasp of something obscured in our increasingly aggressive banter. The introduction of my association also captures the bidirectional nature of the creative process in improvisation. Like being part of a jazz duet the association that emerged from within me, was like an old tune, much like one that might be introduced as a new rife in a jazz musician’s performance.

In that moment, I became flooded with a sudden recollection of past insights that had culminated from our exploration of a number of befuddling dynamics in Sara’s character. One such dynamic was her pattern of furtive eating, which she referred to as her own uniquely stubborn “eating disorder.” Sara never binged and purged and never starved herself, but she did feel compelled to consume most of her calories through sneak eating.

In an earlier improvisational moment in the course of our work, I had shared with her that she reminded me of a foster child, always hungry for nutrition and love, stealing food, ever anxious that she might get caught and removed yet again from another foster placement. To both of our amazement, Sara informed me that her mother had in fact been a foster child moved through multiple placements, a point that had never been introduced in our years of much more traditional analytic work. This revelation culminated in my interpretation that Sara had somehow introjected her mother’s disavowed childhood, one that led to a history of interaction with her mother from which Sara lived the life of an “as if” child. She was her mother’s doll, one to be dressed up, posed to the world, ostensibly deeply loved, but in fact never truly known. All of this fortified her feelings that she lacked what it took to truly be worth being seen, heard, and enjoyed in her own right.

Sara exclaimed to my sad reverie, “I am thinking now of something that happened when I was about 8,” as she commenced describing a “model

scene” (Lichtenberg et al., 1992, 1996) that had never before arisen in our work. “My mother and I were at a T-shirt shop,” she continued, “and my mother burst out laughing and said, ‘We have to get this T-shirt for you!’” The inscription read, CHILD FOR RENT: CHEAP!

I felt stricken at Sara’s remembrance, as she added, “Of course, I told her that I loved it too, and we got it, but it really wasn’t the one I wanted.” She elaborated, “The one that I wanted had a big eye with a rainbow tear coming out of it.” Again, I was swept away in sadness, as is frequently the case; I feel initially more than Sara does, who, in her identification with her mother’s disavowed foster child persona, often adaptively dissociates from her affect about such insights, even though she agrees that they undeniably fit. Stumped by what the T-shirt she longed for meant, I offered that it captured the eye that vigilantly scanned both her mother’s and her own social surrounding hungering for a sense of belonging while privately grief stricken over never feeling truly known. The point of all this is that when analyst and analysand can playfully banter back and forth instead of currying resistance, they can open horizons of heretofore unexamined territory.

Such a brief snippet of treatment is meant to reflect that there is nothing all that unique about being improvisational in psychoanalytic treatment—it’s more that we have not had a language for capturing this aspect of what occurs quite naturally in our work. This is likely the case, because it has been forbidden by a history of theory and technique. What such moments do capture, however, is what can emerge without deliberation, often out of an intensely playful but curious manner of engagement. Meanwhile, being improvisational is not meant to replace the rest of the work of analysis, such as empathic exploration, affect attunement, cognitive insightfulness, or dream work, but becomes something of a delivery medium whereby all these dimensions of psychoanalytic work are more deeply realized in a more enlivened manner. By humanizing the dyad’s engagement, improvisational moments facilitate the dyad’s connection amid its necessary faltering when confusion, uncertainty, deadness, detachment, avoidance, or frightening combat must hold sway.

While at times perhaps seeming chaotic, improvisation is never random.* Episodes of improvisation reflect, retrospectively, patterns between

* Randomness means that patterns of organization are neither predictable nor even discernable retrospectively. In effect, randomness applies to the degradation of organization in any system as in the principle of entropy. By contrast, although chaos is not predictable, it does evidence emergent patterns that are discernable retrospectively. Chaos involves enduring unpredictably developing patterns, not system degradation. So for example, though we cannot necessarily predict how the analytic couples work will unfold, we can retrospectively examine the contributions of each one’s organizing principles and the influence they played in either opening or closing the analytic exploration.

the two participants that include the very process by which the analytic work is opened and deepened versus when it becomes shallow, constrained, and dead. Thus, improvisation can be further cultivated through the maintenance of a *relational ethic*, which involves the following questions being held in an implicit nonconscious “evenly hovering attention.” That is, is what we are experiencing in this moment opening or closing, vitalizing or deadening, connecting or avoiding, focusing or confusing, liberating or constraining, playfully exploring or just fooling around, affirming or annihilating, recognizing or misconstruing, fencing or going for the jugular? The answer to these questions is not meant to value any particular state of experiencing over others (e.g., vitalizing over deadening, connecting over avoiding, focusing over confusing; Ehrenberg, 2005), but to see how they are taking shape in the characters in the present moment scene such that the intersubjective space of thirdness opens versus closes.

Modes of Improvisational Engagement

Another way of conceptualizing improvisation comes from Preston (2007), in what she refers to as two different tempos or what I refer to as two different modes of therapeutic action. Preston refers to them as “little *i*” improvisation versus “big *I*” Improvisation. Little *i* improvisation captures the slower, more usual, more leisurely paced exchanges that reflect a normal, “good-enough” analytic process. In this vein, ideas, thoughts, and feelings can be tossed back and forth with time to reflect upon and consider our play even as we engage in it, that is, “checking out” one another’s reactions ala the implicit relational ethic questions. Here there can be something of a blending of the spontaneous with the reflective.

Little *i* improvisation corresponds to Bass’s (2003) notion of “little *e*” enactments, of which he writes: “Ordinary quotidian enactments ... form the daily ebb and flow of ordinary analytic process” (p. 657). The value of redefining Bass’s definition of enactment in terms of improvisation, however, is that it more specifically addresses the universe of play so critical to capturing the formation of the “relational unconscious.” As Aron (2003) notes, Bass’s small enactments merely recognize “that interaction is ubiquitous and continual” (p. 626). Improvisation takes up the ineluctability of interaction—seminal to relational psychoanalysis—and qualifies it in terms of the critical process of play-in-interaction, a point moving improvisation beyond the mere ubiquity of interaction.

Before moving to *Improvisation*, it is important to note that Bass (2003) coined his term enactment to contrast with what he refers to as “big *E*” enactments. These, he avers, “are highly condensed precipitates of unconscious

psychic elements in patient and in analyst that mobilize our full attention and define, and take hold of, analytic activity for periods of time” (p. 657). This definition comes much closer to what I refer to as “mutual inductive identification” (see below) and as a precursor state to big *I* Improvisational moments.

Big *I* Improvisation captures more the spirit of what I have referred to as “improvisational moments” (Ringstrom, 2007a) when responses are far more impromptu, necessitating more of an intuitive, nonreflective, unmediated responsiveness. They entail “breaking the grip of the field” (Stern, 1997). Big *I* Improvisation is almost always in the implicit realm, whereas small *i* entails some of the explicit. Big *I* embodies more of a *high-risk, high-gain* quality (Gabbard, personal communication; Knoblauch, 2001) but is seasoned with a sense of *yes/and* mutual empathic attunement (a playing off of and with what is arising implicitly between the two partners), which provides a lively, contact-filled, spontaneously expressive alternative to more confrontational modes of engagement (Preston, 2007). Improvisation, therefore, takes up what can become the fortuitous outcomes of *Enactments* or what I refer to as “mutual inductive identification.”

Whether *i* or *I* improvisation, there are some “cardinal guidelines” that facilitate either modes occurrence. They involve the following:

1. Listening (and observing) intently, not only for your patient’s implicit and explicit communications but also for what spontaneously emerges within yourself.
2. Don’t be afraid to introduce the latter, that is, to play with that emergence.*
3. Especially, if you are also following the next cardinal guideline, which is do not negate the other’s reality.
4. Instead, play off it and with it. This is the *yes/and* technique described in greater detail by Nachmanovich (2001) and Ringstrom (2001b), in which you build on whatever the other says.

Mutual Inductive Identification: When Improvisational Play Becomes Constrained and We Revert to the World of Static, Defensive “Scripts”

When the dyad is unable to be improvisational, it usually means one of the self-states within one party takes over. It dominates not only the other

* Emergence within the analyst may be handled by privately engaging in one’s reverie or playing within oneself (Ogden, 1994) or by playing with what is emerging with the other in a more actively intersubjective, interpersonal manner.

multiple self-states but also the intersubjective field. Such domination arises from processes of dissociation, which then manifests into processes of inductive identification. In so doing, it compromises the field of nonconscious play so necessary for improvising.

Without access to one's other self-states the predominant self-state behaves as the "spokesperson" for all the rest (e.g., the "chair" of the "committee of the mind"). Such experience is suggestive of a state of mind in which self-states are incommunicado, beyond the reach of play both from within and from without. These states represent subsymbolic experience that cannot be "mentalized" (Fonagy, 2003; Fonagy & Target, 1997)—that is, connected to symbolic meaning making of one's affective experience. Absent the capacity for such self-state formulation and, therefore, absent the capacity for symbolic articulation, the prevailing sense or version of "reality" that is dominating the mind of one *must* be enacted. And it must be done in a manner that involves both parties participation (Bromberg, 2006). Indeed, when mentalization is impaired, the very capacity to generate new and vitalizing narratives is equivalently impaired. Thus, impaired mentalization connotes a "hostage-taking" of the mind—often embodying the shackles of old identifications with caregivers (Grotstein, 1997; Brandchaft, Stolorow, & Atwood, 1994) in which only old scripts *rule*.

Thus, *Enactments* (Bass, 2003; Chused, 2003), or as I prefer episodes of "mutual inductive identification" in contrast to improvisation, involve the collapse of playfulness—and are discernable by this very experience—"I/we can no longer play with our ideas and feelings within ourselves or between us." The "scene work" that ensues from such episodes is more in the realm of what each party is inducing the other to identify with. This means that episodes of "mutual inductive identification" contrast to episodes of improvisation, insofar as they involve enacting entrenched, scripted aspects of personality. By contrast, improvisation involves playing off of and with that which exists in the service of cultivating new possibilities, new narratives. In this latter way, improvisation involves taking remnants of scriptedness and cocreating new possibility (i.e., new meaning about what just happened). This facilitates greater moments of reflectiveness.

Still, evidence of *Enactments* or episodes of "mutual inductive identification" is no reason to despair. On the contrary, both paradoxically cultivate a kind of "second chance" engagement with the implicit world of "scriptedness" and therefore represent an essential aspect of analytic work. The valuing of enactments highlights one of the most prominent differences between the relational canon and more traditional theories of psychoanalysis. Enactments, according to Bromberg (2006), are attempts to renegotiate

Au: Brandchaft et al. citation OK?

“unfinished business in those areas of selfhood where, because of one degree of another of traumatic experience, affect regulation was not successful enough to allow further self-development at the level of symbolic processing by thought and language” (p. 181).

Such unfinished business, such subsymbolic experience, must become enacted through inducing the other to take on a role, that is, to become a party in the individual’s inner unrecognized drama. Even when unformulated, such self-states always link some organization of self-affect-other (Davies, 2005) needing to be fully articulated, through becoming identified with, by the other. This process typically has to first pass through the other’s own subsymbolic history of experience.

In this inductive manner, we see projective identification as an essential precursor to enactments (Bromberg, 1998). It is for this reason that I have coined “mutual inductive identification” because it links the relationality of the two parties’ mutual projections and identifications and does so in an enacted form, which later can retrospectively be seen as an essential episode of engagement that furthers mentalization and development.

Indeed, in “mutual inductive identification” the state of mind of both the patient and the analyst must be receptive to being induced into becoming a character in the other’s constricted scene. In short, it is critical that each person is “fertile” for taking on and enacting some identificatory experience of the other. Paradoxically, it is this very vulnerability that can be critical to a promising therapeutic match.

A not insignificant point, however, is that when these sub-self-state enactments go unarticulated they are at risk of devolving into states of dominance and submission. And when these are not addressed, they devolve into therapeutic breakdowns, if not impasses. This often happens in a stepwise progress. First, intrapsychically, it involves a “member” (self-state) of the “committee of the mind” running rough shod over the rest. Second, this internal version of dominance and submission gives rise to the interpersonal version of it, since axiomatically “that which cannot be negotiated within, cannot be negotiated without” (Ringstrom, in press). This dominance and submission is captured in Benjamin’s concept of “split complementarity” where a person’s mode of mentalization (meaning-making) comes to dominate the others. This process is also prone in most relationships to become highly reversible, as in each party reversing the positions of dominance and submission in relationship to one another. A good example of this involves the characters of George and Martha in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Nevertheless, part and parcel of the relational canon is that both patient and analyst are vulnerable to participating in “mutual inductive identifications.” That’s because both are vulnerable to dissociating what they have at

Au: Ringstrom
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stake in a given situation and therefore what they need from one another.*† Patients who have been traumatized are especially likely to do this, since the “traumatized self-state” tends to dominate other self-states (Bromberg, 2006; Davies, 1998, 2004). This is evolutionarily encoded, since the function of trauma is not so much about the recollection of what happened as it is about preventing its reoccurrence. Trauma states are less about what happened than what’s going to happen next! All of this is managed by adaptively recognizing any and all circumstances remotely resembling something about the original trauma. Such recognizing becomes the trigger for a host of autonomic, subsymbolic, prereflective reactions that treat the present moment as if it too will be traumatic.‡

In short, “mutual inductive identification” is the process whereby we induce the other to become a player in our unarticulated (often dissociatively disconnected) drama. Whereas patients may well need to induce their analyst to experience something that remains outside the range of symbolization and therefore reflection and articulation (the essential principles of talk therapy), analysts may also unwittingly induce their patients to become the kind of patient that the analysts likes, prefers, and is most comfortable to work with. This propensity, however, is especially likely to arise when a particular patient makes the therapist feel uncomfortable in being inducted (Chused, 2003).

Defensively, therapists then “script” the patient back into more formulaic styles of engagement of their own. That is, the analyst attempts to induce the patient to do the analysis in the manner that the analyst needs to feel comfortable. This latter state is especially vulnerable to being dissociated by the analyst because the analyst’s needs are sequestered in relation to historical psychoanalytic values of *abstinence*, *neutrality*, and *anonymity*. Analysts

* An illustration of the problem in negating the other is captured in this dreadful scene: Actor A says to Actor B, “What kind of cab driver are you, you’re driving slower than my grandmother?!” Actor B kills the improvisation when he retorts, “I’m not a cab driver; I’m a farmer ‘driving’ a tractor!” Actor B is unwilling to build upon Actor A’s perspective. Instead, he negates it replacing it with his own, thereby dominating his scene partner. Actor A may try to salvage the scene by acting crazy such as saying, “Oh silly me, I must have forgotten my meds this morning and I am hallucinating; we’re in a taxi!”

† In sum, “mutual inductive identification” is often a measure of what is at stake for each party. It is in this manner that we recognize how the psychoanalytic process is ineluctably intertwined in both the inner and outer experiential worlds of both patient and therapist, each one’s experience forever contextualizing the others. However, this does not mean that every moment is constituted by a parity of influence, since the weight of what might be occurring is almost always conditioned by what each party has at stake in it.

‡ Our predecessors who ignored the rustling leaves as the possible threat of a saber tooth tiger were not the ones who became our genetic ancestors—biological evolution favors at least some functions of a trauma model of the mind.

are also especially vulnerable to inducing their patients to become the kind they are comfortable to work with when the patient's traumatized state of mind begins to traumatize the analyst's. This circumstance is especially ripe for a kind of mutual coercion as to how the analysis will be conducted.

Restoring Improvisation

It is in these moments, that restoring improvisation can be most helpful, but this entails a number of implicit steps. Often the first step is through engaging in a kind of "passive" improvisation, that is, in a state of private reverie (Ogden, 1994; Ringstrom, 2001a) about the emerging enactment. This may require the analyst to ask, "What is it that is getting induced within me that speaks to some dissociated aspect of the patient's experience and how is this giving rise to my dissociation?" That is, what character am I becoming in the patient's drama. Such reverie must then include, "And how am I unwittingly (dissociatively) inducing the patient to become a 'cooperative' agent in my drama—that is the kind of patient I would be more comfortable working with?" On the other hand (as in the case of Timothy that follows), playing with the mutually emerging inductions can become a source of releasing the dyad from its stranglehold as well as opening possibilities that it is rapidly foreclosing.

Yet another step to restoring improvisation may entail a kind of "metacommunication" (Pizer, 2003; Ringstrom, 2003) about the dyad's process, noting that the way the analyst is trying to be helpful is exacerbating the patient's experience of being harmed. Often such a metacommunication begins by noting that both parties seem to have lost their sense of play. Commenting on their mutuality of loss helps mitigate shaming or blaming the patient for the analytic quagmire. This leads to inviting the patient to jointly imagine how the analysis might proceed differently as well as illuminating how the manner in which both parties are feeling constrained.* In short, all of these steps entail playing with different ways of relating. Some of them are illustrated in the following case material.

An episode reflective of a big *I* improvisational moment arose in my work with 16-year-old Timothy. Entering my office for the first time one rainy Thursday afternoon, Timothy's life according to him was over. His demise

* It would be naïve to not acknowledge that introducing playing with new options for relating may jettison the dyad into another enactment. As just one example, a patient constrained by the straggling constraint of needing to idealize his analyst may experience the analyst's introduction of play as profoundly deidealizing. This then becomes further grist for the analytic mill, eventually leading to the possibility of playing with the patient's deidealization of the analyst, much like what happened with Sami.

came from his not getting the lead part in his high school play that he was certain should have been his. I was soon to learn that this rejection was the “last straw” in what had reportedly been “a year, no two years, no a life time” of unbearable disappointments and rejections. Timothy’s outpouring competed soundly with the cloudburst outside. To my grave disappointment and frankly worry, I found myself feeling unusually judgmental in my reaction to him, weary already of his stormy narcissistic reaction to a breach of his entitlement. In the face of his outpouring, I experienced a profound sense of coercion to perform a certain role, one with a “deadening” history of scriptedness and that was to be the all embracing empathic other, devoid of an alternative perspective.

Experientially, I became frozen, especially disheartened, in fact, in relation to my more positive anticipation of his arrival. That’s because, Timothy attended the same pressure-cooker college prep high school as one of my favorite patients a 16-year-old girl who I adored. Like the color red never appears redder than when placed next to the color green and vice versa, the sweetness of Stella’s Nietzschean-existential anguish made Timothy’s rejection-sensitive hysterics initially taste like a bunch of sour grapes.

So, while there were undoubtedly plenty of my own limitations insinuated in my having been so judgmental about Timothy, I also experienced him as the kind of patient who quickly saturates the intersubjective field with much of the coercive pressure residing within himself. Such pressure obviously affects different analysts differently. In my case it resulted in my clinical intuition (which I note now reflectively, though it was not so elaborated in my mind then) that he was not going to be able to tolerate my going into a moment of private reverie—at least not long enough for me to figure out my countertransference reaction. I felt fairly certain that in the interim we’d lose our precarious balance. I suspect that this would be the case, because I imagine Timothy becoming distressed with my own momentary discomfort in pondering what was going on with me. Furthermore, having perhaps the world’s worst poker face, a point that I believe may have been true of Freud as well, I have had to respect that I am likely to readily “give away my hand.”* Of course, I am not saying that I was objectively correct about what Timothy’s experience would have been—which is impossible to know—but that, given my participation in this relational mix, I believe I was intersubjectively accurate.

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ref list.

* I think that Freud suffered the same problem, hence his introduction of using the couch. My suspicion about Freud is born out of witnessing the black-and-white silent home movies of him in the traveling Freudian Archives Exhibit, in which I was completely thrown by the highly energetic and animated man on the screen. His entire manner stood in stark contrast to the stolid figure so evident in his history of posed photographs. Furthermore, anecdotes from Freud’s own patients suggest that he was far more interactive, far more relational than has been recognized (Mills, 2005).

So although I swiftly mirrored Timothy's sentiment that his life "surely did 'feel over' and that, understandably sucked (!)," I began inquiring about the historical "factual" basis for his conclusion. I also queried him about his assumptions about his future and what made it seem so bleak right now. In so doing, I allowed the emerging of my judgmentally-tainted character into this dramatic scene to let in a little alterity, to introduce a little bit of a different of point of view, a different frame of reference, even a bit of personal history into what I hoped would become a cocreated play space. I also did not fear mentioning the unmentionable. This meant that when Timothy went into greater and greater elaborations about how unfair his life was, how hard he tried, how robbed he was of the higher grades that many of his classmates receive ("who don't work nearly as hard as 'he' does") not to mention the parts in plays and chorus that he didn't get, I did not respond in the expected fashion to his anguished laments, "Why me?! Why do others get more than I do?!" Instead, I replied, "Well, maybe some of them are smarter than you.... Maybe some of them are more talented than you."

Notwithstanding my initial disquieting judgmental feelings, I did not say this to be cruel, but to speak about what Timothy wasn't saying. In fact, this comment was emergent within our intersubjective field of engagement (Coburn, 2002, 2006; Shane, 2006), that was taking shape around the constraints of both of our personalities as they each emerged into the characters we were becoming in this present moment scene. In effect, our scene work was moving into what Stern (2004) and his collaborators at the Boston Change Process Study Group (2002) refer to as "now moment" because I was saying something that Timothy seemed like he probably hadn't heard, as well as my being someone that he did not expect, at least as he would have automatically "scripted" this moment. What followed was what the authors call a "moment of meeting." Stern (2004) defines "now moments" as ones in which there is an immediate sense of threat to the intersubjective field hence they are fraught with dramatic intensity. The resolution of such moments involves the "moment of meeting" wherein there is an authentic well fitted response from therapist to patient that resolves the threat to their intersubjective engagement.

Timothy said, "Wow! That's hard to swallow!" To which I asked, "Why?" Suddenly, he seemed more relaxed, his anguish momentarily remitted, and he said with self-generated perspective, "Well, I guess there always is someone smarter than you, right?" To which I said, "Seems to be the case; I'm pretty damn good at what I do, but I believe that there are folks who are better. And I am a pretty smart guy, but I know quite a few who are smarter." Our session proceeded somewhat like this to its end, and later that night I got a call from his mother saying, "I don't know what you did, Dr. Ringstrom, but you are the first therapist Timothy has ever seen who he said he wants to come back to."

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As our work progressed, more developmental obstacles from Timothy's life emerged. His parents divorced when he was 2, he lived alone with his mother, and his father was a multimillionaire playboy. When life's let-downs buckled Timothy's knees, and his mother wrung her hands and avowed how he had once again gotten a raw deal but that he should just keep plugging away since he was so unique and special. Meanwhile, his father remained ineffectually tongue-tied, instead trying to amend woes from a distance by throwing money at them, such as large donations that might grease Timothy's admission to programs that might otherwise have eluded him. So I said to Timothy, "It's sad. You come home crushed, and Mom 'pours you a warm bath,' while Dad has nothing to say. I can see that that no one has helped you develop broad enough shoulders to bear the weight of rejection and disappointment, the kind an ambitious guy like you is inevitably heir to."

Now as I said this I did not assume that I was right in my venturing so much as I was exploring how we might attempt to play together. Since playing improvisationally involves not negating one another* but playing with what each one is putting into the relational mix, when something "hits" it's pretty obvious. For example, Timothy would run with an assertion of mine—even the initially provocative one that he had trouble "swallowing" as I would run with his. We were not necessarily identifying with parts of one another, as in "mutual inductive identification," or affirming or mirroring one another's assertions as in a self psychological empathic approach so much as we were taking each other's assertions to the next plausible level of possibility. In so doing we were finding out what did and did not "fit" (Stern, 1997).

This approach argues that in the moment of play, the patient (as well as the therapist), are the arbiters of what "fits" for each in any given moment. It's an approach, adaptive of the epistemological position of "perspectival realism" that presumes neither to be the authority on reality. This is not a stance, however, that adheres to relativism, as in all perspectives are relative and therefore one is as good as another. Rather, perspectival realism asserts that what each is spontaneously averring is propositionally true to them in that moment, which then, through the further course of play and exploration, will make better sense for each or perhaps yield in part or in

* Illustrative of this point is the improvisational game "yes-and," wherein the participants greet one another's assertion with the affirmation of "yes-and" from which they then make their own assertion, taking what has been presented to them and taking it further. In this vein each player continues in this additive pattern until the scene reaches its own natural, readily known to both players conclusion, but by its end, it is also clear that it was a byproduct of either one exclusively, none of their imaginative coauthorship, the place of this sensibility in relational psychoanalysis has been discussed in detail by Nachmanovich (2001) and Ringstrom (2001b).

toto the other's point of view.* As Mitchell (1997) averred, it is often best to allow the patient's assumptions to play out rather than challenge them, such that in playing them out both analyst and patient can see what works or what does not.

Returning to my earliest intervention with Timothy, I suspect that why my saying, "Maybe you aren't as smart or as talented as the other kids," was so transforming in that *improvisational moment* was because I was merely hitting upon an unmentionable, unspeakable, deeply private, almost terrifying truth that Timothy had been concealing in an unarticulated fashion his entire life. What made this moment transformative was that I related to it in a manner that was heretofore unimaginable while maintaining a tone and manner that conveyed that the unspeakable could be readily discussed and embraced by both of us. This tone and manner served two purposes: one, to mitigate shame; and, two, to disabuse Timothy of his "psychic equivalence" mode of mentalization, that is, that if he thought something, it must be objectively true. As Allen et al. (2008) wrote, "Rather and converting the patient to a different way of thinking, you should aspire to help the patient to appreciate that there are different ways of thinking about the same outer reality" (p. 180).

Au: List of "one...two" OK here?

When this happens I believe that we are engaging in what I have referred to (Ringstrom, 2007a, 2007b) as a "posi-traum" that is an improvisational moment in which something unimaginably positive happens. Just as the key element in trauma is the assault of something horrendously unimaginable (van der Kolk, 2007; Grotstein, 1997; Ringstrom, 1999), like a sudden unexpected loss for which one could have no preparation, in the case of a posi-traum, the patient is unable to imagine that the analyst (or anyone for that matter) could think or feel about something.

Au: "a" added here to 2007. OK?

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Stern (2007) questioned whether the term posi-traum is apt, especially when compared with trauma. First, it differs from trauma insofar as trauma is more likely to have some somatic elements, as in van der Kolk's (1996) comment, "The body keeps score." Second, no matter how impactful the posi-traum moment may be, it is new and does not have the history of repeated recollection, both implicitly and explicitly recalled over conceivably much if not most of a patient's life. Nevertheless, without knowledge of my work on this idea, Barbara Pizer (2007) and Stuart Pizer (2007) coined a comparable idea that they called "positive traumas." What the Pizers and I were independently conceiving is that an event can occur, almost always in an unpremeditated fashion that has the effect of dramatically altering an entrenched emotional conviction of a patient's.

Au: Page number needed for van der Kolk 1996 quote.

Au: Refs needed for both Pizer citations.

* Though the analyst is not coming from a position as the arbiter of what is objectively true, at the same, however, nor does she abdicate her position as one with some authoritative know-how about the practice of psychoanalysis.

When this occurs, something unpredictably, unimaginably positive happens. Put in terms of mentalization (Allen et al., 2008) a new narrative structure emerges. Like the unimaginable of trauma, this positive event cannot be assimilated within the patient's intransigently negative belief system. Hence the positive event forces an accommodation of a new organizing principle (i.e. a new emotional conviction). So, while it may be questionable to compare the enduring effect of the *posi-trauma* moment with trauma—given the latter's more somatizing and repetitive impact—the invocation of the unimaginable upon salient organizing principles, is also undeniable. This, I am positing, is what Timothy's reaction entailed.

A point germane to improvisational moments is that such *posi-traumas* cannot be deliberate, lest they risk being appropriated and nullified by the patient's subjective sense of reality. This means that they must exceed the scope of the patient's invariant organizing principles. Incapable of being assimilated the new experience forces accommodation of new organizing principles for the patient to make sense of what occurred. Hence, *posi-traumas* typically must arise from improvisational moments that involve doing something new and surprising.* Since the moment of improvisation involves something unpremeditated, it necessarily emerges from the nonconsciousness of both parties and therefore does not bear the stamp of having been scripted and rehearsed. Patients' experiences in such moments bear a quality of recognition something like, "I can't believe that you got that about me, because I hadn't gotten it about myself until you did, and only by your undoing what I hadn't quite recognized had been done to me by others and by myself—both in fact and in fantasy—am I now able to recognize new possibilities heretofore unimaginable in my theory of mind."

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In this manner, Timothy and I proceeded along for several sessions, moving to and fro, sometimes losing our balance of open inquiry, dropping us below the surface of the emergence of our relational unconscious. When this happened, I would once again encourage us to play with how we were thinking about things, to be open to being tenaciously curious.

In the context of this improvisational engagement, Timothy shared another lament, saying he that hadn't been happy in years. In fact, he anguished,

* In a similar vein, Shane (2006) writes, "Change in analysis frequently appears to depend on a state shift in the patient provoked by an unanticipated incident, spontaneous action, or experience of surprise, as these moments are seen to emerge unexpectedly in the complex dyadic system constitutive of the psychoanalytic situation (Galatzer-Levy, 1995)... [Such] emergence describes how new unexpected, and qualitatively distinct configurations suddenly appear in complex systems, in this case the analytic dyad; and it addresses the sense of surprise human beings experience in these difficult-to-anticipate developments" (p. 36).

he “just wanted to be happy.” In this context, I asked when he’d last been and to which he replied, “around age 12 or 13.” I asked him what happened then, but as I did I had a correspondingly strong sense of what he then he replied to almost uncannily. He exclaimed, “Well, puberty happened!” In the throes of my own preconscious experience, I proffered, “Damn, I was just wondering about that myself. What about it, the advent of puberty? I mean that’s a time where you can get a lot more interested in sex, you know with girls ... maybe with guys ... I don’t know...”

He fired back, “Well, I’m *not* gay!” He paused, “I mean, I don’t think I’m gay.” Pausing further, he continued, “I mean, I’ve never been turned on by a guy, I’ve never been turned on by a girl either.” So I said to him, “Wow, the whole sex thing can really be confusing can’t it ... especially, when you haven’t had anyone to talk about it with. Seems to me, we ought to hang loose with this one and see over time what seems truest for you. This is a time of life when all sorts of identity issues can feel up for grabs, you know?”*

Germane to working improvisationally is that it involves ensemble work, wherein the spontaneous gestures of either party play off of and with one another’s. Indeed, as Nachmanovich (2001) argued, improvisation entails working with *bricolage*—that is, working with the materials at hand. It results from one or the other party setting something in motion, with the other taking what is given and moving it one step further. Correspondingly, each one acts in kind, until they both have reached a satisfying ending, as in an improvisational scene or as in jazz. As such, improvisation cultivates a kind of mutually enhanced “free-associational” process that instantiates “unintentional” moments, laying bare the structures of the two parties subjective unconscious’ revealed through their play.

Working improvisationally can also involve reintroducing background material in a manner similar to a jazz musician reintroducing an earlier though now long past rhythm in his current riff. This point relates to my response to Timothy in terms of his revelation about his confused sexuality. Undoubtedly, part of the background of my response to him was shaped by my awareness that Timothy’s lack of friends was because he was so moralistic about drugs, alcohol, and especially sex, certainly a turnoff to peers who are highly inquisitive about such matters at this phase of their life. Thus, somewhere in my own background thoughts, I

* Of special note is that by working improvisationally, I came to relish working with Timothy given the freedom of expression that it created for both of us. He still often presented in a bemoaning victimized manner, but, because we could play with it, our work was refreshing versus stagnating, uplifting versus depressing and expanding versus compressing.

was undoubtedly discerning that Timothy's attitudes about sex reflected a dire sense of threat.

Conclusion

I believe that an improvisational sensibility in relational psychoanalysis is a major vehicle for directly instantiating and playing with new possibilities in the "history and memory of coconstructed meanings between the analyst and patient." It is through the improvisational metaphors of scripts, assigned roles, dramatic arches, and sequences that the otherwise lifeless theories such as those of chaos, complexity, and dynamic systems come alive and become meaningful. The very idea of scripts, for example, embodies the semifixed and illusory ways we imbue our own character—in other words, our own sense of self as well as how we expect (and direct) the other to be in each present moment drama of psychoanalysis. Such improvised relational sequences embody beginnings, middles, and endings that become mini-narratives, and these narratives can serve thereafter as model scenes for further elaboration of the analysis. These live metaphors capture how an analytic process can proceed along an amazing sequence of improvised moments of cocreativity.

However, it must also be humbly noted that the impact of improvisational moments is also about slow accretions, tiny moments of chipping away at seemingly invariant organization—a notable example being Michael Scott's resistance exemplified at the beginning of this presentation. The writers of "The Office" clearly understood this when they made it clear that Michael's character was only minimally impacted by his instructor and their improvised scene. In a later scene in the same episode playing with an Asian classmate actor, we witness Michael quickly lean over and whisper into his scene partner's ear, to which the partner bolts his hands over his head in the position of someone about to be arrested. The flabbergasted class instructor abruptly yells, "Stop!" and asks the actor, "What are you doing?" to which the helpless actor replies, "Michael whispered that he still has a hidden gun!"

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AFTERWORD*

From its beginning, psychoanalysis has arguably been a profession rooted in improvisation. Unfortunately, promoting this idea did not bode well for the creation of a professional mode of practice that required both ethical standards and accountability. Perhaps because of these latter concerns, the place of importance of improvisation in psychoanalysis remained a “dirty little secret,” ironically lost upon many of its practitioners, though not, however, Adam Phillips, who notes that Freud was an improviser *par excellence*; Phillips (1993) writes:

Psychoanalysis, in its inception, had no texts, no institutions, and no rhetoric; all it had to see itself with were analogies with other forms of practice. The first practitioners of psychoanalysis were making it up as they went along.... Psychoanalysis, that is to say, was improvised; but improvised... out of a peculiarly indefinable set of conventions. Freud had to improvise between available analogies and he took them, sometimes despite himself, from the sciences and the arts... Psychoanalysis began, then, as a kind of virtuoso improvisation within the science of medicine; and free association—the heart of psychoanalytic treatment—is itself ritualized improvisation. But Freud was determined to keep psychoanalysis officially in the realm of scientific rigor, partly, I think, because improvisation is difficult to legitimate—and to sell—outside of a cult of genius. With the invention of psychoanalysis—or rather, with the discovery of what he called the unconscious—Freud glimpsed a daunting prospect: a profession of improvisers. And in the ethos of Freud and his followers, improvisation was closer to the inspiration of artists than to the discipline of scientists. (pp. 2–3)

* Many of the ideas formulated in this Afterword are a result of discussions that took place on the IARPP Online Colloquium in May 2010, which featured my paper on improvisation in this volume. I am indebted to all the invited discussants (as well as the participants in the colloquium who regrettably involve too many to acknowledge here) for their improvisational contribution to my thinking. In countless ways, the ideas in this Afterword reflect the thinking of Tony Bass, Gil Cole, Glen Gabbard, Steven Knoblauch, Steven Rosenbaum, Donnell Stern, and Steven Stern.

Given psychoanalysis' ambiguous relationship to improvisation, there are some questions to which my chapter did not sufficiently attend. I will cover each under its respective heading.

Might being improvisational risk preemptory comments that could interfere with the patient's capacity to "free associate" or, even worse, potentially contaminate the patient's unconscious with that of the analyst's while also concretizing the patient's defenses?

This is a perfectly reasonable not to mention expectable concern given classical psychoanalysis' history of favoring *abstinence, neutrality and anonymity* in part to frustrate drives (i.e., to "flush out" the unconscious from the shadow of "self-deception") but also to create an atmosphere of safety in which the unconscious mind of the patient could optimally engage in unfettered "play" through "free association." Given this ethic, an emphasis was placed upon sparing the patient the intrusion and contamination of the analyst's mind. Shafer (1983), for example, argued that such conditions were foundational for "preparation for interpretation," that is, of the least contaminating variety.

Coburn (1999) notes that the kind of argument Shafer makes falls into what Coburn refers to as the "objectivist" position of classical psychoanalysis in which the analyst is more or less in a position of *transcendence*, that is capable of being sufficiently removed from the patient so as not have his subjectivity be much of an influence in the patient's associations. Coburn contrasts this to more of a "subjectivist" position, in which the analyst is inescapably in a state of *embedment* in contrast to *transcendence*. This latter position suits much more the ideas of relational psychoanalysis and its understanding of the inescapable nature of each analysis coconstructing an intersubjective world of interpretation. Indeed, this is a world constituted not by the "cause-and-effect" "objectivist" epistemology wherein the patient speaks and eventually the analyst interprets his "text" but rather an ineffably, mutually influential world of coconstruction and cointerpretation.

Improvisation clearly belongs in the "subjectivist" mode of *embedment*; as such the impact of the analyst's subjectivity has been seen, within the relational tradition, as "irreducible" (Renik, 1993). The contrast of the "objectivist" and "subjectivist" traditions manifests in a dialectic that takes up what can be thought of as the "sins of omission" versus the "sins of commission" (Irwin Hoffman, personal communication, 2010). The former involves the error of too much abstinence; the latter involves the error of too much engagement. The virtue of an improvisational sensibility, however, is that the feedback regarding which error one has committed is pretty instantaneous, insofar as it manifests in the form of "shutting down" the atmosphere of analyst and analysand being able to play with their thoughts, feelings, and one another. Instead, they are thrust into an "Enactment" (Aron, 2003; Bass, 2003; Black, 2003) or what I referred earlier to as "mutual inductive identification." Neither of these conditions necessarily involves errors. Indeed, they represent different ways of getting at what is implicitly embedded in the dyad that was heretofore inaccessible to explication, until, that is, it reveals itself in the analysis of the "Enactment" or "mutual inductive identification."

Is improvisation a theory of psychoanalytic practice per se, or does it involve something of an attitudinal stance that potentially informs all modes of psychoanalysis?

Although psychoanalytic improvisation represents a system of ideas that might suggest it is a theory, I think of improvisation as more of a “stance,” that is, an attitude of “listening and responding (including remaining silent)” that seeks openings and possibilities where heretofore constrictions and foreclosures commonly rule. While it is quintessentially a relational mode of treatment to the extent that relational psychoanalysis is a “big tent” housing practitioners originating out of Freudian, object relational, Kohutian, Sullivanian, Kleinian, Jungian backgrounds and more, the assumption of an improvisational stance enables the relational psychoanalyst to play-off-of-and-with any and all of these persuasions (including other modalities as well).

Furthermore, while improvisation is a stance, it is not a body of techniques. Indeed, improvisational techniques would be almost oxymoronic. There are, however, some simple listening and engagement stances such as “trying to not negate” as well as to attempting to engage in an additive and opening manner like “yes/and” (e.g., recognizing what that other has said and then adding something to it that moves it in unpredictably creative directions, which when determined by the two participants’ unconscious minds lends to a unique collaboration and cocreation of the heretofore unimaginable). Though some may mistakenly think of improvisation as a kind of performance art intruding on an analysis, it is important to note that fundamental to improvisation is the “cardinal rule of listening.” This is what moves improvisation beyond the narcissism of each participant. It puts them in the position of “playing-off-of-and-with” what each other is contributing.

Along these lines, it is a mistake to idealize improvisation, as in what is improvisational is “good” and what isn’t is “bad.” While it is true that improvisation is about playing with and cocreating openness to possibility, life is also rule bound, constrained in the ultimate by our mortality. Moreover, in the course of play, we inevitably bump up against what we cannot play with, which as mentioned earlier generates “Enactments” and “mutual inductive identifications,” which become analytic fodder from which much can be learned.

What distinguishes analytic improvisational play, which certainly involves the participants “casting one another” in a variety of largely unconscious role assignments from its seeming counterpart (i.e., Enactments), or what I refer to as processes of “mutual inductive identification,” in which the two parties also cast one another in roles?

From a phenomenological perspective of improvisation, Enactments (as well as mutually inductive identifications) involve each participant “casting” another in some role(s). In contrast to improvisation, however, Enactments and mutual inductive identification project roles largely determined by “static” transference–countertransference “structures.” As such, they contrast with

the openness that improvisation creates since being improvisational results in playing-off-of-and-with how the analyst and patient create possibilities heretofore unimaginable. Nevertheless, Enactments and mutually inductive identifications are not only inevitable, but they also can be critical to the movement of an analysis, since they provide a special experiential circumstance for the ultimate illumination and interpretation of certain implicit transference-countertransference processes. They embody what Stern refers to as the “interpersonalization of dissociation.”

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In what manner does the collaborative effort of improvisation distinguish itself from the original sine qua non of psychoanalysis (i.e., interpretation) as well as from the contemporary psychoanalytic position regarding empathic understanding?

Improvisational principles draw from such performance arts as theater and jazz, and like these collaborative art forms psychoanalysis is an unscripted process. It relies on and attempts to “play” with the joint contributions of the coparticipants. The outcome of the process, however, is not an art piece per se but about the personal transformation leading to the growth and healing of the patient (as well as frequently that of the analyst). Therapy, nevertheless, is an inherently intense, intimate, and risky business. We get drawn into inevitable transference and countertransference enactments on a continuum of seriousness under the sway of nonconscious internal working models, unresolved developmental trauma, and mutual dissociation. Such enactments can be a force for therapeutic change or a vehicle for retraumatization. The outcome depends crucially on how the enactment is worked with in the therapeutic relationship—being contained and collaboratively explored, thereby validating the patient’s subjective reality. This then lends to a shared, coconstructed emotional experience in which the rupture of the working alliance is repaired. When this does not occur, it risks replicating past abusive relationships as well as retraumatizing the patient.

All of this requires efforts at *collaboration* and *negotiation*, of which, as Donnell Stern wrote during the May 2010 IARRP Online Colloquium:

...Developing the sense of collaboration is more important than whatever understanding comes about as a result of it. Once you and the patient can collaborate about some part of experience that has been off limits, in other words, new understanding often seems to fall into place on its own. The analyst doesn’t have to supply it by acts of interpretation. It is the new freedom that seems the most important accomplishment here; new understanding often seems to me to be the outcome of new freedom, and memorializes it.

Finally, as a mode of play, how does improvisation distinguish itself from other modes of play that might—with rare exception—be seen as less desirable in psychoanalysis?

Improvisation as a form of human play distinguishes itself from another version of play and that is about competition. This latter version of play is in

evidence in a host of adversarial gaming situations such as Scrabble, tennis, debate, and any form of play that is constituted by winning versus losing. For the most part, I do not see a competitive mode of play as germane to psychoanalysis, with the possible exception of what Wolf (1988) refers to as the “adversarial selfobject function.” In that form of play, the patient engages his analyst in a kind of argumentative to and fro that was absent in his development. From a Winnicottian perspective, this may facilitate the discovery that his aggression does not destroy the other—as his omnipotent fantasies might have led him to believe. But even in this case, if the analyst is “hell-bent” on winning, the results of such a “win” will likely represent the repetition of something domineering in the patient’s life. Thus, to the degree to which the topic of improvisational play is sometimes mistakenly conflated with competitive versions of play, understandable concerns about the usurpation of the patient most certainly are bound to surface.

Improvisation, by contrast, cultivates a quality of “win-win”—that is, that the subjectivities of both parties are enlarged as a result. Indeed, the analyst comes to learn something about herself of which she might not have otherwise realized. And, of course, this is often discovered in the course of unraveling Enactments and episodes of mutually inductive identifications that enable her to move beyond her own prejudices and constraints that are a part of constraining the unconscious play between them.

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