

# Improvisation In Counseling

Manfred M. Straehle  
Temple University

Beth Soucar  
Temple University

*Creativity*

*Spontaneity*

*Intuition*

*Acceptance*

*In the Moment*

*Relational Story Building*

# Quote

“In so called real life, we rearrange our lives to insure that we always know who we are to be, what the situation is, and how to meet other's expectations so that we will be seen as worthy. When improvising, this comfortable familiarity is stripped away, replaced by a fear of being noticed by others while being unable to control our performance”  
(Wiener, 1994, p. x).

# Exploring Improvisation

- Define Improvisation
- Aspects of Improvisation Pertaining to Counseling
- Possible Contributions to Counseling
- Brief History of Improvisation in Counseling
- Examples of Improvisation in Counseling
- Improvisational Games in Counseling
- What is Next?



# Definitions

- "a performance given *without* planning or preparation" (Worldnet 1.7 Dictionary, 1997)
- "making, inventing, or arranging offhand." (New Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1989, p. 372)
- "theatre improvisation is a method of stage-acting in the moment, using minimal prearranged structures (such as scripts, plots, or props)" (Wiener, 1994, p. ix)





# Aspects of Improvisation

*Spontaneity*

*Creativity*

*Intuition*

*Relational Story Building*

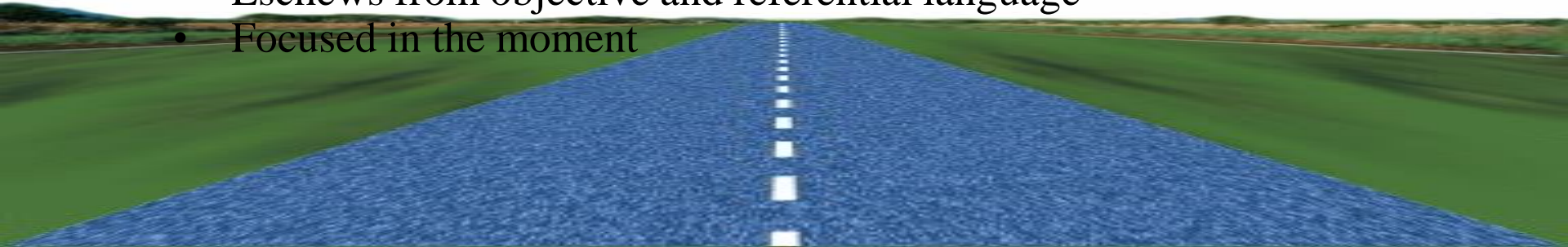
*In the Moment*

*Acceptance*



# Possible Uses of Improvisation

- Invites clients to attend more closely to themselves and others
  - Emotionally and cognitively
  - Verbally and non-verbally
- Helps clients overcome emotional pain
- Helps clients move their agenda and counseling goals forward
- Lessen clients' defenses and resistances
- Creates non-competitive and supportive environments for clients to grow
- Creates opportunities for clients to take on new roles or new “selves”
- Creates environments for clients to be verbally and non-verbally engaged
- Avoids pathological categorizations, and explanatory and theoretical formulations
- Context focused
- Eschews from objective and referential language
- Focused in the moment



# Early History of Improvisation in Counseling

- *Early counseling theorists focused on developing and integrating alternative roles which included aspects of improvisation*
  - Jacob Moreno
    - **Drama therapy**
      - **Living newspaper**
  - Fritz Perls
    - **Gestalt Therapy**
      - **Empty Chair Exercise**
  - George Kelly
    - **Personal Construct Therapy**
      - **Fixed role therapy**

# Recent History of Improvisation in Counseling

- *Recent counseling theorists have not only developed/integrated alternative roles but share more of the aspects of improvisation than earlier counselors*
  - Keith Johnstone (theatrical improviser)
    - **Improv**
  - Newman & Holzman
    - **Social Therapy**
  - Wiener
    - **Rehearsals for Growth**





# Examples of Improvisation in Counseling

- All the examples below emphasize our six aspects of improvisation and their definitions
  - Example emphasizes acceptances and spontaneity
    - One adolescent I saw was being resistant to talking about himself and relationships with myself. Instead, he wanted to turn the picture in the office around. I turned the picture around and he was laughing that I did this.
  - Example emphasizes spontaneity
    - Wiener observed that a daughter was enmeshed with the mother. He decided to use an improvisational game that would create a scene where the daughter was less enmeshed.
  - Example emphasizes all the aspects of improvisation
    - O. Spurgeon English imitated his client who acted like a dog in session. English took on the dog's behavior with his client as an effort to join with the client. The client later was able to learn human social behavior.

# Examples of Improvisational Games in Counseling

- All of these games are from Wiener and Lowe who adapted almost all of them from theatrical improvisation to counseling
  - ***Three persons leaving the stage for the same reason***
    - Three players must pick up on each other nonverbally drawing from the themselves and others and then end the act mutually
    - Develop non-verbal awareness, social skills, and become acutely aware of offerings
  - ***Emotional Short Circuit***
    - Think of a happy moment and cry and then think of a sad moment and laugh
    - Develops genuine emotional awareness by pointing out fake emotions
  - ***How are you?***
    - Client asks how many ways one can ask how are you and the effect of it
    - Develops verbal and nonverbal awareness and their effect on others when asking questions (social awareness)
  - ***Emotional Zones***
    - An area divided into two or more emotional zones. If a client is in the “sad zone” he must act and verbalize sad and if he is in the “happy zone” he must act and verbalize happiness
    - Develops awareness of emotions and can highlight two contrasting emotions

# What is Next?

- There needs to be
  - More awareness and acceptance of improvisation in counseling
  - More research that demonstrates the effectiveness of improvisation in counseling
  - More integration and use of improvisation in counseling
    - Particularly using improvisational games

