

Practitioner Perspective

Exploring Improvisation in Psychotherapy

By Alex Delogu

Psychotherapy has been described as the “improvisation of relational moves” (Wallin, 2007, p. 261). This paper introduces the theories and methodologies of improvisation, and demonstrates their core relevance to our work.



“Humming in the background of all life – and familiar and alien as breathing – is improvisation” (Toop, 2016, p. 1)

Introduction

I hope to make the relevance of improvisation to therapy clear in this work, bringing attention to aspects of improvisation that already exist in the theory and practice of psychotherapy, both implicitly and explicitly.

Free Improvisation

I have been a musician for almost twenty years. Playing music has been a near constant through the

calm and turbulent movements of my life. I've been playing improvised music for the latter portion of that time, learning to play blues and jazz. It was “free improvisation” however that really sparked my interest, particularly under the tuition of Irish improvising musician Shane Latimer. Free improvisation involves playing music with the least possible amount of pre-planning. Just dive in and see

what happens. That a group of people can come together and play music with very little planning is in itself fascinating and though the result may not be to everyone's liking, the process is not simply the production of noise (though it can be that too). I marvel that this practice is both allowed and encouraged. On a personal level this approach also counteracted my sometimes perfectionist tendency to “be better” at my instrument and at music, a tendency that is a real joy-killer. This point is fundamental to answering the question of the importance of improvisation. To anticipate what will be described below, improvisation offers ways of counteracting the deadening forces of habit and reinvigorating any practice. Notice also I am approaching improvisation from a musical standpoint simply due to my life situation, there is an abundance of insight to be found within the areas of improvised theatre, which will be mentioned, and improvised comedy, which will not. This is simply due to a matter of personal preference.

Couple these experiences with my psychotherapy training, ongoing learning, and practice, I thought there must be some connection here. As this idea ripened in my mind I couldn't help but see in the psychotherapy literature threads of improvisation. Likewise, when

reading about improvisation it would seem incredibly applicable to the practice of psychotherapy. Therefore this work is a theoretical weave of a life.

A Little Structure

To show I also appreciate structure, in this paper I will first attempt a definition of improvisation. The therapeutic aspects will begin with developmental aspects of improvisation in infant and caregiver speech. The main section will be an introduction to two central figures in the implementation of improvisation technique in the area of psychoanalysis. There will be a short section on the relevance of mindfulness and Buddhist thought. And finally, a short look at the implicit improvisatory practices of three significant psychoanalysts, Freud, Bion, and Winnicott.

Defining Moments

Defining improvisation is inherently difficult. One attempted definition lists no less than fifteen complex features of improvisation (Asma, 2017, p. 50-52). In Derek Bailey's canonical work on music improvisation he questions, with a hint of ridicule, the motivation for even attempting to define it. "Among improvising musicians there is endless speculation about its nature but only an academic would have the temerity to mount a theory of improvisation" (Bailey, 1992, p. x). And here I go on... Derrida, who is not easily summarised, declares improvisation impossible (Peters, 2009, p. 95 – 96; Toop, 2016, p. 21).

This lack of a theory is not just down to a failure of finding the right language, though that presents its own challenges, but rather an indication that what is being described is, like a lot of things, not in the realm of the exact. It's messy. Improvisation is a practice

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that slips from under the theories placed on it. Even so, a lack of theory does not seem to inhibit its persistent going on. As the old joke goes, it works well in practice but not in theory. To define it is simultaneously to miss the point, to err, "a momentary freezing of perpetual movement" (Toop, 2016, p.29). Along similar lines, to record an improvisation is to evacuate it of its original spontaneity and its unique local context (Bailey, 1992, p. 103-104). Much like how the retelling of a dream is not the same as the dream itself.

In an effort to explain improvisation, without throwing in the towel just yet, let's go big picture first. Everything is constantly changing or, as various philosophers would say, everything is becoming (May, 2005, p. 59; Massumi, 1992, p. 37; Suzuki, 1949, p. 92). Though it is not just philosophers who speak of becoming, it appears in various guises in other disciplines. In physics, "things" do not exist, there are only events, because everything is a process (Rovelli, 2017, p. 85). "A thing is when it isn't doing" says Massumi (2002, p. 6), meaning that "things" only appear thing-like when their processes change too slowly for us to perceive. Constant change is recognised within biology as evolution (Nurse 2020, p. 60; McShea & Brandon, 2010) and to use Kaufman's beautifully clunky word, the possible outcomes of this evolution are "unprestatable" (2019, p. 2), never knowable in advance. Not even an extremely

consistent and repeatable genetic structure can impede change. This is nature as improviser. This change process is also felt closer to home at the level of the body where the body behaves as "an active and open form, continually improvising its relation to things and to the world" (Abrams, 1996, p. 49). Less concrete still, "desire itself is movement" (Eliot cited in Bollas, 1999, p. 28).

Its Not All Quicksand

That being said there is stability in the world. It's not all quicksand. There are processes that slow down or stabilise this constant change. In biology it is genetics that remains incredibly stable over long periods of time (Nurse, 2020, p. 126). Neurologically the brain habituates perceptions so that they are not new any more (McGilchrist, 2010, p. 94). In music it is composition that slows or captures the fleeting music of the moment by creating a score (Toop, 2016, p. 1). Creating marks or patterns is ever present in language. As Nietzsche says disparagingly of language "words dilute; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common" (1968, p. 428). That is, words are already diluting the uniqueness of an experience by making it in some way reproducible or codified. Language creates fixity in the world (McGilchrist, 2010, p. 114) by also being stable over time and repeatable (p. 96). "Listening is doomed to form certainties from evanescent phenomena" (Bonnet, 2016, p. 211). At the level of the body, slowing of change can appear as rigidity in the body, "character armouring" as the Reichians call it, and this can be synonymous with emotional blockages (Totton, 2009, p. 57). This very tension may be the basis of our stable selves as "we experience ourselves through our tensions" (Epstein, 1995, p.

19). Our bodily predicament is beautifully described by Juhan (2003, p. 19) who I shall quote at length:

“This formation we cannot stop. We can only make the choice to let it go its own way – directed by genetics, gravity, appetites, habits, the accidentals of our surroundings, and so on – or the choice to let our sensory awareness penetrate its processes, to be personally present in the midst of those processes with the full measure of our subjective, internal observations and responses, and to some degree direct the course of that formation.”

I don't want to give the impression that structure is bad and change is good, that would be too simplistic. Nietzsche is on point again when he says “the terrible par excellence would be for me a life entirely devoid of habits, a life that would demand perpetual improvisation” (1974, p. 237). Habit, structure, and rigidity can be good. For example it is the interplay between solid bone and flexible soft tissue that gives the human form its expressive integrity. Language as another example, though it has structural and fixing tendencies it can also be used creatively as in fiction or poetry. In complexity theory we are at the edge of chaos, “where life has enough stability to sustain itself and enough creativity to deserve the name of life” (Waldrop, 1992, p. 12). The point is that too much of either can be risky. Too little structure and one risks falling apart and too little flexibility one risks breaking apart. Not to put too much of a negative spin on this, but it's death both ways (Massumi, 1992, p. 37), by changing there is loss or by holding rigidly to prevent change there is lifelessness. Laing (1969) sees

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the same with families: “If I do not destroy the “family,” the “family” will destroy me” (as cited in Celani, 2005, p. 75).

To return to the original point of this detour, improvisation as a practice is the relaxation of the structures that impede change, be they emotional, physical, mental, musical, etc... Deleuze says “to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it” (1987, p. 343-344). That is, to let our selves relax is to move more with the creative energy of our bodies and the world. It is also to relax our “self”, to become less rigidly self-like. It is well and good to say this, to be more flexible or less rigid, it is another thing to actually do it. How this is done is not exactly straight forward. It is the improvisers task to find ways to counteract the rigidifying and deadening forces of nature with their ingenuity and persistence.

Developmental Improvisation

The creative and stabilising processes mentioned previously are already showing up at the earliest stages of human life. When infants begin to interact with their care-givers they are already improvising. Their first starts at improvising, and its nurturance, depend heavily on the capacity of the care-giver to improvise with them.

In several related studies it has been shown that the care-giver's ability to improvise their speech, rhythmically and prosodically, has an affect on the infant (Gratier, Apter-Danon, 2009). One study found that immigrant mothers who did not feel they belonged in their new culture showed less variation in their

rhythmic vocalisations and in turn their children were less creative and adventurous with their own (Gratier, Apter-Danon, 2009, p. 304). One could hypothesise that the feeling of estrangement caused a greater regularity in speech to create some stability in an otherwise foreign environment. Interestingly here, the authors state that “belonging” is expressed through musical vocal expression and hinges not only on identifying with cultural features, but also allowing space to vary along these cultural lines. This means that these vocal variations are not just a minute detail of speech patterning but are expressions of social and cultural aspects of human being. In line with what has been said of improvisation so far: “Belonging requires a balance between the known and the new, repetition and creativity, structure and variation” (Gratier, Apter-Danon, 2009, p. 305). This sensitivity to expressive timing creates an “improvisation zone” (Gratier, Apter-Danon, 2009, p. 307) and the authors consider this, with Winnicott, a dynamic form of psychological “holding” (Gratier, Apter-Danon, 2009, p. 314).

Another study found that a mid-range rhythmic variation was best suited to foster a secure attachment, whereas too much or too little rhythmic variation was connected to insecure attachment (Gratier, Apter-Danon, 2009, p. 307). The final study showed that infants verbalised much less if their mothers vocal expression was highly repetitive (Gratier, Apter-Danon, 2009, p. 318). Flat tone is like the vocal equivalent of “still face.” It is clear from this that subtle improvised expression is an important factor in child development.

Related to this is the more well-known musicality of vocal interaction between care-giver and infant. “Baby-talk”, “motherese”, or the more technical term “infant-directed

speech” (Papousek, 1996, p. 92; McGilchrist, 2010, p. 103; Mithen, 2006, p. 69) is the primary form of vocal communication within the first few years of life, before language is acquired. Most are probably familiar with the large variations in pitch, tone, and rhythm in care-giver speech, and curiously enough in speech with pets (Mithen, 2006, p. 74). Speaking in this way is not solely directed towards language acquisition but is of equal importance in serving to engage attention, regulate emotion, and communicate intentions (Mithen, 2006, p. 71). In psychoanalytic terms this form of communication has been called the “primordial third” (Akhtar, 2018, p. 15). While this sort of musical, improvised interaction is most readily observed in infants it continues on into adult life, albeit in a less exaggerated form.

Into Adulthood

Once the music of infancy slowly fades from our attention and language takes a more pronounced position in communication it can be tempting to disregard these previous steps as merely stepping stones to language. Language performs a peculiar trick of somehow being seen as separate to the actions and gestures of the body that produce it, even though the “word is sensual and meaningful itself, an object to be rhythmically manipulated with lips, teeth, tongue, and breath, and serves as a sensual object of meaning” (Sapen, 2012, p. 193). So under the words, people still engage in a lot of non-verbal communication and even while speaking a lot of the content is expressed outside of the language itself. The intonation, rhythm, pitch, phrasing, and volume all still aid in communicating. The music of language goes on. This is why it is so difficult to decipher the intentions behind a text message or

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an email, they are just words.

The “music” of language is that which communicates its *emotional* content and that is primarily what therapists are interested in. The centrality of these non-linguistic factors is reinforced by research into the Polyvagal Theory, where vocal prosody becomes a direct expression of autonomic state and assists in social autonomic regulation between individuals (Porges, 2011, p. 212-213). To explain briefly, if someone has a calm voice, that will have a calming effect, whereas if someone is shouting that will have a startling effect on others, showing that the quality of voice impacts directly on others’ nervous systems. There is also music to the flattening of tone with depressed people and even more distinctively with suicidal people (Rose, 2004, p. 10-11) showing the continued connection between emotional state and vocal tone. It can be in this music, on which language floats, that repressed material lies (Rose, 2004, p. 6). The therapists job can be to hear these faint, long-missed whispers, and to “bring out something that is there—already there, waiting to be heard – but that is not heard without our help” (Fink, 2007, p. 46).

The Musical Edge of Therapy

In his book *The Musical Edge of Therapeutic Dialogue* Knoblauch (2010) develops his psychotherapeutic practice along these musical lines using jazz improvisation as his central metaphor (Knoblauch, 2010, p.

36-39). Rose calls it a “treasury of clinical illustrations of the phonological as contrasted to the semantic significance of verbalization” (2004, p. 7). There are two main facets to this approach that go hand in hand. Firstly, there are the theoretical aspects, and secondly, the complementary practical aspects.

The theoretical part of this approach is a development of the trajectory taken by Freud’s drive (“hydraulic”) model of mind, through the object-relation’s intersubjective (“plastic”) model, into what Knoblauch calls “resonant minding”, an interpsychic model (Sapen, 2012, p. 179; Knoblauch, 2010, p. 95-98). This resonant minding is participated in as a live, “*simultaneous co-construction*” (Knoblauch, 2010, p. 59) in an affective space. The ‘mind’ part is not solely inside ones’ head (Knoblauch, 2010, p. 95), it is unfolding in the encounter between therapist and client, by both parties and in their own ways through the musical aspects of language mentioned previously. Here pathology appears, in familiar language, to be arising “from too much rigidity but also not enough predictability” (Knoblauch, 2010, p. 96). Sapen likens this live musical interaction to dreaming, in that it is a present unconscious: dreaming together in a wakeful state (2012, p. 159). The benefit here is that while dreaming happens in isolation and is presented in therapy once removed and already processed after the fact, musical improvisation can happen live in a shared space.

This theory is very reminiscent of an embodied approach to expression, where expression is not the externalisation of some private internal thought, but rather thought is *in* the very activity of the body itself. In this way, gesture, music, painting, and language “are

not inner items capable of being introspected” (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011, p. 187), they are on display. Though Knoblauch states that these non-verbal processes can be verbalised, there is a careful trade off here between live interaction and reflection on it (2010, p. 75; Bollas, 1999, p. 168). This same tension between reflective and live activity is listed in Sister Corita Kent’s (Brain Pickings, 2020) advice to students and teachers: “Don’t try to create and analyse at the same time. They’re different processes.” And again, from an improviser, “[t]he question is how to be. Not through the romance of becoming natural but through adjusting the balance of being and thinking about being” (Toop, 2016, p. 42). From a psychoanalyst: “We need to make dreams and disseminate them, just as we need to form interpretations” (Bollas, 1999, p. 37). In his relevantly titled book *The Master and his Emissary* McGilchrist also searches for this balance between being and thinking about being, though he clearly positions *being* as master (2010).

The Affective Dance

These reflections point to the practical importance of the *how* and *what* the practitioner is attending to. In terms of language, attention is to be drawn away from the words themselves and towards the musical *context* of the words, as “*it is the contextual meaning of any particular word, phrase or act that constructs its affective meaning.*” (Knoblauch, 2010, p. 89). This context can either be the therapist themselves, with the client, or the clients own context. For example, in music a note will sound completely different depending on what chord is playing under it. It is highly contextual and relative. And on a larger scale it is the movement between notes and between musical sections that give it its emotional

force. The overall flow of the music can be heard as that which makes it emotive. This flow in communication forms a “process contour” (Knoblauch, 2010, p. 62). It is “the “process contour” of the analyst’s participation in the resonant field which accounts for the therapeutic impact” (Sapen, 2012, p. 191). It is the affective dance between client and therapist that is therapeutically important. The therapist’s own music plays a part. For a visceral experience see the film *The Meyerowitz Stories* (Baumbach, 2017) and the related and excellent video essay *What Realistic Film Dialogue Sounds Like* (Nerdwriter1, 2017).

This contextual shift means a lessening of importance on the accuracy of interpretation and this trend has been noted separately by other analysts (Barratt, 2016; Fink, 2007; Winnicott, 1971, p. 68). “With attention to the interaction rather than the intervention, emphasis shifts” (Knoblauch, 2010, p. 81). This does not mean the words are not important, they very much are, it is simply emphasising their context, much like with vision an object can be focused on intently to the exclusion of all else or attention can broaden and settle into the peripheral field. Interpretation is in service of keeping movement going, keeping the affective contour open. This way of attending responds directly to the familiar objection to *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said (Knoblauch, 2010, p. 98). Neurologically this may be seen as a shift from left-hemisphere to right-hemisphere dominant ways of attending, emphasising implicit ways of knowing (McGilchrist, 2010, p. 94-99). Knoblauch extends this idea into active forms of implicit communication which he calls improvising (2010, p. 75).

Yes, and...?

There is one other significant contributor to the merging of improvisation and psychotherapy and that is Philip Ringstrom (2001; 2012) who imports theory and technique from improvised theatre into his practice. He aims to put clinical “flesh” (2001, p. 446) on the bare bones of the processes of becoming (mentioned at the outset of this article). There are a lot of fruitful variations on themes already presented here and also some fresh new lines of thought.

Ringstrom casts the therapy space as a theatrical one. In classical theatre we have stage, actors with roles, scripts, props, etc... reflecting what is found in the therapy space, with our roles, rooms, internal scripts, and so forth (2001, p. 731). Our scripted therapist roles have also the burden of history behind them, in that psychoanalysis, for example, has a history of proving its effectiveness and presenting results, leading to a tendency to focus on “what one knows”, a secure place of knowing what one is doing (2001, p. 731-733). As opposed to this, improvised theatre speaks more to the “moment-to-moment” unscripted interactions and mutual creative processes (2001, p. 731). Ringstrom states that the “emphasis has little to do with “what one knows,” as it is all about what one does with what one does *not* know” (2001, p. 731). This is where we venture into the unknowable, where roles become unfixed, and predetermined scripts are thrown away: the improvisation zone. Again, this is not random or simply spontaneous activity, it is tuned in to each other’s moment and Ringstrom is careful to clarify this point (2001, p. 742-744; 2012, p. 448).

One of the primary influences on his work is the *yes/and* improvisation technique, which is

an attitude with which one responds in the affirmative in order to drive narrative ideas along, instead of saying *no/or* (2012, p. 455). An attitude of *yes/and* opens things up while *no/or* closes things down.

Thirdness

The idea of “thirdness” is relevant here as it describes the situation in which two people are interacting openly and the interaction is more than the sum of its parts. That is, try to see two people forming one process, “unity in diversity” (Borgo, 2007, p.126), “closer to group mind than singularity” (Toop, 2016, p. 19). A situation “in which both parties are paradoxically distinctive authors while also inextricably coauthors. Hence, neither may lay claim to being the sole author of their improvised moment” (2012, p. 448). In this sense one needs to somewhat disappear to really play (Nachmanovich, 1990, p. 51).

Being in thirdness calls into question our habitual distinction between individual selves, but on a different scale it also calls into question the unity of the self, which I have explored elsewhere (Delogu, 2020b). Ringstrom uses this as a springboard for improvised interaction, stating that we all have a “multiplicity of self-states” or different “characters” within (2012, p. 449). It is important to remain open to these possibilities because as therapists 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” (2012, p. 449). The potential inconsistencies of competing selves is welcome (Fink, 2007, p. 46). In terms of sexuality this means accepting that we are “*inherently polysexual*” (Barratt, 2016, p. 97). The field of potentiality, a play space, is held open, or at least the awareness of

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these potentialities is present.

Potentialities

The writer and improviser David Toop is tuned into this movement when he says “I can tap a surface – simple – and the field of potentiality opens up, whereas with writing, at which I am practiced, I can write a single sentence which may close down the field of potentiality for hours, days, even years” (Toop, 2016, p. 42). It should be noted here that being “well practiced” at something can actually hinder the field of potentiality. For Ringstrom the collapse of openness into a rigid situation occurs when there is a heavily scripted, defensive, or static self-state, in either client or therapist, that shuts down possibilities of play (2001, p. 746-747; 2012, p. 456). “A fixed attitude is a closed door” (Spolin, 1963, p. 44).

This flexibility of self-state echoes the balance between implicit and explicit ways of being, touched upon earlier. Ringstrom describes this form of playful interaction as happening mainly through “implicit relational knowing” (2012, p. 450). Again, a preference for moving more into the implicit, “intuitive, nonreflective, unmediated” is advocated for here (2012, p. 455). This can involve moving away from the more traditional “empathic-introspective” outlook

(2012, p. 446). He says, “it is not always either necessary or helpful that the analyst reflects at length about his reaction before sharing it” (Ringstrom, 2012, p. 742). Moving out of this outlook and acting is what sets this approach apart from the more conventional modes of analytic behaviour (Akhtar, 2018, p. 81-101). This is not an excuse to shirk this careful analytic framing, rather it’s a leap within it. Ringstrom will step into relevant roles, breaking with the expected therapeutic responses to further the work. I’m sure many therapists have experience of saying things that are so obviously the standard therapeutic response that even the client knows it and may even have the courage to say it.

Craving And Grasping

Meditation and mindfulness, with their focus on experiencing the present moment, form an unlikely but very fruitful companion to thinking about improvisation. In *The Embodied Mind* (Varela, 2016) the authors make use of the introspective teachings of Buddhism to inform their cognitively inclined work on embodiment. While their analysis is quite complex there is a small section that is very relevant here. In the face of constant change things arise that we like and also things we dislike. And so things appear to us either as good or bad and this results in us “craving” that which we like and avoiding that which we don’t like (2016, p. 114) much like Freud’s *pleasure principle* (Epstein, 1995, p. 60). This craving then leads to “grasping”, which is where we try to hold on to good things and feelings and we try to get rid of bad things and feelings (2016, p. 114). “We do not just let ourselves be happy or sad, for instance; we must become a happy person or a sad one” (Epstein, 1995, p. 77),

that is, establishing scripted roles in theatrical parlance. The problem here is that because things are constantly changing we make more trouble for ourselves in trying to freeze, halt, stop, hold, grasp, the change. It's not possible to stop time. Tension results. Releasing becomes more difficult over time and circumstances may even continue to make releasing unwise.

As a corollary to the ever-shifting nature of reality another profound point arises that will only be mentioned in passing here. In trying to look carefully at our sense experience we find that there is only change, and so identifying any static or stable centre of our experience is not possible. To put it briefly, there is no stable enduring self beneath the kaleidoscopic textures of experience (Epstein, 1995, p. 75-77; Varela 2016, p. 79-80). The "longing for a center nevertheless persists" (Barratt, 2016, p. 116). The consequence of this can be "narcissistic craving: the thirst for a fixed image of self, as either something or nothing" (Epstein, 1995, p. 60).

The solution from the Buddhist perspective is to become aware of the ever-changing processes of "craving" (2016, p. 114; Epstein, 1995, p. 76) and to abide in "not-knowing" (Epstein, 1995, p. 56). For improvisers this is the name of the game, "[un]certainties are their *raison d'être*" (Borgo, 2007, p. 14). In Zen this will be characterised as cultivating "beginner's mind" (Nachmanovich, 1990, p. 68). "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few" (Suzuki, 1970, p. 21). Again, expertise can hinder this perspective. "The desire to improvise [...] is the desire to begin something without knowing where it will end, or indeed if there is an end" (Peters, 2009, p. 7). They

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(Nachmanovich, 1990, p. 69)

are cut from the same cloth, to be a beginner is, by definition, to not know. This is important in therapy because refusing to know "has more healing potential" (Barratt, 2016, p. 119). This is ignorance of a specific kind, a refusal to assume, to not hurry putting structure on things. Therapists are not to "fix" in two different senses, don't solve and don't pin down. It is only through ignorance that we can hope to learn from an other (Delogu, 2020a).

Grasping happens all the time to varying degrees. It's one of the first reflexes a baby has, to create some stability. To this extent it is not a bad thing, it is just something to be aware of. The "holding space" of therapy names it a place for grasping. It would seem that therapists are constantly having to navigate their craving and grasping, as we should expect from any activity that concerns itself with being present in the moment with an other. What is important is just to be aware of it. While Buddhism sees a way out of this predicament of craving psychoanalysis is more inclined to saying we are simply to live with it (Epstein, 1995, p. 77-79; Barratt, 2016, p. 72).

Psychoanalytic Improvisers

At the outset it was stated that psychoanalysts have been using improvised theory and technique either explicitly or implicitly. At this point it is my hope that you have a feel for what improvisation is, if only implicitly, and that these

connections will be clear at this point.

The first and most obvious improvisation method was set out by Freud with free association (Nachmanovich, 1990, p. 69). Free association involves saying that which comes to mind by relaxing the critical faculties and simply observing what arises (Freud, 1997, p. 15-16). Note here that the shift is simply one of attention. While not the dominant view, it has been argued that this is *the* defining feature of psychoanalysis (Barratt, 2016; Bollas, 1999). In no uncertain terms: "Free association was the only goal of psychoanalysis" (Bollas, 1999, p. 64). Here it is not even simply a method, but the goal itself of psychoanalysis. It is an idealised goal, as, like improvisation, it is not absolutely achievable, habits get in the way, repressive tendencies inhibit; but they are instructive blocks (Bollas, 1999, p. 65). This is also for the therapist to partake in, by allowing a "free-floating attention" (Fink, 2007, p. 10). This forms an attempt to listen openly and to not just pick out that which the therapist is looking for. "When listening becomes nothing more than verification, decoding, reading, it loses its primal function of hearing everything that presents itself" (Bonnet, 2016, p. 204).

The process of free associating throws up a number of problems, two of which have been noted already. First, it challenges the creation of theories about it. If we take free association to be the goal of psychoanalysis this implies that any theorising that is not in service of facilitating this goal is in some sense irrelevant. So that "whenever any practitioner nominates goals transcendent to the method he is almost inevitably in conflict with the terms of the

method” (Bollas, 1999, p. 69). And there have been many schools of psychoanalysis that have grown from the initial seed, which Barratt characterises as “retreats from the significance of the free-associative method” (Barratt, 2016, p. 124). They may be seen as attempt to fix that which is in constant motion. This is by no means a majority view, but it joins the improvised chorus very well.

The second challenge, following Barratt, is that free association upsets the notion of a stable “I” at the centre of experience. That is why free association is difficult. Because it brings up things that challenge the person we think we are, our representation of our self. Thoughts arrive as if from outside ourselves, “we *fall into* the process by which *it thinks me*” (Barratt, 2016, p. 61). That is, we relax into the process whereby thoughts arise, without our knowing what might come out of our mouth.

Continuing on from here Wilfred Bion has some further insight on these matters. One of Bion’s most well-known suggestions is for the analyst to be without “memory and desire” (Bion, 2018, p. 41). This describes quite accurately the sort of attention required to improvise and sounds very close to the process of grasping outlined earlier. Memory and desire become hindrances to experiencing, as if the moment were lacking something, “both imply the absence of immediate sensual satisfaction” (Bion, 2018, p. 41).

Related to this was Bion’s use of “unsaturated” language. That is, language taken from different fields of study that were not laden with meaning, “saturated”, from prevailing psychoanalytic discourse (Sapen, 2012, p. 118). In the realm of improvised jazz this is “exemplified by Ornette Coleman’s attempts to short-circuit

habitual aspects of his saxophone playing”, to play “without memory” (Frisk, 2014, p. 157), by playing instruments he had no training in. Here the saxophone is saturated because of experience and can block creativity, whereas the new instruments are less saturated and open up the field of potentiality, much like becoming a beginner again. The tools in psychoanalysis are largely conceptual and perceptual and so it is here that habituation needs to be offset with fresh concepts and perceptions.

Lastly, Donald Winnicott introduced improvisation through his inclination towards play. “*Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together*” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 51). Ringstrom, who was covered earlier, states that improvisation is the mode of play that Winnicott “failed to articulate” (Ringstrom, 2017, p. 444). So here play is synonymous with improvisation. The importance of this is not negligible for Winnicott: “If the therapist cannot play, then he is not suitable to work” (Winnicott, 1971 p. 74) Winnicott suggested that getting to this state of play involved relaxation, by setting up conditions in which one can relax (Winnicott, 1971, p. 74).

Winnicott’s other well known idea is that of the “false self”(Winnicott, 1965). “The false self is created to deal with an impossible situation; as a construction, it eventually rigidifies and obscures more spontaneous personal expressions, cutting the person off from herself” (Epstein, 1995, p. 37). The false self is a blockage towards spontaneous expression. This underlying spontaneity is called the true self, the expression of spontaneously arising thoughts and desires. In the Buddhist sense

seen earlier, a true self is not to be found under the false self. Rather the sense of self arises in the protective holding and rigidifying of the false self. Winnicott hints at this when he states that there “is but little point in formulating a True Self idea except for the purpose of trying to understand the False Self” (Winnicott, 1960, p. 148). That is to say that the precarious duality of self states only arises because of the false self. To lose the false self is to shed the true self too. “There is no technique for authenticity. It arises freely or not at all, whereas “efforts to be authentic” invoke the same paradoxical failure as “efforts to be spontaneous” (Ringstrom, 2012, p. 742).

It is interesting to note that Winnicott never intended to set up a school in his own name nor to have a coherent body of work, or doctrine (Symington, 1986, pp. 311). This attests to the improvisatory attitude in Winnicott, something that has been a serious issue with the conflicts arising between different schools of psychoanalysis.

Conclusion

The aim of this work has been to thread together the various strands of improvisation that are dotted through psychotherapy. The intention is not to show that all these ideas are the same and to be subsumed under the master signifier of “improvisation”. The focus has not been on ironing out differences between these thinkers and forming some kind of airtight work. There is much more that could be said about each individual thinker and also the discussions and disagreements that might arise between them. This is far beyond the scope of this work but leaves open plenty avenues for further work. The goal has been simply to present them in their

diversity and hang them all on the fragile tune of improvisation.. If it has sparked something, been affective, then it has been a success. “The heart of the music falls silent once more, covered as it must be by the brambles and thick tree trunks of ordinary living” (Toop, 2016, p. 228). 🍌

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