

**STRUCTURED IMPROVISATION COUNSELING:  
A STUDY OF THE USE OF RITUAL AND DRAMA IN  
HOMOGENEOUS AND MULTICULTURAL SETTINGS**

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Since psychotherapeutic technique in America, to a large extent, stems from theory and methods developed in Western Europe, it most naturally conforms to the values and experiences of Americans of European heritage. Innovative forms of treatment may be needed to reach people from other cultural backgrounds. Numerous authors have indicated a need for new methods that would help people from non-European backgrounds develop a frame of reference within which western psychotherapy could be more easily understood and utilized (Kendrick et al., 1983; Kiev, 1964, 1972; Klein, 1981; Cobbs, 1972; Kleinman, 1980). A technique designed for this purpose must necessarily take into consideration values, styles of learning, and those types of psychotherapy that are already congruent with the cultural framework of possible service recipients.

The intervention investigated in this study was developed by the researcher in an effort to bridge the current cultural gap between conventional psychotherapy and the needs of minority group adolescents. The youths of particular concern were clients of an inner-city drug counseling center where the investigator had worked as a social worker. Up until the time of the investigation, many adolescent clients and the center had responded only marginally to traditional one-to-one counseling. When values clarification groups using experiential exercises were employed with these youngsters, slightly more positive results were achieved. The experiential exercises resulted in discussion which served as the foundation upon which a therapeutic relationship could be built.

A second concern of the study centered around the importance of cathartic experiences in treatment. Many minority group children had reported experiencing traumatic events throughout their young lives. The investigator hypothesized that cathartic release of repressed emotions related to such traumas would enable these clients to focus more clearly on their existing problems.

Finally, the findings resulting from this investigation will be discussed in terms of systems theory and neurolinguistic theory. Particularly important to this interpretation is an understanding of the way information is taken in from the environment (input systems), how this information is processed (representation systems), and what responses result therefrom (output systems) (Bandler and Grinder, 1975, 1976; Bandler, Grinder and Satir, 1976).

### The Intervention

Structured Improvisation Counseling, the intervention under study, is a group technique designed to be action-oriented, fast-moving, and culturally relevant to participants. It was designed by the investigator to capture and hold the client's attention. Method acting training, from which the technique draws much of its structure and substance, helps clients establish a comfortable and trusting environment within the group. In addition, it facilitates the process of identifying problems, feelings, and other concerns of therapy by employing means of exploration and elucidation set in a framework less threatening to these clients than the traditional model of therapy might be. Once basic trust is established and problems are identified, acting becomes a means of exploring controversial situations relevant to the lives of these youths. Potential responses to specific circumstances are played out in structured dramas. A group discussion follows each drama which allows participants to discuss their experiences and to share ideas of other possible solutions.

Structured Improvisation Counseling can be viewed as an example of the eco-systems theory in action. Difficult issues that arise in the lives of these youngsters are presented in dramatic form and opportunities for creative intervention emerge. Life presents situations to minority group members that often result in conflicting demands on their adaptive skills and challenge their value orientation. The "correct" responses (those acceptable to the dominant culture) in certain situations often conflict with their fundamental principles of proper behavior according to the norms of their cultural group. For example, the art of compromise, so important to the American middle-class culture, may be perceived as a form of "Uncle Tom" behavior, which is viewed with repulsion by many black Americans of lower socio-economic status.

The focus of attention during Structured Improvisation Counseling is on the point at which the person, his minority group value system, and the values and demands of the dominant culture come into conflict. Creative use of this conflict occurs within a situation where attention is focused on concerns other than the conflict at hand, e.g., attention is redirected to self-consciousness, acting ability, what to say next in the drama, and working out the acting problem. Changing focus in this way allows participants to experience their conflict from some distance, and with more objectivity. Additionally, the therapist is able to see the problem almost as it occurs naturally. The resultant concerns are then discussed following each acting segment. Thus, the worker gains a greater understanding of the problem and the clients are able to convey information to others which they were unable to verbalize.

Structured Improvisation Counseling resembles a phenomenon common to the African and Afro-American cultures. These groups have used forms of ritual such as possession trance cults as means of processing the consequences of colonialization, discrimination, and racism for some time (Bourguignon, 1976). Possession trance cults are native healing groups found in Africa and parts of the Caribbean and South America. These groups employ altered states of consciousness such as trances attributed to spirit possession as part of their rituals. In the Black American sub-culture, individuals may take on roles and act out situations informally in their homes as a means of processing discordant events in their daily lives. This activity is similar to some of the behaviors seen in possession trance cults. Drama, in these situations, and in Structured Improvisation Counseling, is defined as secularized ritual (Leach, 1968). The intervention under study can be seen as a psychotherapeutic version of the above described phenomena which has been transformed into a group therapy format.

In Structured Improvisation Counseling, "acting problems" are presented to the participants as problems of well-known characters in a defined set of circumstances. Situations are constructed from those television programs reportedly watched by the subjects under study. Acting problems may also be drawn from other culturally-relevant material. For example, commonly occurring events can be used in the structure or content of an acting problem. The problems stimulate participants to think about issues which are relevant to their successful functioning at home, at school or work, and in future adult roles. An example of an acting problem follows:

On Love Boat, Isaac falls in love with a woman who is going through a divorce. When he returns to ask her to marry him, she is out, but her husband and son are there. The husband tells Isaac that he has been going through a drug program for six months so that he could bring his family back together and that he loves his wife very much. As Isaac is leaving, he meets the woman he loves in the street. What happens?

No "right" behavior is prescribed; rather discussion of many alternatives is generated.

Other components of Structured Improvisation Counseling include object lessons and acting warm-up exercises. An object lesson involves placing a variety of articles on a table located in the stage portion of the room. Each participant is asked to go up to the table, walk around it once so that he can take in all possibilities, select one object, describe it, put it back on the table, and return to his seat. Other exercises can be done with the same objects. For example, participants may be asked to pick an object and tell a story about it, or to do something with it. Acting warm-up exercises are activities designed to develop concentration, comfort in front of groups, and self-belief in participants' actions (McGaw, 1980; Spolin, 1963). Acting is believing. One example of a warm-up is a mirroring duo exercise in which one person moves his arms slowly while the other tries to follow his lead. It is very important that the duo maintain eye contact throughout the exercise. This activity helps subjects develop concentration. Another example involves shooting an imaginary basketball through an imaginary hoop. By carrying out this activity, participants begin to believe in the acting process.

### Methodology

Investigation within a quasi-experimental design allowed for the study of Structured Improvisation Counseling with similar groups in two different settings. A primarily white, upper middle-class junior high school and a predominantly black drug counseling agency located in a depressed neighborhood were the sites for implementation of the study.

### The Subjects and Settings

In the school, two Occupational Work Adjustment (OWA) classes participated; one was a treatment group, the other a non-treatment control group. All subjects in these two groups were white and were from middle or upper middle class families. They ranged in age from 14 to 17 years. Of the 17 students in both groups, only four were female; these four girls were all in the treatment group. Students were randomly assigned by class to the treatment and control groups. The students in the OWA program had lost interest in school and were involved in semi-delinquent behavior (e.g., truancy, some drug usage, poor academic performance and unruly behavior). The students in the experimental section received pre- and posttesting and ten one-hour treatment sessions followed by a graduation party. The non-treatment control group was pre- and posttested without intervention. The Solomon 4-Group design was used for collecting data.

The inner city group represented the same age range as the school subjects. They had been identified as having similar conduct problems as the school groups. Five were male; four were female. Three members were white Appalachian; six were black. The

group met for ten one-hour sessions and a graduation party. The Solomon 4-Group design was again employed to pre- and posttest. This group was compared to both the treatment and non-treatment groups from the school OWA classes.

In both treatment settings, the room was arranged so that chairs were in a semi-circle and area was left separate for a stage. The chairs were pulled into a circle for the discussion segment of each session.

The format of object lessons, acting warm-up exercises, acting problems and discussion groups was followed in both treatment situations. Content of acting problems in the school setting was geared toward issues relevant to this group's needs. Concerns discussed included appropriate work and school behavior, social relationships, and family problems. In the agency setting, minority group concerns, such as teacher discrimination, being an interracial child, and what to do about "having a reputation" were also topics of concern.

### Design

The modified Solomon 4-Group Design employed in this study is a procedure which counters testing, history, and maturational considerations of external validity (Campbell and Stanley, 1963). Half of each of these groups was pre-tested and all of the participants were posttested. Only posttest results can be analyzed, but comparisons between halves reveal possible history, testing, or maturational effects that could limit generalizability.

### Dependent Variables

Self concept was selected as the dependent variable of interest. The Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale (Piers, 1969) was used to measure subject change in this area. A structured interview including several open-ended questions about the subjects' reactions to treatment was employed to gather qualitative information.

The Piers-Harris scale was developed from an item pool collected by Jersild (1952). The categories reflect concerns children expressed about themselves. Piers and Harris developed a 95-item scale which was further reduced to 80 items. Most of the information on reliability was collected on the 95-item scale; tests of the instrument have shown it to be internally consistent (.78 to .93) and stable (.71 to .77). It appears to be subject to some test learning bias which leads the developers of the test to encourage use of a control group. The scale has been examined for convergent, discriminant and predictive validity with positive results; for example, it has been found to be resilient to socially-desirable responses. The instrument is self-administered and takes about 15 minutes to complete (Robinson and Shaver, 1973).

The Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale has six clusters of components of self concept identified within it. These subscales consist of measures of how children feel about their Behavior, Intelligence, Physical Appearance, Anxiety, Popularity, and Happiness and Satisfaction. The subscale scores were also used in the analysis of the effects of Structured Improvisation Counseling.

The evaluation interview schedule was designed to measure variables of specific interest to treatment. The instrument contained eight, open-ended questions, and was administered in face-to-face interviews. Responses were audio recorded. No reliability or validity information was gathered on this instrument. The purpose of the interview was to query participants about their reactions to treatment. Additionally, one question inquired about possible cathartic experiences.

Catharsis was operationalized according to guidelines set down by Scheff (1979) who defined catharsis as the release of any of four basic emotions through physical reactions to stimulus. Those emotions most likely to be repressed include grief, anger, fear, and embarrassment (shame). The physical manifestations of catharsis for these emotions are crying, laughter, cold chills and frisson, and laughter respectively. Outcome measures associated with catharsis include a sense of control over the release of emotion, a clarity of thought after release, and a generally pleasant sense of well-being during and after catharsis has taken place.

Scheff says that these outcome measures are only experienced when catharsis occurs at an optimal distance, i.e., when the person is both a participant and observer of an event. He discusses the cathartic potential of native healing techniques, rituals, and some forms of drama as examples of means that can be employed to facilitate catharsis (Scheff, 1979). The investigator hypothesized that catharsis would occur as a result of Structured Improvisation Counseling. In addition, the cathartic experience was hypothesized to be more important with the inner-city group than with the school group.

#### Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed by using 2x2 and 2x3 ANOVA procedures. Qualitative analysis of interview findings and process recordings provided a contextual framework within which to more clearly interpret and understand quantitative results.

### **Results and Discussion**

Using the 2x2 ANOVA, the groups receiving the pretest were compared with those who did not, as is congruent with the Solomon 4-Group design. In this analysis, the groups were shown to be similar within each major division, thereby ruling out history, maturation, or testing considerations as possible causes for treatment effects. Then the school groups were compared with each other to determine treatment effects; no differences were found between group means.

A 2x3 ANOVA was then constructed to compare the agency group with the two school groups. When this analysis was conducted, the groups were found to be significantly different on two subscales, Intelligence and Physical Appearance. The Scheffe method for contrasting means was used to determine the direction and significance of this finding, and results showed that the agency group had statistically significant,  $p < .05$ , more adaptive scores in these two areas than did the school groups.

Qualitative analysis showed the agency group to be more enthusiastic about the technique than were the school groups. All participants said they had enjoyed the program and found it interesting. Only the agency subjects, who were mostly black, wanted to

continue the group after the experiment was finished. Several of the agency participants suggested to their individual social workers that the program be continued; some even made concrete suggestions regarding its content. From the school setting, interviews revealed that several participants felt they would have gotten more out of the sessions if they had taken the whole thing more seriously and given it greater attention. They felt that their hesitancy to commit themselves to the process kept them from getting as much out of the program as they could have. Interestingly, the session that most of the school participants remembered and seemed to like best involved playing a dinner scene in which there was some discussion of home life. They said that sitting and talking as a group was the most meaningful experience for them. Furthermore, they felt that they would be more comfortable speaking in front of groups after treatment than they had been before. They also said they felt more comfortable at work and got along better with their employers as a result of treatment.

When the school group participants were asked if they would have been able to talk about their problems without first having done the acting problems, they were not sure. They felt that, while the acting problems had helped to bring these issues to the surface, they were so uncomfortable with acting things out that they could not be sure whether the acting problems were beneficial or not. In other words, they seemed to prefer traditional group therapy to Structured Improvisation Counseling, but were not sure what they were basing the preference on.

In the agency group, more participants said the acting problems helped them to feel comfortable talking in the group. One participant said he had learned to appreciate having a father and mother from hearing about the problems of the other participants who did not have intact families. He also said he spent the time traveling home after sessions thinking about what had occurred during the groups. Another participant said the treatment had resulted in her having been able to make two new friends at school because she had learned to present herself differently and to give people a second chance to get to know her. Several participants reported that they had "learned to think on their feet." They said that now they thought about things before they did them, and that this had made a difference in their behavior. Agency subjects said they were surprised at the openness of the group and that of themselves to the experience. First, they could not believe that they would actually participate in some of the warm-up exercises and acting problem activities. Secondly, a number of participants said they had discussed concerns in the group that they had never previously verbalized. One participant had talked about being an interracial child. Another discussed feelings she had about her mother's incarceration and how schoolmates teasing her about it had affected her and had resulted in her fighting at school. A third subject had described the anger he felt because of his father's death when the participant was eight years old; his father had been killed by the police. Subjects of this sensitive nature emerged as a result of the acting problems' content.

Overall, the agency participants became very committed to the group and to other group members. When they were asked what had had the greatest influence on them as a result of the program, the predominant response, in the inner-city setting, was the group and the other members in it. Whenever one person missed a session, the others would express concern for the participant and let him know, upon his return, how much he was missed. This type of concern is not characteristic of this type of client.

Cathartic experiences were more frequently and regularly noted in the agency setting than in the school. Agency subjects identified a variety of cathartic events which

happened during acting problem exercises and stated that they were able to think more clearly with a greater sense of freedom and control during the discussion time as a result of a particular acting problem. The range of cathartic experiences reported in this group covered all four emotions under consideration and physical manifestations linked to each emotional release were present. Interestingly, some participants who noted having experienced catharsis were not directly involved in the acting problem which elicited the reaction, i.e., they were in the audience.

An example of a cathartic experience involved an acting problem about death that evoked frisson and crying from one participant who had lost her grandmother. Her grandmother had been a wonderful person respected by everyone. When the girl attended the funeral, she was on special leave from an adolescent correctional facility. Several of her grandmother's friends told her how much she resembled the deceased woman. The girl expressed her guilt and shame about the situation to the group and appeared relieved as a result.

In the school setting, an interesting phenomenon occurred during one of the acting warm-ups; a student could not stop laughing. Through the use of a Gestalt technique, by which he was encouraged to laugh harder in order to gain control over the emotional release, he was able to learn how to control his embarrassment in similar situations. A number of other students expressed a catharsis of embarrassment through this exercise. The student in question said that he felt a very pleasant sense of control after this experience.

The difference between the school and agency groups, in their reactions to the treatment, was found to be in the magnitude of effects present rather than in their actual presence or absence. The white, upper middle-class group seemed much more comfortable just sitting and talking about their problems, using traditional psychotherapeutic methods. The predominantly black, inner-city group appeared to have had more difficulty talking about problems before they did acting problems than they did after them. Each group had one session in which no acting problems were present. This session occurred about midway through the treatment program, so subjects were reasonably comfortable with each other by then. The school group was able to make use of the session to talk about family problems and personal issues. Several members of the agency group complained, however, that the session without an acting problem was boring.

The improvement of self concept in the areas of Intelligence and Physical Appearance, for minority group participants, is a particularly important finding. These two concerns are salient issues for minority group members who have been made to feel intellectually inferior and physically unattractive by dominant culture values and standards. For minority members, low self concept results from very subtle messages from members of the dominant culture and is reinforced by basic assumptions of inferiority which underlie much of their interactions with each other. The literature is replete with references to intelligence and physical appearance of blacks as particularly salient characteristics seen by themselves and by the dominant culture as inferior to or less developed than those qualities are in white culture (Lorraine Hansbury, 1966; Kovel, 1970; Kozel, 1967). The Civil Rights Movement, particularly during the 1960s, brought these myths to the forefront of awareness (Reeves, 1971; Haley and Shabazz, 1965; Cleaver, 1968), but was never quite able to convince the majority of black people to stop beating themselves down with these "truisms."



These two issues were addressed in a variety of subtle ways throughout treatment. Learning through acting would appear to be congruent with the cultural framework within which so much of their home training takes place. Their appearance and the self-consciousness they felt when appearing before the group were discussed in most of the early sessions of the program. However, the school group also talked about these things. Only the agency group seemed to alter the way they felt about themselves in these areas through treatment.

The evidence suggests that, at least when the purpose of treatment is to improve self concept, the use of structured improvisations can make that learning more real for people whose cultural framework is congruent with learning through doing. Another possible side benefit from this type of therapy is that it encourages learning from experience. In fact, participants actually learn, within the sessions, the process through which one looks at experiences and uses them to make future decisions. Consider for a moment the possibility that representational systems are learning systems. Allow that kinesthetic representational systems can be equated with the often alluded to concept of "soul" which Black Americans so frequently claim as their own. It is possible that this change in self concept through the kinesthetic representational system can be seen as occurring within the soul of the client. That, I suggest, is culturally congruent therapy for Black Americans.

### Implications for Future Study and for Practice

The use of systems theory in treatment allows for a creative, dynamic relationship between therapist and client. Social workers are frequently involved in helping people from cultures or subcultures other than their own where intuitive understanding of, and empathy for, the client's problems may be difficult. The projective nature of the intervention investigated herein allows the worker to understand more clearly what interactional problems and values conflicts their clients may have. Interventions can then be based on more realistic understanding. During the group experience, individuals can be seen most nearly as if in their "natural" environment as they work out situations and problems that resemble events in their own lives. Behavior takes on a dimension of reality; interactions are less contrived than they might be in the more traditional formats of one-to-one or group therapy. Participants show themselves rather than talk about themselves.

For people whose roots stem from non-literate cultures, the bridge offered by Structured Improvisation Counseling may provide assistance in spanning the broad cultural gap between minority group status and successful negotiation of the dominant culture while at the same time maintaining an integrated sense of identity with one's own group. To examine the technique from the perspective of systems theory (neurolinguistics in particular) one can see that visual, auditory, and kinesthetic input channels are used to take in information which can then be processed first through kinesthetic, and then cognitive representational systems or throughput channels. Using the method to encourage verbalization of experiences which have never been brought to the surface and discussed with others allows an individual to defuse some of the intensity of emotion which has forced him to keep these experiences to himself. It also allows him to expand his representational system to include cognitive, thinking about, processes and allows him to verbalize output rather than turning to violence as his only means of relieving the anxiety

that accompanies such intense feelings. People who function through kinesthetic representational systems may have more violent reactions or may be more inclined toward physical output as a result of the confusion which accompanies not being able to cognitively understand or verbally express the information being processed (Bandler and Grinder, 1976). For example, some of the experiences mentioned above may be too sensitive to discuss in any setting other than the therapeutic relationship but, without the help of an effective cathartic stimulant and sensitizer, the therapist may not be able to uncover the root causes that are impeding the client's growth or movement. This possibility needs to be explored further for greater understanding.

Structured Improvisation Counseling reflects the basic social work values of person-in-situation and self-determination of those seeking help, while stimulating the unmotivated client toward growth. Perhaps the agency client felt comfortable with the intervention because it fit their current way of processing concerns more closely than simply sitting and talking does. At the same time, one might ask if the method prepares people of African heritage to make better use of western psychotherapy once they have been exposed to this treatment.

Another issue for future research involves a comparison of Structured Improvisation Counseling with other forms of group therapy with subjects from similar minority group backgrounds.

Further study should also be directed toward determining the effects of developing methods of teaching that take into account cultural or neurolinguistic factors. Could expansion of the input and representational systems of minority youth improve their school performance and prevent the high dropout rate they are currently experiencing? How would one go about relating an understanding of these systems to the learning process, and how would this change be measured?

If questions such as those mentioned above could be answered, we could then take another step forward toward the ideal of true equality we all espouse and cherish.

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