

"Re-authoring Life Scripts": A Study on the Intervention Mechanisms of Improvisational Narrative Theatre on the "Utilitarian Anxiety" of Financial Institution Students

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Abstract

In the face of a highly competitive social environment, "utilitarian anxiety," characterized by "GPA-worship," "internship involution," and "refined egoism," has become a prominent issue affecting the mental health and value orientation of students in financial institutions. Traditional psychological interventions often focus on cognitive or emotional relief, rarely touching upon the existential roots and social narratives behind such anxiety. This study aims to explore the intervention mechanisms of a group intervention model integrating improvisational theatre and narrative therapy—"Improvisational Narrative Theatre"—on the "utilitarian anxiety" of students in financial institutions. Employing a qualitative research paradigm, this study collected and analyzed the experiential materials of 15 finance major students who participated in an "Improvisational Narrative Theatre" workshop over three months, using methods of participatory observation, focus group interviews, and in-depth individual narrative interviews. The study found that the effectiveness of this intervention model does not stem from a linear effect of single therapeutic factors, but rather through four intertwined, spiraling mechanisms: 1. Discourse Externalization and Deconstruction: Participants used dramatized "problem externalization" techniques to objectify "anxiety," thereby separating it from the rigid identity of "I = my achievements." 2. Resetting and Accepting "Failure": The "here and now" and "Yes, and..." philosophies of improvisational theatre provided a "psychologically safe" space with high fault tolerance, allowing participants to reset their catastrophic cognition of "failure" through "embodied play." 3. Collective Witnessing and Empowerment of "Unique Outcomes": The group acted as an "appreciative audience," discovering and amplifying participants' "unique outcomes" (e.g., altruism, passion, cooperation) that existed outside the mainstream "utilitarian" narrative, thus enriching the diversity of their life scripts. 4. Embodied Reconstruction of "Being by Doing": Through theatre forms like "Future Self-Portraits," participants were able to "rehearse" a non-utilitarian, more integrated version of themselves. This "embodied action" promoted a profound shift from the cognitive to the existential level, achieving the "re-authoring" of their life scripts. This study reveals the intervention pathway of Improvisational Narrative Theatre as a form of "reflection-in-action" and "healing-in-relation," providing an operable, localized practical solution for mental health education in a new era of higher education, especially for value guidance and mindset cultivation for students in specific majors.

Keywords

Utilitarian Anxiety; Financial Institutions (Higher Education); Narrative Therapy; Improvisational Theatre; Intervention Mechanisms; Qualitative Research.

1. Introduction: The Problem and Research Origins

1.1. "Utilitarian Anxiety": A Symptom of the Times and a Group Profile

Under the profound influence of globalization and the market economy, contemporary Chinese society is undergoing a deep transformation in values and social mentality. The path of individual development is increasingly marked by instrumental rationality and quantifiable characteristics. This trend is particularly prominent in higher education, where a "utilitarian" tendency, focused on immediate rewards, quantifiable achievements, and "optimal solutions," is increasingly evident [1]. This tendency is especially concentrated and acute in higher education institutions focused on finance.

The financial industry, as the core of the modern economy, inherently reinforces performance orientation and instrumental rationality through its "high-risk, high-reward, high-competition" nature. This industry pressure inevitably filters down to the talent cultivation stage. From the moment they matriculate, students in financial institutions are commonly drawn into an "arms race" centered on GPA, internships, certifications (CFA, CPA, etc.), competitions, and social networks (guanxi). On one hand, they are typical examples of "refined egoists," adept at planning and calculating, treating all learning and activities as "stepping stones" for future career success [2]. On the other hand, they are also trapped by this "utilitarian" logic. When "who to be" is narrowed down to "how much quantifiable capital one possesses," a deep, pervasive "utilitarian anxiety" emerges.

This anxiety is different from general academic or social anxiety; it is an anxiety at the existential level. Its core manifestations include: value singularization, where an individual's sense of self-worth is entirely tied to external, quantifiable standards of achievement; process alienation, where the intrinsic joy of learning and growth is stripped away, and all actions become mere means to an end; and the fear of "falling behind", where any deviation from the "optimal path" on the "involution" track is seen as an unbearable "failure." This anxiety not only severely damages students' mental health, leading to burnout, emptiness, and a lack of meaning, but also, at a deeper level, constrains the healthy development of their "financial personality," making it difficult for them to adhere to the professional ethic of "finance for the people" in their future careers.

1.2. Limitations of Existing Interventions and the Need for a Paradigm Shift

In response to this problem, university mental health education systems have made numerous efforts, such as offering stress management courses, providing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) counseling, and holding positive psychology lectures. However, these often prove insufficient in addressing "utilitarian anxiety." The reasons are that traditional intervention paths often have the following limitations: First, many interventions tend to be "technical" and "individualized," focusing on teaching students how to "better adapt" to the competition (e.g., time management, resilience skills), rather than addressing the internalized "utilitarian" narrative that produces the anxiety itself. Second, they rely excessively on "cognitive" level counseling, ignoring that this anxiety has become deeply "embedded" in students' physical sensations and behavioral patterns. A simple "cognitive restructuring" is often powerless against this "embodied inertia."

Therefore, this study argues that an effective intervention must achieve breakthroughs on two levels: from "cognition" to "action" and "embodiment", meaning the intervention process must involve not just "talking" but also "doing"; and from the "individual" to "relationships" and "narratives", meaning the intervention must not only change an individual's "faulty cognition" but also challenge and rewrite the "problem stories" that dominate the group [3].

1.3. Improvisational Narrative Theatre: An Integrative Intervention Framework

Against this backdrop, this study attempts to construct and implement a group intervention model that integrates Narrative Therapy and Improvisational Theatre—"Improvisational Narrative Theatre."

Narrative Therapy, pioneered by Michael White and David Epston, has as its core philosophy "The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem." It advocates for using "Externalizing Conversations" to help individuals separate their identity from the "problem-colonized" dominant story, and instead discover and enrich the "Unique Outcomes"—the positive, often-overlooked moments—thereby "re-authoring" their life scripts [4]. This provides the core philosophical tool for deconstructing "utilitarian anxiety."

However, Narrative Therapy in practice is still primarily "talk-based." Improvisational Theatre, as an art of "living in the here and now," perfectly complements this. The core principles of improv—such as "Yes, and...," "Accepting the present," "Celebrating mistakes," and "Spontaneity"—make it an excellent "action laboratory" [5]. Through a series of dynamic, fun, and low-risk embodied games, it directly challenges participants' rigid behavioral patterns.

The concept of "Improvisational Narrative Theatre" is to combine the "deconstructive" depth of narrative therapy with the "embodied" power of improv. It is not just a place to "talk about" stories, but a stage to "enact," "rehearse," and "reshape" them. The core question of this research is: Through what specific mechanisms does this integrative "Improvisational Narrative Theatre" workshop intervene in and alleviate the "utilitarian anxiety" of students in financial institutions? This study will adopt a qualitative research path, delving into the intervention site to uncover the inner workings of this "life script re-authoring" process.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1. The Narrative Essence of "Utilitarian Anxiety"

"Utilitarian anxiety" is, in essence, a highly internalized "social narrative." This narrative is influenced by neoliberal and performance-ism discourses at the macro level [1], constrained by industry standards and "involution" culture at the meso level, and manifests as the internalization of family expectations and peer pressure at the micro level. In the "liquid modernity" described by Zygmunt Bauman, individuals are forced to take full responsibility for "self-shaping," while the yardstick for measuring the "self" becomes highly "quantifiable" [6].

For students in financial institutions, this "dominant narrative" can be summarized as: *"A 'successful' finance student must stay ahead on all quantifiable tracks (GPA, internships, certifications), otherwise they are a failure and worthless."* This narrative has a powerful "colonizing" effect. It obscures other possibilities for the student as a "person," such as curiosity for knowledge, passion for public welfare, appreciation for art, or even the momentary need to "lie flat." When an individual fully identifies with this narrative, anxiety becomes the "background color" of their existence.

2.2. Narrative Therapy: "Problem Externalization" and "Life Script Re-authoring"

Narrative Therapy posits that individual problems are rooted in oppressive socio-cultural narratives [4]. The key to intervention is not to "fix" the individual's "defects," but to stand with them to jointly deconstruct the power of these "problem stories."

The core technique is "problem externalization." This guides the individual to see the problem as an "other" external to themselves (e.g., naming "utilitarian anxiety" the "GPA Monster" or the "Involution Black Hole"). This seemingly simple "language game" has profound psychological

significance: it breaks the rigid "I = problem" identification, creating psychological space for the individual to reflect and act. It transforms the individual from a victim "defeated by the problem" into a subject who can examine, evaluate, and even resist the "problem" [3].

After externalization, Narrative Therapy works to find "unique outcomes"—those forgotten "sparkling moments" that do not align with the dominant narrative. Through "re-authoring" and "witnessing" techniques, these "pearls" are strung together to form a new, more positive, and richer "alternative story," ultimately achieving the re-authoring of the life script.

2.3. Improvisational Theatre: "Embodied Action" and "Psychological Safety"

If Narrative Therapy provides the blueprint for "what to rewrite," Improvisational Theatre provides the action path for "how to rewrite." The interventional value of improv lies mainly in its "process-oriented" and "embodied" nature.

1. The "Here and Now" Philosophy of Action: Improv emphasizes "spontaneity," responding to the present moment without judgment. This is in direct opposition to the "excessive planning" and "future-orientation" characteristic of "utilitarian anxiety." In an improv game, there is no "optimal solution," only the "present reaction."

2. The "Yes, and..." Empowerment Mechanism: This is the "golden rule" of improv. "Yes" represents unconditional acceptance of an "offer" from a partner; "and..." represents contributing and building upon that (Contribution). This rule creates a powerful atmosphere of empowerment within the group: my ideas are seen and accepted; I don't have to bear the pressure of a "perfect performance" alone; "mistakes" are "gifts" that can be transformed into new creations [5].

3. "Low-Risk" Rehearsal for Failure: Improv is essentially "play." The essence of "play" is its "non-instrumentality" [7]. In games, participants are encouraged to "mess up" and "make fools of themselves." This "de-catastrophizing" of "failure" makes it an ideal "rehearsal space" for failure.

2.4. The Possibility of Integration: Improv Theatre as a "Stage for Narrative Practice"

The theoretical hypothesis of this study is that Improvisational Theatre is the "Embodied Practice Field" for the philosophy of Narrative Therapy. The "externalization" in narrative therapy can be "enacted" in the improv theatre (e.g., one participant plays the "GPA Monster" while others interact with it). The "unique outcomes" in narrative therapy can be "instantaneously amplified" in the improv theatre (e.g., a participant shares an altruistic act, and the group immediately "plays" it as a hero's story). This combination upgrades the "talking cure" to an "action cure," allowing the "life script" to be rewritten not only on a cognitive level but also on the levels of physical sensation and interpersonal relationships.

3. Research Design and Implementation

3.1. Research Paradigm

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, specifically a path combining Grounded Theory and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). We are not concerned with the "average effect" of the intervention, but with the "process" and "mechanisms" of "how" the intervention "works" on specific individuals in a specific context. The researcher maintains a "constructivist" stance, believing that the meaning of the intervention is co-constructed in the interaction between the researcher and the participants.

3.2. Research Participants

The researcher recruited participants for the "Improvisational Narrative Theatre" workshop via campus announcements at a well-known financial institution in a coastal region of Eastern China. The recruitment announcement emphasized "exploring the possibilities of pressure and growth," rather than "treating anxiety." Ultimately, 15 students (8 female, 7 male) from various finance-related majors (Finance, Accounting, Economics, etc.) at both undergraduate and graduate levels participated in the study. All participants signed informed consent forms and agreed for their (anonymized) experiential data to be used for academic research.

3.3. Intervention Implementation: The "Improv Narrative Theatre" Workshop as Research Context

The researcher (also serving as the group facilitator) conducted 8 "Improvisational Narrative Theatre" workshops over three months, each lasting 3 hours. The workshop design integrated elements of Narrative Therapy and Improvisational Theatre, and the process itself served as the core "field" for this study.

The workshops were broadly divided into four stages, though the content of these stages often overlapped and spiraled upward in practice:

"Ice-breaking" and Establishing a Safe Field (Sessions 1-2): This stage was dominated by improv games (e.g., "Pass the Energy," "Mirror," "Yes, We..."). The goal was to break down the "interpersonal armor" and "performance anxiety" common among finance students, establish a "low-risk, high-acceptance" group atmosphere, and emphasize the non-utilitarian nature of "play."

Externalizing and Naming the "Problem" (Sessions 3-4): Introduced the "externalizing conversations" of Narrative Therapy. The facilitator guided the group to collectively "see" and "name" their common "oppressor" (e.g., the "Involution Ghost," "GPA-Supremacy"). Through theatre forms like "sculpting" or "personification," this abstract "problem" was made concrete and objectified.

Discovering and Performing "Unique Outcomes" (Sessions 5-6): The core of this stage was to unearth "alternative stories" outside the "utilitarian" narrative. Using a prototype of "Playback Theatre" and "narrative interview" techniques, when one member shared a "unique outcome" (e.g., "selflessly helping someone for no credit," "an afternoon immersed in a hobby"), the other group members immediately "performed" it as a "gift" back to the sharer.

Integrating and Rehearsing "Alternative Scripts" (Sessions 7-8): The focus was on "re-authoring" and "action." Using forms like "Future Self-Portrait" and "Life-Choice Theatre," participants "rehearsed" a "future script" on the "stage" that was more aligned with their inner values (e.g., how to make an "altruistic" choice when faced with a "utilitarian" temptation).

3.4. Data Collection

The data sources for this study were multiple and mutually corroborating:

Participatory Observation Notes: After each workshop, the facilitator recorded detailed notes on key events, group dynamics, and individuals' "embodied" changes (e.g., posture shifting from tense to relaxed).

Focus Group Interviews: Conducted twice, once at the midpoint (after Session 4) and once at the end (after Session 8). These explored participants' shared feelings and their understanding of what "worked" in the intervention.

In-depth Individual Narrative Interviews: Within two weeks of the workshop's conclusion, one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with all 15 participants. These focused on how their personal "transformations" occurred and how they understood the changes in their "utilitarian anxiety" before and after the intervention.

Participant Reflective Journals: Participants were encouraged (voluntarily) to submit reflective journals after each session to record their immediate insights.

3.5. Data Analysis

The study employed a method combining Thematic Analysis and the coding procedures of Grounded Theory [8]. The analysis process was iterative:

Open Coding: All interview transcripts and observation notes were read line-by-line to extract initial concepts (e.g., "once I'm playing, I'm not afraid," "realizing everyone is 'sick'," "I found out I can say no").

Axial Coding (Mechanism Elicitation): The open codes were categorized and linked, gradually moving from "phenomenological description" to "mechanism exploration." The researcher constantly asked: "What caused this phenomenon to occur?" "How was this feeling 'created'?"

Selective Coding (Core Category Construction): Ultimately, all codes pointed toward a core explanatory framework. The study found that the intervention's mechanisms were not singular, but presented as four interconnected, spiraling core themes that together formed the complete path of "re-authoring the life script."

4. Research Findings and Mechanism Analysis

Through an in-depth analysis of the experiential data from 15 participants, this study identified four core mechanisms through which Improvisational Narrative Theatre intervenes in the "utilitarian anxiety" of students in financial institutions. These four mechanisms interact, collectively driving the participants' transformation from being "colonized" by the "utilitarian" narrative to "re-authoring" their own life scripts.

4.1. Mechanism 1: "Discourse Externalization and Deconstruction" — From "I Am Anxious" to "I See the Anxiety"

The first crucial "fulcrum" of the intervention was the embodied application of Narrative Therapy's "problem externalization" technique in the improv theatre. The "utilitarian anxiety" of finance students is stubborn because it is often deeply bound to their self-identity ("I = my achievements"). The core of the externalization mechanism is to sever this equivalence.

1. The Power of Naming: Objectifying "Anxiety"

In the 3rd workshop, the facilitator guided the group to discuss: "If 'utilitarian anxiety' were a 'creature,' what would it look like? What would its name be?" After discussion, the group named it the "Performance-Pressure Monster" (a translation of "绩效Pua怪," PUA here implying manipulation and shaming).

"When I called it the 'Pressure-Monster,' it felt different. Before, it was 'me,' it was 'my' will, 'I' had to compete. Now, it's something 'outside' of me, an 'it,' an 'it' that tries to control me. I suddenly felt, maybe I don't have to listen to it?" (Participant C, 2nd Year Master's)

The act of "naming" is, in itself, a reclaiming of "discursive power." As Foucault stated, discourse is power. When students could "name" the discourse that oppressed them, they shifted from being "objects of the discourse" to "subjects of the discourse."

2. Embodied "Enactment": From "Controlled" to "Controlling"

After naming it, the facilitator invited members to use "body sculptures" to show how the "Pressure-Monster" "oppresses" a person, and how a person might "resist" it. In one activity, one member (A) played the "Pressure-Monster," using gestures to "manipulate" other members (B, C, D) to move like puppets; subsequently, the facilitator invited B, C, and D to try to "break" the strings.

"I played the 'Pressure-Monster,' I was trying to make them all line up according to my 'GPA' standard. But then, (Member B) she suddenly stopped moving on my command, she ran to the

side and *started doing her own favorite pose. At that moment I (as the 'Monster') felt so... deflated. ...After the scene, it hit me hard. The 'Monster's' power is only strong when we 'agree' to be controlled by it. If I 'don't agree,' it can't do anything to me.*" (Participant A, 3rd Year Undergrad)

Through this dramatized, embodied enactment, participants "rehearsed" resistance to the "utilitarian" narrative at an action level. This "bodily experience" was far more profound than a simple "cognitive" message (like "you should be yourself"). Moving from "I am anxious" to "I see the anxiety trying to control me," this "meta-cognitive" awakening, is the first step in "re-authoring the script."

4.2. Mechanism 2: "Resetting and Accepting 'Failure'" — The Embodied Antidote of "Yes, and..."

If "externalization" provided the *possibility* of resistance, the "spirit of play" in improv provided the safe soil for resistance. A core fear within the "utilitarian anxiety" of finance students is "failure." The improv theatre directly reset the definition of "failure" through its core rules.

1. Establishing the "Low-Risk Zone": The Non-Utilitarianism of "Play"

In the early workshops, the facilitator repeatedly emphasized: "There is no right or wrong here, no 'good' or 'bad' acting. The only rule is to 'play'." Many improv games (like "Wow!", "Random Point") are intentionally "silly" and "pointless," which directly dissolves "utilitarian" motives.

"In business school, every case study, every presentation, has a purpose, a grade. You have to 'perform well.' But here (in the workshop), we spent ten minutes learning a 'silly walk.' It's so absurd, but also so freeing. I don't have to 'perform,' I just have to 'be' there, to 'play.' This feeling of 'uselessness' is, in itself, an antidote." (Participant G, 4th Year Undergrad)

This "non-utilitarian" "play" [7] created a "psychologically safe zone." In this zone, "failure" (like doing the wrong move, reacting half a second late) was not only permitted but even "expected," as it often led to laughter.

2. "Yes, and...": From "Catastrophizing" to "Resource"

The "Yes, and..." rule of improv is the core technique for resetting the cognition of "failure." It requires participants to accept ("Yes") a partner's "mistake" or "weird" offer, and use it as "material" (Offer) to build upon ("And...").

"There was a game where we had to talk using 'But,' and it just killed the conversation, the vibe was heavy. Then we switched to 'Yes, and,' and everything flowed. The most memorable time was when I (in an improv scene) was supposed to be an elite lawyer, but I forgot my line, I just froze. My partner (D) immediately jumped in and said, 'Yes, I know you must be thinking about that century-old legal puzzle!' and 'and...' she handed me an (imaginary) glass of water. I just relaxed. I 'messed up,' but my 'failure' was 'caught' by her, and it even became part of the plot." (Participant F, 1st Year Master's)

In financial logic, "failure" is an "asset write-down," a "sunk cost." In "Yes, and..." logic, "failure" is a "resource," a "new possibility." When participants repeatedly experienced "failure" being accepted and transformed through their bodies and actions, their "catastrophizing" cognition of "failure" was "detoxified" at an embodied level [5]. This "fault tolerance" experience directly weakened the rigid "no-fail" premise of "utilitarian anxiety."

4.3. Mechanism 3: "Collective Witnessing and Empowerment of 'Unique Outcomes'" — From a "Single-Plank Bridge" to a "Multiverse"

After the "utilitarian" narrative was externalized and the fear of "failure" was weakened, the workshop entered the "construction" phase. Narrative Therapy emphasizes that individuals never lack "alternative stories," they only lack an "audience" for them [4]. The improv narrative theatre group then transformed into an "appreciative witnessing" collective [9].

1. "Playback Theatre": The Seen Alternative Script

In the latter half of the workshop, the "Playback Theatre" form was used frequently. One member ("Teller") would share a real-life fragment, and other members ("Actors") would immediately "play it back" (enact it). The facilitator specifically guided "Tellers" to share moments "unrelated to 'utility,' but that you felt were very important."

"I shared a story about spending three months in my freshman year teaching an elderly lady in the community how to use a smartphone. No credits, no reward. In business school, that's a perfect example of 'wasting time.' ...But when they (the group members) 'played' my story, they performed it with such ceremony, like I had done something amazing. After they finished, they (as 'audience') shared that they were 'moved' by the story. At that moment, I cried. It was the first time I felt that my 'useless' experience was 'valuable'." (Participant B, 2nd Year Undergrad)

2. "Collective Empowerment": From "Island" to "Alliance"

"Utilitarian anxiety" often traps individuals in "atomized" competition, where everyone views others as potential "rivals." In the workshop, however, when "unique outcomes" were "collectively witnessed" and "collectively performed," a profound sense of "connection" emerged.

"I used to think that in the finance world, talking about 'passion' or 'altruism' was ridiculous, 'abnormal.' Until I heard B's story (previous example), and H's story about fighting with property management to protect a stray cat. I realized, I'm not the only 'abnormal' one! We are all secretly holding on to some 'useless' but precious things under the 'utilitarian' mainstream." (Participant K, 3rd Year Undergrad)

Through the ritual of "collective witnessing," the improv narrative theatre elevated these "private," "marginal," and "useless" alternative stories (unique outcomes) to the level of "public," "important," and "valuable." This greatly "empowered" the participants. They discovered that the values they cherished (like altruism, passion, justice) were not isolated "islands" but an "archipelago" that could be connected. "Utility" was no longer the only "single-plank bridge"; a "multiverse" of life scripts was opened up [10].

4.4. Mechanism 4: "Embodied Reconstruction of 'Being by Doing'" — From "Cognitive Possibility" to "Existential Certainty"

The final mechanism of the intervention was to transform this "multiverse of possibility" into "existential certainty." This relied on the deepest magic of improv: action precedes cognition, and "Being by Doing."

1. "Future Self-Portrait": Rehearsing the "Re-authored Script"

In the final workshop, a core activity was the "Future Self-Portrait" or "Life-Choice Theatre." Participants were asked to play "themselves five years from now," a "self" who was living according to their "re-authored, more integrated" life script.

"I played 'me in five years.' I set myself up as working in a FinTech company, but I refused the 996 culture, I insisted on leaving at 6 PM every day to go play improv. My 'boss' (played by another member) came to accuse me of 'not being ambitious' (which is exactly my inner fear). ...I (as 'Future Me') looked him in the eye and told him: 'My job is part of my value, but not my only value. I refuse.' ...Saying those two words, 'I refuse,' my whole body was shaking, but after the scene, I felt a power I've never felt before. I discovered that I can refuse." (Participant C, 2nd Year Master's)

2. "Locking in" Embodied Cognition: From "I Know" to "I Feel"

This "rehearsal" is different from "thinking" or "planning" at a "cognitive" level. According to "Embodied Cognition" theory, our physical postures, actions, and experiences shape our cognition and emotions in reverse [5]. When Participant C "enacted" the posture of "refusal," her body "experienced" a new possibility.

"Before, I 'knew' I should balance my life, but that 'knowing' was weak, it collapsed as soon as I was in an 'involution' situation. But this time (after 'enacting' the refusal), it's different. I 'felt' that power, my body 'remembered' that feeling of 'standing straight.' It became a kind of 'muscle memory.' ...Now, when I fall back into 'utilitarian anxiety,' I remember that 'me,' the 'me' from the play. She gives me a kind of 'certainty'." (Participant C, interview summary)

The improv narrative theatre provides a "Liminal Space"—a magical circle between "reality" and "fiction." In this circle, participants can safely "try on" new identities and "test out" new behavioral patterns. Through the embodied action of "enacting," this "fictional" experience is "anchored" as a "real" "existential certainty." The "re-authoring of the life script" thus completes the loop from "cognition" to "action" and finally to "being."

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Mechanism Integration: A "Spiraling" Intervention Model

The four mechanisms identified in this study—Discourse Externalization and Deconstruction, Resetting and Accepting "Failure," Collective Witnessing and Empowerment of "Unique Outcomes," and Embodied Reconstruction of "Being by Doing"—do not exist in isolation. They form a spiraling, upward-moving intervention loop:

"Deconstruction": The "externalization" mechanism breaks the rigid "I = anxiety" identification, creating "space" for change.

"Loosening": The "resetting failure" mechanism, through "play" and "Yes, and...," weakens the "fear" foundation of the "utilitarian" narrative, providing "safety" for change.

"Construction": The "collective witnessing" mechanism provides the "material" for a new life script by discovering "unique outcomes."

"Internalization": The "embodied reconstruction" mechanism internalizes the new "material" into a "certain" "lived experience" through "rehearsal."

The core feature of this model is "deconstruction-in-action" and "construction-in-relation." It transcends the limitations of traditional "talk therapy," offering a "holistic" intervention path that simultaneously acts on the individual's cognitive, emotional, physical, and relational levels.

5.2. Implications for Mental Health Education in Financial Institutions

This study has profound practical implications for addressing the "utilitarian anxiety" of students in financial institutions.

First, interventions must "transcend" the individual and touch the "narrative." "Utilitarian anxiety" is not an individual student's "psychological deficit," but the result of "colonization" by a "problem narrative." Interveners need to shift from "diagnosticians" to "allies in narrative deconstruction," helping students to see and resist this "Performance-Pressure Monster."

Second, interventions must "embrace" action and utilize the "body." Faced with the strong "rational armor" and "cognitive defenses" of finance students, mere "preaching" or "cognitive restructuring" is often ineffective. "Irrational," "non-utilitarian," and "embodied" elements like "improv," "games," and "theatre" must be introduced to achieve "loosening" and "healing" through "play."

Finally, interventions must "create" connection and rebuild the "collective." "Utilitarianism" maintains its dominance through "atomized" competition. An effective intervention must do the opposite: create a "non-utilitarian," "supportive community" through "collective witnessing" and "appreciative empowerment." In this community, "altruism," "passion," and "cooperation" are "seen" and "celebrated," thereby reshaping the students' value orientation.

5.3. Limitations and Future Prospects

As a qualitative exploration, the "generalizability" of this study's conclusions is limited. The "mechanisms" identified are primarily based on the in-depth experiences of 15 participants. Future research could expand the sample size or conduct validation and comparison in different types of "utilitarian" contexts (e.g., IT, law schools). Furthermore, the overlap of the researcher and facilitator roles in this study, while providing "field" depth, may also introduce "researcher bias." Future studies could try to introduce third-party observers for triangulation.

5.4. Conclusion

"Re-authoring life scripts" is not just a poetic metaphor; it is a "technical process" that can be practiced. This study found that the core mechanism of Improvisational Narrative Theatre as an integrative intervention model is that it provides an "embodied, safe, and appreciative" public stage. On this stage, students from financial institutions can "externalize" the "Utilitarian Performance-Pressure Monster" from their "selves," "detoxify" the fear of "failure" through "Yes, and..." games, "empower" their obscured, diverse values through the "collective witnessing" of "Playback Theatre," and finally, in the embodied "rehearsal" of a "Future Self-Portrait," forge a fuller, more integrated "self" from "possibility" into "certainty." This process offers a deeply meaningful practical exploration for cultivating a "certain" core of values in an "uncertain" era.

6. Funding support

1. Guangdong University of Finance 2025 Premium Mental Health Education Project: "Quartet of Financial Character Development: Narrative Spiral Workshop in Improvisational Theater"
2. Guangdong University of Finance Announcement of 2025 University-Level Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project: "Research on OBE Practice Pathways for Integrating 'Red Finance' Culture into Innovation and Entrepreneurship Education through 'Digital Intelligence+'"
3. Guangdong University of Finance Fourth Cohort "Teaching and Academic Practice" Project: "Research on Integrating Red Culture Education and Innovation-Entrepreneurship Practice in the 'Fundamentals of Entrepreneurship' Course under OBE Principles"
4. Guangdong University of Finance 2025 Premium Mental Health Education Activity Project: "Setting Sail in the Career Sea, Embarking from the 'Heart' — Enhancing Graduates' Workplace Psychological Adaptability"
5. Guangdong University of Finance 2025 Student Affairs Research Project: "Precise Identification and Collaborative Guidance Mechanisms for the 'Slow Employment' Phenomenon Among College Students Driven by Digital Intelligence"

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