

# Phenomenology and Role-Dynamics

BY SANDY PARKER

*Sandy's working life has mostly been with teenagers in schools and with youth groups in the UK. With a long-time interest in the use of action methods in education and group work, he came to Victoria in 1993. Sandy is a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and his recent work has been with a Quaker spiritual development program in Australia and with pastoral care students at Whitely College, Melbourne. This article further develops ideas from his psychodrama thesis (1998) and from his Masters of Theology thesis (1999).*

To look at any thing.  
If you would know that thing.  
You must look at it long:  
To look at this green and say  
I have seen spring in these  
Woods, will not do – you must  
Be the thing you see:  
You must be the dark snakes of  
Stems and ferny plumes of leaves.  
You must enter in  
To the small silences between the leaves.  
You must take your time  
And touch the very peace  
They issue from.  
(John Moffitt, 1985)

## Introduction

When I create a description of the psychodramatic roles of those involved in an interaction, in a relationship, I seek to look, to listen, to enter into the experience. I seek to create a vivid, living, rich description. I do not seek to understand, interpret, or explain.

I endeavour to create what the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls *thick description* (Geertz, 1983). I desire to avoid the thin description of the external observer. Thin descriptions are the so-called 'objective' ones that omit the understanding and experience of the participants in the actions. They involve 'observations' by those outside and uninvolved in the life of the community. 'Meanings' are imposed from some external framework. Thick descriptions are built from the interpretations and understandings of those involved. They grow from the shared meanings

and practices of the community. For Clifford Geertz (1983, p20) thick description 'takes us into the heart of that which is the interpretation'.

Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers a similar vision. Writing about the artist Paul Cézanne, he describes his purpose (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p62):

the object is no longer covered by reflections and lost in its relationship to the atmosphere and other objects. It seems subtly illuminated from within, light emanates from it, and the result is an impression of solidarity and substance.

This is contrasted with the work of the impressionist painters. The impressionists sought to capture the ways in which we experience the objects through their eyes and their senses. This led to an impression:

which no longer corresponded point-by-point to nature [and] afforded a generally true impression through the action of the separate parts upon one another. But at the same time, depicting the atmosphere and breaking up the tones submerged the object and caused it to lose its proper weight.

The Impressionist's focus is on the artist's experience. In contrast, Cézanne's intention was to focus on both the object and its relationships, neither at the expense of the other. What we perceive, what we experience, is neither geometric, nor photographic, nor solely impressionistic... 'the lived object is not rediscovered or constructed...rather, it presents itself to us from the start' (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p65).

It is a demanding task for the artist, writer, psychodramatist or researcher and, as for Cézanne, requires that we sometimes ponder long before painting the next stroke or making the next move. It is a task that requires discipline and care as well as a willingness to abandon much that we have learned (necessarily) about methodology! (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p67).

### *Role Dynamic Analysis*

Psychodramatic role theory and analysis is different in intent from sociological role theory based on the work of George Herbert Mead. Sociologist Peter L. Berger defines a role as 'a typified response to a typified expectation. Society has pre-defined the typology' (Berger, 1979, p112):

Society provides the scripts... The individual actors need but slip into the roles already assigned to them before the curtain goes up.

Andris Hicks (1983) points out that such an external and objective description is an institutional and 'system serving' view of roles. There is little room for the spontaneity of individual response, little belief in our essential creativity.

For others a 'symbolic interactionist' interpretation seeks to make explicit 'the meaning that the acts and symbols of the actors in the process of interaction have for each other' (Conway, 1988, p67). Such role descriptions are primarily concerned with sociological analysis of our roles in organisations.

In Jacob Moreno's terms this can be seen as deeper analysis of the social roles expected of us in organisations, and of ways in which individuals express or interpret these through role taking, role playing or role creating (Moreno, 1978, p75). To focus on the psychodramatic roles is a richer and fuller way of achieving a similar purpose, by creating a living picture of our functioning in interaction with others. There is the assumption that through the expression of our own inherent creative genius we come to be more spontaneous and effective in our relationships. The main focus of a psychodramatic role-analysis is on the direct relationships of those protagonists, without denying the reality, significance and power of our social systems. This both honours and challenges these systems more fully than any sociological role-analysis can.

Our understanding of role theory and role-analysis based on Jacob Moreno's work is still evolving, and our language and descriptions continue to be refined.

Antony Williams (1988, p58) reminds us that a role is always interactional, and analysis and description must take account of both the context and consequences of the action. He also emphasises that the thinking aspect, or beliefs underlying the role, are a complex 'network of presuppositions', often 'largely out of awareness' (1988, p66). Max Clayton (1993) has powerfully demonstrated how our role-descriptions and analysis can be extended and enhanced. Sue Daniel (1998) suggests we need to recognise that 'seeing and listening are each an action in themselves'.

Adam Blatner (1998) believes it is more helpful to talk of 'role dynamics' rather than role theory or analysis, to distinguish it from sociological role theory. He emphasises the constantly changing and interactional nature of the relationships and recognises the effect of the observer on the relationship:

the meta-role of the observer who...not only modifies the ways the roles are played...but can also continue to reflect on the potential to modify roles.

Role description becomes especially rich and effective when undertaken as a cooperative exercise by all involved (including observers) in an interaction, for example in a training group, or in a role-training enactment.

In remainder of this paper I present two anecdotes by way of illustration, identify some of the strengths of role dynamic analysis and offer some further reflections.

### *The Court Recorder*

I was one of the facilitators for a spiritual development retreat. We met daily in small listening groups. Each participant took turns at being:

- *pilgrim or explorer, speaking about issues arising for them in their lives;*

- *listener or companion-guide;*
- *witness to or observer of the listening process.*

Tania took her turn to be the pilgrim, choosing Chris as her listener. The four of us arranged our chairs. Tania looked warmed up to exploring some questions arising for her. Chris picked up his imposing black notebook, opened it on his knee, pen poised in his hand.

Sandy: (gently) I'd like you to put your journal down, Chris.

Chris: (surprised) I want to be able to remember accurately what Tania says.

Sandy: Ask Tania what she thinks about it.

Chris: Tania, I'd like to be able to make notes – it helps me to pay attention and remember your words.

Tania: I'd rather you put it away – It's you... I want you listen to me, not your book!

Chris looked chastened and doubtful, and put his book under his chair. He appeared uncomfortable and uncertain as he began to listen to Tania's story.

In this interaction Chris seemed to know of only one way to show that he was listening – by demonstrating that he would record accurately all that Tania said. As she took up the opportunity to be the 'pilgrim' she was a tentative reflective explorer. Chris responded as an efficient court recorder, focusing on the accurate recording of Tania's words as his primary task. Each was positive towards the other, yet somehow missed one another. Their roles at that moment may be represented:

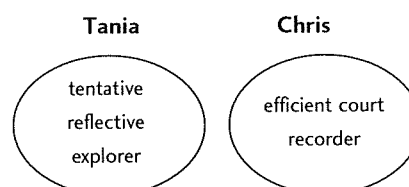


FIGURE 1

There is no actual relationship between their roles. Both Chris and Tania are responding to

## Phenomenology and Role-Dynamics

their understandings of their tasks (towards which they are each positive) rather than to each other. I had a fuller and richer vision, and drew Chris out about the way he saw his role, coaching him to try it differently. I sensed some conflict in Chris – between his anxious but familiar court recorder, and his determination to be an effective companion for Tania. He accepted my coaching, first as a reluctant learner, then a willing learner. His initial response was negative, but changed as he recognised the gentle caring offered:

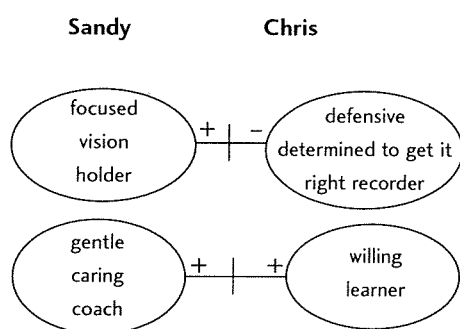


FIGURE 2

Tania observed this conversation with interest, and expressed her need clearly. Chris remained unsure but chose to give it a go:

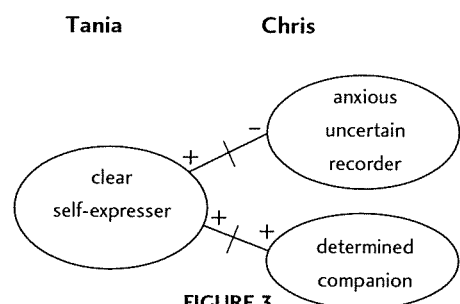


FIGURE 3

Despite Chris's uncertainty, Tania warmed to her task, and new roles emerged in each as they became more confident in their relating:

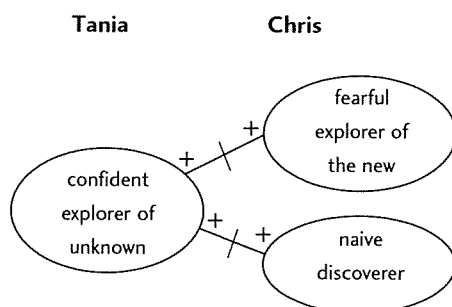


FIGURE 4

After Tania had finished, each member of the group reflected on their experience. Tania and Chris described theirs:

Tania: I liked the way you listened to me – I felt you were really present with me once you put your journal down – you didn't have to say or do anything, just be there.

Chris: I felt I'd lost something when I put it down. I didn't know what to do. I just had to listen, to be with Tania, even though I didn't know what to do. I was scared I'd forget things, but it didn't matter. I realised Tania trusted me. I just had to let go and be me. It was scary, and I seemed to hear Tania in quite a different way, not just her words. I...was surprised.

My own focus was in the moment, believing that this was sufficient, that all could stem from this. In addition to my differing roles in relationship to Tania and to Chris, a key role for me, in relating to the group, was the grounded holder of every moment... Other roles I was displaying included the big-picture holder and the systems-aware role analyst. My awareness of the variety of role relationships was a key factor in my ability to deepen and enrich the experience for all the members of the group. Later the same day Tania wrote in her journal about her experience of this listening group:

Small group, an amazing process. The telling is amazingly open and courageous. It is received with listening and care by three others.

### *The Shy Foal and the Rock*

Later in the same retreat week Tania was one of four members of a different 'listening group', and the only woman in the group. She told the group that she had nothing urgent to explore, and could forego her turn as pilgrim to allow the other three more time.

I knew that she had had a fairly stormy week, with a phone call the day before from her home in another state telling her that her dog was seriously ill. Each of the three men took their turns as 'pilgrims'. Tania was a competent, fully present and effective listener for one of them. I had kept an eye on the time and told Tania that

time still was available for her as 'pilgrim' if she wished – reminding her that she could choose any of the four others (including myself) as her listener. Listening to Tania's silence, I continued to hold a space for her.

As Tania told her story, she spoke of her deep sense of integration with the natural world, of times of meditation practice when she had experienced unexpected flows of energy in her body. She told of her fear of telling anyone about this, lest they doubt her sanity. I let her know that this was not an unusual experience, and invited other members of the group to respond briefly. Afterwards Tania wrote in her journal:

...in the first small group, I surprised myself by speaking of the rushes of happenings that at times caused me anxiety... As I spoke I was aware of feeling very vulnerable even to be speaking obliquely about stuff which is so significant to me... Only in the last small group of the week when Sandy... offered to be my listener did I speak my experience openly and reasonably fully. I know if he hadn't been listener I wouldn't have spoken... And having spoken and received brief but sound reassurance from Sandy and mention of his own experience... I'm relieved and more relaxed.

On this occasion Tania was initially both self effacing listener and clear self expresser. Towards the whole group I was again big picture holder and intuitive systems analyst: for Tania I was a generous and creative provider of possibilities. At first responding tentatively, she sensed my compassion and respect, and gradually revealed more of herself, becoming quietly reflective about what she discovered (see figure 5).

Awareness of the overall role dynamic picture assisted me in moving forwards with Tania. This enabled her to become more independent and aware of her own power, gaining a sense of her own forward movement. Later she was to write in her journal:

When I was listener, Sandy made a particular comment to me 'When you were listening I

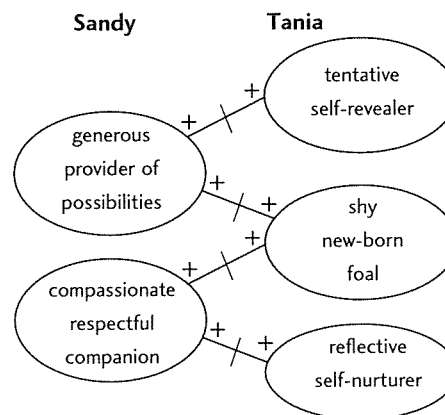


FIGURE 5

had a vision of you as a solid rock in a very rapid river. It was quite beautiful.' This was a valuable gift to me of acknowledgment, and I felt acknowledged and grateful. I said thank you, but I felt very thank you.

In presenting these two anecdotes, I have sought to build a vivid picture of these brief interactions with Chris and with Tania describing the major roles I observed in each of us. There is no judgement of the effectiveness of Chris' way of being with Tania, or my responses to Chris and Tania. My intention is to build a rich, clear and vivid picture true to the experiences of each of us.

### Role Evaluation and Assessment

Such role-analysis and description focuses on the functioning psychodramatic roles rather than on the enacted social roles. Even so, it would be possible for it to become just another 'thin' exercise in labelling people (with adjective and verb!) rather than productive of 'thick' description of people's living experiences.

Ideally the identification of the roles will be a collaborative enterprise. It demands at the very least a willingness to seek to enter into the experience of others, to look at it through their lenses. Our role descriptions will always be tentative and open to modification in the light of our further conversation and reflection. It is my experience – as I believe the vignettes in this article demonstrate – that this approach is enlivening and enriching for all concerned.

This section reflects further on these vignettes. Various ways of assessing roles are suggested to evaluate which roles build and enhance the spirit of the protagonists, carry them forward in their lives, enrich their relationships and build community.

The role descriptions are not judgmental, even when assessments are being made about the effectiveness of a particular role for that situation. To say a role is progressive (building effective relationship) or fragmenting (i.e. retrogressive, distancing or destructive of relationship) is not to make a value judgement about the role: rather it describes from observation whether this particular role builds and carries the relationship forward, or whether it undermines and fragments the relationship. A role may also reveal a coping strategy, when someone is relying on an old and familiar role, rather than finding a new and creative response in an unfamiliar situation.

For example, in the first vignette neither Chris's court recorder (in relationship to Tania), nor his defensive recorder (in response to me) deepened the relationship. In contrast, my roles of focused vision holder and caring coach enabled Chris to begin to develop new ways of relating to Tania. The court recorder was an over-utilised, potentially valuable role, inappropriate to the situation. His underdeveloped role of open interested listener begins to emerge and strengthen as a new response in an unfamiliar situation.

Chris and Tania each displayed role conflicts at different times. In the first vignette, Chris experienced anxiety in the conflict between his familiar court recorder and the learner of new ways of being. In the second, Tania had expressed a willingness to forego her time as pilgrim, though it later became clear that she had urgent questions to explore. From being a self-effacing listener, she becomes both tentative self-revealer and reflective self-nurturer.

Such role conflicts arise in a conflicted 'warm-up' resulting from holding a number of conflicting or contradictory beliefs or values

about the situation. We have noted above that the thinking, or belief element of a role may consist of a complex network of assumptions and presuppositions, some conscious, some unconscious, some strongly at odds with others. The warm-up and the outwardly displayed role can be the result of internal conflict – an argument between our various inner voices or 'intra-psychic roles'. Of course our outward display may change dramatically from moment to moment.

In the two anecdotes presented a number of clusters of roles can be identified:

- *roles involving listening, holding, witnessing;*
- *roles involving open companionship and sharing;*
- *roles involving inquiring, exploring, drawing out;*
- *roles involving modelling and coaching;*
- *roles involving being systems-aware, and being a vision-holder.*

However, more important than any taxonomy of roles, our descriptions seek to communicate a rich and meaningful picture that is true to the experience of all the protagonists.

### Reflections

This analysis of role-dynamics seeks to be true to the experience of those who have participated, as well as to the web of relationships and beliefs in which all are involved. It seeks to present vivid and thick descriptions of those experiences, in such a way that they are illuminated from within, rather than through external frameworks. It is an approach that gives full attention to the world-view and values, to the emotions and feelings, and to the actions of those involved.

There are many ways in which role dynamics and analysis can enlarge and enrich our approach to, and experience of, our relationships.

1. Any account leaves much to the imagination, to guesswork. Theoretical analysis is in danger of losing the reality, just as words can never adequately describe a painting. Role assessment and analysis demands that we read between the lines creating a rich and living picture to enrich our experience. We come to appreciate and



assess our own functioning more fully. The more fully I listen and see, the less I need to 'interpret'.

2. Such role-analysis does not require detailed history or long conversation. Analysis and assessment can be made of brief interactions, and of their moment-to-moment changes.

3. Role pictures allow us to appreciate the uniqueness of an individual and their functioning, rather than seeking to fit some pre-determined analytical framework. The descriptions encourage a reflective analytical assessment of the relationships involved, leading to an awareness of our own, and the other's, movement and development.

4. Identifying which roles are life-enhancing carries us forward in our relationships. This enables purposeful and systematic planning:

- *in responding to another's particular situation and needs;*
- *in assisting us to develop our own functioning in actual situations;*
- *in developing training programs for those involved in caring roles.*

5. Role dynamics is systems oriented:

- *the individual is not seen in isolation, but in the context of their multiplicity of relationships;*
- *there is recognition that in healthy relationships, roles adapt and change in response to developing circumstance;*
- *in giving full attention to values and emotions as well as actions, the social, cultural and spiritual dimensions are all taken into account;*
- *we include ourselves as significant figures in the picture.*

This encourages an awareness of the 'bigger picture', of the vision of what is possible, adding to, rather than detracting from, our awareness of the moment-to-moment changes in role relationships.

6. Role-analysis enhances our awareness of our values and our assumptions. It encourages us to be explicit about our values, for example:

- *do we have a problem-solving or solution focus?*

- *do we believe in the 'creative genius', 'that of God', 'the spirit of the Cosmos' in each individual?*

7. Role dynamics encourages us to see each interaction as a mutual and collaborative learning experience, involving care-giver and care-receiver:

- *there is an openness to analysis and hunches being checked out and corrected through feedback from one to the other.*
- *naming and describing roles is not a complex process: most people can quickly learn to use and understand it.*

## A Cautionary Tale

This article has focused largely on words, yet the spaces between the words may express as much as the words themselves. And when I, or another, finds the truly expressive word – it is surrounded by words that I have chosen not to use – ones maybe tried and found wanting.

In short we must consider the word before it is spoken, the background of silence which does not cease to surround it and without which it would say nothing... We must uncover the threads of silence with which speech is intertwined (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p83–4).

And the artist finishing her painting, the writer his writing, have each produced a work which invites the viewer or the reader:

to take up the gesture which created it and, skipping the intermediaries, to rejoin, without any guide...the silent world of the painter (or of the writer), henceforth uttered and accessible (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p88).

The finished project is incomplete and without full purpose, without you as reader. You and I are necessarily partners in the overall venture. A phenomenological perspective is inherently participative. 'Perception always involves, at its most intimate level, the experience of active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives' (David Abram, 1996, p57). It is an approach that values openness and creativity. Maurice Merleau-Ponty differentiates between language that is truly

expressive and speech that relies solely on remembered meanings and repeating established formulae (David Abram, 1996, p81).

John Woolman, a North American Quaker, wrote of travelling amongst native Americans in Pennsylvania in 1763 (John Woolman, 1989, p133). Visiting one Indian township, he and his travelling companion joined their evening worship. Towards the end he expressed his willingness to dispense with the (inexpert) interpreters as he prayed aloud. Afterwards, he inquired of the interpreters what one of the Indians, Papunehang, was saying to them about the prayers in an unknown language. Papunehang had said: 'I love to hear where words come from'.

This entering into the experience without a necessary need for common language demonstrates, for me, the essence of a phenomenological perspective and is at the heart of the analysis of role dynamics. We do indeed have to discern not only the words, but 'where words come from'.

### References

- Abram, David (1996), *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, Pantheon: New York.
- Berger, Peter L. (1979), *Invitation to Sociology*, Penguin Books: London.
- Blatner, Adam (1998), Subject: pd theory, on the Internet Mailing-List, GROUPTALK <grouptalk@albie.wcupa.edu> , 19 July 1998
- Conway, Mary E. (1988), Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Roles, in *Role Theory: Perspectives for Health Professionals*, 2nd edn, Appleton & Lange: Norwalk, Connecticut.
- Clayton, Max (1993), *Living Pictures of the Self: Applications of Role theory in Professional Practice and Daily Living*, ICA Press: Caulfield.
- Daniel, Sue (1998), Subject: Role Theory, on the Internet Mailing-List, GROUPTALK <grouptalk@albie.wcupa.edu> , 19 July 1998
- Geertz, Clifford (1983), Thick description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture, in *The Interpretation of Culture*, Basic Books: New York.
- Hicks, Andris (1983), *Dr J. Moreno's Psychodramatic Role Concept is Compared with the Sociological Role Concept of P. Berger and T. Luckman*, Psychodrama Institute of Western Australia: Perth.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1993), Cézanne's Doubt; and Indirect Language and the Voice of Silence, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* Galen A. Johnson (Ed.) and Michael Smith (Trans.), North Western University Press: Evanston.
- Moffitt, John (1985), quoted by Marni Schwartz, in Finding Myself in Stories, *Language Arts*, Vol. 62, No. 7.
- Moreno, Jacob L. (1978), *Who Shall Survive? Foundations of Sociometry, Group Psychotherapy and Sociodrama*. Beacon House Inc.: New York.
- Williams, Antony (1989), *The Passionate Technique: Strategic Psychodrama with Individuals, Families and Groups*, Tavistock/Routledge: London.
- Woolman, John (1989), (Ed. Phillips P. Moulton) *Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Friends United Press: Richmond, Indiana.