

# A Psychodramatic View of Adolescence

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Every person who has contact with adolescents is affected by the different significant roles that these young people display. At the point where an adolescent person arrives for a counselling session the counsellor is quickly aware of a variety of reactions and ideas that rise up into consciousness in response to the often quickly changing moods and roles of that young person. It is necessary in the early stages of counselling for the therapist to develop a variety of responses that are both complimentary and age appropriate.

When young people are referred by others for counselling, those making the referral are usually focused on problems or on the negative functioning of that young person. The referring agent wants the negative behaviour stopped so that the young person can "get on with their life". The work is normally short term and constrained by limited funding. Young people with problems are already under-resourced which means that interventions that are expected to be effective within a brief time. This often results in the individual being further marginalised.

It is due to this common dynamic that I have developed a role in myself that I term the '*Broadly Focused Therapeutic Guide*'. In this role it is important to develop an awareness of the young person's view of the entire social system in which she or he lives. The *broadly focused therapeutic guide* is prepared to assist in facilitating the young person in the transformation from child through to adult identity. This role is central to the forming of the therapeutic alliance from the first moments of meeting. The commitment of the therapist inspires trust in the young client. I encourage the young client to bring along a significant other to the therapy session. This may be a mother, social worker, friend, (uncommonly a father) with whom the young person already has some connection. This allows me to gather as much clear and truthful information as possible as well as often providing the young person with a supportive ally or companion.

Sometimes, however, the companion can be over-caring, neglectful or even abusive. In such cases I take steps to block the effects of the negative influences of the other involved. I maintain contact with the young person to

observe their response. Then assert myself as an authority by getting responses directed through me, rather than directed toward the young person. This therapeutic blocking is aimed at protecting and providing the young person with an experience of self. The young person experiences me as a therapeutic guide and good authority figure who does not collude with the negative influences in their life.

### **Guiding Principles for the Initial Encounter**

The primary guiding principle for the therapist is the belief that the client exhibits some ability that is functional. In the initial encounter with a young client I generally receive little information regarding their positive functioning as the referring agent is focused on changing negative behaviour. I endeavour to maintain the view that all people have access to, or are exhibiting some form of creative ability. When young people walk through the office door, often their creative expression is minimised as they assess my functioning from behind a defence structure of fear, apprehension and possibly anger. In order to be effective, I must continue to believe in the individual's ability to function in a positive way, whilst taking account of the qualities of their defensive behaviour.

A second principle applicable to the initial encounter is that if conflicting role clusters manifest themselves they can be clearly identified. Every professional person will benefit in having at their fingertips a methodology that enables them to begin the work and to develop a clear assessment. In my case I have in my consciousness an analysis of typical adolescent roles. This assists me as I begin to work toward making clear assessments of both positive and negative functioning. The model I use assumes certain roles to be necessary for the development of a positively functioning personality and sets out the common roles enacted by negatively functioning adolescents. I use the model as a

basis for recording and analysing the roles enacted in the first encounter. This gives me a base on which to formulate the individual's past experiences and future ideas. I add to this by making further assessments of the young person's role system as the counselling proceeds. Therefore we gather a clear picture of role development over time.

### **Typical Adolescent Roles**

In Diagram 1 (overleaf) I present an analysis of typical roles that are common to the young people with whom I work. The role analysis consists of two basic groups of roles that relate to the individual's negative and positive functioning. A central role is identified in both fragmenting and progressive role clusters.

The diagram portrays the fragmenting roles of the adolescent over-shadowing potentially progressive roles, both preventing and inhibiting positive expression from fully coming into being. It is the function of the broadly focused therapeutic guide to actively assist in turning over the next page in the adolescent's story.

The individual's development of fragmenting roles is frequently an internalised response to interventions made with the young person from an early age in their family. That dynamic is sometimes recreated in the current therapeutic encounter. There is value in the therapist keeping in mind that negative functioning is often the result of 'projective identification'.

### **Projective Identification**

Abuse and neglect become values and beliefs for living throughout generations. The result is the child projects these feelings into the therapist who is in danger of not being able to respond adequately. The young person's feelings of inadequacy and incomplete accomplishment of life's developmental tasks result in the continuance in the cycle of normalising failure

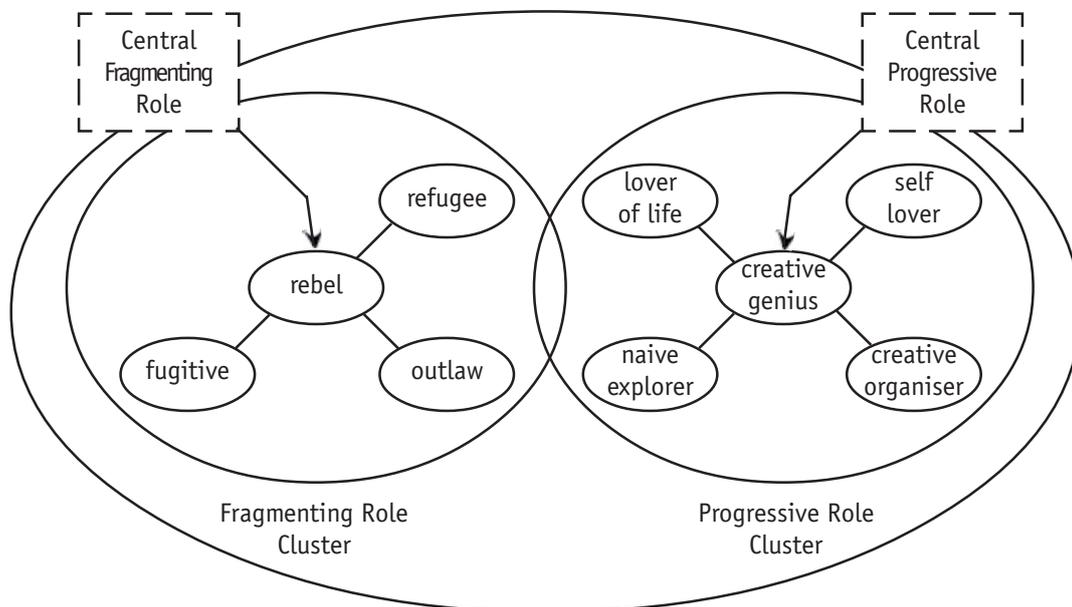


Diagram 1: Typical Fragmenting And Progressive Role Clusters of an Adolescent Client

and aggression. The degree to which the young person has been exposed to adequate mirroring, modelling and nurturing as an infant influences their ability to function in a therapeutic relationship. Along with therapist commitment, I have found that a key task of therapy is to assist the young person to develop the ability to function in the therapeutic setting.

Nurturing and being a compassionate authority requires dedication and a great sense of timing. All of the young people with whom I work experience a lack of what Winnicott named, "good enough mothering". The work of the therapist includes continually finding creative ways of maintaining the therapeutic alliance, especially when there is acting out behaviour and aggressive feelings expressed toward the therapist.

The results of the negative developments in the individual adolescent personality frequently present in patterns that are on the surface shaped by fashions and trends of an era. I have noticed

that underneath these patterns of youth culture lay other patterns of responses to relationships and experiences. Below I present my experience of meeting with young people in a therapeutic setting. I begin with a description of the fragmenting role cluster as this is what I often confront when I first meet adolescent referrals.

#### **Roles in a Fragmenting Role Cluster of an Adolescent**

These roles identify negative functioning that leads to fragmentation of the individual's sense of self. They are often present in young people I see and the young person will accentuate these roles as part of his or her defence structure. The referring agent may also accentuate the presence of these roles by focusing on the young persons negative functioning. However, when these roles are valued as a specific response to a specific situation and thoroughly explored, the actions of negative role functioning can be transformed. This occurs when the spontaneity in the negative functioning is redirected into progressive functioning.

*The Rebel:*

The central role of the *rebel* is present in the adolescent when creative and spontaneous expression is prevented or in some way distorted. Erikson's "*Life Stage of Middle School*" suggests the incomplete developmental task of social co-operation will result in feelings of inferiority and absence of competency (1950). The inability to remain a part of the mainstream group identity results in the need to belong in an alternative system or counter-culture where individuality is developed by acting against the dominant system.

The role of a *rebel* as it manifests in the life of the young people being discussed comes into being because of an inner force that resists being controlled by others. The resistance to external control is potentially creative when the young person is closely coached. Such coaching mirrors creativity and enables understanding of the emotional, physical, social and spiritual implications of growing into an adult. However, the inner force of the *rebel* does not always manifest in a positive way. As the adolescent is moving forward biologically and socially toward independence they are often viewed as moving against the rules and habits of society. In other words the young person is moving against the conserved roles of the culture in which they live. As a result they may present for therapy having internalised the concept that they are bad for wanting to progress. The *rebel* is often angry, confused, mistrusting and therefore often makes choices that are conflicted and constantly rejects others. The *rebel* leads the individual triumphantly into a new adult world.

*The Outlaw:*

The role of an *outlaw* comes into being when a young person finds that they have overstepped boundaries. Not only have they moved against the cultural values as a rebel but transgressed the legal laws. In its simplest form the *outlaw*

constantly stays out later than their parents or guardians believe is safe. It may not be easy for a young person to be trusted having once broken the legal laws as well as the other conserved patterns of the culture. Thus the process of being accepted back into the family or home can be extremely complicated. The *outlaw* often acts arrogantly and feels guilty. They experience fearlessness and invincibility.

*The Refugee:*

Young people find themselves socially and biologically outside the limitations of their immediate environment, in the time and space between childhood and adulthood. They have very few rights and little resources as they look for a place of their own. They are a culture without place, a people without land. The *refugee* becomes homeless and wanders, experiencing sadness, loneliness and despair, yet searching for meaning, attempting to survive as an independent.

*The Fugitive:*

The role of *fugitive* comes into being as the young person runs away from their carers, not knowing how to change the course of events arising from their actions. Knowing they have gone against the cultural conserve, maybe broken laws and have nowhere of their own they lose sight of positive possibilities. The *fugitive* becomes blinded by fear, yet determined to find a place of safety.

**Working with the Fragmenting Role Cluster**

The fragmenting role cluster describes the already maximised nature of acting-out behaviour as the adolescent experiences a turmoil of thoughts and fantasies, unidentified feelings and unbalanced actions.

In order to enhance positive change therapeutic guides and other adults do well to provide wisdom and tolerance when faced with negative

functioning. Wisdom may be expressed through focusing the young person on developing appropriate rituals. Rituals as rights of passage within the therapeutic framework will assist the young person to understand the effects of fragmenting roles on their functioning. Tasks can be set for the young client aimed at assisting progressive functioning linked to a particular life stage that is incomplete or under developed.

A second important method for dealing with negative functioning is concretisation. Through the use of the psychodramatic technique a young person can perceive what they have been doing. Placing objects on the floor or on a white-board in individual sessions or using peers as auxiliaries in group-work sessions concretises their actions, identifies roles and provides a powerful mirroring experience. This creates opportunities for the person to gain insight into their early childhood experience making the connection with the present day way of functioning. When significant others are symbolically brought into a scene it is possible for the young person themselves to clearly identify what are the qualities of the other that give rise to a negative response in themselves. Young people are often judged as being without the capacity to develop insight, and therefore rarely given the opportunity. Psychodramatic expression and development allow young people to experience their own insight, in symbolic and actual ways.

Family members are often surprised, if not shocked to discover that their adolescent child or sibling has the capacity to think and express emotions when involved in therapy sessions and psychodramatic enactments.

### **Roles in a Progressive Role Cluster of an Adolescent**

The term progressive role refers to the functioning that takes a person toward the

fulfilment of their goals. When progressive roles are recognised a positive sense of self is built up in the individual.

#### *Naïve Explorer:*

Young people readily move outward into the world, discovering and sometimes falling into new experiences. I have named this functioning the *naïve explorer*. This role is first seen as the child begins to crawl away from the safety of their symbiotic relationship with mother. The *naïve explorer* wanders forth in order to discover. Without compassionate authority figures and rites of passage, the young *naïve explorer* remains vulnerable and unsafe.

The responses of the primary caregiver will influence the development of the child in both positive and negative ways. If mother does not actively support the naïve exploration, cannot contain her own fears or tolerate the separation, the child will experience self doubt and will always be looking for that affirmation. On the other hand if exploration is tolerated and further explored by the therapist, the child will continue to experience the internal flow of spontaneity and creativity and can develop the central functional role of the *creative genius*.

#### *Creative Genius:*

This role is always present and often unknown and embodies the human life forces of spontaneity and creativity. The expression of drives, emotions and ideas is influenced by the development or lack of development of this role.

There are further roles included in the progressive category. These other roles cluster around this central role of *creative genius* in the service of its constant striving for spontaneous and creative expression. These roles may be absent and a young person may not be able to bring certain functions to life within himself. The absence of these roles is often associated with a

disruption to early bonding or resistance in the process of separation from mother.

Certain functioning may be present yet underdeveloped and can be enhanced through coaching. Underdeveloped functioning can also be developed further by presenting to the young person a role analysis at regular intervals in such a way that new development can be clearly recognised.

The other progressive roles that cluster around the creative genius are *self lover*, *creative organiser* and *lover of life*. The development of these roles assists the adolescent to form a positive self identity and to understand their childhood experiences. The individual needs conscious development of these positive roles in order that specific developmental stages and tasks be completed. Finding the potential of this inner vitality is like sifting for gold and can easily be lost if the therapist is not consistently alert and caring.

*Self Lover:*

The role of *self lover* is enhanced when empathic understanding, adequate mirroring and modelling are expressed by the therapist and taken in by the individual.

*Creative Organiser:*

Developing the role of *creative organiser* is necessary in order that the young person can reflect on their developmental phase of life. The therapist can assist this process by setting appropriate tasks. As the outer world is put into order and developmental tasks are accomplished and reflected upon, adolescents are often relieved to experience some order in the chaos of their lives.

*Lover of Life:*

In the role of *lover of life* the young person realises their relationship with the world and consciously connects their inner experience with

their external environment. This role will come into being in the client as the therapist maintains patience and appropriate mirroring; working through growth crises in a thorough and empowering manner.

**Separating Fantasy From Reality**

When there is conflict in the functioning of young adults it is the responsibility of both adult and adolescent to co-create new opportunities for growth. This creates a new developmental phase of adult to adult mutuality. I have found for sure, that young people often do not know how to distinguish between fantasy and reality.

When the therapist provides adequate roles towards the adolescent and others in their social atom, the young client is able, in terms of the third stage of Moreno's "Spontaneity Theory of Childhood Development" (1946 p74), to separate out and further develop their own experience of fantasy and reality, from the reality of other individuals and society. A young person is then able to see clearly their emerging progressive qualities whilst gaining clarity and insight into their fragmenting roles. The essential roles of the therapist are the *widely focused therapeutic guide* and the *creative compassionate educator*. Diagram 2 (overleaf) sets out the role relationship between the therapist and adolescent as they work to repair the breach between fantasy and reality.

Moreno insisted that life is positive before it becomes negative. Negative functioning arises when the individual's warm up to creative and spontaneous action is not encouraged, is restricted or prevented. The implications for psychotherapy of Moreno's thinking centre on the awakening of the dormant or underdeveloped *spontaneity* factor in the client. Thus bringing into balance creative and spontaneous action when they are, or appear to be, diametrically opposed. In the diagram this is represented by the growing relationship

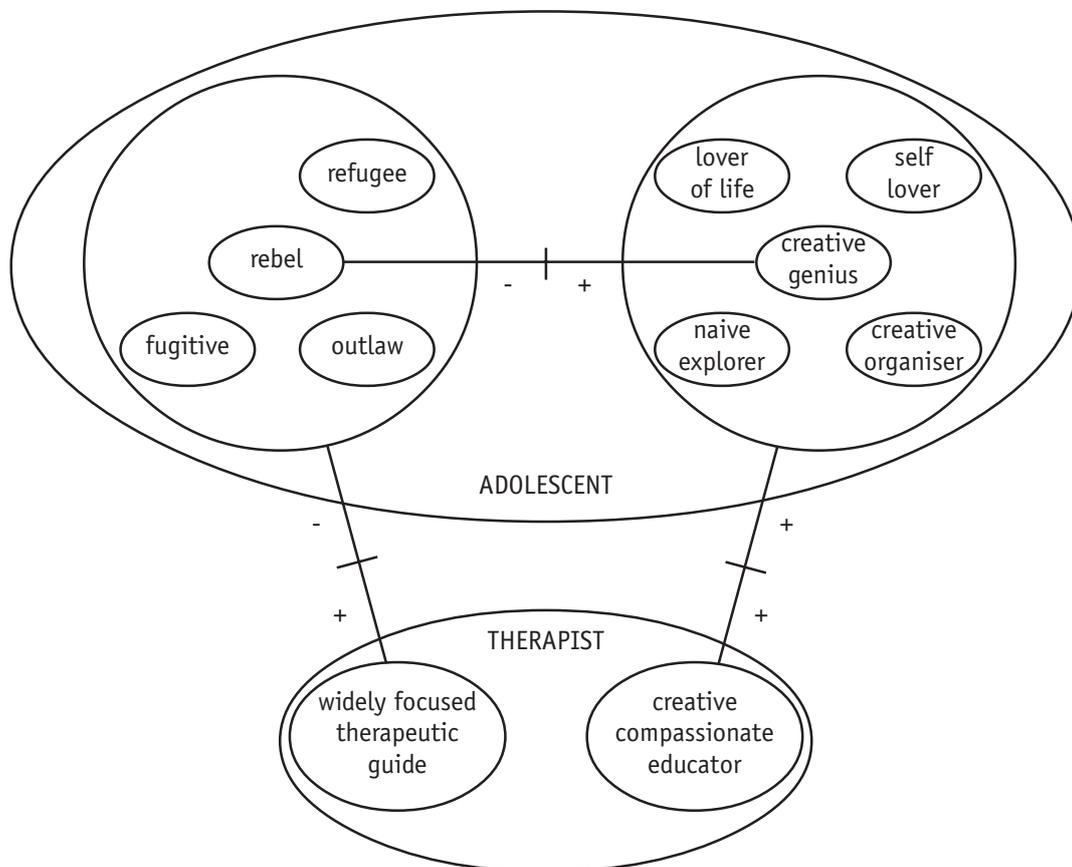


Diagram 2 - Repairing the Breach Between Fantasy and Reality

between the central roles of the *rebel* and the *creative genius*.

Adolescents are constantly marginalised and under-resourced, as the transitory nature of their condition makes them an unreliable investment. Some adults stand aside, as if waiting for this generation of young people to make their magical metamorphosis into the new body of adulthood. These observers perpetuate a neglectful mirroring that leaves developing teenagers unsatisfied, resentful and abandoned. Others may over-intervene, creating roadblocks that cause unnecessary diversion on life's road. There are those of course who do act in the role of good authority supporting and enabling growth to take its course, as need be.

I am an important figure in the lives of the young people with whom I work and remain a supporter of their expression both public and private. The role of *Broadly Focused Therapeutic Guide* is actually a cluster of roles that will differ for each carer or therapist. I find roles such as *nurturing father*, *advocate of positive maleness*, *good authority*, *mirror*, *willing double*, *naïve enquirer*, *magician* and *story teller* are all necessary with young people.

In my work I take into account what I see and hear in the first moments of an encounter and the possible range of thoughts and feelings of the young person concerned. I find that a psychodramatic view of adolescence is extremely helpful in thinking about how to work

effectively with young people.

The main point of the role schema set out in the diagrams is as a sequence of coathooks for the therapist to build on, for example, in looking how the *rebel* presents itself in the session. The therapist can then use their own imagination in naming progressive elements in those roles in order to mirror the creativity they see to the young person they are working with.

To do this we professionals have to be willing to find ways to distil the *creative genius* in the often dark rebellion of youth. And, if we are to embrace the rebellion of youth, we must develop

and maintain a flexible concept of compassionate authority. This means recognising the creative potential of each individual with whom we come into contact and not letting go of this, otherwise we lose sight of that potential and their capacity for growth. I believe it is vitally important for those of us who think we do know that reality is separate from fantasy, to think carefully about how we see and respond to young people.

#### **Bibliography**

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