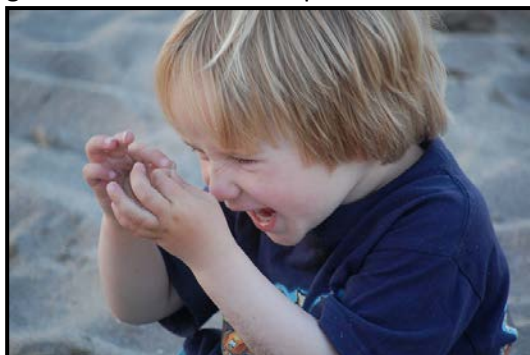


Reflections on Role Theory

Vivienne Thomson

I am a child playing in the sand arranging and rearranging the sand to create forms that are my own form of art and meaning. I am constructing and deconstructing, involved with the texture of the sand, the tactile sense of the grains passing through my hands. I notice how the sand moves in response to my touch and the weight or wetness of the mounds. Sometimes the grains sparkle and I am reminded that sand is essentially glass and a central component in the manufacturing of steel. My father



works with both glass and steel – he is a sculptor and engineer. It is not lost on me how significant he is as an ever present influence on me; and my mother, too, who is a source of inspiration for my creative endeavours. All the world is in a grain of sand. The simple

act of playing in the sand gives me pleasure. Others watching are also enjoying the naïve play. It is even more fun when I am with playmates engaging in the sand play when the results of our collective endeavour expand, our ideas transform as we connect with each other and our constructions meet up. Our delight is mutual.

The metaphor is an apt description of me at work with role theory.

I use the metaphor also to demonstrate many of the principles I have reached as a psychodrama trainer. In this article I will expand on some of these; namely, recognising the essential nature of role and conveying this when describing and naming a role.

Over many years I have been involved with other trainers, practitioners and trainees to hone our abilities in developing role descriptions and role names that are accurate, precise, useful and even inspirational. This has

involved me in a great deal of reflection on my reading and discussion with my colleagues. In AANZPA we are in a process of evolving and refining some of the theory of psychodrama. To date there have been a few articles written about role theory that open up points for consideration including calling it “role dynamics” as has been suggested by several others (Blatner, 1991; Reekie, 2007). Role dynamics conveys much more of the freshness of the subject and hints of the work involved for a theoretician – much like the description from the sand pit. My aim here is to stimulate further engagement about role dynamics as they influence psychodrama theory and our practice.

The work of being present with

Max Clayton (2011) says of meeting a person, “It is not your work to identify the role or the roles, to attempt to put a name to a role, for that is both inappropriate and impossible. Your work is to be present. To be receptive. To experience. To be able to be there.” (p.85) This is directly applicable to a director at the beginning of a session with a protagonist or interviewing for role.

As I wrote the first paragraph of this article I became aware of what was motivating me. I got to know myself better and my awareness enlarged as I made connections with people and places at different times in my life. I felt fluid, flooded with my experiences as a four year old playing in the sand, in the present my hands moving spontaneously. I had a rush of images as I made mental associations that I have come to know of through science, art and general life. I also felt my relationships with people significant to my experience. I am moved by all of these connections. It is a wonderful experience as well as an odd sensation as I feel the atemporal nature of existence where, for a moment, there is a union with the cosmos in which the divisions of present, past and future are dissolved.

My experience is summed up by Zerka Moreno (2006) who says, “In psychodramatic terms, the role is a final crystallisation of all the situations in a special area of operations through which the individual passes in interaction with others who play complementary roles.” (p. 234.) While a role is situational as it emerges in response to a particular time and place and relationship, it is also developed across time and space as well from accumulated experience both real and cosmic. Moreno (1946) described four universals: time, space, reality and cosmos. Each of them are significant to role dynamics. The experience of being is profound and it is this profound experience that we describe in terms of role.

Common practice and my true purpose

General practice in psychodrama is to describe role using two-word descriptors, a noun + adjective to encapsulate a person's role functioning. The noun is one that describes the action e.g., a nurse describes a person who is nursing, a teacher is a person who is teaching, a dancer a person who is dancing, etc.

Relating to me as an author in this journal publication, some people might have described me as an article writer. Such a role name is factual enough and conveys meaning that most people could understand because it relates to our common or collective experience. Moreno categorises this kind of role as a social role. When I read the descriptions of social roles in Moreno's writings e.g., nurse, teacher, etc, they mostly describe what I consider to be functions, professions, position titles or jobs. As such they are defined less by the individual and more by the social context and the group the individual is a member of. For example, in general terms, to be a nurse is to be a member of the nursing profession, which requires the attainment of particular standards of skills and abilities recognized through registration. The position of nurse has a prescribed job description that specifies expectations and accountabilities, behaviour, attitudes, frames of reference and relationships. Biddle and Thomas (1966) state, 'The term role is often used prescriptively, as referring to behavior that somehow "ought to" or "should" be performed; and "expectations," "role expectations," "standards," "norms," and "rules" are others.' (p. 26). The focus is on what the person is doing. Typically, when a role is described this way it becomes stereotypical and devoid of individual expression.

"Every role is a fusion of private and collective elements; it is composed of two parts - its collective denominators and its individual differentials." (Moreno, 1953, p.75) In a two-word descriptor the noun refers to the collective denominator i.e., what is in the public domain and generally known. The individual differentials are typically conveyed by the adjective and describe the personal expression of the individual e.g., judgmental critic, self conscious dancer, gentle nurse.

When I read two-word role names they often appear to be the result of much intellectual effort suggesting quite a degree of objectivity of the person doing the describing. In text, two-word role names are regularly capitalised, highlighted in italics and/or quotation marks somehow attributing them with significant meaning. When they appear like this I get the hiccups each time I read them as the two words upset the flow of language when they are dotted throughout. I also feel physical pain as the essential creativity of the person being described is usually reduced to

some superficial behaviour or banal activity. The descriptions are both partial and miss the life experienced by the observer as well as the richness of the protagonist's experience.

Morenian focus on dreaming again and living creatively: Principles, prompts and pitfalls

You will have heard these quotes from Moreno: "Psychodrama is the drama of the soul" and "Role is the functioning form a person takes." Putting these two statements together I deduce that role is an expression of the soul; the presence of the I-God. Capturing this in a two word descriptor is no mean feat! This is where I get into trouble as I don't want to set any of us up and make it impossible for us to name roles.

Sometimes I have pondered why I have been bothered. You'd have to care or believe that role dynamics are important otherwise the process of naming roles would become a bit tedious. Presumably you and I share the at least the following reasons for naming and analysing roles:

1. to develop clinical acumen by gaining clarity about the systems in which a person exists and the dynamic of their personality
2. to produce satisfying enactments that have dramatic impact and aesthetic quality
3. to develop relationships based on self-awareness and awareness of others
4. to develop spontaneity and creativity.

I'm with Moreno (1946) when he stated, "Our goal is not to analyse the patient, but to help him dream again" (p. 5-6). To achieve this successfully a psychodrama director will have integrated role dynamics as an overarching theory embracing concepts of spontaneity, tele and sociometry and how these are brought to life on the stage. In his recent article, Don Reekie (2013) said, "I am convinced that Moreno's ideas penetrate and open up the heart of humanity and its nature. None of his concepts, theories or methodologies are truly meaningful in isolation. The entire panoply is essential to comprehending each part. Each is inseparable from the whole. Each is dependent on all the others together. We cannot comprehend 'role' without 'canon of creativity', the 'four universals', the 'phases of spontaneity development', and all the rest." (p. 56). Achieving this degree of integration and finesse as a director requires a great deal of practice and application, including analysis. Naturally my reactions have caused me to be more thoughtful and developed in me an appreciation for what is involved in developing adequacy as a role theorist. Some practices that have assisted me include:

- recording verbatim and naming the roles
- freezing an interaction/enactment and identifying different components of the roles
- focusing on one moment in an interaction/enactment and brainstorming role names or brainstorming adjectives and nouns
- creating similes or metaphors for what is observed/experienced
- drawing role diagrams and analysing roles following an enactment
- taking a role name and enacting that by exaggerating non-verbal expression and movement or sculpting the body to convey meaning to an audience member
- doing spontaneity training activities, e.g., playing Red Rover or In the Manner of the Word¹ also assist as they require attention to warm-up and congruence of expression, plus they're fun to do.

I have found that worry tends to stifle whereas playfulness tends to stimulate the imagination helping the process of generating role descriptions and names to flow more readily.

How we conceptualise role affects our functioning as role theorists both in terms of being a director and also in the naming of roles. There are a number of observable aspects of a person's being that can provide significant information that help to identify a role. A good place to start is to identify different components of a role.

There is a well-quoted saying that a role has 3 components: thinking, feeling and action. Viewing a role this way tends to separate the role from the context in which it emerges. It is worth expanding the set of components of a role to include the context as a fourth. In particular the role relationship the person is in at the time as this is a significant factor influencing the person's functioning. The components of a role are:

Thinking A broad area that includes the person's values, tenets, beliefs, constructs, conceptualisations, motivation, view of

¹ Red Rover: Two teams of equal numbers stand facing each other on opposite sides of a room. Each team huddles together to decide a role for a member of the other team to enact. The team then chants, "Red Rover, Red Rover, come over, come over name as a role name." This can be enhanced by giving more contextual description that enables other team members to act as auxiliaries. The person chosen crosses the space fully in role. When they reach the other side and the team is satisfied with the enactment they become a member of that team. The process is repeated taking turns until all team members have swapped sides.

In the Manner of the Word, a person privately chooses an adverb (a word that describes how something is done). The audience members call out different actions the person must enact without speaking. This continues until the word is guessed. The person who guesses the word correctly then becomes the next actor.

	the world, ideology, frames of reference. A technique for identifying a person's thinking is to consider how they would finish this sentence: "The world works best when..."
Feeling	The person's emotional experience, their emotional state and expression. Tele is a significant aspect of this component as a person's emotional life is greatly affected by the two way flow of feeling between people. So too is the person's sociometric status i.e., their position in a group and the criteria on which they are chosen or rejected.
Action	The person's behaviour, what they are actually doing physically, including speech and non verbal communication, or the task they are carrying out.
Context	The situation in which the role is evident and indicates the relationship(s) and role system that warms the person up in a particular way.

For example, in a discussion about a protagonist's role functioning following an enactment, group members observe the outer expression of the person. We note that she is armoured and tight around her chest as if she is wearing a breastplate. We recall a comment earlier in the enactment that she was carrying a bazooka. Relating to her in this scenario we conclude that her heart is in the background. Naming the role would require appreciation of whether her expression is motivated by fear and is to protect herself or whether she is hard hearted or heartless motivated by a desire to hurt the other person. Whatever, a breastplate and a bazooka are instruments of war so the role system enacted is likely to be one featuring power, control, fear, violence of some kind and impotence. I would expect these to be reflected in the role names.

Being an astute observer you may notice a person's pallor, heartbeat, gestures, movement, muscle tone, tension, blood pressure, breathing, posture, temperature, etc., as all these provide data about the nature of a person's warm-up. So too does their turn of phrase, voice tone, degree of passivity and degree of freedom. All of these provide information, along with the context that are indicators of a person's essential being.

In another situation the protagonist is described as a drowning man. In this example, the role name is a metaphoric description of the situation rather than an accurate description of the man's motivation or intent. In still another situation, the protagonist is described as being an innocent victim. While it is important to convey the contextual component, role descriptions reflect the person's motivation and their own agency, their orientation to life in their own right – their essence. Agency lies within a

person rather than being the consequence or result of someone else's action or as a result of a situation, e.g., drowning man, innocent victim.

Descriptions also encapsulate more than the task or activity the person is involved in. For example, in the scene mentioned above a man who is drowning is in the final throws of dying and yet in these final stages of life he could quite likely not be surrendering or giving up which drowning implies. Instead he might be fighting for his life, battling against overwhelming odds or he might be quite conscious of his impending death and rather than exhaust himself fighting against such odds he has chosen to sustain himself by being calm and recalling memories that buoy him along and keep him afloat until the situation changes.

The person described as an innocent victim could in fact be a victim if they orient to the world in this way, but more often than not they would be taking some action that would protect themselves from harm so they might be described as a cowering self-protector or a fierce self-protector.

The vantage point from which roles are observed affects how they are described as does the interpretation of the observer. Imagine a powerful person asserting themselves. Being on the receiving end of the expression may feel like bullying but someone separate to the interaction may see insensitivity rather than bullying. In the eyes of New Zealand law however harassment is generally not concerned whether the action is intended or not (although it must be extreme, or repeated), if another person experiences it as harmful, it is regarded as harassment. In part, any harmful or predatory behaviour relies on the element of surprise. For example, a predator sees their prey or victim whereas the person about to become the victim may be completely unaware of their vulnerability. Being aware of various vantage points can be a significant source of information for both auxiliary work and a director's production in creating satisfying enactments.

As an observer you may have a reaction to a person and a particular attitude that is reflected in your choice of role name. Interpretations and moral judgments can put a spin on what is observed/experienced and then included in a role name. For example, again in a reflection of a protagonist's role in an enactment, one group member named the role as a "wise woman" noting various behaviours she had demonstrated. We verified the detailed description of all the things she had done during the enactment and that you could call all that behaviour wise, however, it was agreed that that was an interpretation. Someone else said the mother was an "old bag". This role name is loaded with judgment and feeling from the person toward the mother. Generating a role name requires the person naming the role to reverse roles and feel what it is like, what the thinking,

feeling and actions are first hand as opposed to a third party point of view where the expression could be objectified.

Perhaps both “wise woman” and “old bag” are more of a statement about the woman’s character. If this is the case, then what is being observed is more related to a cluster effect, i.e., a cluster of roles that a person enacts which create an overall impression of a person’s character or personality.

Roles are, in themselves, not inherently good or bad. Naturally there will be ways of being that personally we judge as good or bad and some that are socially unacceptable. Removing interpretation or judgment from our descriptions we can appreciate the protagonist’s subjective experience and self-perception. Being curious and naive will develop the capacity to look at a situation, event or behaviour as a phenomenon which simply exists. Taking a therapeutic perspective, roles can be viewed in terms of how they contribute to a person’s personality. This approach requires understanding of the clustering effect and the notion of gestalts.

Lynnette Clayton (1982) originated a model noting that role clusters can be recorded in three gestalts – neurotic or pathological, coping, and individuated gestalts. Each gestalt has a central identity called a central organising role that acts as an integrating force for the role cluster. The gestalts have been named and conceptualised in this way as they relate to a person fulfilling their unique life’s purpose. The pathological gestalt consists of the early identity of the child in the family system. In the coping gestalt, the identity is partially separated from parental figures and early life experiences. In the individuating gestalt, the flow of spontaneity and creativity is complete allowing a person to fulfil their unique life’s purpose. Lynnette Clayton’s model also identified the relevance of Karen Horney’s (1950) model identifying behavioural tendencies of moving against the other; away from the other; or toward the other as part of the coping gestalt. Max Clayton (1992) later developed this model reversing the order of the gestalts and changing the gestalt names to progressive, coping, and fragmenting. He also included the categories of moving against the other; away from the other; or toward the other in his schema.

In addition, Max Clayton described the roles themselves as being progressive, coping or fragmenting. This could in fact be correct if you relate to role as being a person’s whole way of being, but most examples I have seen suggest either a confused shorthand of the model or the introduction of a new classification system that determines progressive, coping and fragmenting as hierarchical categories of roles.

Approaches that lead us astray in naming a role

After considerable thought and review of practice, I have reached a conclusion that there are a number of approaches that do not result in role names that provide sufficient meaning to assist a director, auxiliary, protagonist or audience member. These conclusions are presented below.

- A role name is not a diagnosis, but serves to inform us of the role relationship and the emotional life experienced by the person in the role. Neither of the earlier examples of wise woman nor old bag accomplish this.
- A role name is not a description of a relationship i.e., mother, father, daughter, brother as they are too generalised to be meaningful in a particular situation because they describe a person's filial connections or status rather than their functioning form.
- For the same reason, role names are not descriptions of gender identity i.e., man, woman, girl, boy, etc.
- A role name is not a person's name, for example, naming someone as Marco Polo. Marco Polo had many roles and to roll them all into a personal identity does not take adequate account of the dynamic interaction that will be occurring in a particular time and space.
- Roles names are not descriptions of intra-psychic experiences. For example, "part of her", "her inner child", "internal voice" are nonsensical in psychodrama given the definition of role.
- Role names are also not descriptions of the animal world, such as, "stunned mullet", "frightened rabbit", "rutting stag" as these don't convey the more advanced functioning and capability of human thought, intention or will.

Now comes a big however... However all of these things that I say role names are not can be springboards that may lead to role names. Having an image, whatever that is, even a sense of something or perhaps a sound or smell may stimulate the imagination and bring meaning. Giving voice to these images or ideas may bring rejection or resonance of the words and confirmation of the experience may occur. While a role name has not been produced something of the protagonist's role or functioning form has been touched on. Reporting these efforts at recognition when writing up a session have their place but they do not adequately name a role however they may give clues in the creation of a satisfying name.

Being with another person, relating to their world and their experience is a dynamic process. The process involves warming up and the bullet points listed above could be steps along the way in this warming up process. I am less concerned with getting a perfect role name and more

concerned that we don't distance ourselves from each other and our experience of each other.

There are a number of approaches that can lead us astray in naming roles. For example, I have noticed that distancing occurs when a director says, "Warm up to the role of..." as if the role is something external to the person. When a person warms up, they are themselves and the expression of this is the role. A more useful direction would be, "Warm up to yourself as a..." or, "Warm up as a..." both of which relate to the dynamic expression in context.

I have also noticed that distancing occurs when an enactment is described as an "as if" experience. Unfortunately the "as if" orientation separates psychodramatic experiences from "real life" and undermines the personal "truth" and "soul" realities experienced. Distancing perspectives and processes are unhelpful to the integrity of the drama of soul and truth.

An extension of the "as if" approach that perpetuates a misconception of role and warm-up is the notion of de-roling. De-roling is the term used to describe the process of auxiliaries removing themselves from the role they have been acting during an enactment and returning to themselves. At best it acknowledges the need to attend to warm up in the transition from the action to the integration phase. At worst it introduces contradictory concepts about role, i.e., that a role can be discarded or shed, that when in role an auxiliary is not expressing their real self, that whatever a person is experiencing as a result of an enactment is separate to the warm-up in the group, or that a person is caught up in a role and therefore unable to express themselves until they have regained their composure as themselves.

Some directors insist on auxiliaries de-roling at the end of an enactment "as if" the auxiliaries are separate to the enactment and their particular portrayal of the role. Being an auxiliary provides many opportunities to express what is emerging from the individual's own warm-up in role. Auxiliaries are free to express this provided it is pertinent to the protagonist and in line with the direction of the drama. If an auxiliary is unable to act or express fully during the enactment they have another opportunity in the integration phase when they can share from the role they played. Both of these approaches take account of warm-up and what further work might be required in the group.

It is essential to be in tune with a protagonist

A role name is a description of a person's functioning in a particular situation. It is not possible to describe everything about this person without going into lengthy analysis or explanation. Therefore role

descriptions are usually approximations and will inevitably fall short of the real thing. However, naming roles in a way that accurately encapsulates a person's essential being in a particular situation can be electrifying and inspirational providing an acute experience of (self) realisation, learning, fulfilment, warm-up, satisfaction and vitality. Advantages are evident in production, increased spontaneity and creativity, catharsis and development.

A satisfying role name results from a dynamic synthesis of experience, observation and analysis that comes from practice and application and arises out of being in tune with a person.

At the beginning of a psychodrama, a director interviews the protagonist for role eliciting sufficient information to know their view of the world, i.e., the particular constructs they hold, beliefs they have, values they live by, their attitudes and their sociometry. The hidden thoughts, feelings, aspirations make apparent the person's map of the universe. For an auxiliary this is far more important to ascertain than finding out what activity the person is doing or trying to remember words they are saying as their view of the world affects everything about their expression. Once their view of the world has been identified, an auxiliary is free to enact the role spontaneously rather than simply mimic the protagonist.

I have been in some particularly thrilling dramas where the director and auxiliaries functioned well as a team, where each person was free, congruent and relevant in their contribution to the enactment. Their expressions heightened the overall satisfaction of the drama, maximising the therapeutic impact. These experiences are memorable examples of psychodrama as an effective group method. A feature that made those enactments so satisfying was that they were not role plays, simulations or "as if" experiences for any of the people involved.

There are many authors who describe a psychodrama as an "as if" enactment. This description tends to be made from an "objective" viewpoint that while the authors may not intend it, it distances the protagonist and their experience from the director, auxiliaries and audience. Psychodrama is the theatre of truth, requiring everyone involved to enter into the protagonist's subjective experience and enactment as real.

Some years ago my six year old grandson, Christopher, educated me on the importance of distinguishing between relating to a real compared to an "as if" experience. Christopher calls out to me as he is running frantically round in circles in front of me and making a furious buzzing noise. "Look at me Viv I'm a bee!" I reply admiringly, "Yes, look at you buzzing around just

like a bee.” To which he replies with disdainful emphasis, “No, not like a bee, I am a bee!” That’s me told!

Moreno (1975) describes a similar example of his son Jonathan coming to grips with the meaning of dog. Of course a boy can’t be a bee or a dog but their subjective experience is real as they take on the movements, sounds, behaviours and interact with the world in role. This is how a child learns and develops; their role repertoire expands, they discover what they are capable of as well as what is acceptable to others; they make meaning of their experience and of their world. In this same way, throughout our lives each of us has integrated experiences through role taking, role playing and role creating.

Psychodrama concretises a person’s inner experience, where their reality is made obvious to all. In this way, psychodrama is as Moreno (1946) says “the science of exploring the truth by dramatic methods”. Some would argue about the definition of truth expecting a particular display as if truth is an exact science. This view demonstrates paradoxically the truth of the statement in that any psychodrama is an enactment of the inner life and actual experience of the protagonist and therefore is the truth. Getting to know the protagonist’s truth requires everyone to enter their subjective reality.

Dorothy Heathcote influenced me many years ago when I was a drama student and new teacher. It was from her work that I learned an improvisational game called “The Yes Game” that requires participants to accept and say “yes” to everything that is presented and to build on it incorporating it into a dramatic enactment. Adopting a “yes” approach assists the development of the capacity to enter into a person’s subjective experience. Heathcote’s work is clearly informed by Moreno and is summarized in Heston’s (1993) PhD thesis - it is well worth a read.

An outcome of psychodrama is that a person may get to know their self by exploring their subjective reality and as they increase their self-awareness they are likely to increase their objectivity.

Grappling with the meaning of names and how to work with this is age old and is evident in a variety of settings including Shakespeare’s writing. His Juliet reflects some of the dilemmas of conceptualising role as a whole way of being that encompasses the psychodramatic, social and somatic and the meaning that is conveyed through a name.

*Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
Thou art thyself though, not a Montague.
What's a Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O! be some other name:
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd
Retain that dear perfection which he owed
Without that title.*

Romeo and Juliet, Act 2, Scene 2

My experiences of playing in the sand, constructing and deconstructing, interacting with my friends and playmates, responding to the happy accidents that occur as a result of those interactions create a warm-up in me as I contemplate role dynamics. The playful excursions I have had into this subject have challenged me to question some of my practices and the ways I have conceptualised role. I have actively sought opportunities to practice being with others, role reversing with them, and developing my ability to relate to their essential being in order to name a role.

It is a challenge to describe this succinctly and accurately, doing justice to a person's essential expression while at the same time making the description meaningful. There are implications for us all in our various capacities as we apply role dynamics. I look forward to further playful excursions...

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