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Applied Role Theory III— Specific Techniques

In this chapter, several practical applications of Morenian role theory are presented: role naming, role analysis, role diagramming, and the social atom. Again, note that many of these may be useful even if not associated with psychodramatic enactment, although, of course, the approaches can be synergistic.

ROLE NAMING

"Finding a name for something is a way of conjuring its existence, of making it possible for people to see a pattern where they didn't see anything before." (Rheingold 1988: 3).

Just naming the roles involved in a complicated situation is an important element in problem-solving. There's even a slight element of relief involved because naming begins to sort the senses of ambivalence or inner confusion into workable components. Roles can then be defined and analyzed. Australian and New Zealand psychodrama-

tists and sociometrists, following the lead of Max and Lynette Clayton (1982, 1993), have been especially active and innovative in developing role naming and role analysis and then working with these elements psychodramatically.

The names given to roles aren't the names of people, like "John" or "Mary" (unless the client suffers from dissociative disorder and actually experiences the different parts as separate individuals who have already formed actual people-names). In general, the part should be given the name of its function.

In addition to naming the roles, the Claytons further refined the technique by adding an adjective to each noun which thickens the role description. This involves a process of negotiating with the protagonist and involving the group. (The process shouldn't be rushed—it's most important.) The roles identified are often noted on a whiteboard or pad as part of the diagraming process (to be described shortly).

It's important that the naming process should involve a mutual interchange. Neither the director nor the group members should presume to know which words to use. The protagonist must be empowered to choose the names that seem to fit best. If the protagonist tends to be too deferential, the director should actively reminding him or her that no one else can know which words feel most useful. The names given to roles are loaded with emotional connotations—this is the whole point of the field of study called "semantics." For example, in helping a protagonist identify his playful side, there might be a subtle but real difference in the nuance given to the word "funny" instead of "silly," or whether he'd prefer "class clown," "joker," or even "mischievous." Sometimes, this process of helping people to feel into their own preferences regarding the naming of a role is already a healing of socially imposed breaches between "real self" and "false self." For some clients, there's great value in taking the time to encourage and allow for this re-opening of the fragile senses of intuition and personal desire—not just what they've been taught to think they "should" want.

Also, the adjectives appended to the named roles need some negotiation so they can be most evocative and specific. Over-generalizations can dilute the effectiveness of the process. For example, the role of "good father" may need to be broken down into role components to discover which ones account for the "goodness" of the description. These negotiations as to the choice of adjective often lead to fruitful discussions and sometimes even therapeutic breakthroughs. For example, what, in this changing world, is a "successful adult," a "spiritually

mature person," a "real man," or a "true artist?" The naming of the components and negotiations over their elements and standards of achievement make for a good deal of therapy or consciousness raising.

ROLE DIAGRAMING

As the protagonist's roles are named, they may be listed on a whiteboard or pad. Then, reflecting on the roles may be used as a way of grounding and refocusing the protagonist between scenes. As the psychodrama or therapeutic work continues, new diagrams may be constructed that reflect changing relationships among the roles.

Moreno first used role diagrams in the 1930s as a part of sociometry. The idea is simple: the perceived and intuitively felt dimensions of relationships may be represented in two-dimensional space, on paper, transparencies and projectors, blackboards, and now whiteboards with markers. As roles are named and broken down into components, they may also be represented as diagrams, as circles or other shapes in relationship to each other. These diagrams may then be re-drawn as other dimensions of a relationship or life field are considered—past and future, feared and hoped-for, etc. In families or groups, each person may draw his or her own version, and then these may be compared.

Another way to represent different roles is by the use of objects. Williams (1995) uses refrigerator magnets of various types against a large white metal background. The choice of the figures to represent the various parts of self or people in a social network thus becomes a minor projective test, like the choice of figures in sand-tray therapy. Others with a similar intuition have suggested the use of chess pieces or coins, as these can evoke associations as to which person in a social field seems to take which role. (Of course, this resonates with the way children choose various puppets or toys to directly or indirectly represent various family members or peers at school.)

In family therapy, the "genogram" technique is used, portraying the formal kinship relationships. Derived earlier from medical genetics and anthropology, the genogram is helpful in bringing out issues which may remain otherwise hidden, including subtle and multi-generational family traditions (Ancelin-Schützenberger, 1998). Other diagrams may also be used, the point being that of more objectively representing psychological or relational states and dynamics.

ROLE ANALYSIS

Analysis means breaking something more complicated down into its component parts. Individuals may be analyzed in terms of the various roles they play, and those roles, as implied above, may be further defined and broken down into role components which can then be analyzed even further if necessary (Moreno, 1953, p. 293; Hale, 1975). The roles in marital couples or other dyadic relations, families, and groups may also be analyzed in this fashion.

Clients tend to find this process more relevant than most diagnostic procedures because it makes sense to take stock of their role repertoire and their relationships with others. Also, it tends to address the really important issues while other diagnostic assessments may have more areas that are overlooked. The following questions are especially useful:

- Are some dimensions of the personality being suppressed? Is this causing problems?
- If some roles are expressing an excessive or distorted motivation, can the essential need be recognized?
- Might roles expressing one facet of the personality be overdeveloped in part because others are being neglected?
- Are there any important dimensions of personal development that are being repressed or denied, and could other actions express efforts to compensate for or disguise these needs?

"How much" is as important an element to be defined as "what." "A dutiful daughter visits a sick parent," the woman may affirm. "This is a value I choose." "How often and for how long each visit" are the questions then asked. Such elements sharpen awareness, shift people from the tendency to rely on platitudes and generalities, and impose the mature reality of establishing specific standards for oneself. Without those, doubts about vague expectations continue to crowd in.

Relationships may also be analyzed. It helps to actually diagram the various components and sub-components (Hale, 1975). For example, in a marriage, the role component of housekeeping may require some analysis regarding such issues as who does what chore, how the decisions regarding this role distribution are arrived at, and who maintains the standards of adequacy in their accomplishment. Role analysis within families can reveal patterns of triangulation, such as in situations where the parents are allied with each other in certain roles but compete in others, or if there are alliances with any of the children

against one of the parents. Such an analysis may explain difficulties in discipline and other dysfunctions.

Another benefit of role analysis is that it may reframe behavior as being limited to a certain role rather than as being representative of the entire personality. It helps to reduce tendencies to make global judgments, usually negative. For example, some youngsters act more depressed around their families and are in danger of being so diagnosed unless their behavior with peers away from the family can also be assessed. When with the parents, they may be excessively blamed, drawn into side-taking with parents, be caught up in a parent's sadness, or in other ways reacting to the family dynamics.

Role analysis may be applied therapeutically by finding certain areas of strengths and then using those as aids in working with other, weaker roles. For example, a teenager may be excessively shy with members of the opposite sex but more confident in certain avocational interests. Creatively reframing some of those more successful role components may help make the bridge to taking some risks and developing the more vulnerable roles. Since roles are continually shifting, being renegotiated, and redefined, role analysis may be useful at many points in the course of psychotherapy.

THE SOCIAL NETWORK DIAGRAM

Diagramming is also an element in sociometry, to be discussed in the following chapters. One type of diagram, often called the "social atom," is widely used (Moreno, 1947). The basic idea is for the clients to portray the significant people in their lives, placing themselves at the center and drawing the others as small circles or other shapes at various distances. There are a number of refinements that can then enrich the diagram so produced (Buchanan, 1983; Edwards, 1996).

This technique—I prefer the term "social network diagram"—may be used diagnostically along with the aforementioned techniques of role naming, diagramming, and role analysis. In workshops or extended sessions, this exercise can serve as a good warm-up. People become more vividly aware of the matrix of relationships within which they exist. Issues such as friction with, ambivalence toward, or alienation from certain key figures in their lives become relevant topics for discussion.

A typical social network diagram might look like Figure 17-1. Several elements may be noted in this network, similar to that seen in a sociogram (see p. 204, in chapter 19). In addition:

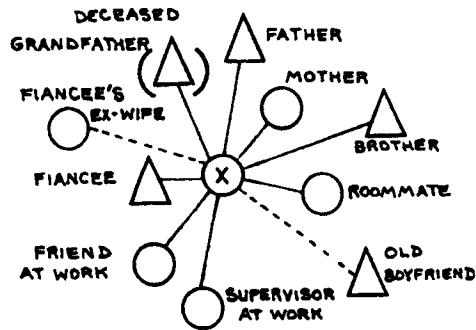


Figure 17-1. Social Network Diagram.

- Pets may be included, putting little ears on a figure, or deceased but still emotionally “present” figures may be permitted, noted in parentheses. Occasionally a small cluster of friends or other groups may be included.
- The distance shown between the central figure and the others often varies as perceived “closeness.”
- In addition to indicating positive and negative feelings with a solid or dotted (or jagged) line, ambivalence may be represented as a very wavy line, indifference or neutrality with a lightly dotted line.
- In the lines drawn between the central figure (who constructs the diagram) and the various people in the social field, it's possible, in addition to showing the feelings the person has for the other, to also show on the far side of the line what the person *thinks* the other probably feels in return.
- There's usually room for variations depending on your purposes.

A social network diagram may be modified and adapted to address a variety of situations (Treadwell, Collins & Stein, 1992). Usually, people draw the significant people in their lives at the time, but other variations might include:

- In the future, who would be included that would make one's life “ideal?” One year, 10 years, other times may be specified.
- In the past, childhood, adolescence or other time.

- The collective network, showing the various groups, clubs, or organizations
- Surplus reality network: heroes, helpers, God, Jesus, other spiritual entities, angels, afflicting demons, ghosts, ancestors, guides, totem animals, etc.

As mentioned above in the section on role analysis, clients understand this approach. Sitting together over one of these diagrams, it is as if therapists or consultants and clients get a chance to review together a map of what are often the more obvious and important issues in the clients' lives. This tends to strengthen the treatment or working alliance rather than weaken it. Also, it's just more human and less mechanical to ask clients about the significant people in their lives, because caring about relationships suggests that the questioner will also be more attentive to maintaining a supportive working relationship for addressing the intuitively sensed vulnerabilities in the clients' lives.

Another value of the diagram is that, while some of the non-problematic role relationships may be ignored at first, at a later stage it may be helpful to note some of those areas of positivity, and discussions of these more supportive connections often help as a form of encouragement. Analysis of what accounts for success in those roles may lead to a transfer of some role components to help cope with the more problematic relationships.

The value of the term "social atom" itself is questionable. Sorokin (1958) pointed out that the comparisons with the physical atom were limited. Moreno's intent was to encourage our viewing people as embedded in social process. A similar sentiment was expressed by the child psychoanalyst Winnicott who was said to have noted that there's no such thing as a baby, meaning that we must remember that development occurs only within the matrix of relationships. I find also that it's better not to introduce idiosyncratic terminology as it just makes it more difficult to explain psychodrama to those not already familiar with and well disposed to its concepts—so I prefer "social network diagram."

CREATING ROLES

"An increase in imagination often results in an increase in courage, for we get stuck when we see no way out of the fear,

shame, or self-hatred that imprison us. Awakening the imagination awakens the heart and stretches it." (Fox, 1991).

In applied role theory, it's not a matter of working with one's given role repertoire. People are invited to consciously imagine and experiment with new role components or whole new roles. (There is some resonance here with George Kelly's "fixed role therapy.") This is in addition to re-framing certain roles or shifting the degrees to which we identify with this or that part of our personality (Moreno, 1934, p. 326).

Many roles can be created, named, and developed in order to provide cognitive orientation to the processes of therapy or personal development which helps to better establish whatever learning takes place. It's not as if people have to accept their present role repertoire. There is no loss in authenticity if the role assumption is being made explicitly and intentionally. Rather, creating roles makes a bridge between surplus reality and ordinary life.

The most important category of roles to develop are the meta-roles, those functions which modulate and coordinate the way the other roles are played. These meta-roles include components of good parent, chief executive officer, mediator, supportive friend, and creative problem-solver, among others. In therapy, perhaps the major working alliance the therapist needs to make is with this role, and making it explicit, pretending it is a leading member of the cast of characters, really helps.

On one hand, of course, this role is already present, but for many people it is hardly experienced. It's like a very *laissez-faire* character who hardly knows how to do his or her job. Therapy, in large part, involves the empowerment of the meta-roles. By naming them and treating them like people in themselves, these roles are brought into more vivid awareness.

Variations of the meta-role include audience and critic, or in a business, the quality-assurance program, the people who observe oneself-as-organization and evaluate the performance. A significant executive function that people need to learn involves taking stock of oneself, diagnosing what may not be working and why it's not working.

Another key role is not just managing and coordinating, but really leading, developing a dream, a set of realistic goals. Many people are just drifting, afraid to set goals. This role need not be rigid or totally dominating—there are times when drifting and "going with the flow"

is what's most adaptive. But, overall, some function of direction is optimally adaptive. It's a powerful point in therapy or personal coaching when this role is energized. In dramaturgical terms, it's the playwright. In spiritual terms, it's the best point of connection of manager and inspiration.

DeBono (1985) notes six different functions in problem-solving, as if one could wear different-colored hats, each asking a different question. Black hat: what are all the bad things that could happen? Yellow hat: what are all the good things? Red hat: what's my feeling about this? Blue hat: just the facts—dispassionate analysis. Green hat: what are some creative alternatives? White hat: how is the group process going? Is everyone being listened to? What's fair? These are six executive or leadership sub-roles, and the point is to bring them to the fore.

A fun role to develop is the enthusiastic audience, the fans. They aren't critical; they already love the performers! Imagine a rooting section, an entourage, give yourself a fan club. Other therapies speak of "affirmations," and the creation of this role allows clients to imagine others saying the most encouraging things. This role can also be cultivated because mere flattery tends to be ineffective. In creating an inner rooting section, working out the kinds of realistic and yet vigorously positive phrases makes for an interesting challenge.

Roles aren't just created, they need to be worked with, refined, developed, and, at times, radically revised. Also, the meta-role of director needs to be reviewing its own functions and those of the various other roles. Are some deficient and needing remediation? Are others overdeveloped? Imagining the ideal interplay among such functions suggests the virtue of balance more vividly.

In many cases, people discover that they suffer from the workings of an overly harsh superego, or self-critical conscience. People would like to get rid of this, but it can't be done. It's as if this complex was "hired on" around the ages of four to six to help discipline the unruly feelings, and it tends to behave like a mixture of the models one may have had in life and an exaggerated caricature of a tough policeman or drill sergeant. Because their minds operate in more simplistic dichotomies, kids will create these more polarized inner roles. Maturation involves the modulation of childish either-or, overgeneralized modes of cognition.

One way to cope with the inner policeman or inner prosecutor is to create an inner "defense attorney" who can use all the lawyerly tricks and devices one reads about in books or sees in movies to challenge superego harshness and self-blame. (In Ellis' method of

Rational-Emotive Therapy, the therapist models this role, actively disputing the clients' belief systems.)

Another approach is to imagine that the inner prosecutor is at a management training school being exposed to the latest ideas about effectively helping people. People often say they wish they could just "get rid of" this source of negativity, but it doesn't work that way. If the ego-self could just will the subconscious, therapy wouldn't be needed. Inner roles can't just be "fired." They can, however, be worked with or "retrained," or new roles may be taken on, expanding the role repertoire. The wiser, new managing roles attempt to show how the older "bullying" inner role patterns aren't helpful, and instead, new, more balanced ways to impose self-discipline are developed.

An implicit role that may be called forward has become fairly well-known in the last few decades: "the inner child." It's often helpful to interweave an interview with this role with some discussions with more grown-up roles, just to acknowledge the presence of several perspectives. I also remind people that right next to the vulnerable, innocent, needy inner child is the insatiably demanding, entitled, selfish and spiteful "inner brat" (Wolinsky, 1993). This usually brings a laugh and opens the door to becoming more familiar with this less socially acceptable but universal facet of our personalities.

A significant role to create is, like the inner manager, implicit in the mind but benefits from being named and put to good use: the "higher self," or "soul." The development of this role is of the greatest use in psychotherapy, serving to ground the client in a source of inspiration, guidance, comfort, and belonging (or "connectedness") that is frequently lost or diluted in our culture. For some, this role is often connected with or even identified with some spiritual intermediary, such as Jesus, or directly associated with the client's own concept of God. Yet the role operates out of the potential of the creative dimension of the subconscious, and the technique involves simply becoming open and receptive to these intuitive and imaginal ideas as they emerge into awareness. It's not necessary to accept uncritically everything that pops into one's mind, but there's a way of balancing good judgment and a measure of surrendering of ego-control.

Creating as a role that mental capacity that connects more intimately with Spirit is one of the more exquisite constructions we may undertake. Doing this is neither superficial nor artificial, but rather a re-thinking, a re-perceiving of innate qualities that had otherwise just seemed to be dully present. It's like recognizing that a rock in your back yard was really a diamond.

All the created roles do not need to be serious or profound. Some

people need to develop dimensions of playfulness, art, social concern, etc. The idea is to know one can choose to have a truly diversified and satisfactorily balanced role repertoire.

SUMMARY

Applied role theory offers not only concepts but also tools for practical use in a wide range of settings. Naming, analyzing, diagramming, and creating roles are some of the operations that can implement this approach. Role theory is also associated with sociometry, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

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