Clayton, M. (1993). The Concept of Role. In *Living Pictures of the Self* (Ch 2, pp.11-28.),ICA Press, Caulfield, Victoria, AU.

THE CONCEPT OF ROLE

The purpose of the concept of role is to make meaning of our observation and experience of one another. It is an attempt to make sense of the many different elements of human functioning as they occur in response to particular situations in which other people and objects are involved.

A role includes many different aspects of a person's functioning. Some roles are psychosomatic. The role of the eater which expresses itself from the time of birth on is an example of a psychosomatic role. Other roles are motivated by the unique individuality of a person and are created through the interaction of the spontaneity and creativity of that person. Such roles are specific to a particular individual. These may be termed personal or psychodramatic roles. Those aspects of a person's functioning that in large measure reflect aspects of the culture are termed social roles. The parameters of a social role are prescribed, as is seen in the roles of the teacher, the nurse, the lawyer, the politician, or the policeman. Most roles are a blending of individual and social elements. If a particular role includes a large measure of the expression of a person's individuality, there will be conflict with the culture. When roles mostly express what is laid down by the culture, the individual may experience dissatisfaction, boredom, anxiety or depression. Thus work is required to bring about a successful blending of the individual and social dimensions.

Each role is expressed through a set of actions, a set of emotions and feelings, and through a set of values. When a person is acting in a functional way the three elements of the role are harmonious. Disharmony between any of the three elements of a role causes the role to be conflicted.

A role is created on the basis of a guiding principle which may be pictured as a map. This is discussed later in this chapter.

Role Description

Role description is a basic element in the analysis of a role system. Its purpose is to identify a significant aspect of human functioning

in a meaningful and enlivening way. A number of role descriptions may be made which portray the nature of much larger segments of human living and these provide the raw data for a larger role analysis. The purpose of such role analysis is to make greater sense of a more complex system of roles enacted by an individual or group of individuals or of role relationships of different groups or cultures and on the basis of such analysis to plan means whereby roles may be developed further so that the aims of the individuals and groups can be achieved.

The first step in making any analysis of a system of roles is the identification of the individual roles. The aim of the next sections of this chapter is to stimulate an ease and daring in making role descriptions. In the first instance it is best to formulate role descriptions on the basis of immediate first impressions of someone's functioning, for such first impressions have been found to be highly accurate in many respects. Some have found it helpful to begin by writing down the different qualities of a person's functioning. Thus they may look at a person and then write down a series of adjectives, such as gentle, warm, soft, giving, and outgoing. Having identified the qualities of the person's functioning they may then identify a noun which describes the nature and purpose of the person in the situation. Is this person a friend, a companion, a lover, an advisor, a guide, a fun-lover, an adventurer, an organiser, or what? Finally it may be concluded that the person is acting as a sensitive guide. Having concluded this, the person's functioning may be reviewed again to check that the description is apt and accurate. Naturally the ability to know what role an individual is expressing develops with practice.

Examples of Role Descriptions

In a recent group session a member of the group identified several roles for each of the other members of the group. Ken was described as Socrates (serious thinker), Henry Kissinger (interested in keeping the peace), eager beaver, colourful self expressor, supportive companion and self doubter. These descriptions immediately made sense both to Ken and the other members of the group. Ken became more alert and involved, as did everybody else.

The roles of the other members of the group were characterised as follows:

Judith   • pixie
           • delighted receiver

- interested pupil
- anxious learner
- self doubter

May
- truth seeker
- interested enquirer
- thoughtful pupil
- self doubter

Trish
- artist
- interested observer
- disappearing waif
- secretive information withholder
- anxious learner
- self doubter

Henry
- Freud (thoughtful analyst)
- quiet observer
- enthusiastic information gatherer
- Chairman Mao
- defence lawyer
- self doubter
- anxious learner

Mary
- interested enthusiastic learner
- willing supportive companion
- tentative explorer
- self doubter

Tony
- philosopher
- interested pupil
- curious investigator
- eager beaver
- obedient pupil
- anxious learner
- self doubter

Rick
- experienced navigator
- gentle guide
- patient teacher

Further Categorisation of Roles

Roles may be further characterised as adequate, over-developed, under-developed, or conflicted and statements may be made about roles that are absent.

In the case of another member of the group just referred to the following assessment was made:

adequate roles	• silent supporter
over-developed roles	• self doubter • anxious learner • mistrusting politician • appraisal seeker
under-developed roles	• truster of self in an unknown situation • spontaneous actor
conflicted roles	• anxious learner versus spontaneous actor
absent roles	• naive enquirer

Roles and Group Process

Further consideration of the roles and role system which developed in this group led to the formation of several conclusions. It was noted that the over-developed roles of self-doubter, anxious learner and mistrusting politician dominated and that this caused restrictive solutions to emerge. The effect was that the group leader had to work hard to keep bringing out the feeling response in the group members. When the group members did give their feeling responses better relationships started to emerge, however, the group overall decided to acknowledge only the group leader and more or less give lip service to the other group members. Strong links between members therefore did not occur.

Outcomes of Making Role Descriptions

The descriptions of roles that have been listed were presented to the members of the group and this had a positive result. These descriptions had the effect of increasing the awareness of all the individuals both of themselves and of the others. There was a heightening of the involvement of group members with one another. The focus of group members on the group leader diminished. These outcomes have been regularly observed when role descriptions have been presented.
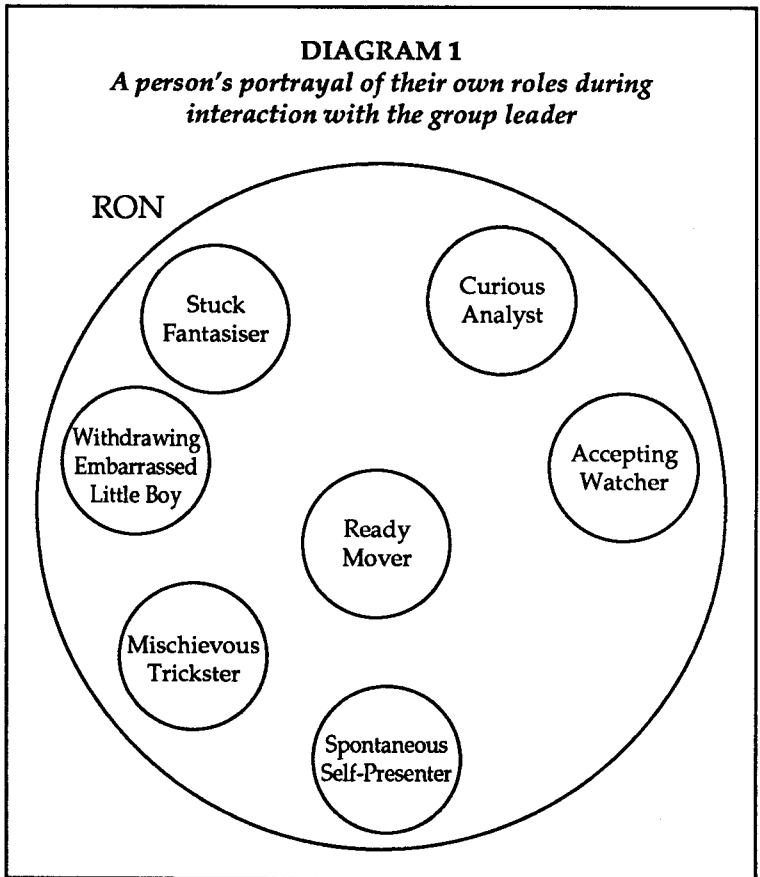
Self-Identification of Roles

Individual group members may be taught to observe themselves and identify the roles which they play. Various means can be

developed for stimulating individuals to identify their own personality functioning. The more an individual is in touch with their creative impulse the greater is the development of new means of setting out one's own roles.

Example of an individual identifying roles

In one group session there was a period of interaction between the group leader and one group member. During this interaction both John, the group leader, and Ron, the group member, enacted a number of different roles. Subsequently different aspects of Ron's functioning were enacted by members of the group and Ron observed these portrayals of himself. As he identified the roles portrayed he wrote them on the board and these roles are shown in diagram 1.

DIAGRAM 1
A person's portrayal of their own roles during interaction with the group leader

RON

Stuck Fantasiser

Curious Analyst

Withdrawing Embarrassed Little Boy

Accepting Watcher

Ready Mover

Mischievous Trickster

Spontaneous Self-Presenter

Subsequently Ron wrote down the following description of the events in the group and of the experience of developing the diagram.

> *Initially when interacting with John in the group I was feeling anxious and conflicted. I take it that John was endeavouring to facilitate my involvement with the group as a "spontaneous self presenter". This is how I wanted to be in the group and yet I felt trapped within myself, not knowing which way to turn. I think I was definitely "stuck".*
>
> *John brought me out in front of the group. It felt intimidating, but safe. It was nice to have some direction and a feeling of moving towards, and creating a positive development. The actual actions involved with moving out of my chair assisted with this. Using the group area to present myself I began to unfold and bring to light those roles present and operating in me at that time. I was able to act in each role and see my auxiliaries mirror each role for me. I finally reached a point where I felt like I was being a spontaneous self presenter, which of course is what I had set out to achieve.*
>
> *I then set about expressing diagrammatically on the whiteboard the nature of the various roles. In doing so I named, with assistance from group members, each role.*
>
> *Developing the diagram was done in an exploratory fashion. Some of the diagram didn't feel quite right, however, I did feel like I was beginning to get some kind of a grip on what was operating within me. I felt awakened and my thinking was clearer about my own process. I felt relieved and more freed up. I had a sense of hope that I could develop further as a "spontaneous self presenter", and a feeling that I had already achieved something.*
>
> *At the time I became less self conscious and more conscious of group members, in a comfortable way. I noticed that the group members were more involved with me and less in themselves. They appeared more alive and more freed up themselves. For me it felt like there was a more positive flow of feeling within the group, as if the whole group had been awakened.*
>
> *This experience and reflection has allowed me to explore the role diagram and experiment with various diagrammatic forms and role names over the last week or so. I've come to a point now where I feel satisfied with the diagram and the role names – it feels right. I now have a clear picture of my own process in that*

particular situation. I realise that this occurs often in me in similar situations. I now have a good idea of what I can do now to develop as a "spontaneous self presenter". In future situations if I feel stuck I will be able to call upon my "curious analyst" and "accepting watcher" roles. These can facilitate or warm me up to being a "spontaneous self presenter". Therefore I need to develop these roles further and in conjunction with each other.

Role Descriptions made in a Hospital Setting

Effective use can be made of role descriptions in any setting at all. The reason for highlighting their utilisation in a hospital setting is that I have had close personal knowledge over many years of the work of a superintendent of a hospital. This psychiatrist regularly made role descriptions of hospital patients at the time of admission, at different periods during their hospitalisation, at discharge, and sometimes after their return to the community.

The roles of one patient were identified shortly after admission and were categorised under four different headings:

Roles associated with bulimia
- voracious gorger
- guilty eliminator
- disappointed standard-setter
- helpless addict
- helpless, lost child
- enraged, self hurting perfectionist
- out of control destroyer

Roles associated with being smothered by husband
- despairing bride
- reluctant cohabiter
- rebellious partner
- guilty companion
- guilty lover
- imprisoned freedom lover
- entrapped free spirit
- reactor to sexual monogamy
- smothered teenager
- secret hater
- inadequate female
- enraged hitter
- caged lioness

Roles associated with rootlessness
- rootless roamer
- lonely lost soul
- rejected victim
- rejected daughter
- wrong gender
- unsuccessful child
- insecure traveller
- rightless person
- jealous sibling

Roles associated with being unable to make friends
- cringing pleaser
- misunderstood loner
- hypersensitive silent feeler
- fearful non-communicator
- lone rager
- unhappy victim
- self hater
- insecure companion
- friendless companion
- inadequate companion
- worthless companion
- sad distancer

Planning based on role assessment
An in-patient programme was developed to expand her function-
ing as an objective observer and create a scientific evaluator role to
combat the overwhelming feelings associated with her function-
ing as a global passive, uncomprehending reactor. She was like a
cork floating on a sea of emotions, blown hither and thither by any
wind and wave that came along. Her roles associated with distanc-
ing were only being used negatively to prevent her from gaining
suitable support. They were not used positively to assist the
evaluation of her feelings, and to obtain distance and relief from
being overwhelmed by feelings. Admission would allow her to
practise communication, receive peer feedback to reduce roles like
worthless companion, sad distancer, and fearful non-communica-
tor.

Developing a Role Description
The best role descriptions are those which focus their attention on
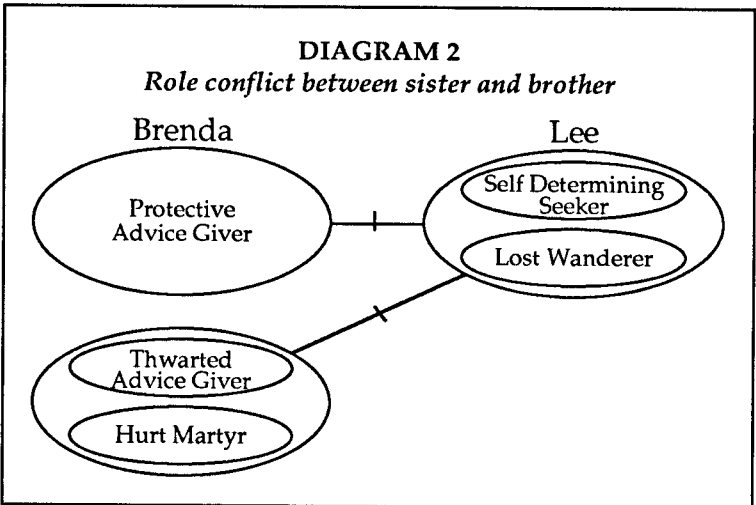the real essence of the person. They represent an attempt to

penetrate the surface level and to say something which makes sense out of many different aspects of the person's functioning. Each description which achieves this may be termed an integrative concept.

As already indicated it is most effective to arrive at a quick identification of a role. Once a description is made it is useful to have another look at the person from that point of view and check that all the movements, feelings, emotions, and thoughts that have been expressed fit that description. A meaningful description is one which fits the present warm up of the person and is therefore congruent with their present life circumstances and the challenges which they are facing. It presents a clear picture of a person functioning in life in such a way that any person will be able to visualise the situation just by reading the description. Similarly, the intention of role descriptions of two people interacting is to create a clear picture of what is occurring for any reader, whether they have been present in the situation or not.

Examples of Role Descriptions of Relationships

Conflict between sister and brother
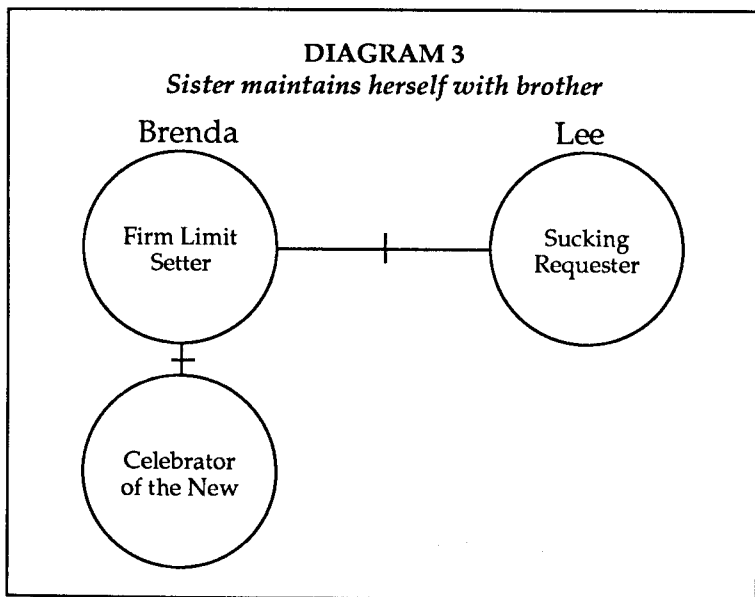In the first example portrayed in diagram 2 there is interaction between a woman and her brother. Brenda has given Lee advice about getting on with his life and not seeing an old friend. Lee asserts he will do as he likes and this leaves Brenda frustrated and hurt.

DIAGRAM 2
Role conflict between sister and brother

Brenda — Lee

Protective Advice Giver

Self Determining Seeker

Lost Wanderer

Thwarted Advice Giver

Hurt Martyr

The psychotherapist's assessment of this role system was that the role of the protective advice giver is dysfunctional and well developed, as are the roles of the thwarted advice giver, hurt martyr, and lost wanderer. Lee's functioning as self determined seeker is functional and in a process of developing.

New relationship between sister and brother

On another occasion Lee asks his sister, Brenda, if she will iron his trousers for him. Earlier on when he had moved into her house Brenda had decided not to fall into acting as a supporting wifely maid as she had done previously with her brother. At that time Lee had agreed with her. In the incident being considered now Brenda refuses Lee's request to iron his trousers and she feels satisfied with herself. This is portrayed in diagram 3.

DIAGRAM 3
Sister maintains herself with brother

Brenda

Lee

Firm Limit Setter

Sucking Requester

Celebrator of the New

Brenda's functioning as a firm limit setter and celebrator of the new are considered functional and developing. Lee's functioning as a sucking requester is dysfunctional.
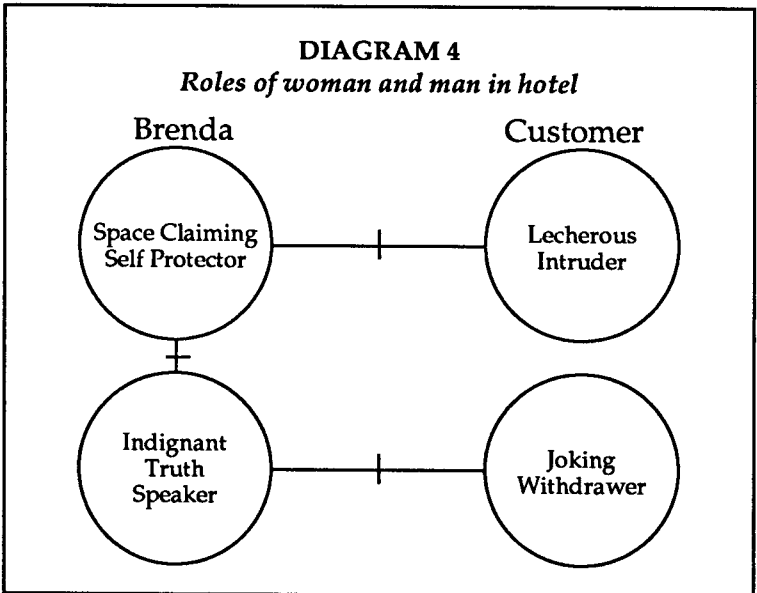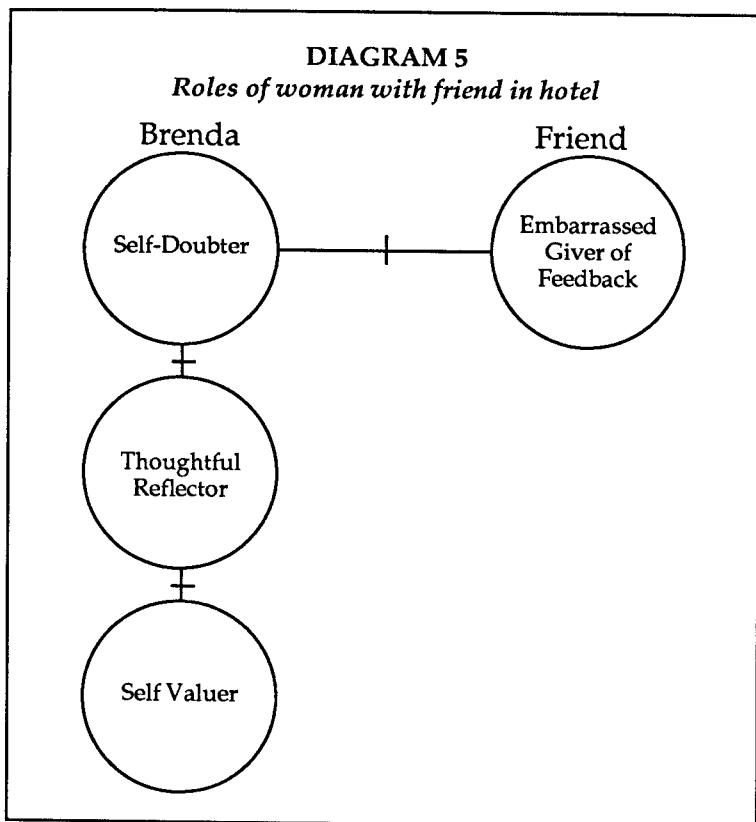
Incident in a hotel

In another incident Brenda is having a drink with a girlfriend in a hotel. A man who has been drinking at the bar approaches Brenda, puts his arm around her and fondles her bottom. She is shocked, moves away and says "I think that's offensive". The man with-

draws and jokingly joins his mates. Brenda's friend looks embarrassed. She says that she thinks Brenda was a bit heavy. Brenda becomes confused, initially wondering whether or not she has done the right thing. After reflection she decides she did. Diagrams 4 (below) and 5 (next page) portray these two situations.

The roles of lecherous intruder, joking withdrawer, and indignant truth speaker are regarded by the psychotherapist as developed and dysfunctional. Brenda's functioning as space claiming, self protector is regarded as functional. The combination of her action as a space claiming, self protector through which she pulls away from the man and her functioning as an indignant truth speaker whereby she goes against the man creates a certain isolation between them. She could have dealt with the situation in another way, for example by moving toward the customer with humour after the initial moving away. In this way she could preserve her own boundaries and create something more positive with the customer.

Each of the three diagrams clearly portrays to both the therapist and to the client, Brenda, a clear fine tuned picture of the role system in each of these three situations and immediately creates in both of them an intuitive sense as to what changes and further developments are called for.

DIAGRAM 4
Roles of woman and man in hotel

Brenda — Customer

Space Claiming Self Protector — Lecherous Intruder

Indignant Truth Speaker — Joking Withdrawer

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                   DIAGRAM 5                       │
│           Roles of woman with friend in hotel     │
│                                                   │
│      Brenda                      Friend           │
│    ╭─────────╮                ╭─────────╮         │
│   ╱           ╲              ╱ Embarrassed╲       │
│  │ Self-Doubter│────────┼───│   Giver of  │      │
│   ╲           ╱              ╲ Feedback   ╱       │
│    ╰─────────╯                ╰─────────╯         │
│         │                                         │
│         ┼                                         │
│    ╭─────────╮                                    │
│   ╱           ╲                                   │
│  │ Thoughtful  │                                  │
│  │ Reflector   │                                  │
│   ╲           ╱                                   │
│    ╰─────────╯                                    │
│         │                                         │
│         ┼                                         │
│    ╭─────────╮                                    │
│   ╱           ╲                                   │
│  │ Self Valuer │                                  │
│   ╲           ╱                                   │
│    ╰─────────╯                                    │
│                                                   │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

The Nature of Role

It is of immense importance to perceive the essential nature of any role. The means by which this is done will vary from one person to another. One person may perceive the essential nature of a role through an intuitive process. Another person may arrive at accurate conclusions about the spirit of the role through a logical process. The fact remains that effective application of role theory is directly related to the ability to see beyond the outward manifestations of the role. It is necessary to see and experience the real values of the person.

There are many occasions where it is easy to perceive the values of a person. Let us imagine someone who has developed a new strain of tree that will grow at high altitudes, assist in the prevention of soil erosion and provide raw materials for the local people, such as pollen for the local producers of honey. The trees

have been planted in some areas but governments and other groups are apathetic about organising the purchase and planting of the trees in other areas where they are needed. The inventor persists in negotiating. This person is motivated by a vision of people co-operating together in the sharing of their knowledge, in the creation of better technologies and of greater resources for local communities. Here is a person who values human life to a great degree, someone who in fact loves life, loves other human beings. This is what motivates them. It is this which gives vitality to their functioning as an inventor and as a creative organiser with local communities and agencies.

The essence of any role or role cluster is a set of values or a map of the universe. This map or picture of the way life works is the central controlling element in any role we enact. The map of the universe that is held by a creative person includes creative people building up one another as they work or play together. By contrast a resentful person lives in accordance with a quite different map of the universe.

There are many occasions when the essential nature of a role is not obvious. In such cases it may be possible and appropriate to explore the different dimensions of the here and now situation by bringing about expression of what is not being said and done outwardly. The bringing to the fore of the hidden thoughts, feelings, and aspirations which are above and beyond what a person is expressing in life itself and the deeper exploration of this expression makes apparent the different maps of the universe. Such exploration of what may be termed surplus reality may involve re-experiencing when a particular role first came to birth, when a particular map of the universe was first formed, and becoming acquainted with the warm up process of the individual as well as with the social and cultural matrix in which the events took place.

The Nature of a Role Revealed in a Dramatic Enactment

In one group session Mary was very keen to become aware of what was motivating her and if necessary to develop a more productive set of values and she was willing to go to great lengths in this regard. She became a protagonist in a dramatic enactment which involved several scenes. As the drama proceeds there is interaction between Mary who wants to get on living her life in a productive way and Mary the waif. Throughout the entire section

reported here Mary is interacting with herself and the director from time to time has her reverse roles such that she experiences to a much greater degree the different aspects of her functioning and develops a relationship between these two aspects. The report includes everything that was said in the session as well as the major aspects of non-verbal functioning.

Mary:	(Moves closer to the waif. Puts a hand out.)
Director:	Reverse roles.
Mary as Waif:	(Cries a good deal.)
Director:	Reverse roles.
Mary:	(Reaches out again. Cries with the waif. Still pulls away quite a bit.)
Director:	You probably want to say something to her.
Mary:	Yes. It doesn't make any sense. I can't make any sense. (To the director) Can't you see she's dead.
Director:	She's dead.
Mary:	(Cries, screams, hits hard on the ground.)
Director:	Reverse roles.
Mary as Waif:	(Cries.)
Director:	(Sensitive.) Yeah, what's that?
Mary as Waif:	It always goes away. (Cries.)
Director:	It always goes away. Reverse roles.
Mary:	(Touches and strokes the waif a little bit. Cries.)
Director:	Spit it out. What is it you want to say to her?
Mary:	(Looks mournful, is quiet.)
Director:	What is it now that you want to say? What is it in you now?
Mary:	It's just that I want to let you know I'm here. I'm here.
Director:	Reverse roles.
Mary as Waif:	(Cries more, cuddles up to the auxiliary, is calmer.) I feel so alone, so scared. (Cries more and keeps cuddling up.)
Waif:	I don't want to be a burden and I always have been.
Director:	Reverse roles.
Mary:	(Warms up to being with the waif.) Not quite. Locked up in a dark cape.

Director:	(He sits, lets himself be with the protagonist.)
Mary:	(Warm and close.) I'm really sorry.
Director:	Reverse roles.
Mary as Waif:	(Cuddles up.)
Director:	So you know she's sorry.
Mary as Waif:	I need to breathe. I need to breathe.
Director:	Reverse roles.
Auxiliary as Waif:	I need to breathe.
Mary:	(Cries, looks at her.) I didn't want to do it to you. You were just so ugly. I'm sorry.
Waif:	(Angrily.) Don't hold me down!
Mary:	I don't know what to do! (Sounds petulant.)

(The audience objects. The director instructs her to be with her as she has been doing.)

Mary:	(Cries.) I was protecting myself.
Auxiliary as Waif:	(Cries.) Why did you have to do it that way?
Mary:	It was the only way I knew. (Screams.) Because everything else was wrong.
Auxiliary as Waif:	You crushed me to death or you tried to.
Mary:	You got me into trouble all the time. And I was scared. I thought if I did it my way everything would be alright. (Cries.) I'm sorry.
Auxiliary as Waif:	What have you got now?
Mary:	A shadow. (Cries.) A ghost. A voice that screams forever. And I hurt it.
Director:	Reverse roles?
Mary as Waif:	I'm not going to let you do that to me anymore. (Shouts loudly.) I'm never going to let you do that to me again! I knew you'd hear me eventually.
Director:	Reverse roles.
Mary:	(Sits with her close.) What a mess. (She says she wants to keep doing it and has bad habits and says: "Good" when she is told by the waif that she will not be allowed to do it again. Cries.) I feel very sad. (Cries more.) I don't feel haunted … just very sad. (Takes the hand of the waif and they are together.) I feel very sad. Sad for what's been that I can't change. I've tried

> my whole life trying to do what my father wanted
> and now he's dead ... Because I was big and because
> I was ugly. And the truth is he always cared, in his
> own way ... I have this awful feeling that he died not
> knowing that I loved him and appreciated him ... not
> fully ... because I keep so much locked inside. So here
> I am thirty-eight years old. I am like a child who can't
> talk ... it's sad. But I suppose it's not irredeemable.
> (She starts to laugh and the group smiles and laughs.)

(Mary looks warmly at the director and is satisfied.)

Director: How about you come over here and we'll finish now.

Mary: Sounds like a good idea.

In this enactment the protagonist makes a strong positive connec-
tion with herself. She acknowledges that she had been scared, that
she had moved away from herself, and she expresses her sorrow
about having done this through expression of deep feeling. She
commits herself in a convincing way to not moving away from
herself again. The action portion of the session concludes with the
protagonist laughing and with the group smiling and laughing.
The director announces that the session will be finished now and
he organises the sharing phase of the session.

This is a worthwhile enactment. It was extremely satisfying to
the protagonist and to everybody in the audience and, in addition,
extremely satisfying to the director.

The re-integration or sharing phase of the session

The members of the group were able to perceive the essence of
what Mary was doing and this is reflected in the comments which
different group members made. The following is a record of what
some of the group members said immediately at the conclusion of
Mary's dramatic work.

Inga: For me it was really great to see you unfolding, little
                by little. I feel that about my life, that I've stuffed so
                much up and I feel a lot of burden. I was thinking of
                myself with my children, not wanting to be a burden.
                I feel like that in the group quite a lot so it struck a
                deep cord in me.

Jane: I see you struggling to bring the formless into aware-
                ness and I struggle with that and I like seeing the life

	force come out. I like the tantrum. And am amazed at you keeping on going.
Nadine:	The images and symbols got me going and took me into a timeless space. Powerful images. The images for me were so large, bigger than this life. It was good.
Mary:	I feel like I have been there and back again. (Chuckles.)
Ellen:	I am amazed. I feel like there are times in my life when I feel haunted. I can't relate it to myself except that I must listen to myself. I must hang in there with myself. The other thing I had as a child was the dream of falling eternally and I would be screaming in my sleep.
Inga:	The other thing I was reminded of was the difficulty of staying there with so much pain. I was amazed at you doing this.
Don:	I identified with the director fixing things up and I thought of a saying of the Sufis: "Adam was in the valley and we must let him weep."
Director:	I appreciated your ability to keep going into the unknown. I have grown up with the feeling of ugliness growing up and I have side-stepped it and still do partly.
Ellen:	I felt reassured when Mary cried such a lot. I cry a great deal myself.
Director:	It was good for me to just let it evolve and be comfortable with that. And I had this voice in my head: "Is there an intervention that will make it more possible for her to do what she needs to do?"
Mary:	That's the first time I have just let it be ... I usually struggle. I felt substance ... A feeling of me there.

In the dramatic situation described the set of emotions and feelings and the set of actions displayed by Mary are the outward manifestations of her map of the universe. In this particular session the different elements of her functioning are becoming more congruent with one another, they are being harmonised into a unified, working system. Mary is generating within herself an experience of living satisfactorily in accordance with a new map of the universe and this is the basis of a profound and lasting

development. The old map of the universe is being dropped and the old sets of emotions and actions are becoming irrelevant and so these will gradually disappear.

Concluding Remarks

A number of role descriptions have been listed in this chapter with a view to stimulating the ability to accurately observe human beings as they engage in their life and work. Roles and role relationships have been presented in diagrams which convey an immediate impression of what is happening. The nature of a role has been illustrated through presentation of the discoveries made by a person in the course of a drama. In the next chapter role descriptions of individual roles are presented in the context of more complex systems of role relationships, and thus their function as basic building blocks in the analysis of personality and relationship systems is made obvious.