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## **Freedom to act in new ways: The application of Moreno's spontaneity theory and role theory to psychological coaching**

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### **Abstract**

Moreno's concepts of role and spontaneity offer a useful methodology for psychological coaching. A central principle in Moreno's approach is that strengthening spontaneity and creativity through free-flowing enactment of a person's core concerns can produce the conditions that generate new and constructive responses to problematic situations. A coach, trained in Moreno's approach, can apply the concepts of role and spontaneity to promote and develop healthy functioning by helping clients access their capacity for self-direction, experimentation, self-review and purposeful action. This paper presents the principles of role-training and illustrates its application in an individual coaching context.

Based in existential philosophy and methodology of the theatre, role training is a particular application of psychodrama that works to "bring about the development of specific, limited aspects of human functioning so that a person's professional or personal goals are achieved more adequately" (Clayton, 1994, p. 142). The psychodramatic method operates from the principle that role-play enactment of a person's core concerns can produce the conditions in which the person is able to create new and constructive responses to the situation. J. L. Moreno, the founder of psychodrama and sociometry (Hare & Hare, 1996; Moreno, 1993/1934), proposed that people with heightened spontaneity discover their own way of functioning healthily, adequately and appropriate to their environment. He experimented with role relationships, taking account of intention, personality, and social influences (role theory), and freedom to act and mindfully create (spontaneity).

The Moreno (1961) concept of role is central to his philosophy. Role is understood holistically as a person's specific way of being himself or herself in any given situation. The Morenian paradigm considers that personality emerges from the roles enacted, with an individual's constructs of how the world of people operates guiding the organisation of their role repertoire (Clayton, 1992, 1994). Role

training builds on healthy functioning, or on progressive roles, which may be adequate to the situation, rudimentarily developed, overdeveloped, conflicted, or even absent. The task is to identify the specific functioning requiring development, focussing tightly on the role or aspect of role for which greater efficacy is required.

Moreno (1993/1934) proposed that spontaneity is the freedom to mindfully generate and direct responses to meet a situation with vitality, creativity, originality, adequacy and flexibility. When spontaneity is low there will be a lack of role flexibility, while increased spontaneity activates a person's innate creativity and generates new, more effective roles. Central to the building of spontaneity within a role-training session and the subsequent development of new roles, are the processes of (a) warm-up, (b) enactment and (c) integration. These will be discussed in the following section, and then illustrated in a case example.

### **Three phases of role training**

A role-training coach views each session as having three main phases: warm-up, enactment and integration. Warm-up focuses on investigating the area of concern so that the client is energised and engaged in the process. Enactment focuses on generating

spontaneity and creativity to explore possibilities, and integration focuses on promoting equilibrium, consolidation and embedding new roles into existing ways of being. The dynamic process of “warm-up–enactment–integration” is re-iterated within each phase, to maximise creativity and conscious learning at each stage.

#### *Warm-up phase*

The warm-up phase begins with an inner warm-up process focused on investigating a specific area of relating. In this phase the coach interviews the client to help them clarify their purpose, target the problem area and collaboratively identify the situation that will be the focus for the investigatory enactment. The intention of the enactment within the warm-up phase is to produce conditions that evoke a powerful experience of being in the actual situation itself. This stimulates awareness of the affective, cognitive and behavioural processes inherent in the situation (McVea, 2006). The client is invited to set the scene and play his or her own role and those of others in the scene. Once each new role is taken and played, roles are reversed several times so that enactment reveals the dynamics of the relationship. Client role reversal with significant others has been found to reduce inhibitions, clarify cognitions and make manifest previously hidden relationship information (Kipper & Uspiz, 1987; McVea, 2006). Role reversal also increases empathy, thus creating the possibility for healthier relationships (Bohart, 1977; McVea, 2006).

When the scene is acted to a point where significant difficulty is experienced by the client the enactment is stopped by the coach. The coach then works to promote the client’s awareness of their discomfiting experience. Integration of discomfort awareness and consciousness of when and how it emerged provides a base from which to enter the second phase. The client and coach reflect on the investigative enactment; often the coach offers to mirror back to the client significant interactions from the scene, to assist the client’s awareness of their process. Mirroring in group settings is done through enactment by group members. A similar experience can be produced in the consulting room by the coach and the client standing together facing the scene where the role-play has just been performed, and recalling the interaction in replay imagination. Mirroring has been found to assist cognitive processing of experience and to facilitate integration (Reekie, 1997). Heightened awareness of the relationship dynamics inherent in the situation being explored may bring about strong and painful feelings, or may bring relief from anxiety. On occasions the client develops enough spontaneity

and creativity in this phase to try an alternative response immediately. In such a case the coach warmly supports such experimentation, while continuing to hold an investigative stance and promoting an atmosphere that facilitates playful exploration, without expectation of immediate success. If an adequate response is achieved, the session moves on to the final phase of integration. If the experimental response is not adequate then the phase of enactment is entered.

#### *Enactment phase*

The enactment phase focuses on generating a range of possibilities. The earlier enactment is reviewed to warm up to healthy functioning and to discern areas of difficulty. Purposefully attending to healthy functioning orients both client and coach to viewing the client as a competent adult with existing resources, spontaneity and creativity, and this frame of reference is useful in encouraging open-minded exploration. Client and coach dispassionately and purposefully build on the client’s established warm-up, assess role relationships and then develop enactment interventions in order to experiment with alternative responses. Clayton (1994) emphasises the usefulness of clients actively participating in an assessment of their functioning, suggesting that this “assists in the development of the organisational ability of a person, as well as appreciation of the self” (p. 142).

Investigative assessment is an active and interactive process in which the client can mentally observe re-enacted scenes, be affected by them and enter into a discussion focused on relationship dynamics and the systems in the situation. Discrete moments of disruption in relationship are identified through mirroring. The purpose is to deepen the client’s awareness of the roles that emerge in relationship to people and the environment. The assessment identifies whether roles are progressive, absent, rudimentary, overdeveloped or conflicted.

Enactment interventions promote spontaneity and creativity for playful exploration of alternatives. In a group setting this is done by a client modelling a variety of responses enacted by other group members. In the one-to-one setting (Hirschfeld & McVea, 1998) client and role-trainer experiment together acting how they imagine others might respond. The client may be asked to consider who in the world might do it differently, and unusual or provocative role models might be purposefully chosen. Anything can be tried. This is not about finding the best way but rather to generate a range of possibilities. The client’s experimentation deepens their experience of the situation and expands their capacity for creative imagination. Integration within the enactment phase

occurs as the client produces new responses and reflects on them. The coach may replay the scene, coaching the client in order to further consolidate and develop a specific role.

### *Consolidation and integration phase*

The consolidation and integration phase begins with a warm-up to the emerging roles. The detailed mirroring and amplification of minute particulars of changes in action and speech, help the client's reflection and appreciation of positive developments. (In a group context, sharing from other members assists integration, and the mutuality re-engages the individual in the group's commonalities.) The strength of the newly developed role is tested through further role-play enactments simulating similar conditions. The purpose here is to strengthen confidence and increase flexibility, with no expectation of having to succeed or create the perfect performance. The client is coached to be mindful of incremental improvements in effectiveness and degrees of freedom, and is encouraged to view real-life experiences as further role tests and opportunities for further role development.

The following case illustrates how the three phases of role training were applied with a client who sought psychological coaching. As with most contemporary approaches to psychological coaching, role training focuses on the present, rather than the influence of the past and is focused on building spontaneity and role flexibility, rather than problem analysis. This is consistent with Moreno's emphasis on the "here and now" that has underpinned his philosophy and methodology since the early 1920s. Moreno recognised that the present experience of "here and now" has a range of intrapersonal realities operating in each person, including transferences from early formative relationships and fantasies. As will be seen in this case example, a strong warm-up to the current situation can produce a deep awareness in the client of the original source of maladaptive functioning. It is then possible to access the past to inform and resource the present, as a platform from which to construct future possibilities.

### **Case illustration**

Matthew is a regional manager working for an international company. He is well regarded locally and is increasingly called upon to present at international meetings. However, he has experienced debilitating anxiety prior to these meetings, which tend to have a highly competitive culture. Matthew had three role-training sessions. Two sessions were intervention sessions prior to presenting at an

international conference; the third was a review session afterwards.

### *Warm-up phase: Focus on investigation of an identified area of functioning*

*Warm-up within the warm-up phase.* Matthew reports that at regional meetings he is able to present confidently to large groups of people, but he feels overwhelmed with a sense of inadequacy and dread as he anticipates presenting to senior executives at international conferences. In discussion with Matthew the coach proposes to commence work with the area where, in the past, Matthew has been most spontaneous. The coach asks him to make a short presentation as if he is speaking to his local team.

*Enactment within the warm-up phase.* Matthew enthusiastically articulates a clear vision for the group. Asked to take the role of a team member, he imagines listening and finds he appreciates the positive impact of Matthew's vision and is willing to be involved. Matthew is alerted to his abilities, his positive relationships, and to his being seen by the coach as a competent professional. Matthew then becomes agitated as he notices the discrepancy between this specific experience and his experiences in international executive meetings.

The coach then asks Matthew to set out the anticipated problematic scene and enact it as though it were happening here and now. The coach asks questions designed to warm up Matthew to the moment he enters the auditorium: where is the presentation happening; what is the atmosphere; who is present? Setting the scene thus expands his awareness of what is happening, and how he prepares himself for the event. Matthew takes on roles of key people as they await his arrival. The coach interviews him as each person to bring out his perception of their expectations and attitudes. He enacts a range of responses: critical, competitive and friendly. He enters into these roles with a high level of spontaneity.

As himself, Matthew becomes aware of growing anxiety and a reluctance to move to the podium. The enactment brings powerfully to life the interpersonal dynamics and Matthew's inner experience of his thoughts, feelings and values. In a moment of action-insight, an experiential event akin to the "aha" moment of gestalt therapy evoked by body movement and relational memory, Matthew becomes aware that the experience feels the same as his experience of being publicly humiliated by his parents as a child. It then occurs to him that being highly self-critical has a positive, protective aspect, in that it guards him against entering situations in which he could be publicly humiliated again.

*Integration of the warm-up phase.* The coach particularly notes where Matthew is most spontaneous and where his spontaneity diminishes. Through action-insight, Matthew identifies specific unhelpful ways of thinking that impede his performance. Matthew becomes acutely aware of the association between formative experiences and his present psychological functioning. In discussion with the coach, Matthew recalls that in international forums he feels himself very much a junior player, and that he tends to perceive others as being critical. Not surprisingly, he then becomes anxious and tends to focus on what can go wrong. Reflecting on the problematic scene Matthew is able to refocus his attention onto his goal of giving a professional presentation, and this helps him regain a measure of confidence.

*Enactment phase: Focus on assessment and generating possibilities*

*Warming up to enactment.* It becomes clear that an underdeveloped aspect of Matthew's functioning is his ability to hold his authority in the face of perceived critical authorities. He realises that adequacy in this area will in fact be of help to him both at work and elsewhere. Drawing on such insights, the role-training intervention is then focused on sustaining his authoritative purpose against his perceptions of critical authorities.

*Enactment at the height of spontaneity and creativity.* Matthew is coached to experiment with his responses to critical authorities in the international meeting context. The coach suggests that Matthew think of other people who may respond to critical authorities in a range of very different ways, and this process creates models for the subsequent role-play experiment. He enacts a number of responses and is then coached to explore and expand each role. During this modelling, or brainstorming in action, Matthew's spontaneity increases. He finds that in fact he enjoys expanding his repertoire of ways to prepare for and to present in high-powered meetings.

*Integration within the enactment phase.* The coach plays Matthew's role while Matthew again takes up the position of a member of the audience to experience possible reactions. He views his performance from multiple audience perspectives. He notices that some of the reactions of audience members are aggressive. However, he also notices that different audience perspectives evoke a range of different responses, including some very positive responses. Matthew is surprised by his discoveries from these role reversals and develops a different awareness of the relationship between himself and the group. He begins to enjoy his experience, successfully

managing situations that had previously elicited high levels of anxiety.

The scene is then replayed with Matthew as himself. He is less spontaneous than in the previous practices but produces a response that is in keeping with his generally quiet style, and which is adequate for the situation. He is pleased. This concludes the first session.

*Integration phase: Focus on consolidating and integrating a new role or aspect of role*

In the second session Matthew warms-up to integration, reporting greater confidence about the upcoming presentation. However, he is also concerned that he may not be able to maintain this confidence. While he is no longer experiencing debilitating anxiety, the new role is not as yet comfortably or fully integrated. Between sessions Matthew has been reflecting on his relationship to authority in general and with his father in particular. He left home as an adolescent after a violent altercation with him. He says: "I have never heard my father say he approves of me" and identifies two areas for role development: being able to accept praise and being able to manage strong feelings.

*Enactment towards integrating contaminating youthful echoes.* A psychodramatic encounter is proposed between Matthew and his father, meeting as adults in the present. In taking the role of the critical father Matthew becomes aware that his father is in fact proud of his son. Matthew role-plays his father, and expresses this pride. Roles are then reversed and receiving this message in the role reversal Matthew has an overwhelming emotional experience. He tries to control his response and discovers a significant maladaptive belief: "If I don't suppress my feelings I will explode like I did when I was 15". Matthew is coached to express his affection for his father and his grief for the lost years of what might have been in their relationship. He does this with strength of feeling and clear intent.

*Integration for consolidation within the integration phase.* Matthew experiences acceptance and warmth between himself and his father. He becomes more open to his positive experiences with authority and to increasing confidence in his ability to manage his feelings. Matthew strengthens his readiness to maintain a positive purpose, to manage his feelings and take authority when meeting authority.

*Review process*

*Review of his achievements and a healing connection build up integrative and consolidating processes.* Several weeks later in a third session, Matthew reviews

his participation in the international executive meeting. He is very satisfied with his presentation and the positive response he received. More importantly from his perspective, in the same period he had a meeting with his father, and in this his father had spontaneously recognised and applauded Matthew's recent work achievements. Matthew reports that the role-play enactments have helped resolve his need for his father's approval. This seems to have provided an opening for his father to relate to him in a new way. The role-training intervention had a specific impact on his performance at the meeting as well as an impact on his functioning in his life in general.

### Conclusion

With its focus on healthy functioning and collaborative relationships, role training offers an approach to psychological coaching that can be applied in a wide range of contexts. The case study illustrates the dynamic process of warm-up, enactment and integration that is central to the method. Playful exploration and mindful analysis of role relationships can assist people to access greater spontaneity and creativity in their responses to challenging situations.

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