

ROLE-PLAYING IN THE INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOTHERAPY INTERVIEW

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Role-playing used for psychotherapeutic purposes as in psychodrama, and for training and practice as in sociodrama, was developed by J. L. Moreno (1) in about 1920. It is an immediately useful technique in that it deals with actual interpersonal behavior, i.e., interaction. It can be used by therapists of any school of psychology, each working from his own frame of reference.

Moreno's technique fits, particularly well with Adler's theory and practice, for both men emphasize the social embeddedness of the individual. Since Adlerian psychotherapy is largely re-educational, role-playing can be instrumental within it, by affording opportunities for practice and training as well as bringing about insight regarding one's own purposes, abilities, and mistakes and those of others.

Role-playing in its various forms is ordinarily used in group psychotherapy, but it may be an effective technique in the individual interview, particularly with highly resisting and noncooperative individuals. This paper will report several forms in which I have used the technique in this way.

PLAYING ONE'S OWN DOUBLE

Mrs. L., 23 years old, left her home (mother was a widow) at the age of 17. At almost 19 she married. The couple lived in the Greenwich Village section of New York City. Soon after her son was born, she and her husband separated. In a short time she was living a rather loose life, though she did have a job as a stenographer.

She had begun treatment with group psychotherapy but was so hostile to the rest of the patients that she was referred to another therapist for individual guidance. Here again she resisted every interpretation and suggestion. Soon this therapist also found her too defiant and referred her to me.

When she came to me, her son was three years old. She was worried about his future, but she could not decide whether to continue living in her rather sordid environment or move to a more respectable neighborhood.

As discussion would be difficult owing to her "No" complex, the tendency to reject or oppose every suggestion, I placed a chair next to hers and said, "When you sit in your present chair, you are Mrs. L. who wants to leave Greenwich Village. When you move to the chair alongside of you, you are Mrs. L. who wants to stay. Now start your own discussion with yourself." Again and again I placed her in situations wherein she played a double role. She debated with her own conscience long enough to make her own decisions and become aware of her overt and hidden purposes.

SELF-APPRAISAL ROLES

Anxiety pertaining to job application. Mr. A. graduated from evening college. He specialized in business administration. He had always had fears of inability to cope with new situations and of assuming responsibility. He dreaded applying for a job.

MR. A. (*in the role of a friend who is trying to place him in the concern where this friend works*). Well, he has what it takes. For eight years he went to evening college, one that specializes in business administration. He graduated with high marks and . . .

THERAPIST (*in the role of personnel manager*). O.K.! O.K.! His diploma assures his having had good training. Sure he had high marks. I can buy brains. I want to know what sort of person he is.

MR. A. He has stick-to-itiveness. He has a fine sense of humor. He's cooperative. (*Gives illustrations.*)

We reversed the roles, with Mr. A. playing the personnel manager and the therapist playing Mr. A. Then Mr. A. became the job applicant with the therapist in the role of an employer. These scenes were repeated several times with variations.

In the discussion which followed the action, Mr. A. made two comments: "An employer has his problems, too," and, "I suddenly felt confident that I can do things too—especially if I stop worrying about how I look."

School anxiety. Leonard, 9 years old, after being chosen class vice-president, often refused to go to school. In the interviews preceding role-playing, he said he liked being vice-president, but then the "kids got angry at me when I reported them." He feared responsibility. He also revealed his ambition to be in the limelight either as an entertainer or a lawyer.

Scene 1. Leonard in the role of master of ceremonies introduces the famous entertainer Leonard Jones, proclaiming his qualities and capabilities.

Scene 2. Leonard in the role of a graduate of a law school is applying for a job. He meets his possible employer, played by the therapist, to state his qualifications.

The purpose of this role-playing was not primarily to relieve his fear of responsibility but to acquaint Leonard with his motives and his abilities, and to discover sore spots troubling him—as an introduction to a program of therapy.

ROLE EXCHANGE WITH THE THERAPIST

Alex, 15 years old, almost six feet tall, was sent to me by his mother. She complained, "He punches and pushes me around. He calls me ugly, stupid, idiot. Once he loaded his air rifle and threatened to shoot me. In spite of his high IQ, his work in school is poor."

His parents were divorced soon after his birth. As his mother went out to work, she boarded him with different relatives. She herself was extremely neurotic and at one time had been institutionalized in a mental hospital, probably for schizophrenia. Her parents dominated her all the time, and Alex occasionally. They, too, were anxiety-ridden.

Alex came grudgingly and, like many who are forced to go to a therapist, appeared with the attitude, "I'm here. Cure me." He was reticent and sullen, talking in one or two syllables, "Yes. No. Maybe. Don't know." When discussing girls and athletics, he was more voluble, but still rarely spoke in sentences.

This went on during several sessions in which I tried to explain to him his purposes and his life style. Then I said, "You are naturally unhappy in this situation — my questioning, etc. Well, here's your chance to get back at me. You be Mr. Shoops and I'll be Alex."

Alex, in the role of the therapist, appeared delighted and started lecturing, explaining my purposes, etc. While he was doing so, I made a point of answering him fully. In between answers, I soliloquized aloud, "There he goes again. Sure, so I try to be a big shot, pushing my mother around. Sure, so she works hard to support me and is worried about me. She criticizes me, too. So I use her as if I were a baby. So what"!

This scene is what Moreno would call "the warm-up." It puts Alex in the mood for playing the next two roles and for understanding and gaining insight. The effect of the role exchange is intensified with the interpretive soliloquy of the therapist.

VARIOUS REVERSALS

Alex plays the role of his mother who is returning from work tired and hungry.

THERAPIST (*in the role of Alex, as the mother comes in*). Oh you! You come so late and I'm hungry.

We frequently switched roles, thus helping Alex to gain some insight into his mother's side of the relationship.

SOLILOQUY

ALEX (*in the role of his mother who is alone in her bedroom before going to bed*). It is hard on Alex, my coming late . . . hurriedly prepared meals . . . But he is so impatient and so angry at me.

THERAPIST (*as her double*). Why can't he help? He could set the table, etc.

Alex, alone in his bedroom, soliloquizes. While he is so doing, I act at times as his double, at other times as his conscience, etc. The soliloquies and side dialogues are intended to represent Alex's hidden thoughts and feelings, along with his overt ones.

PLAYING TRAIT PERSONIFICATIONS

Mr. K. is a teacher. As he is insatiable in his demand for praise, he always feels deprived. He worries constantly that his pupils (15 to 17 years of age) might like other teachers more than they like him. After several interviews we were able to expose his purposes and life style. But he knew this only intellectually. Therefore, we conducted the following role-playing sessions.

MR. K. (*sitting alone, worrying about his pupils' affections*).

THERAPIST (*in role of Duty, approaches him*). You are their leader and their guide. They need you.

THERAPIST (*in role of Vanity*). Yes, sounds nice but they will forget you. Work for your reputation and personal success, not for ungrateful children.

Then we both assume roles of trait personification. We use a chair to stand for Mr. K. Our roles shift as we become Selfishness vs. Re-

sponsibility, Uselessness vs. Usefulness, etc. Such sessions helped spoil his defenses for failure. Frequently, when feeling sorry for himself and about to appeal for approval, he would think, "I suppose Mr. Shoops would say I'm begging for approval."

ROLE-PLAYING IN VISEODRAMA

In viseodrama (2) we make use of drawings and cartoons, instead of using live persons to act out problem situations.

Jerry, a defiant, disruptive boy of 10 years, for no apparent reason, attacks children, his mother, and others. He has acted aggressively from the age of three. Naturally he has no friends. In school, teachers feared his violent and passive defiances. They were arranging to discharge him as incorrigible.

In sessions previous to the one to be described, we had interpreted his aggressions as a means of being in the limelight and as a struggle for power and revenge. I had told him, "So you try to force people to pay attention to you. People don't want you to boss them. To be important, you must be considerate and respectful of others; you must cooperate."

On one occasion, when the family was going to visit relatives, Jerry refused to dress appropriately. I could have dealt with this situation by a verbal interview or by role-playing, psychodrama. In the latter case, I would have developed the drama as follows:

Scene 1: Jerry presents the original situation. Scene 2: Jerry exchanges roles with the therapist. Scene 3: Each would show how he would like the other to act in the original situation. Scene 4: Jerry would show how he would act now.

Instead, since Jerry at times objected to psychodrama, and since he is an avid reader of comics, I suggested that he present this incident in cartoon form. I drew the first figure, and he did the rest. In all, the following five figures were drawn.

DADDY (*with speech balloon*). Fred, we're going to visit Uncle Bill, right after dinner. Get dressed.

FRED (*with speech balloon*). I'll put on my jeans.

DADDY (*with thought balloon*). I bet he's going to put up an argument.
(*with speech balloon*). Put on your black pants and a jacket.

FRED (*with speech balloon*). I like my old jeans.

DADDY (*with thought balloon*). Boy, he has no respect for his relatives.
(*with speech balloon*). O.K., then stay home, or wear what I told you to.

Because of the satisfaction Jerry gained from his successful cartoons, he now willingly went through the role-playing Scenes 3 and 4 indicated above.

In the cartoons Jerry plays a double role, that of himself and that of his father. In psychodrama, we frequently assign a patient two roles at the same time, sometimes using two chairs, as in the case of Mrs. L. above who played her own double.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We have found the following ways effective for employing role-playing or psychodrama within the individual psychotherapy interview. The patient may play his own double; he may attempt self-appraisal through some one else's role; the patient and therapist may reverse their roles; they may take the roles of other significant persons; they may soliloquize in various roles; they may play trait personifications; or the patient may play roles through drawing cartoon figures, with their thoughts and words written into thought and speech "balloons."

Through role-playing we can manipulate situations so that the patient can meet those he has faced poorly, or those that he may face. Thus we can help a child or an adult gain the experience he needs for self-realization. However, we precede and close all role-playing sessions with an interview, which is essential in helping the patient to crystallize his feelings and purposes. Through these methods we can provide the patient with opportunities for practicing social skills, for meeting difficult situations, and for taking responsibilities. We can help him gain insight into himself and be aware of others.

REFERENCES

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