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# A Beginners Guide to Role Training - by A Beginner

(Francis Horn) 1996

## Who developed it?

- Founder and pioneer of psychodrama, sociodrama, sociometry and many forms of group work was Jacob Levy Moreno. Born 1889 in Romania, studied medicine (and psychiatry) in Vienna.
- Began the 'Theatre of Spontaneity' in 1921, where he experimented with improvisational drama. Then used the methods in smaller groups for personal and interpersonal problems.
- Moved to work and live in America in 1925. Set up a sanitarium in New York using psychodramatic methods for patients suffering a variety of illnesses, particularly mental illness. Trained nurses and others in the method. (Psychodrama currently used in some hospitals, where they have a 'Resident psychodramatist' - and in New Zealand as well.)
- Married Zerka in 1949 - she still practices and teaches in America. Moreno "decided to die and stopped eating" in May 1974. (Blatner)

## What is a role?

Although we play many socially or culturally defined roles, such as: mother, brother, colleague, boss etc., we play a vast number of other roles in our lives, which can change from moment to moment. The naming of roles in the role training context, aims to capture more of the individuality of the person, in whatever they are doing. For example, a 'courageous leader' or 'willing playmate' or 'concerned advisor' could all be role descriptions of someone who is playing the role of 'mother'.

Moreno's role theory encourages us to look at the whole person, to have a broad picture of them in the world. Therefore, apart from looking at these more individual role descriptions, we consider the three components which make up any role: thought, feeling and action. When we observe someone in a role training session, we can encourage their development in these three components of the role they are developing. For example, someone may be over-developed in the thinking part of their role, and by engaging their feelings, may have a breakthrough in how they perceive the world in that role.

The cluster of roles we have in our repertoire will include 'coping' roles, which we may use when experiencing stress, or which we immediately turn to in certain situations. For example, in the role of mother, I might find I habitually engage the role of 'stern disapprover' when my child expresses anger. As we move through life, we often realise those seemingly automatic coping roles, no longer serve us in a useful way, or frustrate us and our relationships. We feel the need to integrate new roles in our functioning, to help us respond to those new situations. As Moreno said, we need to look for “new responses to old situations, and adequate responses to new situations.”

### **What is role training?**

Role training is an action method that uses the principles of role theory and particular techniques developed by Moreno. Role training aims to assist individuals improve their functioning in a specific, chosen area of their lives.

Role training is useful in the training and development context. It is not 'personality' training and is not as 'transformational' as classical psychodrama.

“ . . . it is a valid principle that when a person functions more adequately in one small area of their personality . . . many other areas of their personality also start to function better.” (Clayton)

### **Who is involved?**

Role training is conducted in a group, with one individual at a time working on the aspect of themselves they wish to develop. This individual can be referred to as the 'protagonist'. The person who leads and guides the session is usually referred to as the 'director'. These terms come from the field of drama - and are used in psychodrama - as it is an action-based method. Likewise, the part of the room where the action occurs is called the 'stage' or 'action space'.

We refer to the rest of the group as the 'audience'. When an audience member (or members) is chosen by the protagonist to assist in their enactment, or role training session, that person is referred to as an 'auxiliary', or 'auxiliary ego'.

## The Basic Role Training Procedure

The steps involved can be summarised as follows:

1. Purpose
2. Action
3. Assessment
4. Intervention
5. Role test
6. Sharing

### *1. Purpose*

After the group is 'warmed up' to the purposes and benefits of using role training, the director establishes the purpose of a session with a protagonist. They identify the area of development that is of concern to the protagonist, and generally establish what will be achieved eg. to identify the first thing that happens to the protagonist, which causes them to take on the role of 'stern disapprover' when their child expresses anger.

“In most role training sessions, it is best to focus on one small element. This means the focus of attention can be kept very sharp and clear . . . [and the] session itself can be completed in a brief span of time.” (Clayton, 1992)

### *2. Action*

The protagonist will then enact the situation, after setting up the stage to represent the room or place where the action occurs. The director will take note of and draw attention to the critical moment in the enactment.

### *3. Assessment*

The director will assist the protagonist to make an assessment of what happened in the enactment ie. what worked well for them, where they felt stuck, when they didn't know what to do etc.

### *4. Intervention*

The director then chooses from a range of possible interventions to assist the protagonist. The protagonist may actually make their own assessment, realise what would assist and re-enact the scene.

Otherwise, the director may choose from the following methods: coaching, mirroring, modelling and role reversal.

*Coaching*: a way of encouraging the protagonist, or instructing them, from the director's role of "wise person". Eg. "I believe that in this situation it's OK for you to say what's true for you."

*Mirroring*: the director will ask an auxiliary to repeat what the protagonist has said or done, while the protagonist observes this 'mirroring' from outside the action space. The director will then interview the protagonist with such questions as "how does it feel when you observe this? What do you think that person needs in this situation?" This is a useful method if the protagonist expresses such things as "I don't understand; I can't see what to do next."

*Modelling*: Here, the director asks if members of the audience could enact what they might do in the situation. They are offering their experiences and ideas to the protagonist. They do this in a brief, succinct manner, with no evaluation of their modelling. The protagonist then considers which, if any, of these models suits them, and will often be inspired to try something new anyway. This is a useful method if the protagonist says "I don't know what to do."

#### 5. *Role test*

Now the protagonist re-enacts the situation, with the new knowledge and insights they have. They may have a number of attempts, depending on the initial agreement on purpose. Perhaps more mirroring will assist.

#### 6. *Sharing*

The members of the audience share what the experience was like for them - how the enactment touched them, what memories or thoughts it conjured for them, and how they can relate to it.