

Kellerman, F. (1994) Role Reversal in Psychodrama in *Psychodrama Since Moreno, Innovations in Theory and Practice*, (Eds) P Holmes, M Karp & M Watson, pp 262 – 279, Routledge, London.



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# Role reversal in psychodrama

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Mary stands facing her mother with her hands outstretched and weeping, urging her mother to look at her. But mother doesn't respond. Mary says: 'Look at me, mother!' But her mother is preoccupied with herself and looks away. The daughter is asked to take the role of her mother and, in that role, she says silently: 'If I only knew how to convey my love to you, I would hold you.' And with tears rolling down her cheeks, Mary looks at the person in front of her who is herself and embraces her for a long while, and while holding on to the person who again becomes her mother, Mary is finally able to let herself feel maternal affection.

This is role reversal, a technique typical to psychodrama, and it is one which is considered by many practitioners as the single most effective instrument in therapeutic role-playing. According to J.L. and Z.T. Moreno (Moreno *et al.* 1955), such a procedure is important not only for interpersonal socialisation with others, but also for personal self-integration. It may thus facilitate the often painful separation of children from their parents and parents from their children, leaving both free to love the other for whom they really are. As such, role reversal resembles a re-enactment of the process of separation and individuation (Mahler 1975).

In this Chapter, I will briefly sketch the history of the concept and technique of role reversal, clarify its meaning, indicate the abilities necessary for its proper use and differentiate between two forms of the technique – the reciprocal and representational role reversals – which have somewhat different goals and may be regarded as functioning within two different theoretical frames of reference.

## **HISTORY**

As with most techniques borrowed from the theatre, role reversal has a long history; it has been used in fairy tales, mythology, drama and in

literature throughout the centuries. Furthermore, role reversal has always been a natural and integral part of children's role-playing. It is therefore not surprising that the young Moreno started to experiment with role reversals when he played with children in the gardens of Vienna around 1908. According to Marineau (1989: 46), Moreno later used some role reversal when he put himself in the role of Zarathustra's 'self', thus adapting Socrates' method of teaching through dialogue in a protocol called 'The Godhead as Comedian'.

According to Carlson-Sabelli (1989), the first actual referral to role reversal was described, but not named, by Moreno (1914) in his poem on encounter;

A meeting of two: eye to eye, face to face  
And when you are near I will tear your eyes out  
and place them instead of mine  
and you will tear my eyes out  
and place them instead of yours  
then I will look at you with your eyes  
and you will look at me with mine.

(Moreno 1914)

This poem may be regarded, not only as the spiritual foundation of role reversal, but also as the philosophical basis of Moreno's existentialist view of life, reflecting his deep belief in direct, reciprocal meetings between people who take the roles of one another. Buber's treatise 'I and Thou' conveys a similar message, urging people to encounter one another as if 'I-act-You and You-act-I' (Buber 1923: 73).

After his move to America in 1925, Moreno became greatly influenced by the social psychologists and pragmatists J.M. Baldwin, W. James and J. Dewey who emphasised the social nature of human development and C.H. Cooley and G.H. Mead who talked about the self in terms of roles acquired by the outside world (Moreno 1953: lx). While pointing out certain differences between his own theories and the theories of these scholars, Moreno seems to have been greatly inspired by them (see Abele-Brehm 1989; Hare 1986), and he started to operationalise the concept of role reversal and apply the technique, first in educational and industrial settings (Moreno 1953: 325) and later, within psychiatry, as a way of 'objectifying' a psychotic patient (Moreno 1940: 123).

In 1955, the Moreno family published a joint paper, 'The discovery of the spontaneous man' (Moreno *et al.* 1955), which described the technique of role reversal as an aid in child-rearing. It contains many examples of role reversals between the child Jonathan and his parents, e.g. a three-way role reversal between a busy father who talks on the telephone, a child who demands immediate attention and a mother who takes sides with her son. The paper is concluded with twenty-six

hypotheses regarding the dynamics of role reversals, most of them remaining empirically untested to this day. At the time of the publication of Zerka Moreno's (1959) central paper on the basic principles and procedures of psychodrama, role reversal was already established as the *sine qua non* of this method.

Since the pioneering work of J.L. and Zerka T. Moreno, role reversal has been applied to a wide range of settings (Kipper 1986: 161), including, for example, the clinical (e.g. Alperson 1976; Blume 1971), educational (Carpenter 1968), industrial (Speroff 1955; Kelly *et al.* 1957), in the training of interpersonal communication (Johnson 1971b), in the dynamics of bargaining, and in the study of attitude change (e.g. Johnson 1967, 1971a; Johnson and Dustin 1970; Muney and Deutsch 1968). However, in her reinterpretation of the literature, Carlson-Sabelli (1989) found that most research on role reversal involved individuals playing roles of fantasy characters and that there is still insufficient research supporting claims about role reversal between real people.

#### DEFINITION

Strictly speaking, role reversal means precisely what it says: a reversal of roles: a daughter reversing roles with her mother, a husband with his wife, a student with his teacher or a persecutor with his victim. While the (social or 'sociodramatic') roles involved in such role reversals are usually complementary and interdependent – one does not exist without the other – they are also opposites that strive for unity. Each side is encouraged to understand the point of view of its own counterpart and to find a peaceful way of co-existence. According to Brind and Brind role reversal:

naturally compels the protagonist to deepen and to widen his empathic identification with the opponent, just as this same process compels him to see his own self-enactment through the eyes of the adversary or the adversary substitute (auxiliary) who now portrays him.

(Brind and Brind 1967: 176)

It is clear, however, that, within psychodrama, the meaning of role reversal has widened to include also non-complementary, psychosomatic, psychological, psychodramatic and spiritual roles which, according to J.L. Moreno (1953: 75) all together comprise 'the tangible aspects of what is known as "ego"'. Any or all of these 'tangible aspects' may be reproduced within another person and the aspects of the other person may be reproduced in oneself. Blatner and Blatner suggested that 'we are all role-reversing all the time in our minds in a kind of ongoing process for maintaining a sense of social bonding' (Blatner and Blatner 1988: 119). However, while such imaginary role reversal is an essential aspect of all mutual relationships, the particular and unique characteristic of psychodramatic role reversal is

that it is done in action and not only in imagination. The daughter actually puts herself in the physical place of her mother and imitates her mother's body posture, her manner of speech and her outer behaviour, while her mother does the same with her daughter. Such externalisation and concretisation of inner representations facilitate experiential learning, a process which is mostly non-verbal and physical in nature (Bohart and Wugalter 1991).

To 'reverse' means to convert something to an opposite character or position. What is converted or transposed, however, is not entirely clear. Because, though the technique of role reversal seems remarkably simple (Kipper 1986: 161), further examination reveals a complex intrapsychic and interpersonal process involving at least three interdependent processes: (i) empathic role-taking; (ii) action reproduction; and (iii) role-feedback.

First, when two individuals try to enter into the personal worlds of one another, they use whatever empathic skills they have – emotional, cognitive and behavioural – to take the role of the other and 'become' him or her for a while. Such role-taking may start with a superficial imitation, mirroring or modelling, to become a more deep and complete impersonation, identification and introjection of the other person. Like empathy, role reversal begins with the perception of some subtle cues from the other and proceeds through a co-ordinated use of certain mental abilities, including memory, fantasy, and awareness of one's own feelings and thoughts in the role of the other. The first phase of role reversal thus rests largely on intrapsychic experience, involving some comprehending or perceiving what another person is experiencing within. But, while empathy is one of the basic principles in the technique of role reversal, Moreno emphasised that empathy alone cannot explain the process of role reversal: 'concepts like "spontaneity states", "the warming-up process", "tele" and "clustering of roles" are necessary for a proper interpretation' (Moreno 1972: 259).

Second, whether correct or incorrect in their comprehension, the individuals involved in role reversal try to reproduce and report in a subjective manner what they perceived in the other. In the words of Moreno, the person taking the role of the other 'is not only feeling but doing; he is both constructing and reconstructing a present or an absentee subject in a specific role relation. Often it matters little whether the reconstruction is an identical copy of a natural setting, as long as he projects the dynamic atmosphere of the setting; this may be more impressive than its identical copy' (Moreno 1972: 259).

Finally, role reversal involves responses which are based, not only on how I perceive you, but how I perceive how you perceive me, and so forth (cf. Laing 1961). In the third phase of role-feedback, the individuals are required to reflect on their own as well as the other person's responses and on the mutual interaction. The 'observing self' must watch and notice

behaviour 'from the outside' both when being in their own role and in the other person's. As Moreno pointed out, at the same time as people become emotionally involved in one another, 'they are required to observe themselves in action very closely; to register continuously as they warm up to the role what this role does to them and what they do to it' (Moreno 1972: 259).

Obviously, complete role reversal is impossible. We can never fully conceptualise the feelings, attitudes and motives of another person, and much less reproduce what we perceived. We all differ in our ability to put ourselves in the position of another person and in our skill to reproduce the inner experience of that other person in action. The ability to role-reverse is not only dependent on a certain degree of intellectual, imaginative, emotional and interpersonal functioning, but also on role-taking and role-playing skills which are insufficiently developed in many persons. While some people may learn to take the role of another through playful warm-up and spontaneity training, others will have difficulty in role-reversing because of 'mental rigidity' (Sylvester 1970) or unwillingness to suspend disbelief.

The ability to role-reverse properly was viewed by J.L. Moreno and Z.T. Moreno (1955) as essential for the social growth of the child, developing around the age of 3 years when the child leaves the egocentric phase and is able to recognise a 'you' (Leutz 1974). It can only develop if the child itself has received proper doubling and role reversal from the parents (Z.T. Moreno 1975) and it is then 'an indicator of the freedom from the auxiliary ego, the mother and the mother substitute' (J.L. Moreno 1972: 63). The corresponding and congruous psychoanalytic theories of psychosocial development were formulated by, for example, Freud, Klein, Kohut and Mahler who also have important links with social psychology although their proponents do not specifically acknowledge those links.

A further requirement for proper role reversal seems to be a balanced personality, a certain degree of ego strength and ordinary sensory perception. Role-reversal ability grows with personality development, and especially the separation of 'I' and 'You' – the achievement of personal identity and sense of separateness from parents – described below in terms of object relations theory. Moreover, the process of role-feedback requires a differentiation between 'I' and 'Me' – the ability to exist both in the present and to reflect on the experience through an observing self as described below in terms of social psychology. Patients who have severe defects or conflicts in these areas, such as narcissistic, paranoid, psychotic, autistic or severe personality disorders, will have difficulties to role-reverse with real people (J.L. Moreno and Z.T. Moreno 1955; Starr 1977). With such populations, role reversal should be used sparingly or not at all so as not to confuse their limited sense of self. Rather than using role reversal with these patients, Goldman and Morrison (1984) suggested

that the auxiliary be put in role with a 'main message' of the significant other.

Finally, while differences between people may be the very reason for role reversal in the first place, such differences will make it more difficult to role-reverse. In the words of Moreno and Moreno, 'the technique of role reversal is the more effective the nearer in psychological, social and ethnic proximity the two individuals are' (1959: 155). For example, in a recent open session on psychodrama, Barbara who was born in London had difficulty in role-reversing with Li from Vietnam, because she did not understand Li's cultural heritage.

### **THERAPEUTIC VALUE OF ROLE REVERSAL**

The therapeutic value of role reversal is unclear. While most psychodramatists of the classical tradition maintain that role reversal is effective in a wide variety of situations, some psychoanalytic psychodramatists dispute its benefits. For example, according to Basquin and co-workers: 'role reversal is useless, even calamitous, because it disdains the patient's defenses, does not ease the expression of unconscious needs and thus it threatens to block the thematic development' (Basquin *et al.* 1981: 82). In a strong refutation of their thesis, Kruger says that 'role reversal is a means to reduce defense by projection and identification. By structuring and integrating interpersonal processes it leads the individual out of isolation and dissociation' (Kruger 1989: 45).

However, while role reversal should be rightfully regarded as one of the most effective techniques of psychodrama, it should not be used indiscriminately in all situations and for all protagonists. For example, in a case report of a sexually abused adult, Karp was careful not to role-reverse the young woman into any of the male abuser roles because:

to understand the reasons behind their action was not the task of this session. Too many victims get lost in an attempt to understand and forgive. They can trap themselves in a sea of rationalizations from which they may never return.

(Karp 1991: 109)

### **TWO FORMS OF ROLE REVERSAL**

Two major forms of role reversal were differentiated in the literature. The original form, called 'in situ' (Z.T. Moreno 1959: 241), 'proper' (Moreno *et al.* 1955: 141) or 'classical' (Carlson-Sabelli 1989) role reversal, involved at least two real persons, both present, reversing roles with each other. The second form was called 'incomplete' role reversal by Carlson-Sabelli and Sabelli (1984) because one of the persons involved in



the interpersonal situation was absent and represented by a stand-in ('the auxiliary'). I prefer to use the more descriptive terms 'reciprocal' and 'representational' role reversal to differentiate between the two forms, because it is my feeling that the earlier designations: proper/improper, complete/incomplete and classical/modern, convey an unnecessary and erroneous value judgement about the interaction taking place.

The two forms of role reversal have somewhat different goals and may be regarded as functioning within two different theoretical frames of reference. Reciprocal role reversal, based on social psychology, is used mainly as an aid for dealing with people in the outer world, as a way of correcting biased perceptions of other people and receiving feedback of oneself and as an interpersonal conflict resolution technique. Representational role reversal, based on object relations theory, is used more as an aid for the externalisation and interpolation of the inner world of one protagonist. The two forms of role reversal will be further discussed below.

#### **Reciprocal role reversal and social psychology**

Reciprocal role reversal aims at facilitating the process of socialisation, the process of social learning by which people (usually children) come to recognise, practise and identify with the values, attitudes and basic belief structures of the dominant institutions and representatives of their society. As such, reciprocal role reversal may be used to assimilate the social norms (group-defined standards concerning what behaviours are acceptable or objectionable in given situations). The most suitable rationale for this technique may be found within social psychology.

Social psychology maintains that children develop in interaction with their environment and especially with certain important others who either stimulate or inhibit their emotional and cognitive growth as well as their sense of self. These significant others convey an outer social reality with which the child can identify. In the dialogue with this outer social reality, the child becomes an object for itself; thus developing a self as object ('Me'). The self as object, or the social self, is the first conception of a self and grows from the perceptions and responses of other people. Cooley (1902) used the term 'Looking-glass Self' to describe this aspect, which develops from the reflective experience of a person looking at him- or herself through other people as in a mirror. Similarly, Moreno and Moreno (1959) described how children use their parents as natural untrained auxiliary ego objects who help the infant get started in life through mirroring.

Sooner or later, however, the child starts to question its view of outer social reality and the self as subject ('I') develops. This subjective part of the self responds from within, in the here and now, on the spur of the moment. While self as object is conventional, demanding socialisation and

conformity, the self as subject breaks out in spontaneous, uninhibited and sometimes impulsive actions. Mead pointed out that 'it is through taking the role of the other that a person is able to come back on himself and so direct his own process of communication' (Mead 1934: 253).

Indeed, while socialisation is a necessary part of all interpersonal functioning, strengthening the self as subject is an important part of psychodrama. Moreno felt that 'taking the role of the other is a dead end. The turning point is how to vitalize and change the [conserved] roles, how to become a "rolechanger" and "roleplayer"' (Moreno 1953: 691). In reciprocal role reversal, the dialectic process between 'I' and 'Me' is re-enacted so that both objectification and subjectification can again merge and differentiate so that a new intrapsychic balance is achieved. According to Carlson-Sabelli and Sabelli:

role reversal allows the protagonist to become aware of his interpretations and hold them up for re-examination, thereby providing a way to go beyond them. We often uncritically accept what we believe while we interpret and critically evaluate the ideas of others. Through the role reversal, the protagonist sees himself as an object and experiences others as subject.

(Carlson-Sabelli and Sabelli 1984: 166)

From this theoretical basis, reciprocal role reversal may be used to modify biased person perception, to resolve interpersonal conflicts and to increase interpersonal functioning and empathy. These applications will be further discussed below.

#### *Correction of biased perceptions*

The first and most obvious application of reciprocal role reversal is to help two persons understand one another better and to modify whatever erroneous conceptions they may have about the other person. For example, William seemed to be looking at everybody 'from above', as if he felt that he was better than everybody else. But when Eva reversed roles with him, she felt that his apparent distance was more a sign of his low self-esteem and fear of being compared to others in the group. This result of reciprocal role reversal involves a change of the perception of *another* person.

In contrast, reciprocal role reversal can also change the view we have about ourselves. In such cases, the immediate feedback and mirror image of how we are seen by others and why we are treated in a certain manner make our own roles more clear. For example, in a recent psychodrama group, Tom kept interrupting every other group member who was talking. This behaviour annoyed Carin who had difficulties expressing herself in the first place. In a reciprocal role reversal between them, Tom understood and sympathised with Carin's position and later altered his dominating

behaviour. Carin, in her turn, experienced the joy of being the centre of attention which gave her some incentive to later share with the group her old dream of being an actress.

Ideally, role reversal produces a shift in perception so that both persons can see the other and themselves in a new and fresh way. The goal is not 'insight' or awareness in itself, but spontaneity; to look at an old situation differently, or to reorganise old cognitive patterns in a way which facilitates more adequate behaviour (Yablonsky and Enneis 1956). In the words of Zerka Moreno:

the patient has 'taken unto himself' with greater or lesser success, those persons, situations, experiences and perceptions from which he is now suffering. In order to overcome the distortions and manifestations of imbalance, he has to reintegrate them on a new level. Role reversal is one of the methods par excellence in achieving this, so that he can reintegrate, redigest and grow beyond those experiences which are of negative impact, free himself and become more spontaneous along positive lines.

(Z.T. Moreno 1959: 238)

Many examples of reciprocal role reversals reported in the literature concern child-rearing situations between parents and their children. For example, after an argument between a mother and her daughter regarding what clothing the child should wear, role reversal produced the following remark by the mother: 'Am I really as aggressive as Kay portrayed me? My poor Kay!' (Z.T. Moreno 1959: 241). This implies a shift in position of the parent. In contrast, Leutz (1974: 47) reported a situation in which a son did not want to go to bed. After role reversal, the son seemed to accept the position of the mother and went to bed with a smile. Thus, while some of the examples emphasise changing the point of view of the parent and others emphasise a behaviour modification of the child, ideally the procedure will produce a widening frame of reference in both of them.

In a variety of interpersonal situations, people rely on simple judgemental strategies which tend to mislead them. Nisbett and Ross (1980) traced the source of many such inferential errors to the tendency of people to overutilise pre-existing 'knowledge structures,' or 'schemas', which frequently lead to biased judgements about people, to transference, prejudices, stereotyped attitudes and to other faulty causal attributions of behaviour (Heider 1958). In such cases, the aim of reciprocal role reversal is to widen the perceptual field and to correct the earlier 'narrow-minded' interpretations of the world. According to Williams (1989), changing old code books and establishing new ideas is a prime goal of psychodrama. By exploring the belief aspect of a role through role reversal, various attitudes, assumptions, prejudices, convictions and expectations which guide the members in their behaviour are revealed and explored.

For example, when Eva chose someone else to become the protagonist, her friend Marianne was very offended. Marianne attributed Eva's choice to her jealousy over Marianne's privileged position with the leader. However, by altering Eva's and Marianne's perspectives through reciprocal role reversal, they changed their causal assessments and cleared up their misunderstandings.

### *Interpersonal conflict resolution*

Reciprocal role reversal is frequently recommended as a remedy for interpersonal conflict resolution. The assumption behind this recommendation is that if antagonists reverse roles with one another, they will be forced to take a new view of the situation and hopefully reconcile their differences. According to Bratter (1967), this creates a kind of dialectic thesis and antithesis that, if successful, may produce a kind of synthesis or merging of two opposing positions. Williams (1989) argued that the specific value of such a procedure is that it enables a person to embody both sides of the dialectic dyad which is inherent in recurring conflicts.

As an illustration from a psychodrama group, let's consider the following interchange between two group members, Philip and Pamela. It started out by Philip coming late to a psychodrama session. Pamela told Philip that she resented him for not coming in time and that she felt Philip was not serious about the group.

'I don't understand what you are angry about', Philip responded. 'I was in an important meeting and it was impossible for me to come here earlier.'

'Well, then I'll explain', Pamela snapped. 'I expect you to come on time to our sessions, but you always have good excuses for coming late and you don't consider what it does to the group.'

'I'm sorry you are upset', Philip said, 'but you are such a nuisance when you don't get what you want.'

'I didn't come here to be insulted', Pamela yelled, now red in the face and apparently upset. 'You are such an idiot . . .'

'Oh really', Philip said with thinly disguised irritation. 'You're not precisely a genius yourself.'

'Don't "Oh really" me!' Pamela answered, leaning forwards in her chair. 'I'm warning you, Philip, if you don't come in time next week, we will lock the door and leave you outside!'

Philip looked at Pamela with wrathful indignation. 'If you want me out of the group, just say so!'

The friction between Pamela and Philip gradually escalated until it reached a point of mutual resentment. What had started out as a personal disappointment rapidly developed into an open confrontation with mutual misunderstandings, insults and a search for revenge. The interaction surprised the

group who had no idea what had hit it. The group leader, himself startled by the rapid eruption of tensions, tried to remain calm while reflecting on something suitable to say or to do. In an attempt to work out the differences between them, he suggested that Philip and Pamela reverse roles with one another.

After some initial resistance, Philip and Pamela agreed to reverse roles and, as they slowly warmed up to the role of the other, they repeated the earlier exchange of accusations. Before long, however, they started to argue as vehemently as before, but from their opposite positions. When they had finally ventilated their anger and expressed their fantasies about what was going on within the other person, they became silent, looking seriously at one another. It became clear that something else was going on between them besides the apparent fight; a kind of appreciation and attraction of differences. Suddenly they started to smile and Philip (still in the role of Pamela) said:

'You're a bastard Philip! You don't care about anyone except yourself.'

'Well, I'm glad you care about me', Pamela answered in the role of Philip. 'I wish more people would care as much as you do.'

'I'm sorry I hurt your feelings', Philip responded as himself, now falling out of role. 'I didn't know you cared so much!'

'Well, I do', Pamela said, 'that's why I get so offended when you come late. If you want me to continue to care, please come on time next week.'

The goal of reciprocal role reversal is to generate 'tele'; that almost mystical 'two-way feeling' for the 'actual make-up of another person' (Moreno and Moreno 1959: 6). Tele is not based on transference or other displaced feelings and perceptions. It carries with it an authentic meeting, or encounter, in which people take each other for what and whom they are. As such, it can be characterised as a kind of 'inter-personal chemistry' (Kellermann 1992: 102).

However, reciprocal role reversal does not automatically produce a change of mind in any of the involved persons. Unfortunately, positive outcomes of reciprocal role reversals in interpersonal and intergroup conflicts are rare and reconciliation is usually hard to achieve. Rather, it is my experience that two people who are involved in a head-on collision are stubbornly unwilling to truly reverse roles with one another as long as they conceive the other person as an enemy. If they do agree to reverse roles, they do so for a short period of time, repeating the main message of their opponent and then resort to their old position of 'I am right and you are wrong.' Consequently, Moreno's vision that lasting peace between people and nations will be achieved if the capacity to reverse roles is only cultivated, must therefore be considered naive and utopian.

Moreover, Carlson-Sabelli (1989) did not find enough research evidence to verify the assumption that reciprocal role reversal will promote

reconciliation and mutual understanding between parties in conflict (Cohen 1951; Speroff 1955; Rogers 1965; Sylvester 1970; Deutsch 1973). It seems more likely that reciprocal role reversal 'will cause individuals who hold opposing attitudes to come closer together if their initial positions are compatible but will force them further apart if their initial attitudes are incompatible' (Johnson and Dustin 1970: 149). Thus, while we still know too little about the effects of reciprocal role reversal to recommend the blind use of it in all conflictual situations, it is likely that reciprocal role reversal will be more effective in co-operative relations than in competitive ones (Deutsch 1973).

It is my position, dependent on what the fight is all about, that any effort towards interpersonal conflict resolution in psychodrama must take into account at least four levels of intervention (Kellermann 1993): (i) the biosocial-emotional which is based on encounter and the ventilation of aggression; (ii) the intrapsychic which is based on the correction of perceptual distortions; (iii) the interpersonal which is based on mediation and interaction-analysis; and (iv) the group-as-a-whole perspective which is based on sociodrama and group analysis. Reciprocal role reversal would be especially suitable in the second phase in order to reclaim displaced emotions and re-integrate them within oneself (see the following section on object relations theory). It is also suitable in the third phase in which more adequate interpersonal communication can be facilitated, but it should not be regarded as the single, most efficacious remedy for interpersonal tensions.

### **Representational role reversal and object relations theory**

In contrast to reciprocal role reversal which involves two protagonists, representational role reversal is an intrapsychic process, dealing only with one person. The absent other person is portrayed by an auxiliary who becomes the role-reversing partner. Auxiliaries are not only used to portray the roles of absent actual persons, or their inner representations, but also of the protagonist's self (parts or whole), and/or of the inner symbolic world at large. In fact, auxiliaries may portray anyone or anything with whom a protagonist has an inner relationship. For example, in one and the same psychodrama James selected group members to play the roles of his parents, wife and children and also of the part of himself which kept blaming him for not being a good-enough son, husband and father. Later, he also picked someone to play his car, an inanimate object of significant symbolic value. When reversing roles with these inner images, James got an opportunity to externalise his emotional attachments and to learn to deal with them in a more adaptive manner.

Representational role reversal may be understood from the perspective of traditional psychoanalytic concepts and especially from the point of view of psychoanalytic object relations theory (Polansky and Harkins 1969;

Blatner and Blatner 1988; Holmes 1992). Object relations theory has come to refer to a general theory of the structures in the mind that preserve and organise interpersonal experiences. It is based on the assumption that people internalise important people and events which then become representations of anything that was previously perceived; inner pictures or memory images of ourselves (self-representation), of others (object representation) and of the world at large (symbolic representation). Mental representations also include the relations which existed between ourselves and others and the relations between others in varying degrees of veridicality and bound together by affects (Sandler and Sandler 1978). The complete structure of these inner representations, formed in early childhood, develop into an inner drama in which we play all the roles and which continues to influence us in all aspects of life.

Psychodrama, and especially representational role reversal, offers an extraordinarily powerful instrument for the externalisation (and sometimes for the interpolation) of our internalised mental images so that 'they are summoned to life and made to appear in a three-dimensional space' (Sandler and Rosenblatt 1962) as an inner drama on a stage within a theatre. This inner drama may be reconstructed through role reversal so that the images of 'I-and-You' and 'I-and-It' may again be put up for examination.

The main purpose of representational role reversal is not to deal with the realities of the outer world, but to come to terms with one's inner world and to reach some inner peace and self-integration. As a general 'rule', Zerka Moreno suggested that 'the subject must act out "his truth," as he feels and perceives it, in a completely subjective manner (no matter how distorted this appears to the spectator)' (Moreno 1959: 234). This rule, according to Carlson-Sabelli and Sabelli (1984), creates a problem for the psychodramatist who frequently recognises the need of many protagonists to differentiate real perception from misperception. As a general guideline, they agree that psychodramatists should give supremacy to subjective reality but add that objective reality should be given priority in order to enable protagonists to see things as they really are. For example, a patient who was reluctant to receive treatment for a terminal illness had to be helped through role reversal to first recognise objective reality before he agreed to receive treatment (subjective).

Another goal of representational role reversal is to encourage protagonists to take more responsibility for their own decisions. As such, role reversal emphasises the active participation of protagonists in the instillation of change. For example, when Yvonne asked the auxiliary who portrayed her dead mother to forgive her, she was instructed to reverse roles and decide for herself if she was ready for forgiveness or not. In another psychodrama, Eli asked the group leader what to do with his unhappy marriage. But instead of answering Eli's question, the group

leader suggested that Eli reverse roles with the leader and, in this role he said: 'Well, first you have to take a more active role in your life and make your own decisions.' A similar focus on self-direction was conveyed by Ruscombe-King who urged alcohol abusers to reverse roles with 'alcohol'. Talking to an empty bottle of alcohol, Tom said: 'You make me feel lousy!' In the role of 'alcohol', he answered: 'I don't force you to drink me!' (Ruscombe-King 1991: 165).

The ultimate focus on responsibility, however, is of course to role-reverse with God himself. In a case report described by Nolte *et al.* (1975), Cinda asked God: 'Why did you take my father away from me?' While attempting to answer her own question in the role of God, Cinda was confronted with her own conceptions of existence and, by making the death of her father more meaningful, she was provided with some comfort in her grief.

Moreno described the dynamics of representational role reversal in the following eloquent manner:

As the subject takes part in the production and warms up to the figures and figure-heads of his own private world he attains tremendous satisfactions which take him far beyond anything he has ever experienced; he has invested so much of his own limited energy in the images of his perceptions of father, mother, wife, children, as well as in certain images which live a foreign existence within him, delusions and hallucinations of all sorts, that he has lost a great deal of spontaneity, productivity and power for himself. They have taken his riches away and he has become poor, weak and sick. The psychodrama gives back to him all the investments he had made in the extraneous adventures of his mind. He takes his father, mother, sweethearts, delusions and hallucinations unto himself and the energies which he has invested in them, they return by actually living through the role of his father or his employer, his friends or his enemies; by reversing roles with them he is already learning many things about them which life does not provide him. When he can be the persons he hallucinates, not only do they lose their power and magic spell over him but he gains their power for himself. His own self has an opportunity to find and reorganize itself, to put the elements together which may have been kept apart by insidious forces, to integrate them and to attain a sense of power and of relief.

(Moreno 1953: 85)

From the above quote, it is interesting to note that Moreno employed classical psychoanalytic language in his attempt to describe the process of representational role reversal as 'energies invested in inner images'. The emphasis on the internalisation of a good object as a basis for the growth of an independent and integrated self, is apparent. Furthermore, narcissistic processes such as idealisation, splitting, projection, identification and



projective identification, which may be viewed both as pathological and as a part of normal development, all have important functions in the process of role reversal (see Kruger 1989). Thus, we may conclude that representational role reversal in itself functions to facilitate and accelerate the separation-individuation process (Mahler 1975) for the not-too-severely-disturbed patient.

## EPILOGUE

Mary stands facing her 8-year-old daughter who wants to be held by her. But Mary feels uncomfortable with her daughter's clinging and pushes her away. 'I know it is good for you to be close to me and your need is very real. But every time you cling on me, I feel terrible. And when I push you away, I feel even worse because it makes me feel guilty, like I'm rejecting you.' As if searching for a clue of love in mother's eyes, the daughter looks at Mary with penetrating and reproaching eyes. Mary says: 'I love you! But I can't stand it when you stare at me like that!' In role reversal, Mary looks at herself as if in a mirror. She wants her mother to hold her and to look at her and she stares at her in order to catch a glimpse of her mother's eyes. 'Please, look at me mother . . .'. But, in the middle of the sentence, she becomes silent. Mary is again thrown back to her own childhood and her own mother's rejection. Grandmother is then brought into the scene. Mary says that grandmother has an intuitive, warm relation to Mary's daughter. Mary watches as grandmother and daughter embrace, and then she joins them and they start to move, including all generations of mothers and daughters in their dance.

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