

ROLE THEORY AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE SELF

J. L. MORENO, M.D.

Moreno Institute, New York, N.Y.

HISTORY OF THE ROLE CONCEPT

A new body of theory developed in the last thirty years which aimed to establish a bridge between psychiatry and the social sciences; it tried to transcend the limitations of psychoanalysis, behaviorism and sociology. One of the most significant concepts in this new theoretical framework is the psychiatric role concept.

It is a "myth" that the American sociologist, G. H. Mead, has had a major influence upon the development of the "psychiatric role concept" and its psychopathology. The formulation and development of the psychiatric role concept and of role playing techniques is the exclusive domain of the psychodramatists. This includes all forms of psychodrama from the extreme non-analytic to the extreme analytic versions, in the U.S.A., France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Japan and India. It is the psychodramatists who have not only formulated the concept but have initiated and carried out extensive empirical and clinical research for nearly forty years. G. H. Mead's posthumous book, *Mind, Self and Society*, appeared in December 1934, about a year later than Moreno's *Who Shall Survive?* which was released in January 1934. At no time does Mead use the term role player, role playing or role playing techniques or deal with the psychopathological implications of the role concept. He was an excellent theoretician but never left the plane of theory. Were it left up to him the vast body of role experimentation and role research would not exist. What we psychodramatists did is (a) to observe the role process within the life context itself; (b) to study it under experimental conditions; and (c) to use it as a method of psychotherapy.

EMERGENCE OF THE SELF

"Role playing is prior to the emergence of the self. Roles do not emerge from the self, but the self emerges from roles."* (Quoted from my *Psychodrama, Volume I*, page 157). This is, of course, an hypothesis only, which appeals to the sociometrist and the behavioral scientist but may be rejected

* For extensive discussion of role theory see "Spontaneity Theory of Child Development," *Sociometry*, Vol. VII, 1944, and "Sociometry and the Cultural Order," *Sociometry*, Vol. VI, 1943.

ROLE THEORY

by the Aristotelians, theologians and metapsychologists. The sociometrist will point out that the playing of roles is not an exclusively human trait, but that roles are also played by animals; they can be observed in the taking of sexual roles, roles of the nest-builder and leader roles, for instance.** In contrast, the Aristotelians will claim that there must be a latent self postulated as pre-existing all role manifestations. Were it not for such a self structure, the role phenomena would be without meaning and direction. They must be grounded in something which unites them.

It is possible to reconcile the opinions of the behavioral scientist with those of the philosophers. The infant lives before and immediately after birth in an undifferentiated universe which I have called "matrix of identity." This matrix is existential but not experienced. It may be considered as the locus from which in gradual stages the self and its branches, the roles, emerge. The roles are the embryos, forerunners of the self; the roles strive towards clustering and unification. I have distinguished physiological or psychosomatic roles, like the role of the eater, the sleeper, and the sexual role; psychological or psychodramatic roles, as ghosts, fairies and hallucinated roles; and then, social roles, as parent, policeman, doctor, etc. The first roles to emerge are the physiological or psychosomatic roles. We know that "operational links" develop between the sexual role, the role of the sleeper, the role of the dreamer, and the role of the eater, which do them together and integrate them into a unit. At a certain point we might consider it as a sort of physiological self, a "partial" self, a clustering of the physiological roles. Similarly, in the course of development, the psychodramatic roles begin to cluster and produce a sort of psychodramatic self and finally, the social roles begin to cluster and form a sort of social self. The physiological, psychodramatic and social selves are only "part" selves; the really integrated, entire self, of later years is still far from being born. Operational and contact links must gradually develop between the social, the psychological, the physiological role clusters in order that we can identify and experience after their unification, that which we call the "me" or the "I." In this manner, the hypothesis of a latent, metapsychological self can be reconciled with the hypothesis of an emergent, operational self. This theory is, however, useful in making a mysterious concept of the self tangible and operational. It has been observed that there are frequent imbalances in the clustering of roles within the area of psychosomatic roles, psychodramatic roles or social roles and imbalances between these areas. These imbalances

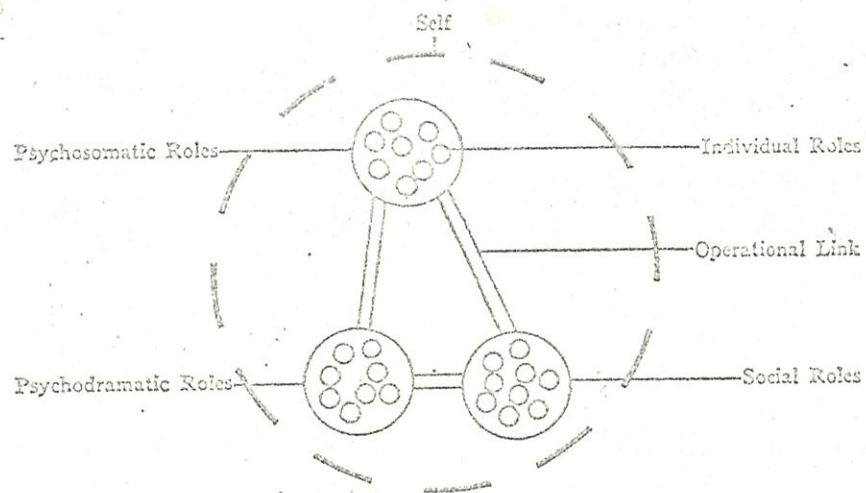
** "Sociometry of Subhuman Groups," *Sociometry Monograph No. 33.*

Group Psychology
Vol. X
No. 2
1912

produce delay in the emergence of an actual, experienced self or sharpen disturbances of the self.

As the matrix of identity is at the moment of birth the entire universe of the infant, there is no differentiation between internal and external, between objects and persons, psyche and environment; it is one total existence. It may be useful to think of the psychosomatic roles in the course of their

SELF-ROLE DIAGRAM

SYMBOLS

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| External, large circle | = Self |
| Smaller circles within large circle | = An area of Roles—Psychosomatic Roles, Psychodramatic Roles and Social Roles |
| Smallest circles within circles | = Individual Roles |
| Double connecting lines | = Operational Link |

transactions helping the infant to experience what we call the "body"; the psychodramatic roles and their transactions, to help the infant to experience what we call the "psyche"; and the social roles to produce what we call "society." Body, psyche and society are then the intermediary parts of the entire self.

If we would start with the opposite postulate, that the self is prior to the roles and the roles emerged from it, we would have to assume that the roles are already embedded in the self and that they emerge by necessity.

Pre-established as they are, they would have to assume forms which are pre-determined in advance. Such a theory would be difficult to accept in a dynamic, changing, self-creative world. We would be in the same position as the theologians of the past who assumed that we are born with a "soul," and that from that original, given soul everything a man does or sees or feels emerges or comes forth. Also for the modern theologian it should be of advantage to think of the soul as an entity which evolves and creates itself from millions of small beginnings. The soul is then not in the beginning, but in the end of evolution.

Article

Role Theory + the Emergence

of Self - J. L. Moreno.

2. death. Vol XV 2 June 1962