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THE USE OF ROLE PLAYING AS AN EDUCATIONAL AND THERAPEUTIC DEVICE WITH THE DEAF

LAWRENCE J. BRICK

INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the applicability of role playing with hearing impaired adolescents and adults. Although not as widely used in general education and therapy as verbal interaction, lectures, and study, role playing may be especially useful with deaf people whose language facilities and experiences are limited. The general background and implications of role playing are discussed along with some of its advantages. Examples are given from the author's experience in working with deaf adolescents in his school's social hygiene program and in personal counseling. It is felt that the usefulness of role playing can be extended to working with the mentally ill deaf, retarded deaf, and those who need vocational guidance and training in social skills. As in most guidance and educational situations, the counselor's or teacher's ingenuity, positive interest, and understanding of his group is of greater value than knowledge of the basic steps or rules of a technique.

Role playing is a method in which problems and situations are acted out by an individual or members of a group. The method of psychotherapy utilizing drama and play acting was originated by J. L. Moreno (1964), who first experimented with psychodrama in Vienna in the early 1900's and found it to be an effective therapeutic and behavior training device. Wolberg (1954) suggested the use of role playing in some types of therapy with the therapist taking the role of individuals with whom the patient seeks to relate on different terms. Hendley, Lippitt, and Zander (1947) experimented with role playing

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as an educational procedure where teaching at the performance- rather than the verbal-level was emphasized. Planned dramatization was used as a method of getting across an educational point, and spontaneous role-taking was employed as a method of getting the students to enact and evaluate their perception of reality in the classroom. Wright (1960) emphasized this method for training the disabled in social skills.

Role playing as a term also has been used interchangeably with concepts such as spontaneity training, sociodrama, reality practice, and play acting. Although different connotations are attached to the terms, they all emphasize the use of performance or acting as an educational or therapeutic tool. Moreno's influences are still being felt in today's modern world. His ideas form the basis of many practical learning programs such as on-the-job training, in-service training, executive training, leadership training, practicum, etc. These programs have in common a belief in the value of exposing the learner to a variety of structured or unstructured situations in a nonthreatening atmosphere where he can learn and experiment with different types of responses at a minimum threat to himself and a minimum cost to the environment that he is preparing to enter.

Some of the advantages of this approach that have been suggested, irrespective of the type of population being worked with, are (Moreno, 1964; Wright, 1960):

1. Role playing gives the learner a chance to try different patterns of behavior with a minimum of personal threat. Ideally, the atmosphere of the acting situation should be warm and accepting rather than critical.

2. Acting out in a therapy situation helps to bring out the conflicts, feelings, and inner fears and wishes that the patient may not be able to verbalize. Through this approach, the patient may desensitize himself to his inner difficulties and work them through with a clearer understanding of himself.

3. Encouraging a person to take on a role which is antagonistic to his own may enable him to develop a better understanding of different viewpoints and to acquire greater flexibility in human relations. For example, rather than ask the person to try to understand how another person feels, the therapist will encourage him to dramatize that particular role. Colloquially, this is described as "putting yourself in someone else's shoes."

4. In a group situation the audience has an opportunity to see roles being played with personal threat being minimized. Verbal interaction

in a group situation has the limitation that the learner tends to restrict himself to "selling" his ideas and defending himself from attack, imagined or otherwise. Sometimes a constructive criticism is interpreted as a personal threat.

5. Often certain situations (e.g. — another person's insult) upset the client. The counselor can re-create those threatening situations by acting them out himself, thereby providing an opportunity for the client to experiment with and learn different types of responses. Sometimes this is referred to as counter-conditioning, for the client learns new responses contrary to his previous responses.

6. Few people are able to see objectively their own behavior and its effect on others. Within their positive relationship, the counselor can act out for the client or reflect on a performance level annoying behavior that is under consideration, thus enabling the client to see himself and react to it.

7. Role playing gives the learner a chance to show what he would actually do rather than merely to discuss what he thinks he would do. Role playing enables the learner to appreciate the meaning of "it's easier said than done."

8. Role playing provides opportunities for bringing a variety of roles and experiences into the learner's world within a short time as opposed to letting him learn from practical experience the hard way over a long period of time.

Before the participants get involved in role playing which can be threatening, it is essential that an accepting and positive relationship be developed between the counselor and the client (or teacher and student). If rapport is to be reached, especially with deaf people, the mode of communication with which the client feels most comfortable should be used. The communication method may be oral, finger-spelling, sign language, pantomime, writing, or any combination of these.

The question arises as to how useful role playing would be with the hearing impaired. For the normal population there are many other effective teaching and mental health approaches which have been found useful. However, these devices depend largely on verbal communication for successful learning. In order to benefit from the available verbal techniques, a certain amount of language facility and a background of experience is necessary. Usually the deaf are limited in these areas. The language limitations associated with deafness are well known. The vast majority of the adult deaf have achieved a *total language* capacity of not more than the *reading* level of the average

fourth grader. Special deaf norms were developed by Wrightstone, Aronow, and Moskowitz (1962) after the Reading Test of the Metropolitan Achievement Tests, Elementary Battery, was administered to more than 5000 deaf students in the ten and one-half to sixteen and one-half age range. The sixteen-year-old group earned a median grade equivalent of 3.4.

Hearing enables a person to be constantly aware of the world around him, to hear different roles being played, and to hear others from all kinds of background interact. He hears relationships, patterns of behavior, and variety in life from radio, television, movies, and observation of others. With normal language ability, he can likewise benefit from books, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and other reading materials. The average child grows up in a sound-loaded and verbally saturated world of experiences and relationships; and in his growing years he builds up a backlog of experiences which broadens and influences his choice of behavior and roles.

On the other hand, deafness severely circumscribes the person's experiential world. The deaf person is taxed in his efforts to absorb and learn about the world around him. His learning of roles, behavior, and experiences of others is derived from what he can get from his family, from his school, and from the sharing of experiences with others who, like him, may also be limited in their experiential world.

In view of the soundless world the deaf person lives in, how is his behavior influenced? In a research study comparing a hearing group with a deaf group, Levine found among other things that the personality patterns of deaf fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds in a school for the deaf were characterized by "a substantial lag in understanding the dynamics of interpersonal relationships as well as the world about, . . . a markedly constricted life area, . . . and a rigid adherence to the book-of-etiquette code rather than inner sensibility as standards for behaving and even for feeling" (Levine, 1956, p. 146). Although she pointed out that these findings were not to be construed as evidence of maladjustment in its true meaning, this does reflect a problem that needs to be dealt with.

Is it possible to bridge the experience gap? The approach used in role playing may be one possible way of bringing the real world into the classroom, for a variety of experiences can be created in a short time period. In the social hygiene classes conducted by this author at the Illinois School for the Deaf in Jacksonville for the past three years, students have been asked, for example, to play the role of husband and wife with children to discipline. It is one thing to discuss how to disci-

pline children and another thing to experience this in role playing with a child whose responses are unpredictable. In addition, the "spouse" may disagree with the method of handling the child, another unpredictable factor. This may result in violent arguments in front of the "child," much to the enjoyment of the rest of the class who are quick to point out the mistakes made. The new role players may copy the positive points previously acted, but this time they take care not to argue in front of the child. Instead they may go to another room to iron out the problem. In the meantime, the child tears the room apart or otherwise points out the need of immediate disciplinary action. Eventually the participants recognize the importance of not undermining the spouse's authority and of deferring disagreement to a more appropriate time. Whether the students solve the problem is not as important as the growing awareness of the problems of marriage and raising children and a better understanding and tolerance of different viewpoints and patterns of behavior. The students learn that things cannot always be classified as right or wrong and begin to develop an appreciation of the importance of compromise and flexibility.

A similar approach has been used in how to behave at a job interview and what to do in a frustrating job situation. Role playing has been used successfully to get across the meaning of life insurance as with the forty-five-year-old widow with four children and no work experience who dramatizes the problems both of having and not having life insurance. It helps in understanding the problems and emotional turmoil of unwed mothers, e.g., the expectant mother who dramatizes her feelings about the unborn baby, her parents, her friends, and her future.

It has been this author's experience that role playing with deaf adolescents is more effective than verbal discussions. Problems are discovered through spontaneous drama that would not be realized through discussions. Moreover, learning takes place at less cost under these circumstances than if the students had to find out the "hard way." Role playing is an effective way of getting ideas across that deaf students, especially slow learners, would not normally understand with their language limitations.

Role playing has also been applied in the individual counseling situation. A client easily upset by insults and teasing can be counter-conditioned by the counselor playing the role of the teaser, thus giving the client a chance to develop patterns of acceptable responses. The counselor explores with the client what upsets him, wins his confidence and trust, and begins teasing him at the least threatening level. As the

client develops confidence, the counselor becomes more aggressive and more threatening. Sometimes a student complains about a situation which he does not understand. For example, a student has been thrown out of class and is too embarrassed to go back. Moreover, he feels that he was innocent and the teacher intolerant. After the situation has been explored with him, he is given the teacher's role, and the counselor plays the student's role as it happened in class. Then the roles are reversed. In a situation like this, the problems are brought into focus and the student begins to understand the teacher's position. His new insight may be thus used to resolve his difficulty with his teacher.

In summary, there are several advantages of role playing, especially with deaf people with limited experiences and limited facilities with language. Role playing helps to get around the limitations of getting ideas across verbally by its stress on performance and behavior on a nonverbal level. It has potential as a method of teaching social skills, in developing insight and flexibility in human relations, and in exposing people to a variety of experiences in a short time. It may be applicable in the classroom, in vocational guidance, and in the treatment of neurotic and mentally ill patients. The author feels that role playing as an educational and therapeutic tool with deaf people should be further explored.

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