Role development in psychodrama training—Findings and challenges

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Abstract Moreno considered the roles in which one operates as the “tangible aspect of what is known as ‘ego’” (zit. in Leutz 1974, p. 43). Although the role concept is one of the main concepts in psychodrama there exist only a few attempts to invent handy measurements for the development of roles. This pilot study published in the Zeitschrift für Psychodrama und Soziometrie is an attempt to systematically analyse the roles of psychodrama students in their training; based on role descriptions suggested by Clayton (1994) and Daniel (2007) combined with the five dimensions of the five-factor model of the BIG FIVE. The analysis was conducted at two measurement points: after the first period of the self-awareness training (120h) and at the end of training (240h). The training sessions were accurately documented, including a description of all roles the students had taken. The roles were assigned to one of the five dimensions and counted. The findings suggest a notable development after each period. Although the results are promising there are still several questions waiting for answers.

Keywords Psychodrama · Role-development · Personality · Role description · Psychotherapy training

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Rollenentwicklung in der Psychodramaausbildung – Ergebnisse und Herausforderungen

Zusammenfassung Moreno betrachtete die Rollen, in denen man agiert, als den „greifbaren Aspekt dessen, was als ‚Ego‘ bekannt ist“ (zit. nach Leutz 1974, S. 43). Obwohl das Rollenkonzept eines der Hauptkonzepte im Psychodrama ist, gibt es nur wenige Versuche, handhabbare Messungen für die Entwicklung von Rollen zu erfinden. Diese in der Zeitschrift für Psychodrama und Soziometrie veröffentlichte Pilotstudie ist ein Versuch, die Rolle von Psychodrama-StudentInnen in ihrer Ausbildung systematisch zu analysieren; basierend auf Rollenbeschreibungen von Clayton (1994) und Daniel (2007) kombiniert mit den fünf Dimensionen des Fünf-Faktoren-Modells der BIG FIVE. Die Analyse wurde zu zwei Messpunkten durchgeführt: nach der ersten Phase des Selbsterfahrungstrainings (120h) und am Ende des Trainings (240h). Die Ausbildungseinheiten wurden genau dokumentiert, einschließlich einer Beschreibung aller Rollen, die die Auszubildenden übernommen hatten. Die Rollen wurden einer der fünf Dimensionen zugeordnet und gezählt. Die Ergebnisse deuten auf eine bemerkenswerte Entwicklung nach jeder Periode hin. Obwohl die Ergebnisse vielversprechend sind, warten noch einige Fragen auf Antworten.

Schlüsselwörter Psychodrama · Rollenentwicklung · Persönlichkeit · Rollenbeschreibung · Psychotherapieausbildung

1 Introduction

Role concept is one of the main pillars in psychodrama. The term role is nowadays used in various fields. It was originally used for a specific part an actor played in ancient theatres by following a written description on a wrapped paper, the so-called ‘role’. Scientifically, sociologists and anthropologists first used the term in the late 19th century. Originally, it was not a sociological term but one of drama; later on the role concept became “a part of the furniture in social sciences” as R.W. Connell (2016, p. 7) put it. While sociology focused more on the social aspect of roles, Moreno emphasized the interaction process of individuals and groups and the development of roles during this process. He defined role “... as the functional form the individual assumes in the specific moment, he reacts to a specific situation in which other persons or objects are involved. The symbolic representation of this functioning form, perceived by the individual and others, is called the role” (Moreno and Fox 2008, p. 62). He understood role as the way of being and the way of acting. The way someone ‘reacts at a given point in time, to a given situation, in which other persons or objects partake’ (Moreno 1961, p. 15). It consists of sociocultural stereotypes (Claessens 1974; Dreitzel 1979; Moreno 1972), personal experiences, personal patterns of acting, perceiving and experiencing in a particular context and the opportunity of new creation. Leutz (1974) considered the role, in which a person operates as the “tangible aspect of what is known as ‘ego’” (Leutz 1974, p. 43).

Moreno distinguished between roles having different grades of freedom to perform. Some roles are enacted by following a written or orally transmitted script.

Not only theatre roles are based on scripts. Groups and societies develop certain rituals as well. They serve to strengthen the group boundaries and to contain impending feelings. E.g. in a marriage ceremony the wedding couple, the priest and the audience act, think and feel in their roles as the traditional script demands. The participating people play their “roles” as they are prescribed and fixed often in the same way over centuries. In this case, the freedom of a creative performance is restricted.

In everyday life, the interaction between people or groups allows for more creativity. However, the role expectation of the other, the power imbalance and the social context is shaping the form of the role.

Some social roles can be easily identified by typical behaviour or wording; we describe people by comparing them with role stereotypes. It is common to say that someone is behaving like a teacher, a child or a good mother, even though a particular teacher, mother or child might behave differently. The individual form of a role is influenced and shaped by personal life experiences and by the performer’s own will.

Daniel (2007) describes three components of a role: “A role is comprised of thinking, feeling and action. When thinking, feeling and action are in harmony, the role is described as congruent.” (p. 71). Stanislavski (2002) found this an essential attitude for a good actor. In theatre or film performances, we consider an actor far better and persuasive when he is taking in all parts of a role instead of only acting. In everyday life, we perceive such a person as authentic.

Furthermore, Moreno distinguishes three forms of roles depending on what they are focusing on: psychosomatic, psychodramatic and social. Therefore, role descriptions should include all these components. Descriptions of *social roles* can be e.g. “a caring mother”, “a destructive soldier”. *Psychodramatic roles* are e.g. “a lonely dreamer”, “a wise man” and *psychosomatic roles* are e.g. “a silent crier”, “a voracious eater”. The ability to take up an adequate role in any given case out of a variety of possible others allows the role player to cope with many conflicted situations in life. Blatner (2007) suggested to use the term “meta-role” for this ability. This role is somehow the coordinator or manager of the role dynamic inside a person. He compared the relationship between the “meta-role” and the various other roles with the “I—Me” relationship mentioned by Mead (2000).

After traumatic or burdening life events people often get stuck in unsatisfactory interactions because of having been punished in the past for their reactions. They are again afraid of being punished physically or psychologically or they are worried about losing their relationship to significant others. Psychodrama therapy aims to find the underlying reasons by enacting significant life events; through the process the unsatisfactory role patterns are identified. By using the technique of role reversal, a client is encouraged to discover new opportunities. In psychotherapy training, trainees are expected to expand their repertoire of roles to better understand their clients. Psychodramatists should be flexible in various interactions to overcome conflictual situations more easily.

Therefore, role development in all fields and the enhancement of roles are an important goal in training. We expect clients and trainees to become more flexible and creative in their feeling, thinking and acting in their interaction with partners and in various situations. Creativity is needed to find solutions. Anxiety, low mood

and depression reduces creativity (Khalil et al. 2019). Psychodrama aims to reduce anxiety and depressive feelings through the psychotherapeutic relationship, awareness, perspective change, catharsis, insight and reflection. As a result, the roles used by the trainees should show great diversity to allow a broad spectrum of reactions towards others. We need to understand how we can measure changes during a therapy process or during a psychotherapy training to enhance the quality of training and therapy.

Previously there have been some attempts to measure the quality of a role. Johnson (1988) developed the diagnostic role play test for particular mental health disorders. Clayton (1994) and Daniel (2007) were the first to base their attempts to measure the role development on verbal descriptions of roles, to put them into categories and to observe how they changed over time.

Measuring personality has a long scientific history. Role development instead seems to be a “stepchild” of research.

2 Personality and role

Personality can be defined as the individual characteristic patterns in thinking, feeling and behaving. Nevertheless, the term ‘personality’ can be used in various ways. Allport (1971) reported that by 1937 there were about 50 different interpretations of this term. This fact acted as an obstacle for the development of personality research (Herrmann 1991). Bridging this period, empirical personality research did not start with essential knowledge about personality but with observable and measurable parts of personality.

Allport and Odbert (1936), Eysenck (2014) and Guilford (1959) considered personality to be a dynamic organisation of relatively constant characteristics regarding situation and time. There exist various trait models of personality which are based on general traits. These traits are expected to be stable over time. These models were criticized by others for ignoring the effect of context.

In contrast, the role concept of Moreno emphasizes the uniqueness of acting, thinking and feeling within in a given relationship, at a particular time in a particular place. For Moreno it was evident that the “role-emergence is primary to the self” (Leutz 1974, p. 38). Furthermore, the self or personality (Moreno himself did not use the term ‘personality’) is formed by roles and clusters of roles. Acting in roles should be spontaneous and creative in every situation. He did not neglect the presence of ‘role conserves’, which are predictable, but his view of domains was vague and unspecific. Does his view exclude any predictability and any measurement?

Eysenck (2014) pointed out: “Both specificity and generality of behaviour, attitudes and sentiments have been shown experientially to exist; the question remains of just how specific each action is and how far it is predictable from knowing the tendency to perform a quite different action.” (p. 15).

3 Measuring personality

New approaches seem to have found the missing link between general traits and role traits and for the first time allow a closer look at developmental aspects of personality. Wood and Roberts (2006, p. 780) consider that the role concept “capture the psychological meaning of situations to people and can be incorporated into typical trait models” (p. 780).

Starting in the thirties of the last century, Thurston (1935), Allport and Odbert (1936) were successful in developing five broad dimensions of adult personality. They started with the verbal expressions for personal differences; with factor analysis they could derive five relatively stable, independent factors.

Subsequently, McCrae and Costa (1987) developed an instrument, the NEO Personal Inventory Revised (NEO-PI-R) that measures the same five domains; each comprised of 6 facets. It is a standardised questionnaire for self-evaluation. Based on the BIG FIVE or OCEAN-Model it comprises Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness; the NEO-PI-R also reports on six subcategories of each. Each facet ranges from a high expression of characteristic to a low one (Costa and McCrae 1995).

1. *Neuroticism*—Anxiety, Hostility, Depression, Self-Consciousness, Impulsivity, Vulnerability
2. *Extroversion*—Warmth, Gregariousness, Assertiveness, Activity, Excitement-Seeking, Positive Emotions
3. *Openness to Experience*—Fantasy, Aesthetics, Feelings, Actions, Ideas, Values
4. *Agreeableness*—Trust, Modesty, Compliance, Altruism, Straightforwardness, Tendermindedness
5. *Conscientiousness*—Competence, Self-Discipline, Achievement-Striving, Dutifulness, Order, Deliberation

The characteristics of each dimension and its facets are describes by adjectives. E.g. the facet anxiety as part of the dimension “neuroticism” can be described by adjectives from a high expression of characteristics like worried, nervous, troubled, scared ... to a low expression of characteristics like calm, relaxed, without fear, intrepid ...

Although this is promising progress, compared to past efforts, it still does not include variations from acting, thinking and feeling in different situations. Roles show stability over time and situation as well, but they can also change and develop.

A hierarchical model developed by Wood and Roberts (2006), called ‘Personality and Role Identity Structural Model’ (PRISM) which, in addition to general domains and facets, includes role identities, representing perceptions of narrower, context-specific dispositions. (Fig. 1).

By including roles in the research of personality, it is possible to investigate personality change and development (Wood and Roberts 2006). “One hope in examining role identities alongside general ratings of personality, then, is that role identities may offer a way to understand how life experiences affect general personality traits over time.” (See *ibid*, p. 784).

Fig. 1 Personality and Role Identity Structural Model—PRISM (Wood and Roberts 2006, p. 783)

Wood and Roberts stated that, “Appropriate role identities can often predict role outcomes better than general ratings that would be predicted by these theorists, we also found that the general trait ratings demonstrated a breadth in predicting outcomes across role domains that the role-specific ratings did not” (Wood and Roberts 2006, p. 804). The method for measurement was still based on questionnaires and self-evaluation; in addition, they suggested including behavioural observation.

The following case study follows this suggestion and tries to find out if there are any changes in role identities that can be observed.

This pilot study aimed to measure the role development by integrating the role concept into a personality theory. The focus of this contribution lies more on the methodological aspect and less on the presentation of the actual development of roles in each participant.

4 Method

4.1 Participants

The sample for this study included 9 students of a university training programme for psychodrama psychotherapists. They were all female with an average age of 44; all had a professional background in a social field (4 nurses, 2 teachers, 3 social workers).

All participants started their training at the same time, so they had the same level of learning experience regarding their psychotherapy training. In addition to the self-awareness training in a group of 240 h, the curriculum includes 600 h of theory, 90 of

individual self-awareness training, 600 of practice, 150 for supervision and 550h of internship.

4.2 Self-awareness training

The self-awareness training was in a group setting covering 240h (each session 45 min). The training was blocked in units of 15h and provided in intervals of approximately 3–4 weeks over a period of two years.

The students explore their roles in protagonist-centred and group-centred plays with the method of psychodrama and sociodrama. The topics were self- and group-chosen and often connected to troubling life events, dreams or every-day situations that were wished to be changed.

In protagonist centred plays, auxiliaries were chosen by the protagonist to play a specific role; whilst in group centred plays, the roles were chosen by each player for themselves. A play lasted in general between 20 min to 1.5h.

The play was followed by feedback that was given by the auxiliaries to the protagonist.

The goal of training was an exploration of roles, personal life stories, life plans, behavioural patterns and strategies, with objectives that aimed:

- To increase the self-esteem and social competence of the participants,
- To develop their spontaneity and creativity,
- To enlarge their repertoire of roles,
- To increase their level of self and external cognition,
- To increase motivation and ability to risk new behaviour and roles,
- To deepen empathy,
- To raise flexibility in role-taking,
- To get a higher level of resilience and frustration tolerance,
- To improve the ability for verbal feedback, reflection and hypothesising and knowledge about the main psychodrama techniques.

4.3 Therapist/trainer

The trainer was a psychodrama psychotherapist with a long experience of therapy, training and teaching. The task of the trainer was to facilitate the group process and to guide the protagonists through their drama and to conduct the group-centred plays. The trainer had no active influence on the topic of the protagonist play.

4.4 Presumptions

Presumptions were that:

- The roles, trainees can take spontaneously in an interaction, are limited by the experiences they have had before.
- The range of roles, someone can take, can be enlarged by experience and by solving conflictual situations that previously limited the behaviour.
- The expansion of role variations can be observed.

4.5 Research method and procedure

The roles of each participant were described by two observing trainees in the way Daniel (2007) suggested by using an adjective followed by a noun that describes the role cluster and the characteristic as well (e.g.: caring mother, frightened rabbit).

In order to have well-defined and independent dimensions, the roles were matched with traits and facets offered by the BIG FIVE. This second step was done by the group-director, after the self-awareness training has finished.

The roles of each trainee (A-I) in each play were described and matched as close as possible to factors of the BIG FIVE: C=Conscientiousness, N=Neuroticism, E=Extroversion, O=Openness to Experience, A=Agreeableness (Table 1). Some roles could only be matched by knowing and understanding the context.

The roles were assigned to the dimension, by using the adjectives that characterize each facet.

The assignment to a particular dimension does not show if there is a high or low expression of the characteristic of a dimension. It shows only that the character of the role belongs to a specific dimension. E.g.: the “protecting brother” and the “uncontrolled drunken man” belong to the same dimension AGREEABILITY although they are on opposite sides of the scale. The study does not focus on the structure of the personality of the trainees. Following the theory of psychodrama, it is interesting if people increase their range of roles during a training or through a psychotherapy.

The findings were obtained by the following procedure:

Table 1 Example for role descriptions matched with dimensions of the BIG FIVE

Trainee/ Play	A	B	C	D	E
1	Cooling breeze (A+)	Warm southern wind (A+)	Hidden sun (E-)	Tortured ocean (N+)	Day- dreaming cloud (N-)
2	–	Critical view (A-)	Critical view (A-), Depreciated girl (N+), Powerful daughter (N-)	–	–
3	Strict mother (C+)	Daydreaming girl (N-)	Self-confident woman (N-)	Admired and spoiled woman (N-)	Smart vamp (E+)
4	Protected girl (N-), Insulted teenager (N+), Drunken, uncon- trolled brother (A-)	Protecting brother (A+), Jealous man (A-), Drunken, uncontrolled man (A-), Insensitive brother (A-), Distant brother (E-)	Relaxed col- league (N-)	Supporting man, (A+) Proud father (A+)	Protected girl (N-), Insulted teenager (N+)

- The roles were related to one of the five dimensions of the BIG FIVE.
- The roles in each dimension were counted.
- The data of the first part of training were compared with the data of the second part.
- For this study presented here the variation of dimensions from high to low score (here marked with plus and minus) were not taken into consideration.

5 Results

In the first period (session 1–7) the trainees played 249 roles in total. In the second period (session 8–14) they played 178 roles in total. Each trainee took between 22 and 36 roles ($m=27.7$) in the first period and between 14 and 22 roles ($m=19.8$) in the second period. Overall, most of the roles were found in the dimension of neuroticism, 92 in the first period and 52 in the second period. In both periods the dimension of openness was less represented in roles (23 and 17). Although the roles in general are less in the second period (178) compared with the first period (249); the number of roles (37 and 38) in the dimension of conscientiousness remained almost the same in both periods (Figs. 2 and 3).

All trainees had the highest score in the dimension of neuroticism and the smallest number in openness. Fig. 4 shows the distribution of roles in all dimensions as a percentage of the total number of roles in each period.

When comparing the roles of a single trainee in the five dimensions of the first period with those of the second there is evidence of different changes. In order not to exceed the limits of this article only two are chosen as examples; one with little changes regarding the dimensions and one with bigger changes.

Fig. 5 shows the role development of trainee A. In the first and second period most of the roles are assigned to the dimension of neuroticism. There is only one in the dimension extraversion for both periods. None of the other dimensions show an increase.

Fig. 6 shows the role development of trainee D. There is the same number of roles in the dimension of conscientiousness in the first and second period. The roles in the dimension of extraversion has doubled from the first to the second period and the roles in the dimension of neuroticism are less in the second period. The distribution of roles in all five dimensions became more balanced after the whole time than in the example of trainee A.

6 Discussion

This pilot study is a first attempt to describe psychodramatic roles closely in detail and bring them in conjunction with the personality dimensions based on the BIG FIVE. Roles always have a cognitive, behavioural and emotional aspect. This fact makes it easier to relate them to the facets and dimensions of the BIG FIVE, which is also based on descriptions of personal characteristics. The five-factor model

Fig. 2 Roles in period I: Session 1-7

Fig. 3 Roles in period II: Session 8-14

of personality (McCrae and Costa 1987) allows the role descriptions to be more accurate and missing roles to be more visible.

During the analysis, it turned out that the assignment of role description to facets of personality dimensions was mostly indisputable, though in a few cases it could have been assigned to two different dimensions. Nevertheless, there should have been more than one evaluator in order to get data that are more reliable.

It was expected that psychodrama training and self-awareness training, as part of the education, would increase the diversity of roles regarding the personality dimensions. The findings do not support this assumption in general. However, there

Fig. 4 Roles and dimensions

Fig. 5 Role development of trainee A

Fig. 6 Role development of trainee D

are trainees who developed a wider variety of roles, while others did not. To find reasons for the “resistance” of trainees to develop roles in other dimensions we would need more studies. The group dynamic, the topics and the relations between the group members may play an important role regarding the development of roles. If the group needs a particular group member to stay in a specific role in order to stabilize the group, the members will probably avoid asking him or her to play a different one. Group therapist and trainers should consider this. In addition, independent observers and evaluators could help to keep the bias low.

Furthermore, we do not know how roles, which are newly developed in a training, were integrated into the lives of the trainee. A questionnaire given after each session and again months later would put light on this.

The reduced number of roles in the second period compared with the first period was probably because there were less psychodramatic plays and more theoretical input. This made it more difficult to compare both periods. Nevertheless, the variety of roles regarding the personality dimensions changed in some cases but not as much as anticipated.

The large number of roles in the dimension of neuroticism can be explained by the fact that most of the psychodramatic enactments dealt with difficult life events; for example traumatic situations in childhood, conflicts and loss in the past and present and relationships with people that had a troubled life.

Putting together all variations of degree within a particular dimension may also distort the outcome. For example, the dimension “neuroticism” has a range from attributes like anxious, nervous, helpless, etc. to e.g.: relaxed, self-confident, unbiased, etc.

The role descriptions, which are the basis for assigning them to the five personality dimensions included more often emotional terms like: frightened, content, depressed,

optimistic, etc., and less adjectives that described cognitive or relational aspects like sociable, creative, unmindful and similar.

The higher number of emotional descriptions comparing with cognitive and rational adjective might be due to the observer's focus on emotional aspects. A training for observers, for this role, beforehand would probably help.

7 Limitations

It became obvious that written documentation are still too vague and subjective; video tapes of session would be much better. The objective description of roles and the assignment of roles to the five dimensions demands trained observers; there should also be clearly more than one evaluator with a sufficient inter-rater correlation.

A limitation in this was the small number of trainees. This means that this pilot study gives only a glimpse of the possibilities for using this method of structured observation. Addressing these issues would allow getting findings that are more meaningful at the end.

8 Summary

The present study is a promising attempt for measuring role development by combining role description with an already well reviewed five factor model of the BIG FIVE. It allows the categorization of role expressions in a structured and more objective way than it has been done previously. The earlier expectation, that the psychodrama training would help in general to increase the range of roles in all dimensions, was not achieved. Looking at the scores of roles in each dimension, at an earlier stage, would help not only to give proper feedback to the trainees, but also to shape the training in an aim-oriented way.

This form of structured observation would also help to scrutinize psychodrama psychotherapy in terms of the development of roles during the therapy. The study should stimulate further investigations to get a reliable tool that is urgently needed in psychodrama.

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