PART III
RESEARCH AS DYNAMIC INTERACTION

8 Role Play

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A researcher is interested in the effects of verbally aggressive language on the individual's situational sense of self in a learning situation. As there would be legitimate ethical concerns about exposing a participant to such abuse within an experiment, a role play format is used. A research confederate explicitly role plays the teacher, either in a no-abuse condition, or in a high verbal abuse condition specifically linked to failure to learn. A role play situation is constructed and a learning task provided. Participants play the part of learner but actually are expected to learn the task set, albeit within a role play setting.

Role plays or simulation techniques are a way of deliberately constructing an approximation of aspects of a 'real-life' episode or experience, but under controlled conditions, where much of the episode is initiated and/or defined by the experimenter, researcher or other inducer. Their essential defining characteristics relate to two levels of 'as-ifness' or conditionality, in which both the overall framing of the event and the specific conditions and objects internal to the event have a make-believe aspect and specific imaginary conditions are set, based on perceptual and experiential substitutions — for example a laboratory is a classroom, a research confederate is a teacher, etc.

Within the field of psychology, role plays are set up for a specific purpose, usually to allow exploration, experimentation or particular therapy processes. For example, in psychodrama, aspects of a violent, abusive marriage may be 'recreated' to promote insight into the precipitating factors; or, in research on attitude studies, an episode is enacted between individuals, in which an important variable is manipulated, in order to assess its effect on, for example, attitudes to abortion. In both the latter cases, and in the case of the initial vignette above, the effectiveness of the role play, in terms of the quality of the engagement of 'players' in their make-believe world, will depend heavily on the skill of the role play inducer in providing facilitating induction conditions. The latter will be the main focus of this chapter.

Role plays have been widely used in social psychology since the Borgatta (1955) studies on individuals' interactional styles in groups. Through the 1960s, role plays were used in experiments on risky shift, person perception, leadership, attributional style and decision-making (see Alexander and Scriven, 1977, for a review of this area). The 1970s saw particular use of role play in replicating conventional manipulative experimental studies, or in replacing these methodologies in order to avoid problems of deception. A powerful debate emerged for and against such use of role play: broadly speaking, proponents espoused more humanistic, person-centred beliefs; opponents espoused conventional, positivistic beliefs. This debate had a damaging effect on the prevalence of use of role play in social psychology despite the wide continuing use in clinical (research and treatment) applied fields, such as occupational and forensic psychology. The debate was not resolved, but there was at that time, and continues to be, a complete failure to consider in detail the matter of role play technique. Minimalist situations abound, whereby research and experimental participants are merely directed towards pretending to be person A in situation C, with little more than two-line inductions. This is typified in the domain of social skills research (see McNamara and Blumer, 1982, for review). This leads to highly stereotyped and predictable role plays in which 'actors' are insufficiently 'engaged' in the role play event to be able to generate mundanely realistic behaviour. Nevertheless these sorts of criticisms, and those of the 1970s, can be answered and resolved where technical issues are confronted, and where clear conceptual understandings of role play are offered (see Yardley, 1982a). Most of these criticisms are rooted in ideas about the 'involvement' of the 'subject', which is seen by all to be the cornerstone of the validity and efficacy of role plays. Here (see also Yardley, 1982a), we will consider the 'engagement', rather than the 'involvement', of participants in role play as the key to successful technique and hence to successful and highly flexible and productive research strategies.

Most important here, we will consider those fundamental aspects of induction that are required in order to produce valid and viable role play that 'engages' participants. In the context of promoting alternative methodologies, such role play approaches, whilst needing thorough description, are neither amenable to prescription, nor separable from their epistemological and conceptual groundings. Hence, in this chapter, an emphasis will be placed upon the questions that must be raised in relation to technique and methodology, rather than on the provision of precise and pre-emptive solutions. There will be an attempt to specify induction principles which should clearly guide choice of techniques. However, overall any role play technique must pay scrupulous attention to the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of the research exercise. Any qualitative technique which presents only a prescriptive and technically driven set of methods risks undermining its own grounding.

Before commencing on the specifics of setting up a role play, some
general methodological issues should be addressed. The central question for the use of any research method, including role play, must be: 'What kind of knowledge am I seeking, and for what purpose?'

The kind of knowledge we seek is, of course, to a great extent dependent upon the kind of generative models and theories of knowledge to which we subscribe; although these commonly consist of unarticulated a priori assumptions on the part of researchers, rather than of formal expositions. In carrying out research, we expect, as a matter of faith, that certain procedures of gathering information, or of generating events, will provide us with knowledge about, for example, mechanisms, structures, social constructions or important dynamics. Hence, researchers using role play in order to simulate a social episode, for example, must first ask themselves quite simple but specific questions about the extent to which their a priori assumptions determine: (1) the choice of social context, the choice and type of information fed into the role play, the observational domain, for example whose observations are to be gathered and how; and (2) the extent to which the experimenter/researcher will control and determine the objects and the method of researching, as opposed to giving that control to the 'subjects' of research. For example, if the researcher is interested in the potential disabling potential of anxiety to social interaction, who will define a valid role play context for its examination?

In role play methods, as used in research and also in clinical and applied practice, there remains a continued dominance of hypothetic-deductive methods underpinned by positivistic, human thinking. Hence, subjects are treated as interchangeable units; there is the continuing frequent use of deception; and there is the characteristic isolation of hypothesized key variables, which are stripped of their context. An example of this latter position lies in the extensive area of interactional skills research (see McNamara and Blumer, 1982, for useful review). Despite the continuation of this dominant positivistic paradigm within role play procedures, there exists, particularly within applied fields, a variety of approaches to the gathering of knowledge which might broadly be termed heuristic and person-centred (for example, Kelly, 1955a; Mixon, 1971, with some qualification; Moreno, 1946; Stioma, 1983; see also Ginsberg, 1979). However, of those who actually propose using role play within a broadly more humanistic orientation, their approaches tend to be unsystematized and relatively unreflective with respect to their procedures and techniques, a balance which I wish partly to redress here.

Some conceptual issues in role play

Primary as-if status

This status is shared by conventional experiment and role play alike. An initial framework is set up that serves to separate the events occurring within it from events occurring outside it in the mundane world.

This framework draws upon the commonly held and socially constructed assumption that there is a discontinuity between the world within and outwith the frame. This discontinuity disrupts the usual relationship between behaviour and consequences and thus limits/ abolishes/abrogates responsibility and liability for individual experimenter and participant. The notion of discontinuity (that there will be no effect upon the 'person' of the victim, in the example above) is, of course, to some extent a fiction as the 'actor' who 'acts' within a role play is a continuous being crossing over the frame. Inductors must be alive to the consequences of this: both in terms of understanding that, whatever safeguards are introduced into a role play, actors experience and are affected by experience; and also in terms of the need for clear terminations of role play, and for debriefings. Hence, role play inductors must take responsibility for action within role plays, which includes stopping them if they get 'out of hand'; must clearly signal the conditions under which the role play will be brought to an end; and, finally, must quite explicitly announce that a role play has finished and individualize this endpoint for each actor. Failure to de brief, in order to allow subjects to express unfinished business whilst 'out of role', or feelings about the role play may lead to unanticipated problems, for role players and inductors alike. Again, in the example above, some 'as-if' insult may inadvertently impact upon a participant's core identity.

This primary as-if framework provides an opportunity for researchers to control aspects of the mundane world more strongly, discretely and consistently than is usual in the mundane world. Within this framework, these aspects or conditions are conventionally established through the language of situation and person. The distinction between situation and person is frequently unwittingly arbitrary but needs closer examination by researchers. For example, in a role play, is a situation frightening or are the persons involved frightened? What are the implications of such framings for the action and for the research findings? Most important, in role plays alone some of these conditions have a secondary as-if status.

Secondary as-if status: the essential role play feature

It is only within a role play that participants are asked to make specific perceptual substitutions of conditional, 'make-believe' objects, both concrete and psychological, personal and situational, for ordinary, mundaneely perceived objects. Thus, an empty classroom is to be perceived as a pizza bar and a shy self to be viewed as an extrovert self, a normally polite person a verbally abusive one, etc. (It is precisely with respect to these secondary as-ifs that I argue greatest methodological attention is required, and, most important, as far as role play technique is concerned, it is towards these that induction procedures must be oriented.)
Relationships between as-ness and actuality

The relationship between as-ness and actuality is highly complex and indeed elusive. The 'playful', albeit frequently serendipitous, engagement with an explicit set of secondary as-ifs, within a primary frame of as-ness, suggests at the very least a self-conscious acting within, and through, conditionality, which paradoxically demands a suppression of the experience of conditionality, if the desired spontaneity of action is to emerge (parallel to Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief').

How might individuals achieve this? And what are the methodological implications of this? There are two domains of inquiry that are suggestive here. The first relates to the relationship between thought and action, and the relevance of the space-time dimension. The second relates to the relationship between objects through which one knows and objects which one comes to know. Both relationships are crucial to the technical setting up of role play.

Thought and action It is generally accepted that thought and action have different temporal characteristics. Notwithstanding their deep mutual interdependence and co-constitutiveness, thought is faster than action and is, of necessity, unbound by mundane space-time constraints. In addition, and in general, thought is held to be prior to action, although there are clearly circumstances when thought follows reflex behaviours or action, as acts of reflection. But no matter what the ordinal relationship, thought resides, as does the dream, in a distinct space-time domain.

If we can indeed conceptualize reflective thought and action as temporally distinct, then there are inevitably frequent and continuous temporal lags between the two, no matter how small, whether microseconds or hours (usually within an interactional flow involving seconds rather than longer units). Research which involves the post hoc gathering of accounts hugely increases this gap, no doubt causing participants to lose much of the salient detail of their experience, and leading to summaries that distort and underreport subtleties and intricacies. Role play methods are potentially particularly adept at decreasing (or indeed increasing) as far as possible the temporal lag between action and thought. When carried out with technical expertise and psychological sophistication, they offer the potential for a much closer-to-the-event accounting. 'Action' can be brought to a halt every few minutes, explored with participants and then re-engaged with, provided appropriate reinduction is carried out. (We will discuss inductions below, but, broadly speaking, reinduction necessitates employment of the exact same induction processes as described below, albeit with a tighter focus on continuous activity, and with an updating of action to that point.)

Under certain conditions the gap can almost be obliterated by eliciting the in-flow articulation of and exposition of experiences.

For example, suppose that a researcher were interested in the cognitive strategies or emotional states underlying an argument with a neighbour about a boundary dispute which has become 'out of hand'. To record the interaction live and seek a post hoc account would certainly provide valid information and, if the recording is not overly intrusive, authenticity. Yet, even with cued feedback procedures, it is dubious whether moment-to-moment events will be apprehended as well post hoc as they might be concurrently. Role play offers the potential to start and stop the argument, to probe the moments, almost in action with an immediate return to the action afterwards. Clearly such accounting itself may change the course of the action, but combined with other approaches role play offers a unique contemporaneous approach to account-gathering.

Role play can also facilitate the exploration of durée (subjective experience of time). Apart from very closely approximating mundane temporality, the individual's own sense of time can be explored by externalising its fluidity, amplifying or diminishing the chronological sequence of time, and allowing an exploration, in-flow or post hoc, of the meaning and significance of the event/process within the individual's experience of time. For example, those extraordinary moments experienced before an inevitable car crash can be 'played out', giving the 'victim' the real-time equivalent of the subjectively time-expanded experience, and allowing the role player to move into and out of this experience (provided reinduction is facilitated), in order to provide descriptions and elaborations of it. Time and space can here be infinitely expanded, and their relationship potentially infinitely varied. The latter is in complete contrast to mundane space-time relationships or indeed to a scripted role play or piece of theatre. There, conceptual products are given, prior to action and thought, in the timeless zone of the written, but produced and bounded within an almost precisely predictable time period, following a prescribed, usually linear chronology.

Whatever the manipulation of the space-time relationship within a role play, it is most important that role play participants are inducted so as to be appropriately experientially bound to a temporal zone as intended, such as described in the example above. This need to be temporally bound relates centrally to one of my three major induction principles - presencing.

Presencing (see p. 116 for detailed description) has three aspects, one of which strictly concerns the construction of experiential-time-present by the role play inductor, through actualizing description of situation and persons, for example: 'You are here. This is the dental surgery. Around you are ...'. Hence, time-present is and must be affirmatively and proactively co-constituted with the participant by the inductor, and conditionality of form, content and expression must be entirely eschewed.

Paradoxically, another particularly interesting significant feature of role play is the technique's harnessing of 'real' time as distinct from the elicitation of imaginary time in 'passive' role plays or through introspective activities. As already implicit in the above arguments, reflective thought or account-giving needs no synchronization to mundane space-
time objects and object relationships, whereas 'real' action must be integrated into mundane object relationships. Hence an aspect, and a very epistemologically powerful one, is the possibility of placing participants within a more closely approximate 'real' space-time nexus (as opposed to subjective time, as discussed above), which brings its own different set of demands upon individuals, and provokes some level of 'realistic' orientation to these dimensions. Introspection and imagination, and indeed experimentation, discard this space-time condition (experimentalists and introspectionists alike discard it by context-stripping and spatialization of variables). There is a powerful parallel to be discovered in the realm of spatial relationships. Thinking of a room is not the same as actually physically negotiating the space in the room. Thought will probably not conceive of the unexpected raised door threshold when planning the great entrance to impress one's lover. Objects implode inwards with their own reality when they are actual.

**Objects through which one knows and objects which one comes to know** Objects of knowledge and experience arise in a space-time nexus but the 'fact' of their existence in this nexus, and the fact that we know objects through the space-time nexus, still leaves us with the question of how we might know objects that exist within this nexus. I am here predominantly going to draw upon Polanyi's (1966) account of the nature of knowing. Polanyi argues that we can only know objects through the medium of other objects, and that in this process the objects which are the medium of knowledge are lost to focal awareness. He provides a simple, but powerful and vivid, concrete example of the blind person who knows his spatial world through the stick. The stick is not at the forefront of awareness, but only tacitly present, allowing experience of the world and of the objects it 'discovers'. Presumably we can extend this tacit dimension to even further removed domains of awareness, into the unconscious, for example, should we so conceptualize experience.

What are the implications of Polanyi's tacit theory for the establishment of secondary as-ifs within a role play? Elsewhere (Yardley, 1982b and forthcoming) I have argued that the term 'engagement' is to be preferred over the term 'involvement' when considering the position of actors with respect to the reality status of the interactions in which they engage, as involvement has tended to be confounded with level of arousal or activity. 'Engagement' throws emphasis upon the objects of engagement, and the need for individuals to experience their conditional as-if environment through familiar objects, and also as containing their familiar objects, whether these are physical or psychological. If we are supposed to be in a given, supposedly familiar, environment, it is only when we are confident of familiar objects that we are able to be spontaneous with respect to action.

For example, if you are supposed to be role playing a row with your spouse in your bedroom, it is not easy to concentrate on the row if you don’t know where the door is, the bed, the window, etc. Whatever the nature of the interaction, individuals make use of physical objects and space as part of their self-presentation, expression and their interactions. If the row should involve one actor throwing him- or herself on the bed to howl with misery, the act of having to search for an appropriate surface upon which to throw him/herself is clearly disruptive of the flow of an argument. Of course the totally engaged role playing individual just might in the heat of the moment throw him/herself on a putative bed which is not present - at which point we would descend into farce. More psychologically speaking, if an actor is asked to role play an angry abusive father, if he cannot apprehend that the predominant manner of the father’s knowing is through the internal psychological 'object' or more of fear and self-loathing, then the actor cannot (re)create and understand the environment in a similar manner to the father.

Such need for particularity for objects through which to be familiar, to be knowledgeable, and through which to gain further knowledge, is also the mirror image process through which role play inductors must stipulate given thought objects, that is, the secondary as-ifs through which role plays are generated. The positing of these secondary as-ifs or objects by an experimenter, or indeed by a subject, is grounded in selective attention. Some 'objects' may be selected almost haphazardly, perhaps to give a rough impression of a physical space. Others may be selected as crucial and significant to the experimenter's understanding of the role play world he or she is trying to create. Thus, if E describes A as happy-go-lucky, he or she has certain expectations of the action state and experiential state of A, which may or may not be valid, and which may or may not accord with the actor's understanding of A. In contrast, the supposedly trivial detail in a role play, such as a single elicted object, for example an ornament on a shelf, may represent or call up significant psychological images on the part of an individual that may profoundly influence his or her action. Hence, all objects must be open to the interest and thorough scrutiny of the role play experimenter. We need, thus, to consider the relationship between the necessary springs of action of the particular act and indeed actor, as expressed in the 'objects' for the particular role and particular 'actor'. We must also consider the objects as selected and elicited by the role play inductor, and compare them with what may or may not be felt to be valid springs of action for the individual actor. This is clearly infinitely and regrettably problematic and calls also for some pragmatic decisions about the extent of such inquiry. However, this need for knowing the world through objects points to my second and third induction principles, those of particularization and personalization.

Before moving on to elaborate these, there is one further relationship to be considered here, which refers also to the space-time dimension. This concerns the relationship of thinking and conditionality in relation to role play. Any thought can be conceptualized as a conditional premise or framing, an as-if, a positing of possibilities within which, and to which, the
thinker orients: reaching forwards and backwards into time, albeit within a primary frame of real consequentiality or belief in real consequentiality.

Role play suspends and brackets the above frame, and makes formally available these as-ifs, these thought objects which tie present to future - stopping the flow, and creating stable but mutative points of reference - 'fixing' points of reality as-if spatially distinguishable and detachable from the flow. (Hence, we can interrogate the underlying assumptions behind the thought that 'precedes' the action. This will, in turn, raise the detached as more significant than others, and what the potential and burden of their symbolic meaning is, as well as their value and power.)

Role plays are intrinsically exploitative of this relationship in playing out this conditionality, that is, in playing out thought and action in explicit relationship, that is, concretely, visibly and audibly.

It can be seen that role play offers itself as the potential technique par excellence for explicating a formal exegesis of the relationship between thought and action. All the secondary as-ifs can be viewed and treated as expressive statements about the nature of causality, meaning and action, in that any deliberate attempt to construct such as-ifs points to an expectation that the content of these and their mutative transformations will lead to differential action and/or experience on the part of the subject. These assumptions can be tested out against the action and experience of participants.

**Induction principles**

**Particularization—the technique**

Particularization is simply the explicit detailing of all the secondary as-ifs (thus a chair is a car), so that all those objects that are supposed to be and need to be readily available to awareness are brought into awareness so that they may indeed be known, and all those objects that need to be 'taken for granted' are also made explicit. If action is to occur in a supposedly known environment, then for it to occur as if in mundane psychologically on the actor must be known. This must take place, first, by making these objects direct objects of awareness. This awareness must be sufficiently detailed so that the objects feel familiar, known, and are indeed taken for granted by participants. At the physical-spatial level, for example, where a laboratory is meant to represent a prison, the physical boundaries must be sufficiently known in their new symbolic status: they must first of all be particularized. Hence, role players must know all those aspects of the prison environment that they would mundanely know, whether, for example, this relates to the physical space that they are in, or to details about the prison regime, or personal details about themselves or others. (I have already discussed above the relationship between 'knowing objects' and 'being aware of objects', and it is this relationship which underpins the need for particularization.) Such a stipulation prohibits the uniformity and unopposed ingress of an experimenter or therapist's preemptive and generalized constructions. These 'particulars' may be constituted as external or internal objects, the former being those which are externally apprehensible, the latter relating to subjective or inferred states of being.

Inductions must also take account of **structural compatibility** between the role-played situation and the form of inductions. Hence, if one 'prisoner' is supposed to know more about a prison culture than another, perhaps by virtue of length of sentence or previous conviction, then the induction should be sensitive to these different states of knowledge for the relevant role players.

**Particularization in practice** Let us suppose that a researcher wishes to carry out a piece of work on attributional styles as an aspect of professional/work identity, comparing prison warders and governors. Decontextualized and minimalistic inductions would almost certainly lead to the production of stereotypes and stereotyped actions (for example, 'You are prisoner Z barked up with prisoner Y. You're having an explosive argument. Warden X intervenes'). Detailing relevant, and indeed seemingly irrelevant, 'personal' histories, in addition to thorough inductions concerning the prison contexts, would minimize this risk. The greater the role players' lack of knowledge of these contexts, the greater the need for 'bridging' inductions that sufficiently provide knowledge from which action can arise. There is no such person as warden X or prisoner Z or Y; only 'Jim Stevens', warden; and 'Robert Edwards', prisoner, who is aged 35 and has the following identifying features and characteristics, with a particular personal history.

In the author's own experience of role play inductions, participants constantly reiterate the need for such full induction provision and almost never complain of too much induction. Although I have not formally tested the full range of particularization possibilities, in terms of the amount of stipulated detail, common sense would suggest that at some point role play participants can be given too much detail. Moreover, the almost invariable picture arising from the extant literature on role play, both in experiments and in applied settings, is one in which there is a dearth of information provided to subjects and certainly no awareness of induction principles such as particularization.

**Actors' states of knowledge and particularization** Clearly, in each instance, there are pragmatic limits to the amount of information that might be given and absorbed. If one only has an hour for a role play, a combination of 55 minutes induction and 5 minutes role play action and feedback is unlikely to be appropriate. Sufficiency of information is clearly related to purpose (and this needs to be considered explicitly). However, above all, this has to be related to the actors' state of knowledge, as contrasted to the
knowledge assumed for the role play. This is extremely important for role play inductors to take into account. Actors may be drawn from a very discrete and narrow 'shared community of meaning', allowing a good deal to be taken for granted, but more likely there will be significant discontinuities of knowledge, and Linell and Luckmann (1991) have argued that the more complex the social distribution of knowledge, the more uncertainties about the degree to which knowledge is shared by participants. As implied in our reference to Polanyi’s (1966) concept of tacit knowledge, individuals act and gain knowledge through other objects, so that for our purposes here, the more novel the role play situation for the actor, the greater the need for ‘bridging particularization’ to create the appropriate objects of experience. Differently positioned characters may need to be in different states of knowledge, as would mundanely be the case (as indicated in the example above), and inductors should search for structural compatibility between ‘actual’ and ‘role-played’ event. (For example if the actor playing a first-time remand prisoner actually knows a lot more mundanely about prisons than the actor playing the experienced warder, a structural incompatibility exists.)

In attempts to provide a mundane or normative role play ‘space’, it is also relevant to consider the concepts of local environments, drawn from conversation analysis (see Bergmann, 1990), and that talk and topic often turn or are drawn to the local environment, and that conversational interaction is not merely a product of those individuals who interact nor the larger social context in which they find themselves, but highly tuned to very specific local conditions. Hence, inductors should also again consider the need to give ‘particularized’ induction to the initial context, not with reference just to its historical groundings, but also to its topical setting, with particular attention to the range of discourses available to that setting.

The question of which objects are to be particularized is, of course, a methodological and epistemological issue (see the section on personalization below), and is also dependent upon the relationship between the ‘framing’s’ of the event and the ‘foci’. Hence, there may also be figure/ground issues. If one is undertaking research on anger, does the inductor construct anger through direct or indirect but suggestive objects, such as in terms of a heated argument between two men over a woman, in the former case, or in terms of a chance encounter between two men in a pub, where one man is accompanied by the other’s girlfriend, in the latter case? The choice of all such set-up information, or secondary as-ifs, may follow highly stereotyped and overdetermined objects, in terms of their likely ascribable meaning, or provide a more open-ended set of possibilities and possibly the generation of more subtle behaviours.

Presencing—the technique

Presencing is the process through which the inductor constructs and asserts the ‘actuality’ of the as-if role play event, for those particularized objects must be made present and actual, so that they are perceived as ‘out-there’ (part of the ‘situation’ or ‘other person’) or ‘in-here’ (part of the self). In practice, this entails that the experimenter who sets up the as-if event works actually within the conditional frames that she expects the participant to use. For example, she must say in her instructions not ‘This is supposed to be a waiting room... Will you act as if...?’, but rather ‘This is the waiting room... You/We are...’. She thus conveys her own familiarity with the scene by her assertion or expectation that the scene is familiar and actual to the participants. This evidently also necessitates particularization, either given or elicited, on her part to ensure that what is supposedly actual is known. It occurs not by one presencing act but by an accumulation of particularizing and presencing statements that builds, in sedimentary fashion, a total and experientially actual environment.

Personalization—the technique

Personalization is the process through which the inductor draws on and makes explicit use of individual participants’ personal experience and meaning systems.

The degree of personalization, the degree to which particularized material or objects are drawn from the participants themselves, might be argued to be solely a methodological issue related to the objectives of the experiment, whether idiographic or nomothetic. Yet it can be stated unequivocally that even where the objectives of the experimenter remain covert, and where a situation is presented via ‘objective’ and physical objects, even the slightest degree of personalization of the mere physical environment will improve the quality of individuals’ engagement with the environment.

For example, if the event is to take place in an imaginary post office, asking participants themselves to set out the physical space (counters, doors, etc.) will undoubtedly improve their comfort in this environment. Further, the space will become more vivid and more meaningful. However, ideally through personalization, the inductor draws on individual domains of reference and meaning, and renders possible truly ecologically and phenomenologically valid research. For example, in the earlier example of two men in a pub, information can be elicited from the individuals, drawn from their experience, which may make the experimenter’s anticipation of an angry argument highly unlikely, but increase the ecological validity of the situation for the actors. (It is fair to say that such initial situations, preconstrued by conventional experimenters, are rarely tested for their validity in terms of the mundane world: they are never drawn from a known significant population of event with comparable rigour to their ensuing experimental testing.)

In role play experiments to date, the personalization of secondary as-ifs has been almost entirely absent. Hence, there is absolutely no attempt to
explicitly evoke the individual’s idiographic experience in such a way that it can inform a standardized situation or produce an ecologically valid one. In a humanistic context or qualitative methodology context, this is arguably essential.

**Self-disclosure versus self-concealment**

This is a major concern for participants. Of interest here is Iser’s literary analytic definition of communication: ‘Communication is a process set in motion and regulated ... by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment’ (1980: 111). Even behind the ‘mask’ of the role, actors appear to experience certain actions as risky, inasmuch as they feel exposed through these acts to the critical gaze of others. Even in a highly scripted encounter, there is a sense in which the ‘leakage’ of self occurs, through micro-behaviours or, indeed, through the very manner in which gross behaviour is enacted. Individuals normally protect selves from the scrutiny of others, and, indeed, from the scrutiny of themselves. Yet within a role play they may be asked to behave in a manner that directly impacts on an area normally vigorously hidden. More explicitly, actors may indeed be asked to demonstrate clear choice in behaviour given minimal guidelines, so that all actions are seen to reveal choice and personality. This relates to the converse, where, given minimal scenarios with stereotyped particularization, some actors feel free to ‘act out’ and enjoy that freedom, although they view the behaviour generated as ‘unreal’.

Any deepening or deliberate personalization of role plays involves more personal exposure. Within any set of role plays, for example, there is frequent activity, both explicit and implicit, aimed at limiting disclosure of self and others. Individuals refuse to personalize some roles, and also state that they do not want to know more about each other, particularly where there are pre-existent working and social relationships. Group relationships and dynamics are salient. Rivalries, friendships and mild to moderate dislikes may emerge in a constant state of fragility, needing careful mutual negotiation to stay within the tasks of a role play. Some of these relationship issues will emerge in the role play activities, and individuals will often stereotyped by others to play certain repeated types of roles which mirror some of the internal group dynamics. This points to the need for a role play inductor to be alive to these issues and carefully create boundaries for events, preferably negotiated with participants. It also raises again the question of the ethical responsibilities of an experimenter/role play inductor.

Although social interaction is intrinsically potentially positive, engaging and pleasurable, it is also risky and potentially damaging and endangering to self and other. The more demandingly a role play engages the moral, emotional and personal individual, the more dangerous is its potential. As time goes on, the idea that role play offers safe conditions without consequences in the real world increasingly becomes an unlikely proposition. This should not deter role play users, merely make them more sensitive to their responsibilities.

The concerns above can be dealt with in several distinct ways, some of which are outlined below:

1. by high levels of scripting and stipulation of induction information, taking the burden of choices off actors;
2. by explicit contracting with participants over the expected levels of personal disclosure;
3. by clear debriefing and taking actors out of role at the end of role plays;
4. by the clear induction framing of the role play that sets out the encapsulated nature of the role play event, with (within reason) disclaimers for the implications of actors’ actions.

**Role play applications**

Finally, to what uses can role play techniques be put? Although clearly I cannot begin to cover all aspects of the multitude of potential and current uses of role play (see Yardley, forthcoming), I will try to briefly indicate areas of research that could usefully employ role play methodology, in particular by summarizing those features of role play technique that facilitate a research enterprise.

Role play primarily allows the manipulation of time and space: these can be condensed or ‘exploded’ outwards. It also allows the almost infinite manipulation of ‘objects’, both internal and external, subjective and objective. Role plays allow a formal separation to be made between the ‘real’ world of consequentiality and the experimental world of ‘as-if’, thus abrogating individual responsibility for certain kinds of action. Role play allows a rapid movement in and out of subject participation to subject accounting modes, reducing also the distance between action and accounting opportunity. This further allows knowledge gathered in relation to accounting activities to be dynamically fed back into the construction of the role play activity, maximizing exploratory research work. And finally here, role play, properly approached from a methodological and technical perspective, forces the deconstruction of a priori assumptions by its potential for attention to objects through proper consideration of the constructive secondary as-ifs, both implicit and explicit.

Above all, role play is a sufficiently flexible technique to be amenable to the search for different kinds and levels of knowledge, based on different kinds of research intentions and strategies. Just as in everyday lives different individuals feel different needs to examine their own interactions, at different levels of depth, researchers also commit themselves to different domains of levels of experience and analysis. Role play can operate with very different methodologies, inasmuch as it can provide the content upon
which researchers work, and although the content is at least partly importantly determined by the induction input and style, the focus and analysis belongs to the research strategy.

At their most superficial, role plays can be used to generate behaviours in highly standardized contexts. Hence, a high level of 'scripting' can be stipulated which only allows for a limited degree of spontaneous action. Mixon (1971) has provided a model which describes various permutations of role play and which includes a highly scripted level which he has employed in replications, as indeed has Manscled (1979). The construction of a highly standardized, well-particularized but non-personalized as-if situation is well suited to the use of role play as:

1. a medium for providing a context within which independent variables can be manipulated, for example as in the opening vignette in this chapter;
2. a medium for providing a context for the measurement and observation of behaviour, for example in the assessment/measurement of communication skills;
3. a medium for the replication of conventional experimental designs to avoid problems of deception.

In such circumstances role plays can be used to stabilize and conventionalize the background against which action occurs. The more gross the analysis, the more standardized and well known the social episode of concern, the more appropriate particularized but not personalized induction.

At their profoundest, role plays can be set up to facilitate deep interpersonal experiences and depth analysis. Many of the 'new' research areas and theoretical frameworks call for an attention to micro-features of action and behaviour, to a depth and range of interpretation that is entirely congruent with the format of well-inducted role plays, as described here. For example, given the 'creation' of ecologically valid 'simulated' interactions, with high degrees of personalization as well as particularization and presence, which consequently do not generate demand-driven, stereotypical and false encounters, verbal material becomes available for ethnomethodological inquiry, interpretative or phenomenological analysis, or discourse analysis, the latter with a focus on what the dialogue does and how it does it, in relation to its constructedness. Because of the possibilities of moving in and out of an active or experiential mode into an observational, reflective or account-gathering mode, provided reinduction is used, role play offers highly accessible and flexible techniques for gathering a range of data types.

Role play is well suited to exploration and open-minded psychological inquiry. It allows high degrees of mutuality. Small details of action and situation can be continuously changed to assess their effect on participants who are chosen for or educated into high degrees of discriminatory and accounting abilities. The creativity and psychological abilities of participants can become a powerful resource (much under-exploited in conventional research) in such a setting. Control of the content of the role play can be shared with participants. As in other research techniques, exploration can be a goal in itself or a stepping stone for 'tight' role play experimentation.

The points of research departure and analytic arrival are as many as there are theoretical and methodological approaches. The latter will, of course, provide the frames and foci and points of reference for research within specific discursive domains of inquiry already pregenerated by the theoretical grounding of choice, or by default. Any methodology, any domain of inquiry, can be carried out within the as-if methodology of role play. The question is finally not therefore for what can role play be used but is overwhelmingly how can role play be best made to work? This chapter has been an attempt to introduce some answers to this question.

Note

1 Indeed 'Being' is arguably, at least partly, the state of continuously positing a revisable anticipated future – and re-membering a reusable and reinterpretable past – an infinite regress and progress of as-ifs: as-if we knew the mind of the other; as-if we could 'hold' the other in a steady state; as-if we knew the consequences of our action; as-if we experienced a truth.
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