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Fixed Role Therapy

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Definition

A form of brief, constructivist therapy in which the client enacts a make-believe character drafted by the therapist to portray an alternative identity for a fixed period of time, typically 2 weeks. Rather than teaching specific social skills, the enactment is intended to convey to the client that change in one's outlook and social role is possible at any time, if one is willing to try on an alternative way to approach one's life, including its challenges.

Related Terms

► [Personal construct therapy](#); ► [Role therapy](#)

As the original brief psychotherapy, fixed-role therapy (FRT) was pioneered by American psychologist George Kelly in the late 1930s to foster rapid personal growth and resilience in the urgent context of the Great Depression, and it has come to be used in a great range of clinical settings in the decades since. Like personal construct theory (PCT), the overarching theory of personality and

clinical psychology of which it was part, this active experimental approach to therapy presumed that people attempt to make sense of the world by devising and revising a system of *personal constructs* that help them interpret, anticipate, and respond to the events in their social world (Kelly 1955). Importantly, this same meaning system shapes their own view of themselves, as their *core role constructs* frame their identity and values and govern how these are expressed in their behavior and life choices. While the resulting life script functions as an indispensable guide to navigating our lives, it can also constrain the range of possibilities and ways of relating that are visible or permissible to the person, sometimes contributing to a sense of being “stuck” in an unsatisfying or conflictual role to which the person can see no alternatives. In such cases, FRT offers one bold and creative way for stepping into an alternative way of life for a fixed period of time in order to view oneself and others through another lens and restore a sense of empowerment to engage life differently.

The fixed-role procedure involves first inviting clients to draft a brief *self-characterization* about themselves, (Neimeyer et al. 2003) typically one or two pages in length, using the following instructions:

In the space that follows, please write a character sketch of _____, just as if he were the major character in a book, movie, or play. Write it as it might be written by a friend who knew him intimately and sympathetically, perhaps better than

anyone really could know him. Be sure to write it in the third person. For example, start out by saying, “_____ is...”

By encouraging the client to adopt a self-distancing but compassionate perspective, the instructions invite expression and exploration of the client’s strengths as well as perceived problems, allowing him or her to determine what features of the self and social world are important to emphasize. For example, Jonathan, a young army officer wrestling with religious questions as well as aspects of his relationships with others, drafted a self-characterization that acknowledged his career success, but also the perfectionism and anxiety that drove his performance, as well as his uncertainty as an African-American man in what he considered a “white world.” He further related this sense of insecurity to having grown up without a father, and his lifelong drive to be “a better kind of man.” He sought therapy to “get more comfortable with who he was” and to see if he could feel “less uptight,” despite his career success.

Analyzing the main themes in Jonathan’s self-characterization, the psychologist and a team of three consultants then constructed an *enactment sketch* of approximately two pages for him to read daily and perform for a fixed period of 2 weeks, during which he would meet with the group to discuss his experiences and discoveries while in role. To help Jonathan hold in mind the key characteristics of the make-believe identity, the role was given the humorous name Samson Knight, to underscore his noble characteristics, but also to play on the name of the famous brand of travel luggage. In part, the sketch reads:

Samson Knight may have his own “baggage” like the rest of humanity, but he carries it well. Poised as he is on the verge of a career in creative writing that both scares and excites him, he is proud of what he has accomplished and realizes that he has earned the right to kick back, travel and enjoy himself at times. He attributes his success to his own strength, hard work, and the support of his key members of his family, his girlfriend and his religious community—perhaps to a point that he downplays how the random events of life also shape who he has become.

Raised as he was by two troubled parents, both of whom were too immersed in their own issues to provide much nurturing to him, Sam learned early and well to seek what he needed from others, and he found it in the persons of his two older sisters. Even now, as they move into their own distinctive versions of adulthood, he remains in contact with one or the other of them nearly every day, whether texting a greeting, asking for advice, or simply sharing an experience. Though given to self-reliance in many ways, his life has taught him that the greater form of strength comes from shared vulnerability.

Though hardly a fashion plate, Sam enjoys selecting and wearing loose fitting, slightly “retro” clothing for comfort and to broadcast to others his laid-back style. Sometimes with his girlfriend and sometimes on his own, he’ll spontaneously head to a thrift store just to see what his \$5 will buy, and often comes back with a colorful, slightly “tacky” Hawaiian or safari shirt, always a size too big. He often chuckles to himself at the raised eyebrows of his friends, who have come to recognize the playful inconsistency in his apparel that conceals a more basic consistency: Sam’s reliable tendency not to take himself too seriously, except when others require his rock-solid friendship. This is not to say that Sam is always chivalrous as a knight, however, as he can occasionally be a bit preachy. Mostly, though, who he is corresponds with what he does, and finds expression in a quietly good-humored conviviality built on a genuine affection and respect for others.

Significantly, Sam takes pride in being a black man. He reads African American literature compulsively, whether it is the work of James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, or Tracy Smith, the brilliant young poet whose *Life on Mars* explores cosmological questions that verge on the spiritual. Sometimes he’ll even sneak off to an open mike poetry reading at Java Cabana or another funky cafe, sipping an espresso, and perhaps striking up a conversation with other aspiring writers and artists. But most of all, Sam likes to read poetry in the park, taking frequent breaks to watch the dogs and their owners play in a spontaneous, free way that he admires. Without a concern for social roles or masks, they seem to him to be fully capable of being simply what they are, a quality he admires.

Finally, though he says that he is not a “fitness nut,” Sam enjoys a leisurely jog, whether on his own or in the company of friends. More often than not, Sam finishes his run in a peaceful spot in nature where he practices his meditation. In order to connect spiritually and ground himself for the day ahead, he meditates on several mantras: “I am a man,” “Life is imperfect” and “Who I am is enough.” Sometimes, when he hears these words echoing in the

silent corridors of his soul, he feels something stirring deep within him, and senses that it is the voice of God.

Importantly, the enactment sketch offered a somewhat playful alternative way of being that addressed Jonathan's struggles (his perfectionism, anxiety, and difficult childhood) while also respecting his core values (his motivation to succeed, his religious beliefs, and his cultural identity). By integrating these into a reasonably coherent personality who is fallibly human rather than idealized, the sketch encourages the person to live out a different, make-believe role for a fixed period of time, without telling others around him about his experiment with an alternative identity. To assist the client in this, the sketch offers a balance of character traits and motives along with suggested activities and interests that express these abstract characteristics in concrete behaviors (Neimeyer and Winter 2006). Jonathan laughingly accepted the sketch, and although a little self-conscious at first, "loosened up" his off-duty wardrobe, developed a taste for espresso, and discovered a broad range of African-American writers and poets whose work expanded the action story genre to which he was accustomed. By the end of the 2 weeks, he reported several surprising interactions "with some pretty interesting people" and felt "less uptight" and closer to his sisters than he had in years. He also decided to take a course in meditation, which he described as "not really a religious thing for me, but more spiritual." Although he set aside further performance of the fixed role of Samson Knight in keeping with the therapeutic protocol, Jonathan described feeling "more comfortable with himself," and discovered he had the freedom to make "course corrections" now and then to fulfill his life plan. He closed the last session of therapy by giving the therapist a new book of poetry published by a young African-

American poet as a token of his appreciation for the "adventure" they had gone on together.

Since its inception in the work of George Kelly (1995), fixed-role therapy has been used successfully with clients presenting with a variety of problems, ranging from depression (Dalton 2009) and social anxiety (Abe et al. 2011) to substance use (Horley 2006) and marital distress. As a nonjudgmental approach to treatment that draws on client strengths while fostering experimentation with alternative outlooks and behaviors, it appears to facilitate change by increasing clients' flexibility and social intelligence (Neimeyer and Winter 2006). It also seems to mitigate the threat of change by creating a sense of "serious play," encouraging clients to step into an alternative life role for a fixed period of time, to recognize that reconstructing a sense of self is entirely possible.

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