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FIXED ROLE IN A FISHBOWL: CONSULTATION-BASED FIXED ROLE THERAPY AS A PEDAGOGICAL TECHNIQUE

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FIXED ROLE IN A FISHBOWL: CONSULTATION-BASED FIXED ROLE THERAPY AS A PEDAGOGICAL TECHNIQUE

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Since Kelly's pioneering work on Fixed Role Therapy (FRT) in the late 1930s, this novel method for fostering experimentation with and performance of alternative identities has been adapted for use in a number of clinical contexts, as well as some pedagogical applications. Our intent was to blend these contexts by developing a fixed role enactment as a collective class exercise in a graduate seminar on personal construct psychology. This article details the procedures and safeguards by which the self-characterization of a class volunteer was written and analyzed by parallel consultation teams comprised of class members, who then drafted and negotiated an alternative role for the volunteer to enact over a two-week period. It further specifies the role of the volunteer herself and the course instructor as consultants to these teams, and describes the outcomes of the collective experiment viewed through the written reflections of multiple participants. The result was a moving, innovative, respectful, and often surprising process of experiential learning for the entire class, bringing to life many of the principles that animate constructivist therapy.

First introduced by George Kelly in the late 1930s and early 1940s (Markley, Zellhart & Jackson, 1982; Neimeyer & Jackson, 1997), fixed role therapy (FRT) was eventually incorporated into personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955) as its most distinctive psychotherapeutic technique, ultimately undergoing various modifications and refinements to adapt it to a range of clinical applications. As a procedure in which therapist and client collaborate in constructing a new and hypothetical role or

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identity for a client to enact for a fixed period of time, FRT converges with the epistemological assumptions underpinning broader constructivist and performative approaches to psychotherapy (Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995; Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000; Newman & Holzman, 1999). Partly for this reason FRT has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in recent years. Our goal in the present article is to further the use of the method by discussing its application as a pedagogical technique for conveying some of the spirit and procedures of constructivist psychotherapy. In so doing, we hope both to illustrate and to formulate guidelines for this adaptation of the method, inasmuch as its use in the public fishbowl of the classroom offers some distinctive advantages and requires some particular safeguards that differ from those relevant to more private clinical contexts. We will begin with a brief review of previous uses of FRT in order to provide a basis for comparison and contrast with the present application.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

It is significant that Kelly first began experimenting with the methods that eventually crystallized into FRT in the late 1930s, when the combined economic and environmental effects of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl had devastated the farming communities of the American Midwest (Neimeyer & Jackson, 1997). Faced with widespread suffering and virtually no available psychological services of any kind, the hard-hit school system in the small city of Hays, Kansas, turned to the Psychology Department at Fort Hays Kansas State College for assistance. In response, over the next few years, Kelly and his students drew upon Korzybski's (1941) conceptualization of general semantics, with its emphasis on the reality-shaping function of language, and Moreno's (1937) psychodramatic methods, to develop a radical and practical method for fostering change, which they initially termed "role therapy." The procedure required first carefully assessing clients' personalities and abilities, and then drafting a hypothetical role description of someone who confronted similar life problems, but approached them from a different perspective. Kelly and the consultation team then helped clients take up and enact these fictional identities in their actual social worlds for a brief, fixed period of time (typically a few weeks), after which they rigorously evaluated the outcome. The result was not only one of the first examples of systematic psychotherapy research, but also the first form of brief therapy (Neimeyer & Bridges, 2003).

Kelly's (1955) publication of his magnum opus allowed him to embed FRT and its creative group therapy variants in a comprehensive

theoretical framework that had become, if anything, more radical in its epistemological assumptions. Thus, rather than relying on a battery of standardized psychological tests to portray the client's initial personality, Kelly had by then developed self-characterization. This is an idiographic narrative form of assessment, where qualitative analysis reveals self-constructions on the part of the client that can be partially retained, and partially suspended or reinterpreted, in the enactment sketch on which FRT is then based (Kelly, 1973). By the time of the publication of *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, Kelly had also become more explicit about the goal of the procedure, which was not so much to train the client in approved ways of construing and acting in the social world, as to "try on" new identity options while wearing the "protective mask of make believe" (G. Neimeyer, 1995). To underscore this creative capacity to devise and revise identity commitments across time, Kelly explicitly advocated "de-roling" at the conclusion of the treatment, after which the client and therapist would sort through what was learned together. In the words of Cruise and Sewell (2000), "The beauty of the fixed role technique is that it allows a client to temporarily abandon the self and explore alternative constructions knowing full well that his or her own construction may be readopted when the role play is over" (p. 235).

Following the publication of Kelly's (1955) work, a number of articles appeared that either considered FRT in theory or offered detailed case studies of its use. Bonarius (1970), for example, drew on a clinical example to illustrate the paradox of FRT as an approach consumed by neither the past nor the present, but that nonetheless helped the client navigate the future. In keeping with the psychodramatic origins of the technique, Davies (1972) compared FRT with Moreno's (1937) "theatre of spontaneity," as well as Wolpe's (1973) behavioral rehearsal and Bandura's (1969) modeling procedures, arguing that social imitation was a therapeutic mechanism in each method. However, in contrast to the behavioral methods, Davies noted FRT's explicit reliance on social imitation at the "complex and integrated level of personality function" (p. 284). Finally, Skene (1973) provided a detailed example of treating a young man who was court ordered to seek treatment for homosexual behavior in an era when this represented a violation of British law. Interestingly, FRT increased the client's social competency, which was a major therapeutic goal for the client, without affecting his behavioral attraction to same-sex partners, which might be viewed as a coherent part of his core role structure.

Subsequent publications on FRT extended its use to couples, family, and group settings. For example, Kremsdorf (1985) employed FRT within a couples therapy framework and found that FRT "demonstrated to the

couple that previous rigid patterns could be broken through experimentation and adoption of new perspectives" (p. 223). Kremsdorf concluded that FRT offered unique advantages when applied with couples, because each partner enacts a role that is complimentary to the other's, and therefore even slight alterations in the behavior of one are reinforced by the partner. Green (1997) further extended FRT to the domain of family therapy, using it with an 11-year-old boy who struggled with several challenging family situations. Group therapy applications have also appeared, both in treating social anxiety (Beail & Parker, 1991; Karst & Trexler, 1970) and in promoting greater self-awareness of facets of the identities of members participating in a "multiple self-awareness" group (Sewell, Baldwin & Williams, 1998). Finally, in an extension of fixed role methods beyond the clinical context, Brophy and Epting (1996) used enactment sketches to assist managers in a large organization in developing ways to strengthen their mentoring abilities.

In a rare pedagogical application, Woodward (1998) explored the similarities of people's experiences of acting as standardized patients (people trained to portray a patient role in a consistent fashion to provide training experiences for medical students) and the therapeutic process of FRT. Conducting focus groups with standardized patients, Woodward found that the participants' process of learning about a role, adopting it, enacting it, and abandoning it resulted in an increased sense of personal awareness, which was strikingly comparable to FRT outcomes. The primary purpose of the present article is to encourage further extension of FRT to educational settings by illustrating its application in a graduate psychology course in personal construct theory, where it was intended to model processes of narrative assessment and enactment-based intervention. Equally important, the integration of FRT into the course structure provided an opportunity for experiential learning about the basic precepts of constructivist philosophy having to do with the nature of the self and the role of performance in personal development (Neimeyer 1998, 2000). A secondary goal was to augment previously published technical recommendations for the implementation of FRT in clinical settings (e.g., Adams-Webber, 1979; Epting & Nazario, 1987; Neimeyer, 1993) by offering an explicit set of procedures and safeguards for its use in a pedagogical context.

THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

The "living laboratory" in which our experiment with FRT took place was a 15-week graduate psychology course in personal construct theory (PCT), taught by an instructor (RAN) having extensive familiarity with the theory. The class met for a single 3-hour session per week, and

involved a dozen masters and doctoral level students, the majority of whom were enrolled in programs in clinical or counseling psychology (and among whom were the other authors of this article). FRT was introduced in the sixth week of the course, following systematic presentations and spirited discussions of Kelly's basic theory, with its emphasis on the primacy of personal meaning, constructive alternativism, and reinterpretation of psychological disorders along nonpathologizing lines. A distinctive feature of the course was its consistent incorporation of personal reflections (prompted by weekly reaction papers and reinforced by a detailed self-study), as well as opportunities for experiential learning (through role plays and other small group exercises). As a result, a norm of active participation had been developed, and frequent personal disclosures illustrating theoretical concepts had established a high level of trust among class participants.

As part of the self-study requirement, all students had written a self-characterization, as well as completed one or more personal ladders and a web-based repertory grid (Fransella & Bannister, 1977; Neimeyer, 1993; Neimeyer, Anderson & Stockton, 2001; Shaw & Gaines, 2002). Self-characterizations followed a minor modification of Kelly's (1955) basic instructions (appearing below) to write a description of oneself from the third-person standpoint of an intimate and sympathetic friend who knows the writer perhaps better than anyone actually could. Based on the often moving and occasionally eloquent self-descriptions that resulted, I (RAN)¹ privately approached one writer, Laura, to ask her if she might be willing to share the results of her self-characterization with the class, and use it as the basis for a group exercise in FRT in the ensuing weeks. I gave explicit permission for her to edit the draft in whatever way she deemed appropriate to make it more comfortable to share with her classmates. She considered this overnight (at my request), and consented. Laura's own description of the writing process follows.

WRITING THE SELF-CHARACTERIZATION

Writing a self-characterization was a unique chance for self-exploration and discovery at a time in my life I considered transitory and uncertain. At first the task seemed slightly threatening, but as soon

¹From this point forward, we have opted to retain our individual authorial voices where noted, in order to reflect more adequately our distinctive roles and perspectives in the FRT process we will depict. Where no individual names are signaled in the text, the writing represents the composite of our joint discussion and processing of the experience. Likewise, Laura, who volunteered for this class-based application of FRT, prefers to acknowledge her authorship of the self-characterization that follows, and accordingly has edited her writing slightly to make it suitable for distribution to a less intimate audience.

as I began to write, the words came easily and comfortably. I began by expressing what I considered concrete and obvious traits of my personality, and subsequently delved deeper into more intimate details as I felt more fluent describing myself through words. The writing process was cathartic, a release which I had not anticipated. It was as if I knew I could write whatever I needed to, and then go back and edit the self-characterization for the consumption of the class. However, after my first draft of the self-characterization, I found very little that I wanted to leave out of the final draft, because the words I had written flowed into a coherent story that would be incomplete without each of the details I had initially included.

The experience lent itself to being a variation of an intimate diary entry, written by myself about myself. By writing the sketch in the third person, I was allowed to step outside the "role of Laura" and observe those aspects of me that would normally be less apparent than if I were writing from my own perspective. Also, knowing that I had the right to disclose as little or as much about myself as I wanted to made writing the self-characterization a new and uncommon exploratory process.

Laura's full self-characterization, edited by her for publication, appears below following the modified version of Kelly's (1955) opening prompt.

In the space that follows, please write a character sketch of Laura Ray, just as if she were the major character in a book, movie, or play. Write it as it might be written by a friend who knew her intimately and sympathetically, perhaps better than anyone really could know her. Be sure to write it in the third person. For example, start out by saying, "Laura Ray is. . . ."

Laura Ray is a young woman in a transitory period in her life, constantly questioning both her day-to-day decisions and her long-term decisions. She is often passionate about her beliefs and eager to discuss them with her friends and family. Sometimes she is easily swayed by others' opinions if they express them eloquently and convincingly. You might say that she is occasionally gullible.

She loves to read and is always eager to continue learning in the classroom, as well as through real world experience. She sometimes has a shaky sense of self-confidence and does not attempt new undertakings at which she might not be successful. Often it takes encouragement from others to motivate her to try something new, whether it be studying abroad or eating at a new restaurant.

She is an avid outdoorswoman, with a love for hiking, camping, skiing, and biking. She finds a deep spirituality in nature, and often chooses to be alone on her outdoor expeditions to relish in the beauty of the woods, the desert, or other surroundings. She notices many details about nature and her surroundings that others might overlook, such as the brightness of the moon on an exquisitely clear night, or the song of a particular bird in a nearby tree. Her attention

to detail extends into her relationships with others and her memory of extremely specific details about her friends and relatives. However, she tends to let others tell her more about themselves than she is willing to disclose about herself.

Laura is a good listener, eager to lend an ear to anyone who needs a friend. She does not like sarcasm, due to its often judgmental undertones. She is sometimes oversensitive to others' criticisms, and has tried to adjust her sensitivity to a more functional level. In fact, her sensitivity to others' opinions and comments often interferes with her ability to let people get close to her, and she fears getting hurt by those who love her. She was involved in a extremely intense relationship several years ago, and has had trouble reaching a similar commitment level in new relationships. Her most recent two relationships evolved into long-term relationships that were not feasible to continue, and she never explicitly ended them.

Laura used to be able to easily trust people, but she has had some difficulty since her parents were divorced after 28 years of marriage. The divorce especially affected her relationship with her father, whom she had been very close with growing up. Now, she feels as though she really has to work on her relationship with him and "schedule" time to see him. However, she is now closer than ever to her mother, aware of the misery she endured during those tough years.

ANALYSIS OF THE SELF-CHARACTERIZATION

After Laura wrote her self-characterization, I (RAN) asked her if she would like to read it to the class, or whether she would prefer to have me do so. Laura felt that it was more in keeping with the perspective-taking the exercise invited to have me read it as she listened, and so I did, finding myself audibly moved by her poignant description of her love of nature. After inviting some brief (and appreciative) reactions from other class members, I then discussed a set of hermeneutic guidelines for analyzing self-characterizations, adapted from Kelly (1955; see Table 1). I then organized the 12 members of the class into three consultation groups, assigning each a private room. Each group began by rereading a copy of Laura's self-characterization to ensure that everyone was familiar with its content. Interestingly, given the minimally sufficient structure of the analytic guidelines, each group then quickly developed its own style of working over the next hour, with one systematically applying each of the guidelines to the protocol, another brainstorming formulations keyed to particularly resonant phrases in the self-characterization, resorting to the guidelines as needed to fuel this creative process, and the third engaging in energetic discussion, unhindered

TABLE 1 Guidelines for the Analysis of a Self-Characterization

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1. Start with a credulous approach. Do not immediately start looking for the defense mechanisms, external contingencies, or cognitive distortions in the client's presentation, but instead try to answer the question, "What does the world look like through this person's eyes?"
 2. Observe sequence and transition. Interpret the protocol as a flowing whole, assuming that apparent breaks are unexpected elaborations of similar or contrasting content.
 3. Observe organization. Assume that the opening sentence of each paragraph has the greatest generality.
 4. Reflect each statement against the context of the whole protocol. Do key terms take on somewhat different meanings in different settings?
 5. Look for repeated terms with similar content. These may signify an important construct that is not adequately symbolized.
 6. Shift the emphasis on different parts of the sentence. This may suggest alternative "readings" of its meaning.
 7. Restate the essential themes in your own words to grasp the protocol's basic message.
 8. Assume that the writer is working at the "growing edge" of his or her self-understanding. The areas that the person chooses to discuss should contain enough uncertainty to make exploration interesting and enough structure to make it meaningful.
 9. Examine the client's attributional style. What cause and effect constructs does the client use?
 10. What are primary dimensions implied in the protocol? What are their implicit poles? These may suggest behavioral, emotional, or existential alternatives as the client sees them.
 11. How does the client characterize him or herself on these constructs? Does this change?
 12. What are the idiosyncratic meanings attached to the terms?
 13. Who are the person's validating agents, if any? Who invalidates the client in various roles?
 14. What evidence does the person use to support his or her placement on given constructs? Which of these seem most amenable to change?
-

by the note-taking that characterized the other two groups. As each group worked, Laura and I circulated from one to the next, allowing groups to ask Laura for clarification or feedback on their emerging conceptualizations, or to consult with me on technical or procedural questions about conducting the analysis. Aside from these "content" goals for the interaction, two explicit process goals of "consulting with the consultants" were (1) to prompt these young psychologists to dis-

cover a respectful means of discussing another person's life in such a way that they would be comfortable having the "client" present for the discussion, and (2) to privilege the "voice" of the "client," Laura, in resolving ambiguities and crafting the emergent understanding of her writing. A further objective, implicit in the formation of subgroups, was to afford each class member an opportunity to participate actively in translating hermeneutic principles into practice. Reflecting on this consultation process, Laura observed,

Initially, I was slightly wary of the idea of several small groups of classmates analyzing my self-characterization. I wondered if it would be awkward if the separate groups came to very different conclusions about certain aspects of my personality, and if I would then have to choose the more "appropriate" interpretation of my self-characterization. In fact, this did not occur. Although the three small groups had varying interpretations around similar themes, their analyses usually fit neatly together and often provided an enriched, expanded analysis of the self.

I was able to circulate with Bob and listen to the groups while they were analyzing the self-characterization. I did not want my presence to be uncomfortable to the groups, perhaps stifling their intense discussions. Instead, I chose to actively reinforce the groups' ideas when I felt they were correct observations of my personality, and provide clarification when asked particular questions about the details of the self-characterization. I was able to expand on themes I had touched upon in my sketch by providing specific examples or stories. If a group struggled with a particular aspect of the self-characterization, I would offer an idea that had been discussed by the other consultation groups, or emphasize another theme that the group had already developed. Simultaneously, Bob provided "technical" support in the actual analysis process by clarifying the guidelines used to analyze the self-characterization.

In the midst of this peripatetic consultation, Laura and I felt enthusiasm and intrigue quickly replacing our initial nervousness, and developed the metaphor of functioning as bees that were, through our repeated visits to each group, cross-fertilizing the ideas each was cultivating. One active group member (HH) summarized the consultants' reactions to this process in the following terms:

Each group generated questions about certain phrases or words Laura used and asked her to clarify the meaning behind these when she came around to consult. It was very helpful to have her there to add her detailed perspective to the themes. She agreed with the interpretations most of the time and would correct the groups if they misin-

terpreted her meaning. This process was very “real” for the class members because they knew her; it was not just an academic exercise in analyzing a sketch of a fictional or unknown person. One of the many advantages of this exercise was that Laura was able to interact with all consultants in order to reinforce their ideas and clarify the main themes. Sometimes, Laura would tell detailed stories during these consultation visits that added some background of her life (such as her development of skills as a harpist) and gave a different perspective to the various groups. These detailed accounts gave the groups a great deal of insight into the situation that they would not have had if she had not been there to expand her point of view. She also offered thoughts from other groups to help develop their ideas and emphasize the central themes. Everyone felt comfortable talking to her about these issues and their personal thoughts on her self-characterization. Everyone was sensitive to Laura’s feelings and respected her for her willingness to disclose private information, and she took “criticism” very well. Both Laura and Bob added a great deal to the group discussions and had a positive effect on the overall analysis.

Ultimately, what emerged from this phase of the consultation was a set of recurrent themes in the analyses, which included the following, phrased in the terms of one of the participants (HH):

1. Laura noted that she had *trouble trusting others* and takes time to feel confident with new people she meets. Perhaps for this reason, she placed her most revealing sentences at the end of each paragraph, because she seemed to be “feeling out” what she wanted to say before she said it.
2. Laura feels a need to be *successful* and *in control*. This is reflected in her not partaking in something new when there is a chance that she might fail.
3. Laura is in a *transitory period* where her life is changing, and she is questioning her decisions in a chaotic world.
4. Laura is an outdoorswoman who truly *loves and appreciates nature*. She likes to get away from the chaos of the rest of the world, and she finds peace in nature. She likes to spend this time alone to reflect on her thoughts.
5. Laura pays *attention to details* about people, places, and things, which might relate to being in control. She can control her level of awareness in any given situation. She can choose to pay attention to what she wants to, or she may put blinders on and not see things that are obvious to others. These may be things that she does not want to accept. This could be a defense to shield her from excessive pain and hurt.
6. Laura *loves to read* and learn, both in the classroom and from real world experience. Yet paradoxically, she yet is afraid to try new

things, perhaps because doing so would make it hard to maintain her perfectionism.

6. Laura is overly *sensitive* and does not like sarcasm. Some things that people say in a joking manner can rub her the wrong way, and she strives to avoid a similar way of speaking herself.
7. Laura is a *good listener*, and she mentions this repeatedly throughout her self-characterization. It seems to be an important quality that she sees in herself, and one she values.
8. Laura notes that she is *easily swayed* by others and prefers for others to express their opinions before she expresses hers. This suggests a shaky self-confidence and a fear that her opinion may be criticized by others. However, the consultants did not feel that she lacked self-confidence, as she courageously volunteered for the FRT exercise. Laura did say that the reason she volunteered is that she was really ready for a change in her life and took this on as a new challenge even though it was a bit scary.

WRITING THE ENACTMENT SKETCH

With their respective analyses of the self-characterization in hand, each of the three consultation groups then proceeded to draft a provisional enactment sketch for Laura, supported by the guidelines summarized in Table 2. Most groups started this process with a valued central

TABLE 2 Guidelines for constructing the enactment sketch

-
1. Do not portray an ideal person or a model of superhuman coping in whose image the client is asked to remake him/herself. Instead, try to construct a plausible and multidimensional person who embodies limitations as well as strengths.
 2. Avoid prescribing the polar opposites of the core constructs in the self-characterization, which could trigger resistance or rejection of the sketch by the person asked to enact it. Instead, seek to entice the client into an orthogonal or novel way of construing the social world that neither replicates or contradicts his or her current constructs.
 3. Signal central concerns, issues, interests, and values, and anchor these in specific roles, pastimes and activities. A successful enactment sketch should suggest—though perhaps not strictly prescribe—behaviors compatible with the new identity the client is asked to perform.
 4. Create a character that the client might like to get to know over a brief period of intensive contact. The character might not be ideal, but she or he should at least be interesting!
 5. When writing the enactment sketch, mirror the organization and style reflected in the client's self-characterization. This helps ensure that the sketch will "speak" to the client in a voice that is familiar, balancing the impact of content that is novel.
-

theme from the self-characterization to mitigate the threat of inconsistency of the new role with Laura's sense of self. Beyond this, the consultants constructed roles that encouraged Laura to experiment with novel ways of perceiving and acting in the world, following Kelly's injunction that the new role be in some sense "orthogonal" to the old, neither redundant with it nor its polar contrast. I prompted them occasionally to put "legs" under their more abstract descriptions of personality traits (assertiveness, emotional involvement) by suggesting how such qualities would be performed or enacted in a social sphere. Each of these potential additions to the new role were subjected to an "acceptance check" by Laura, and incorporated into a rough draft of a distinctive enactment sketch crafted by each group, as reflected below.

Group A: *Carrie Oakie*

Carrie Oakie is a young woman on the edge of a precipice; though she doesn't quite know what lies on the other side. She is a fun-loving, spirited, and passionately committed woman. Her commitment to nature and the environment is expressed through her involvement in the Wolf River Conservancy, her work at the Lichterman Nature Center, and teaching children about ecological resources, appreciation and conservation. The passion with which she expresses her opinions can sometimes be intimidating to others. However, she is still able to listen to others and is open to a diversity of ideas. For fun, she enjoys getting dressed up in a wacky style and taking center stage at a local bar and perform to karaoke music on Friday nights. But she has to be careful prancing in her pink rhinestone-studded stiletto boots that she enjoys wearing with her black feather boa. Carrie courageously belts out an off-key version of Aretha Franklin's "RESPECT" and relishes her friends chuckling in the front row.

Group B: *Alla Boutmie*

Alla is a confident young woman who is self-motivated. She enjoys getting others' perspective but is firm in her own decision-making. She loves to play her harp daily because it is her emotional outlet. She enjoys trying new things such as pottery classes and volunteering at a nearby hospice.

She is an avid outdoorswoman with a deep love for nature. She enjoys sharing her nature outings, such as hiking and camping, with her closest friends. She also cultivates her spirituality at church. She is in the process of investigating different religions and places of worship. She belongs to a book club because she enjoys discussing her opinions in response to others. In her relationships with others, she tends to talk a lot, especially about herself, sometimes monopolizing the conversation. She also is a little naïve, taking people at face value. She tends to deal with things on a "now" basis, avoiding procrastination at all costs.

Group C: Holly Schtick

Holly Schtick is a young woman who enjoys nature, and the beauty she encounters becomes even more meaningful to her when she shares it with someone else. Holly frequently shares photos of her special “nature moments” with friends.

Holly is an inquisitive and curious individual who loves to learn for the sake of learning and is focused on the big picture rather than the minutia. When her interest is sparked while reading, she drops everything to pursue the intellectual gold of the new ideas. Sometimes Holly finds it difficult to refocus on the original material.

She often finds herself staring at cloud formations to see what they may represent. The same is true for her perceptions of people. She is less likely to remember the color of a friend’s shirt, but rather, would recall who she believes the person to be and what the person represents in her life.

Holly also loves people. She has an intense interest in who they are but, curiously, she is not overly concerned with pleasing them. For example, she likes to listen to what others say, but is not reluctant to voice a differing opinion. Finally Holly has a tendency to ruminate about comments of others, but effectively seeks input from trusted friends as to the meaning of those random comments.

CONSTRUCTING A COMPOSITE ENACTMENT SKETCH

After all consultation groups completed their drafts of the enactment sketch, I reconvened the class in a plenary format to review the results. Each group appointed a representative to share the gist of its analysis of Laura’s self-characterization, followed by reading its sketch aloud to the class. Laura listened closely to each, and then highlighted key points that she wanted to keep for the final fixed role sketch. These highlights were typed up as a rough draft and circulated by e-mail to the entire class, with each member submitting revisions and suggestions to me. I then helped integrate the sometimes divergent recommendations into a coherent enactment sketch, attempting to make the new identity more interesting, vivid, and plausible through the addition of more concrete detail and narrative smoothing. Because this amounted to constructing a role that was in some sense more “holistic” than its predecessors, we as a group decided to retain the homonym “Holly Schtick” for the fictional self that Laura would temporarily portray. Laura then read and enthusiastically approved the final draft in the next class session. The accepted enactment sketch read:

Holly Schtick is a somewhat quiet, passionate young woman who enjoys nature and music. The beauty she encounters in nature becomes

even more meaningful to her when she shares it with someone else, such as her fellow volunteers in the Wolf River Conservancy. For this reason, Holly takes a special pleasure in nature photography, whether she is capturing the grand sweep of a mountain range or the subtle geometry of a garden reflected in a single dewdrop. She realizes that it takes a special sensitivity to resonate to the sublime beauty of nature, a sensitivity of which only one in 10 people are really capable. But she does not easily give up her search for these people, any more than she gives up finding the rare soul who can hear elements of the divine in her playing of the harp. The one time she was invited as harpist to play as part of an Easter benefit in the Goldsmith Garden Center was a dream come true, letting her integrate two of her greatest passions in an outdoor ambiance in the presence of many appreciative adults and children.

Holly is an inquisitive and curious individual who loves to learn for the sake of learning and is focused on the big picture rather than the minutia of life. When her interest is sparked while reading, she drops everything to pursue the intellectual gold of the new ideas. Sometimes Holly finds it difficult to refocus on the original material, because she becomes so focused on exploring the implications of the concepts she encounters, or carrying out inner "debates" with the positions of authors with whom she disagrees. Although she enjoys a vast range of books, she confesses that she is especially moved by the visions of naturalists like Henry Thoreau or Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. She is pretty sure that if she had lived a century or two ago, she would have taken up residence beside them at Walden Pond or in the pine scrub of north central Florida.

Perhaps as an expression of her curiosity, Holly often finds herself staring at cloud formations to see what they may represent. The same is true for her perceptions of people. She is less likely to remember the color of a friend's shirt, but rather, would recall who she believes the person to be and what the person represents in her life. For this reason, she occasionally finds it oddly difficult to describe even her good friends to people who don't know them. Although she sometimes gets frustrated by her inability to recall details about people or events, she ultimately realizes that her overall feeling about things is the more reliable guide to life.

To people who don't know her well, Holly is something of a paradox. On the one hand, she clearly has an intense interest in people, but, on the other hand, she is not overly concerned with pleasing them, perhaps because she is more concerned with being true to her own feelings than with satisfying the dictates of social convention. But even in her unconventionality and occasional naiveté, Holly is generous and caring. One recent expression of this was her decision to volunteer with hospice, providing support for dying patients and their families by her simple presence, her intention to lighten their burden in practical ways, and her sharing the gift of

recorded harp music that seemed to ease the transition they were undergoing.

Though Holly is not always well understood by others, she is a cherished friend to those who care enough to respect her inner complexity. With those she knows less well, Holly is sometimes enigmatic, or even provocative, suddenly offering a strongly felt opinion that is not always well received. Although she is not immune to being hurt by the occasional negative reactions this elicits from others, she prefers seeking the counsel of a trusted friend about these situations to simply ruminating on them. I guess you could say that she lives a “holistic” life—to borrow one of her favorite words—finding refuge in nature and music when the human drama becomes just a little “too much.” I think that it is this well-rounded quality about her, the way she is equally “at home” on her own or with others, that makes it so rewarding to be her friend.

THE USES OF ENACTMENT

Having accepted the above sketch, Laura began the two-week enactment phase of the project, metaphorically inviting Laura to take a vacation, and allowing “Holly” to stand in for her in her school, work, social, and family life with the occasional support of consulting class members. Reflecting on this process, she noted:

Before I could attempt to enact the role of Holly, I had to step outside myself and examine those areas in my life that were calling for change or refinement. I had to imagine how I must appear to the people around me and try to see through their eyes. I also had to decide how much of Holly I would choose to incorporate into my actions at any given time, and how high or low I should adjust the “volume” on her character. By focusing so much attention on my portrayal of her, I was automatically stepping outside myself, and my self-awareness diminished. Just as the experience of *flow* triggers a sense of detachment from the self and absorption in a task, I was separate from myself and able to see and feel what others notice about Laura.

I enacted the role of Holly for two weeks. During this time, I read the sketch that the class drafted every morning and night, and reminded myself throughout the day with strategically-placed notes on my dashboard and in my daily planner. Sometimes I chose to have *conversations* with Holly rather than actually *being* her, but at other times I stepped directly into her role. The most important thing for me during the process was to be sure that I maintained an outsider’s perspective on myself. I even visualized myself as others would see me driving down the street, making a purchase in a store,

or reading a book in a coffee shop. I wanted to know how Holly viewed the world through her eyes, and especially how she viewed me.

At first, I found it awkward to say and do things I normally would not do, such as making a comment when I disagreed with something someone said, or going to a restaurant by myself. However, it was empowering to know that I could attribute some of my more unfamiliar actions to Holly. With every new comment or action, I felt strengthened and more independent. I sometimes even felt as though I were drawing people towards me with a magnetic sense of confidence. I was especially focused on increasing my assertiveness and trying to see my world as a coherent entity rather than a million details held together by the glue of my imagination.

Adopting Holly's holistic perspective had amazing effects on my senses as well as my thoughts and actions. I allowed myself to be wrapped up in the *season* rather than the *day*. One afternoon I was driving down a beautiful street and passed a man mowing his lawn. The smell of fresh-cut grass flooded my car and gave me an overall feeling of happiness and comfort. The idea of Spring was an all-consuming mental and physical sensation, rather than my usual awareness of a detail captured in one moment in time, such as a flower or a blossoming tree. I had a sense of how happiness and pleasure can come from a combination of thoughts and senses.

Through Holly, I began to hear music in a different way. In the past, I have dissected the individual instruments' parts in a composition and listened to their specific contributions to the song, but I have begun to listen to the combination of sounds and rhythms as a whole. This has allowed me to hear familiar music in a new way, enjoying it for its originality and expressiveness rather than its technical merit.

Another continuing theme that I noticed during my enactment period was that of "letting go." I have always thought that I ruminate too much about people's comments and situations that were not as ideal as I hoped them to be. Holly would definitely live in the moment and not dwell on the past, so I found myself tying up some loose ends that had kept me attached to the past. I finally ended an ambiguous relationship and allowed myself to be fully involved in starting a new one.

It is an absolute pleasure that my enactment of Holly Schtick coincided with the emergence of Spring, a time of renewal and growth. I have learned many things from her and feel like I have a new sense of self-worth and confidence, knowing that I can engage myself more with others without needing the façade of role enactment to "justify" my assertiveness and candor. I have witnessed for myself how powerful changing perspectives can be for encouraging introspection and self-awareness.

During the two weeks Laura devoted to the enactment, the class continued to meet, focusing on other relevant readings and exercises, and concluding with an update from Laura on how her performance of Holly was going, and how others in her life were responding to her new (and unannounced) experiment. Significantly, Laura preferred to keep these discussions brief, cultivating her insights privately in a personal journal, deferring a fuller discussion of the FRT experience until after she had “de-rolled” and could again speak from her own perspective, rather than that of Holly. Thus, the intensive in-therapy enactment and coaching of the adopted role that characterizes most clinical applications of FRT was obviated in this case; Laura apparently adopted the role enthusiastically on her own initiative, only occasionally consulting with friends in the class in the course of doing so. In keeping with the spirit of narrative therapy (Epston & White, 1995), the class collectively planned a ceremonial dinner as a rite of passage to mark Laura’s “return” at the end of the enactment, and to provide a social context for a fuller discussion of her experiential learning. As sometimes happens in therapy, however, unforeseen life events intervened, precipitating a more abrupt and unsupported relinquishment of Holly’s role than we had planned. Laura explains:

As a class, we had discussed the process of de-rolling before I even stepped into the role of Holly. We noted that it was important to have some formal relinquishing of her role so that I could clearly step back into my role as Laura. One suggestion included having the class meet after the two weeks to officially say goodbye to Holly, perhaps over dinner or in another social environment. Another suggestion involved “burying” Holly in a funeral-like ceremony. I expressed my interest in a social gathering where I could discuss my enactment period with the class in comfortable surroundings.

Unfortunately, I was unable to participate in a formal de-rolling exercise. On the morning of the last day of the enactment period, I received a devastating phone call from my sister regarding her pregnancy. She needed me to be there for her as Laura, not as Holly, so I was instantly ripped from my temporary role and thrown back into my own life. In retrospect, the de-rolling felt genuine and perhaps was more effective than a formal ceremony or planned event. I was distinctly separated from Holly, and then able to look back at her effects on me once I felt ready to do so.

Several weeks after relinquishing the role of Holly, I chose to trace those aspects of herself that would have lasting effects on my personality, as well as remembering those qualities which I would not wish to retain from my enactment of her. One of the most important lessons I learned from Holly was that examining the “whole picture” of a situation can reveal more than focusing on its minute

details. Moreover, she taught me why I engage in certain behaviors, such as often being hesitant to open up to others and disclose details about myself. I have struggled with my insecurity and have become a good listener because I felt as though I had more control over a relationship if I knew more about the other person than he or she knew about me. Rather than seeing my openness with others as part of a reciprocal relationship of honesty, I had been focusing on my vulnerability without seeing that the other person is just as vulnerable.

Also, Holly taught me that it is often possible to get what I want if I simply ask for it or express my opinions, rather than hoping that the situation will magically offer me what I have hoped to attain. Being assertive has never been easy for me, but succeeding in several small conquests to actively seek what I have desired through Holly has instilled in me a sense of accomplishment and strength.

Sometimes Holly's honest approach to her feelings was a bit too much for me. I felt as though she could be too blunt with her thoughts and opinions and force them on others more strongly than she should. This aspect of her personality reinforced her assertiveness and lack of dependence on others' impressions of her, but often made her seem standoffish and arrogant to those who did not know her. However, she taught me the importance of being honest with myself and others, even if it sometimes involves standing up for something that others may disagree with or find unappealing. I hope that part of Holly will remain with me and will give me strength for many years to come.

STUDENT RESPONSE

Of course, a distinctive feature of this pedagogical application of FRT was its implementation in the fishbowl of the classroom context, rather than in the privacy of a therapist's office. As a consequence, the experiential learning that resulted was not limited to the client and therapist(s), as in traditional clinical applications, but explicitly extended to the emerging professionals who collaborated to construct, support, witness, and process the exercise. This kind of participatory learning proved powerful for the entire class, offering a rare and sustained opportunity to experience first-hand the heavy responsibility entailed in actively engendering change in the life of another person, in a setting that fostered high levels of reflection and dialogue. One student (KR) summarized her experience of the exercise in the following written reflection:

Taking part in a small team and simultaneously participating in the larger consultation group for Laura's fixed role therapy left me with

a mixture of concerns and reassurances. I felt reassured that if my small team misinterpreted aspects of Laura's self-characterization, we would have the larger team to correct us. This was also true for creating the enactment sketch, as ideas could be built upon, and so risking greater input on creating orthogonal constructs seemed less daunting. The concern on my part was that our suggestions would be so far-reaching that it would be difficult to envision where this fixed role therapy could lead. Furthermore, being used to working with a person one-on-one, I was afraid that the project would lose some of the intimacy and commitment to remaining personal that accompanies working in a dyad. Relying on a larger team of consultants, I was worried that we would lose sight of Laura as a result of dispersion of responsibility.

But in the end, being part of this fixed role therapy enterprise left me with a number of highly positive impressions. First of all, we all worked amazingly well together. Second, our instructor's injunction to talk about Laura at any given point as if she were in the room with us (which she sometimes was!), made me feel as though this project was much more personal, significant, and responsibility-laden than initially expected. It also made me realize that this was not just another assignment as in so many courses, which had to be fulfilled and/or endured. Third, every team made unique contributions to the construction of the enactment sketch, and when we got back into the large group we would either find ourselves being confirmed in our interpretations or building on what others had developed. Fourth, the larger consultation team developed a group cohesiveness and was able to provide a safe environment, the likes of which I had not experienced in any other classroom. And last, we as a class managed to become and stay empathic, caring and responsible, realizing to the full extent what Laura's volunteering meant for her, which made our participation in this experiment an amazing experience that we will long remember.

SAFEGUARDS

Just as this more public pedagogical application of FRT can foster unique learning outcomes, so too it requires special safeguards to protect the interests of all participants, and particularly those of the volunteer. Fortunately, most of these were anticipated in our use of the method and implemented consistently from the outset. However, as is perhaps true of any genuine experiment, the performance of the project also brought to light some additional guidelines that might well be observed in future adaptations. We would therefore like to offer the following recommendations for similar educational applications of FRT.

1. *Establish a safe class atmosphere.* Beyond the usual group therapy injunctions to honor the disclosures of other participants by maintaining confidentiality about group discussions, a profound attitude of mutual respect and concern needs to be established as a prerequisite to considering FRT. To a large extent, this can only be developed if modeled consistently by an instructor who shows genuine interest in the personal experiences of class members and who interacts with them as the emerging professionals and colleagues they are. Such conditions are probably most easily established when classes are small (the 12 participants in our class perhaps representing an upper limit), students share basic career goals (such as the pursuit of training as clinical or counseling psychologists), and evaluative objectives are subordinated to developmental ones (in this instance exempting the FRT exercise from any form of grading or marking). These factors, probably in combination with less specifiable conditions arising from the unique composition of this class, established a context within which the creative application of FRT in a group setting seemed both feasible and productive.
2. *Involve a professional therapist or counselor in the process.* In our case, the fact that the instructor was a practicing constructivist psychotherapist provided some intrinsic safeguards, ensuring a level of attention to issues of group process and volunteer responses to the exercise that was essential. However, in retrospect it seems prudent to provide the volunteer access to an independent therapist at her or his discretion, to provide more consistent support to the volunteer and class in the event of unanticipated complications during the enactment, to circumvent possible dual-role issues for the instructor, and to allow the volunteer a private forum for processing insights arising from the experience that she or he might prefer not to share with classmates. However, sequestering this optional consultation from the classroom also seems important, underscoring that the manifest purpose of the FRT procedure is pedagogical rather than therapeutic in the strict sense.
3. *Allow ample time to process the experience during and after its completion.* Complementing the FRT exercise with a reflective self-study using a variety of personal construct methods provided a convenient medium for some of this processing on an individual level, and this was supplemented by relatively brief updates during the enactment period. However, care should be taken to schedule the procedure early enough in the academic term to allow sufficient time for group processing and perhaps rituals

of “reentry” following de-roling. In our case, much of this was accomplished by the subset of the class that chose to continue meeting in order to draft this report, but providing this opportunity during the course itself would have made it more consistently available to all students.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Across its 60-year history as a therapeutic technique, fixed role therapy has been adapted to an impressive number of treatment settings, ranging from individual interventions for a variety of problems, to couples, families, and groups willing to “try on for size” novel roles for addressing familiar difficulties. The present report extends this history in pedagogical directions, in keeping with recent constructivist attempts to use life narratives and case studies to enhance educational outcomes (Mayo, 2001, 2002). To an even greater extent than these innovations, however, the pedagogical application of FRT entails experiential learning, a learning-by-doing that involves students in alternating, collaborative cycles of action and reflection, creating a powerful prompt for professional, as well as personal growth. It is our hope that, with appropriate safeguards, such an application might be helpful in other training contexts in which developing therapists confront the awesome responsibilities entailed in entering and enlarging a client’s world of personal meaning.

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