

Role Playing: An Alternative to What?¹

Siamak Movahedi²

University of Massachusetts, Boston

Abstract. Some of the arguments for the use of role playing as a substitute for traditional experimental methods are examined. The premises on which such arguments are based are found to be more controversial than the technique itself. Role playing as a research tool is not categorically rejected; however, it is argued that its use may be theoretically justified in relation to a certain research problem just like any other method. Finally, the need for theoretical research and for meaningful explication of important social psychological concepts like role has been emphasized.

In an earlier analysis (Banuazizi & Movahedi, 1975; Movahedi & Banuazizi, 1975), we criticized the use of role playing for testing hypotheses which concern the impact of certain structural variables on social behavior. We argued that such attempts represent little more than a reification of concepts like status, role, and power and a literal apprehension of the dramaturgical interpretation of social behavior. Although there are human conducts which can be primarily viewed as role behavior, i.e., associated with the individual's status within a social system or a social situation, this concept of role is theoretically different from that used in the role-playing technique. Finally, we maintained that role playing might be regarded as a good strategy for assessing an individual's attitude toward the incumbents of certain social positions, rather than a technique for explaining the critical processes which go on in a real-world situation.

The previous analysis was contextually specific, and our arguments were advanced only in reference to testing a certain type of hypotheses. The focus of the ongoing controversy over the use of role playing as a substitute for the traditional experimentation is however somewhat different.

Panic over the ethical implications of certain experimental practices, concern over the problem of interpretation of experimental outcomes, and the difficulty of setting up adequate control measures have resulted in a search for alternatives to traditional experimental strategies in social psychology. The question raised is whether role playing can or cannot offer one such alternative. This question has led to an eagerly pursued debate over the viability of role playing as a general research strategy in social psychology. This controversy like many others in the social sciences is fraught with confusion and misunderstandings, and the recent debate in American Psychologist (Forward et al., 1976; Cooper, 1976) has not been particularly fruitful in clarifying a number of crucial points.

In this paper, I shall attempt to make some comments on a few of the most recurring arguments that are made in support of the use of role playing as a substitute for traditional experimental methods. My discussion will be strictly limited to the question of justification. Role playing as a strategy for discovering new hypotheses is not of concern in this paper; for such hypotheses, regardless of how they have been discovered, should be subjected to an empirical test. Also, role playing as a pedagogical tool, therapeutic technique, or as an independent variable in a social psychological proposition is not at issue in this analysis.

It should be noted at the outset that in the role-playing controversy it

is not the logic of experimentation which is questioned but rather the efficacy of certain tactics--deceptive or make-believe--in simulating the desired theoretical conditions. This is an empirical problem which should be addressed both in terms of a theory of action and through methodological research. However, since we lack a well-established comprehensive theory of human behavior which can provide meaning for our constructs and direct or guide our research strategies, no adequate analysis of role playing vis-a-vis traditional experimentation can be undertaken.

In advanced sciences like physics and chemistry, it is unlikely that the choice between two strategies or techniques in testing a given hypothesis should become the subject of a major controversy and develop into an ongoing polemic. The comprehensive theories in these fields entail instrumental and interinstrumental laws and can evaluate the theoretical relevancy or meaningfulness of various experimental procedures. In addition, questions of interpretation or equivalence of the outcomes of different strategies are not answered by fiat or arbitrary introduction of theoretical constructs.

To the contrary, in social psychology the premises upon which role-playing or deceptive tactics are based are at best theoretical sketches, viewpoints, and often vague philosophies. They are hardly established theories of significant scope and explanatory power. Consequently, attempts to resolve the methodological issues associated with the choice of the two experimental strategies--role playing and the traditional experimental method--are made through rhetorical arguments over the presence or absence in each method of vague attributes such as "realism," "spontaneity," and "involvement." In addition, the observed outcome of the two strategies--pressing a lever on a shock generator, or pretending as though one were pressing such a lever--are interpreted by fiat and through constructs such as "power," "authority," or "obedience," which are introduced ad hoc. As a result, it would be rather difficult to make a meaningful comparison between the outcome of role playing and that of the traditional experimentation, or to evaluate the relative contribution of each to the a posteriori plausibility of the hypothesis in question.

In discussions on role playing, a distinction is often made between active and non-active role playing. Recognition of this distinction is important largely because it is the active role playing which is proposed as a substitute for the traditional experimentation. The term "active role playing" refers to involved participation in a scenario by acting as if one were in a given situation or an incumbent of a certain status like teacher, police, guard, prisoner, etc. The term "non-active role playing," on the other hand, refers to the procedure of asking subjects to predict their own behavior or that of others by imagining or pretending to be in a given situation or incumbents of certain social position (cf. Mixon, 1972).

Although most critics of role playing have dealt with non-active role playing, there seems to be little disagreement between them and their adversaries over the use of non-active role playing. Both groups agree that non-active role playing does not permit "realism," "spontaneity," and "involvement" and is thus inappropriate as an experimental method (see Aronson & Carlsmith, 1968; Freedman, 1969; Mixon, 1972, 1976; Forward *et al.*, 1976). Kelman's (1972) position on this issue, however, is not quite clear. He makes a vague and ambiguous claim when he says "I feel that for certain purposes it [non-active role playing] may be quite valuable and--depending on the particular procedures used--it may produce 'real' behavior" (p. 1004). "The particular procedures" are not, of course, specified and the concept of "real behavior" is left unexplicated. In this paper, I use the term "role playing" to

refer to the procedure of active role playing.

The major arguments for the use of role playing that are found in variant forms in a number of writings in social psychology deal with the following issues: (a) ethical implications of the deceptive tactics, (b) the problem of experimental artifacts and difficulty in interpreting the observed outcome of the experiment, and finally (c) the presence of "realism," "spontaneity," and "involvement" in active role playing. Some brief remarks on each of these is now in order.

(a) The problem of ethical implications of deceptive tactics is somewhat overstated and seems to present the weakest argument in support of role playing. Few of us would condone those experimental practices that are blatantly immoral and are harmful or disturbing to those involved; such practices should be avoided and prevented. However, the overzealous squabble over the right of the subject to know beforehand every aspect of the experimental procedure is of a different order. In terms of ethical priorities alone, in our everyday professional and nonprofessional lives, we dare witnessing many more serious violations of human rights, dignity, and decency--than the practice of disguised experimentation--on which we should, but few of us do, take an official stand as social scientists. Even in our own field, many of our "theories," researches, and practices in different areas of human behavior like intelligence, learning, mental illness, addiction, sexual behavior, crime, psychotherapy, behavior modification, rehabilitation, etc. are on much shakier ethical grounds than the practice of hiding from experimental subjects the true nature of the study. After all, role-playing technique itself is not immune from certain unethical practices. Furthermore, the logical analysis of science is entirely independent from the analysis of its ethical dimension and the blending of the two only helps to precipitate further methodological confusion.

(b) Most investigators agree that artifacts in social science research--experimental or nonexperimental--create serious tactical and inferential problems. The experimenter's bias, demand characteristics of the research setting, subjects' suspiciousness or attitude, and a number of other unwanted factors may render the assessment of the experimental outcome problematic. There is, however, no logical or empirical reason to posit that the elimination of deceptive tactics and the adoption of role playing is going to resolve the problem of interpretation or inference. In fact, in a previous analysis (Banuazizi & Movahedi, 1975), we attempted to show that the interpretation of the outcome of even an ingeniously designed role-playing strategy like the Stanford Prison Experiment (Haney et al., 1973) is not any less unproblematic. This is not of course to imply that deceptive strategy would have provided an alternative preferable to role playing in Zimbardo's study.

To clarify this point a little further, let us look at an example of a research problem which has been studied through both the traditional experimental method and role playing. The best example that I can think of is Milgram's (1963) obedience study and its "replication" by Nixon (1972). Here I am unclear as to what Milgram's original hypothesis was, and whether his "theory" of obedience (cf. Milgram, 1963, 1965, 1974) was inspired ex post facto by his research findings or was formulated prior to his experiments and had in fact predicted the phenomenon of "obedience in the experimental setting." These are, of course, two fundamentally different questions with entirely different methodological implications. Although one may take Milgram's study as a strategy for generating a theory of obedience, his experiment already presupposes such a theory on a social structural level. This issue may, of course, be clarified by a careful examination of Milgram's

numerous discussions of his study.

Milgram reports that in the context of a learning experience created through deceptive tactics, 650 of his subjects administered increasingly severe shocks to another subject until they reached the most potent shock available on the shock generator. Mixon (1972), on the other hand, used an active role-playing method, a paper diagram of a shock generator, and followed Milgram's procedure in "complete detail." Six of his ten male subjects acted as if they were administering increasingly more severe shocks.

Mixon (1972, 1976) makes no claim that the result of his study is equivalent to that of Milgram or that role playing can be substituted for the traditional experimentation. He seems to make a much stronger claim. Mixon apparently contends that his findings provide a less ambiguous and theoretically more meaningful indicator--than Milgram's--of the extent of obedience to perceived authority.

In numerous papers, Mixon (1972, 1974, 1976) criticizes Milgram's experimental procedures and questions his inferences. In all these discussions it is the active role playing that emerges as the most appropriate research strategy for studying obedience.

Mixon's analyses of Milgram's study are perceptive and thought-provoking. However, still I fail to see how his results are any less, if not more, ambiguous and his strategy is any more theoretically meaningful than those of Milgram.

I agree with Mixon that Milgram's (1965) description of the behavior of his "obedient" subjects as "shockingly immoral" is not dictated and justified by his findings; and also that it is not clear to what extent subjects' obedience in Milgram's study is any different from the general compliance characteristic of experimental situations.³

However, contrary to Mixon, I can take the evidence of subjects' general compliance in experimental settings (cf. Rowland, 1939; Yong, 1952; Orne & Evans, 1965) to corroborate Milgram's reported findings rather than to undermine them. Subjects' compliant behavior in the experimental setting may also be interpreted as "obedience" to "perceived authority," the experimenter. How can one tell that the subject is playing "the role of a subject" rather than being obedient to the experimenter? By the same token, how does Mixon know that his six male actors were obeying his order rather than playing "the role of an actor" in a role playing situation?

It should be noted that neither Milgram nor Mixon observed obedience on the part of their subjects. They only saw their subjects press a lever or act as if they were pressing a lever. Now whether the observed behavior in these studies would represent compliance (as used by Freedman & Fraser, 1966), fulfilling the perceived role expectation (as used by Orne, 1962), obedience to perceived authority (as used by the writers themselves), or some other constructs is open to question. What we have here is a remarkable example of how theoretical constructs are being introduced ad hoc. Both writers are making inferences which are problematic and open to question. However, while Milgram attempted to build some elements of actual "authority" or "demand" in his experimental setting, Mixon simply assumed that in terms of the structure of authority a make-believe situation is isomorphic with the actual situation.

Certainly we are not dealing here with merely a problem of scientific tactics. Certain philosophical and theoretical presuppositions are also at issue. The following seems to be Mixon's implicit or explicit theory of social behavior.⁴

Every social situation involves certain rules--apparently well defined--associated with specific roles. By taking

a role one understands or discovers the rules and acts accordingly.

In this simplistic and well defined world, the goal of social psychology thus becomes the understanding of the rules. Such understanding can be achieved through role playing or by taking other people's roles. For instance, to interpret the outcome of Milgram's experiment, what Mixon (1974) did was "to take the role of the naive subject in order to look at the scene through his eyes" (p. 78).

Given this conception of social reality, role playing may follow as the appropriate strategy for the understanding of human conduct. I said it may follow rather than it logically follows; for still it is not clear that the rules associated with a particular role in the actual situation are the same as those associated with the role of "playing that particular role" in a make-believe situation.

Furthermore, in Mixon's view, every act seems to be an instance of playing some role. He fails to answer his own important question "Can a person not play a role?" (1974:75). And, when he asks "Can an experimental subject not play a role?," he emphatically answers, No. We are witnessing here a remarkable bastardization of a theoretical construct. The concepts of role and playing a role have been reduced to cognitively meaningless figures of speech by violating the principle of nonvacuousness of contrast. This principle requires "that no predicate apply either to everything or nothing in its universe of discourse since such a rule of use would be tantamount to no rule at all" (Blake, 1959:332). It is ironical that Mixon's philosophical position on the nature of human act originates from Wittgenstein's linguistic proposal of following a rule," i.e., the proposal that the meaning of terms are to be found in the rules of their usage (c f. Winch, 1967).

It seems to me that rather than worrying about whether two research tactics "produce equivalent data," we should worry about the arbitrariness of our important theoretical constructs. After all, the goal of science seems to be not the expedient production of data but the development of significant concepts and theories of high explanatory power and scope. The crucial task facing us is to explicate our fundamental theoretical constructs within a network of meaningful law-like propositions, and try not to introduce them ad hoc or simply as a matter of definition.

(c) The presence or absence of "realism," "spontaneity," and "involvement" has been also used as argument for or against role playing. However, it is doubtful that these attributes constitute the necessary or sufficient features of the experimental method.

The primary feature of experimentation is control. Nevertheless, no experiment can be characterized by complete control. In fact, in testing a theory controlling for any and every variable except those under consideration is neither feasible nor desirable (cf. Hempel, 1966). In every case of experimentation, the investigator should be able to demonstrate that certain abstract theoretical constructs have been given empirical realization. This task is easier when a theory or a hypothesis is to be tested. The situation becomes more complicated when experimentation is used as a guide for generating or discovering new theories. Even in the latter cases, the experiment is directed by some sort of theoretical strategy (c f. Hanson, 1971).

Every experiment is by definition artificial and contrived. However, artificiality is the desirable feature of experimentation rather than its weakness. In evaluating the success or failure of setting up a contrived situation in an experiment, the most important question would be whether the theoretically relevant conditions have or have not been brought about (cf.

Zeldich & Evan, 1962). At this point it seems unnecessary to add any further stipulation to characterize experimentation. Concepts like "realism," "spontaneity" or "involvement" instead of being informative, generate only confusion and misunderstandings.

For instance, the terms "real," and "realism" have been used to predicate different aspects of the process and product of role playing and the traditional experimentation. To make a case for role playing, it has been argued that it is "real," it has "realism," and it produces "real" behavior. One can hardly disagree with such claims. There is no doubt that role playing is real rather than some imaginary or hypothetical method. It is also true that the behavior of actors are real rather than the reflection of one's hallucination or nightmare. How about "realism"? Is role playing "realistic"?

To Aronson and Carlsmith (1968), "an experiment is realistic if the situation is realistic to the subject, if it involves him, if he is forced to take it seriously, if it has impact on him" (p. 22). This is called "experimental realism." They also use the term "mundane realism" to refer "to the extent to which events occurring in a laboratory setting are likely to occur in the 'real world'" (p. 22). Experimental realism is thus taken to be equivalent to involvement, situational impact, and to being attentive and taking the experiment seriously. Aronson and Carlsmith also give a number of behavioral symptoms like squirm, sweat, stuttering, trembling, nervous laughter, etc., which are supposed to be indicative of this type of realism. In commenting on mundane realism, Aronson and Carlsmith make the following remark: "Many events that occur in the real world are boring and uninvolved. Thus it is possible to put a subject to sleep if an experimental event is high on mundane realism but remains low on experimental realism" (p. 22; emphasis mine).

Given the above sense of "realism," little wonder that role playing is claimed to have a high experimental realism. Anyone who has had some experience in psychodrama or sociodrama, or even in stage acting will agree with role playing advocates on the actor's involvement in his role and on his spontaneity. The behavior of actors in the Stanford Prison Experiment was hardly a series of automatic and rehearsed responses to a prompter; they were involved in their role and their behavior had elements of spontaneity. Also, in role playing actors may experience and exhibit tension, nervousness, anger, trembling and so forth (cf. Mixon, 1972). In sociodrama or psychodrama, one can easily get tense, emotional, angry, and may end up screaming or crying.

In fact, one can argue that role playing is higher on experimental realism than traditional experimentation. For student subjects usually find role playing more exciting, entertaining, involving, and much less boring than many of the traditional experimentations in social psychology. It would be indeed very difficult "to put a subject to sleep" in a role-playing episode.

Aronson and Carlsmith's explication of "experimental realism" hardly seems to be adequate. Subjects' involvement, seriousness, and attentiveness would have no bearing on the confirmation or disconfirmation of a theory, should an experiment lack the theoretically stipulated conditions. Responses symptomatic of "experimental realism" may be elicited by a myriad of situational and interpersonal factors that may have little to do with those specified by the theory in question.

Thus to argue for the "realism," "spontaneity," and "involvement" in role playing is not to establish its viability as a general experimental strategy. This is not, however, to deny that for certain research problems role playing--active or non-active--may provide a theoretically meaningful method of investigation. For instance, people may be made to feel guilty, anxious, angry, sexually aroused, get goose-flesh, disgusted, and even throw up by

having them imagine something or act as if certain conditions prevailed. Should an investigator want to produce such states in his experiment, there is no reason why some ingeniously designed role-playing strategy cannot be used.

As a final point, the concept of role as used in role playing should not be confused with the social structural concept of role (cf. Coutu, 1951). The latter concept represents the pattern of behavior that the incumbent of a social status has to negotiate with the incumbents of a set of complementary statuses in an ongoing interactive process of coping with structural exigencies in a given culture.⁵ The latter concept is a theoretical construct which at best should be explicated in terms of a theory of social action. This construct is on a higher level of abstraction than observed behavioral regularities or game rules such as those of baseball or chess.

The role of the policeman or the housewife is not a set of well-defined patterns of behavior like that of a player in a baseball game. For instance, the policeman negotiates his role behavior with the incumbents of various social positions--formal or informal--like other fellow officers, district supervisors, division heads, the district attorney and his associates, the mayor, etc., and finally with his potential or actual adversaries within an ongoing interactive context characterized by constant danger and challenge to his authority (cf. Skolnick, 1966). Now to posit that one can activate such social processes by acting in a sociodrama is to take the dramaturgical analogy literally. This is one reason why some writers believe that the term "role" should be eliminated altogether from social structural analyses, or to be replaced by some other term which has no distorting dramaturgical connotations (cf. Dewey, 1969; Coulson, 1972).

To make this point more clear, let us look at Schachter's (1959) experiment and its "replication" by Greenberg (1967) through role playing. Neither Schachter nor Greenberg maintains that the genetic disposition of the firstborn child or the only child is responsible for the child's great need for affiliation under condition of high anxiety. Being the firstborn child, the only child, or any other child is to occupy a particular status in the family. To cope with his social situation, the child has to negotiate a certain response pattern, emotional state, or attitude with other members of the family in an ongoing interactive context. The role--in the structural sense--he has to play in the family may in turn result in the development of certain personality dispositions, in this case, a need for affiliation.

To test Schachter's hypothesis or to replicate his experiment, it would have been theoretically meaningless for Greenberg, or for any other investigator, to have randomly assigned half of the subjects to play the role of the firstborn or the only child and the other half the role of the later-born child. Now, if the stereotypes or images of the firstborn child or the only child had been crystallized in this culture, just like those of the police, prison guard, junkie, mentally ill, psychiatrist, etc., the subjects would have acted out their stereotypical images of their assigned roles. But the outcome of that experiment would not have been comparable to that of Schachter and would have had little bearing on his hypothesis.

In summary, the controversy over the use of role playing as a viable research tool does not seem to be exclusively a problem of scientific tactics. Arguments for or against role playing seem to derive from particular philosophical and theoretical presuppositions about human behavior, and also from explicit or implicit proposals concerning the nature and the goal of the behavioral sciences. Consequently, the issue cannot be resolved simply through methodological research. In fact, although most methodological research on

the use of role playing as an alternative to experimentation have produced nothing but equivocal results (cf. Miller, 1972), the same type of arguments have continued to be advanced in its support. The issue should at best be addressed on the theoretical and conceptual level. For the premises on which role playing is being debated sometimes are more controversial than the technique itself.

Role playing cannot categorically be ruled out as a research tool. I believe role playing can be used both as a strategy of confirmation and of discovery. However, its use should be theoretically justified and its merit be evaluated only in relation to certain research problems. The same thing applies to deceptive or any other tactic.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that role playing as a research strategy cannot be justified merely because the traditional experimentation is not socially, morally, or technically feasible. After all, experimentation--deceptive or nondeceptive--is not synonymous with the method of scientific confirmation or discovery. Non-experimental methods are much preferable to those experiments which are fraught with serious sources of error, and to those role playings which render a meaningful inference from their outcomes problematic.

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Footnotes

¹I am indebted to Richard Ogles, John Dickinson, and Frank Nutch for their helpful comments and advice. I wish also to thank Don Mixon for encouraging me to take a stand against his position.

²Requests for reprints should be sent to the author in care of the Department of Sociology, University of Massachusetts, Boston, Massachusetts 02125.

³Mixon is correct in arguing that a number of previous studies had pointed to a behavioral phenomenon similar to that reported by Milgram. I personally have difficulty appreciating Milgram's surprise and his sense of dismay at his findings.

⁴This is, of course, my reconstruction of Mixon's views as I understand them. He actually makes no clear distinction between rules and roles. He used the two terms together both with disjunctive and conjunctive logical operators.

⁵This statement is not to be taken as an explicit definition but as a successive definition or as an explication of a presystematic term for use in a particular theory of action. (For programmatic statements about such a theory, see Ogles, R. H., An image of man toward an image of society. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Sociology, University of Colorado at Denver, 1973.)