

Drawing from role biography in Organizational Role Analysis

Susan Long

When we take up and engage a particular work role it is always in the context of a larger work system. The value of conceptualizing work systems as systems of role relations is that it emphasizes the interactions between roles and their links to the tasks of the enterprise. In contrast, the idea of ‘person’ seems to have lost the essence of interaction. Persons are often thought of as independent units in our increasingly individualistic and narcissistic society.

Role is at the intersection of the person and the system. Although a role is a structural part of the system, it is filled and shaped by its incumbent, the person. This person has a history of taking up different roles in different systems: family, community, work.

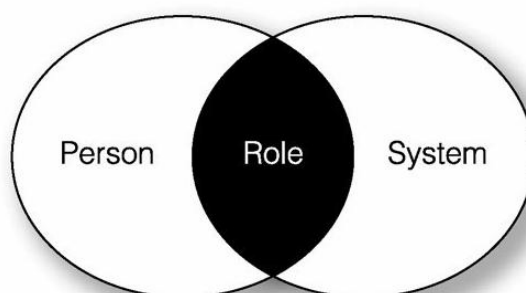
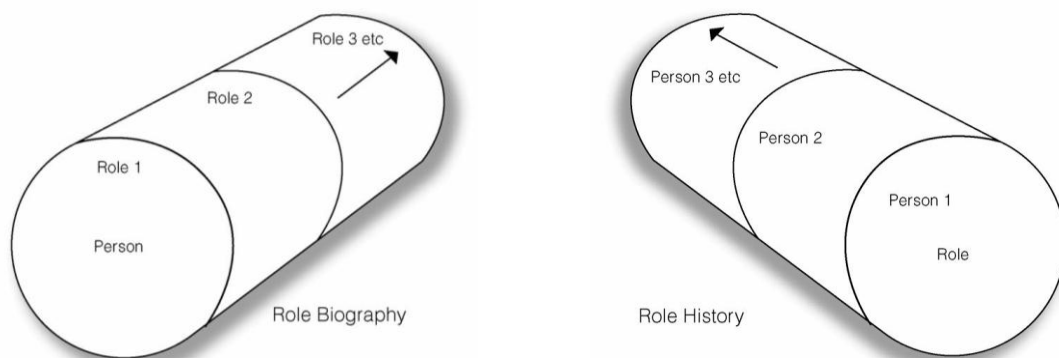


Figure 1: Person, Role and System (Sievers, Workshop in London, 2000)

Many executive coaches focus solely on the person, aiding them to develop personal skills and capabilities that will aid them in their roles. Organizational Role Analysis (ORA) or socio-analytic role consultation as discussed in this book looks also at the organization or system. There are mutual interactions, influences and interconnections between the role of the client or person, other roles and other organizational structures. Although individual role analysis typically encounters the system through the perceptions, thoughts and fantasies of the role holder (see Sievers and Beumer, this volume), when conducted in conjunction with organization culture analysis or research (Long, Newton and Chapman, this volume) the organization-in-the-experience of the consultant/researcher and other players may also be examined. A broad picture of multiple representations requiring negotiation and mutual exploration arises. Each requires exploration if the dynamics of the client role are to be fathomed.

In this chapter, I discuss the idea of ‘role biography’. I use this term to describe a biography of the *person-in-role* as described through the various work roles that they have taken up throughout their lives. I distinguish this from ‘role history’ which is a history of a particular organizational role, shaped over time by its incumbents. Perhaps I have named these two terms rather arbitrarily, but the distinction is valid.

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Figures 2&3: Role Biography and Role History

In role consultation I might explore both role biography and role history with the client. In their current work role, the client is at the intersection of their own role biography with the history of that role. This is always a unique position. Influences on the person in their current role come both from (i) the organization/system, the role history and its relatedness to other roles, and (ii) the person, their role biography and their skills and attributes.

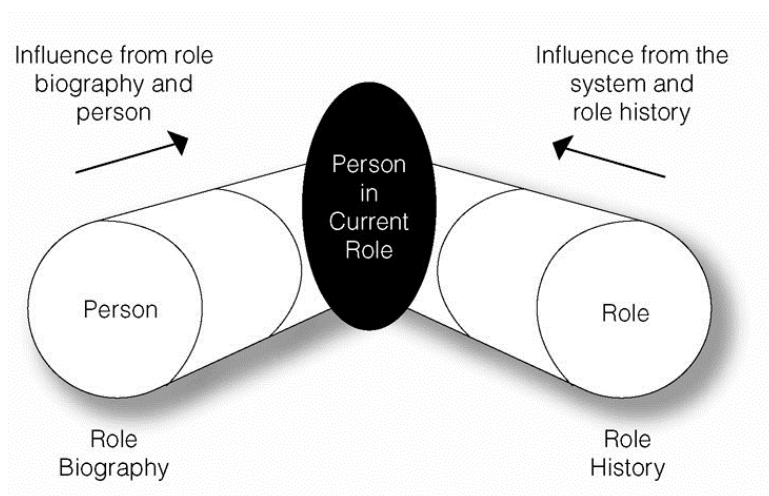


Figure 4: Influences from Role Biography and Role History on the Person in Current Role.

ROLE BIOGRAPHY

I began working with role biographies as part of an induction workshop conducted for incoming management students as part of their university program. It was a way of helping them understand each other's backgrounds. I would ask students to imagine themselves at different stages of their lives: first at age six, then at age sixteen, then at the age when they entered their first permanent job. At each stage I would ask them to think of the roles that they were taking up in relation to tasks in the family, at school or in their neighborhood. When we reached the stage of imagining themselves in their

first full-time employment, I asked them to think about the work roles they had taken up there.

For each stage they would be given time to explore the recalled roles with another student or a small group. Memories would be revived that had not been accessed for many years. Examples might be of tasks such as peeling vegetables, caring for younger siblings, feeding the cat, doing a paper-round, ironing for neighbors, creating and running a library amongst friends. But also emotional roles would be linked to these. For example, being the one who was reliable, being the reckless one, always looking out for mum, being the one who made the tea when others were upset, the studious one. The students discovered that they had been engaged in work roles with accompanying socio-emotional roles since a very early age. Exploring these memories with others was fun, often moving and sometimes sad. The exercise was particularly illuminating when done with students from quite different national and ethnic backgrounds.

The final part of the exercise was to explore how the roles at each of these stages were linked to current work roles. Could they find a pattern in their role biographies? What were some of the common themes emerging? Were there large breaks in the patterns? What might these mean for their current work roles? This exercise has always led to engagement and learning for the students. It was a way of getting to know one another but also, a method for self-discovery.

A few years ago I began to put the ideas behind this exercise together with the role drawing exercise that I use as part of Organizational Role Analysis (ORA). I have used drawings in my work for many years. In my career as child psychotherapist I used drawings alongside play therapy to help the child express his or her ideas and fantasies and to explore the more unconscious phantasies present for the child. Working with families, I often used drawings alongside family histories. When children and their parents draw together, their ways of interacting are illuminated and can be explored with them, as well as their understandings of family history. The drawing acts as a transitional object and facilitates communication. So, working with role drawings seemed to me a natural way of co-exploring the work experience with my clients. Next, I began to think about getting clients to explore their role biographies through drawing.

The Drawing and its Exploration

I ask the client to do a drawing. They may have already done a work drawing following the instruction 'draw yourself in role at work', so they may be familiar with the kind of task proposed. For this drawing I say 'the role biography is an attempt to look at the various work roles you have had in your life. You may have had a great many roles. Don't try to fit them all in. Some will seem more important than others, although you may wish just to note others. Try just to make the drawing as of a journey starting from the roles you took up in your family, through childhood, adolescence, young adulthood until now'. The drawing takes longer than the usual work drawing because the client has to go back through many memories and depict each. Often I will ask my client to do this between sessions and we explore the drawing in the next session.

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In using work drawings, I learned that the type of instruction given makes quite a difference to the type of drawing produced. As ORA or ‘Socio-Analytic Role Consultation’ is a mutually collaborative exploration with the client, we might often explore what would be the best kind of drawing for the consultation at the time of the drawing. The instructions ‘draw yourself in role’, ‘draw your experience at work’ or ‘draw your organization and your place in it’ aid the exploration of different facets of work experience.

So, it is also with role biography. One can explore the experience in roles at different stages of life, self in role, or self in various organizations. I have tended to use ‘draw yourself in roles throughout your life’ and have emphasized the idea of a journey. The journey encourages multiple depictions that aid a more detailed exploration rather than the client forming a general picture to represent the whole biography from the start. The detail often provides more space for the client to learn things about their role biography that those ideas they have pre-formulated into a composite image. I ask that childhood and adolescence are included and state that roles in the family and at school are important for us to explore. These are formative years for the development of things like work ethic, choice of vocation, emotional role development, leadership capacity, attitudes to authority and capacities to represent others.

When exploring the role biography, it is important that the consultant refrains from making direct interpretations. The idea is for the client to present his or her drawing, responding to queries of clarification about the drawing. ‘What is this you are doing here?’ or ‘what does this stand for?’ Following clarification, both client and consultant may associate to the drawing expressing what it reminds them about.

I have used this exercise also in the socio-analytic training program through the Australian Institute of Socio-Analysis and in classes in the Organization Dynamics program at RMIT University. Here a small group of about four to six members takes on the task of exploring role biographies with students presenting their drawings in turn. If time and task boundaries are managed carefully, the associations of the small group members can be very helpful in identifying otherwise overlooked implications in the drawing.

Finally, if it has not already occurred, the client is asked to make connections between the various roles taken up throughout life. Importantly I stress, ‘what is the link between this role and your current work role?’ ‘What might we understand about your current work role in light of this previous role?’

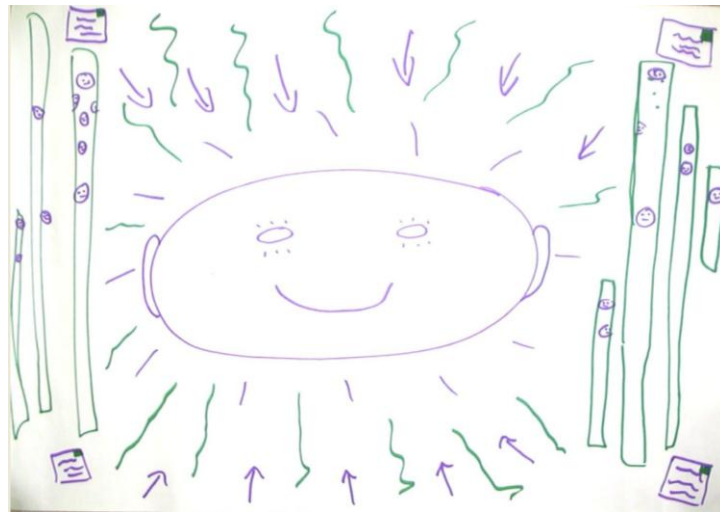
SOME CASE MATERIAL

Sandra

Sandra is an organization consultant who likes to work primarily as a coach. She did two drawings as part of a workshop that I conducted. The workshop called ‘Working with Roles’ had an experiential design and was conducted over three days. One part of the workshop involved members of small groups sharing role drawings and exploring implications derived from the drawings and the process. The first drawing, done on the first day, was of herself in her primary work role. The second drawing,

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done on the second day, was a role biography. She explored the drawings in some depth at the workshop. I followed this up with an interview four months later.



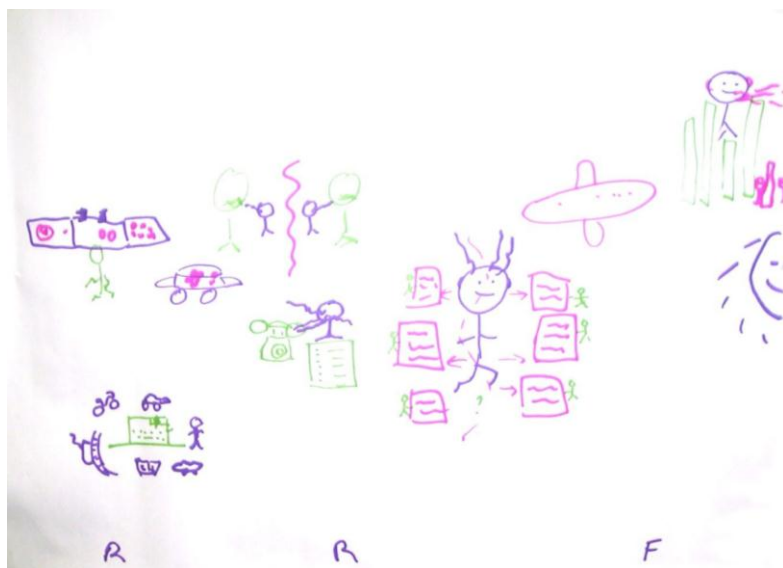
Sandra described this as ‘me in my business.’ She then went on to say that ‘the business is me.’ She saw her primary role in the business as engaging with the coaching task. She pointed out that she was happy (hence the big smile) and that the work involved lots of listening and talking (hence the big ears and mouth). The arrows around her head stood for incoming information. Other lines depict information going out. She felt surrounded by information coming in and out. She felt clear that her work was mainly ‘in the head’; that she worked to give her clients choices and options rather than her becoming involved in recommending action or becoming involved herself in action. The towers at the side of the drawing stood for the organizations she worked with. The faces in the towers depicted people at different organizational levels. She stressed her increasing understanding that she needed to work with those in senior levels if she were to influence practices in the organizations.

At each corner of the drawing are stamped envelopes. These she said, represented the requirement for written work and documentation. For example, written reports for clients, business reports and taxation documentation, marketing materials, proposals and invoices. She strongly disliked having to do this writing (hated it with a passion) and stressed that her preferred way of working was verbally. However, she recognized the increasing need for writing in her role. The letters in the drawing were placed so as to ‘frame’ her other work. They also expressed a commitment to doing the writing, ‘without which my work would not occur’.

As she explored this drawing, she expressed surprise at the size of the mouth she had drawn. She said that it was still a struggle for her to balance the amount of listening and talking that she had to do – what to hear and what to say. Her eyes, intended to look attentive, appeared to her now as excited. She was struck by the way the drawing showed clarity of purpose. The coaching role and herself as her business, was central and focused. Later she said ‘the drawing is all bliss, not a worry in the world. It shows me doing my core business (of coaching). I enjoy it and am paid for it’.

Other complexities arose, however, when it came to the role biography drawing.

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The role biography drawing roughly depicts four separate but connected sets of roles across time.

1. The Family Role and System.

On the lower left is a drawing of the things she liked when she was little. Important here was a train set. 'Girls aren't supposed to like trains' she explained. But she still has this one. Above this on the upper left is a drawing of Sandra's role in her family of origin. There were four siblings in the family and they are drawn around the kitchen sink. Her role, along with the others, was to wash and dry the family dishes after the evening meal. The social setting was one where chats, discussions and arguments took place. Sandra particularly remembers engaging this role as a prelude to her 'escape'. In contrast to her siblings, she would spend much of her evening outside the family at friends and then, when older, at other venues. She depicts herself as leaving the family home on foot, and later by car.

2. Adult Family Role and Work Role

The central part of the drawing is taken up by two pictures. The upper picture depicts Sandra in the middle of her two sisters, one older, the other, younger. These sisters would compete, especially over domestic tasks such as who was the best cook. Although alike, these sisters grew apart and Sandra found herself as a 'go between and peacemaker' often representing one sister to the other or indirectly carrying messages between the two who would not approach each other directly. Sandra also often took on this role between her mother and sisters. The picture shows a dividing line between the sisters and Sandra as turning at one time to one, and another time to the other sister. As she described her drawing, she spoke of how she had finally realized the nature of the role she was playing and from then on refused to continue, telling her sisters and mother to engage each other directly. She believes she had taken up the role because 'everything had been such a big deal to them and I became like two separate people in the discussion - one with each sister'.

Just below this is a depiction of Sandra's first major work role. Here, at age seventeen, she was 'paid to sit on the phone talking to people and making appointments for them' with eight or so doctors in the public sector. She had got this job herself despite, or perhaps because of her father's offer of finding her work at his place of employment. This job seemed to capitalize on her enjoyment of talking with people and her ability to be 'in-between' others. She had wanted to leave school feeling it was a 'necessary evil' and eventually was expelled for misbehaviour. The one regret she had was not paying attention in geography classes because later in life she traveled a lot but really didn't have a sense of where countries were in relation to one another. She later enrolled in a course in public administration.

The other central picture shows her as the National Human Resource Manager of a large organization that consisted in part of a group of laboratories. Their work was mainly in drug testing associated with sport. Her work was mainly in restructuring and downsizing. This role had followed a series of roles in smaller organizations, first in administration then moving to Human Resources. She had now worked her way into a bigger role that meant a lot of travel between locations throughout Australia. 'I don't know how I did it sometimes', she said. 'I was always on the go, away every week and organizing the travel myself. The GM was better off staying in Canberra, so I always offered to be the one who traveled. It was self-imposed. I had seen him strained by travel. One day I saw him in the airport stooping and looking old.' So Sandra took over most of his travel to the sites. 'When I left, they replaced me with three people', she said.

In this job the theme of helping also emerged. She was trying to help scientists move on in the face of the company restructure. This was difficult in the face of the scientists' attitudes that a 'job was for life'. For some people it took up to a year. She wanted to take care because the change was traumatic for some and there had been suicides in the history of the company. She helped over one hundred people to move on. She was once more in an 'in-between' role.

3. Current Role

The last picture on the right is a partial reproduction of her first picture in miniature. She has moved to her own business, celebrating her success, but feels she is 'not quite in it yet'. The picture is half off the page. While talking about this part of the picture she began to realize that although she had wanted to create a business with coaching as its core, she had not yet achieved this. She was distracted into other work more than she felt she should be. She would often be drawn into work that she was offered rather than proactively seeking the work she wanted to form the core of her business.

Following the workshop she had thought a lot about the drawings, especially her half formed business. At the interview she said that she now saw her business as having three tiers. The core was coaching work. The second tier was to do 'one-on-one' work of a related nature such as debriefings following management training programs or feedback from exercises such as '360 degree' exercises where the direct reports, peers and managers of a person in role are surveyed with respect to the person's work capabilities. The third tier was group work such as conflict resolution or team building. She liked this latter work the least. She

realized that the roots to her preference for coaching lay in her biography, this was her preference. We discussed that it might be her ‘valency’ to use Bion’s (1961) term.

Currently she is working with a coach to explore her own role. She has taken her drawings from the workshop to this coach and believed they help the work she is doing there. In particular, she is working on marketing and a business plan. ‘I had quite a shock in the workshop when I saw how my business was half-off the page. I never before thought that I might have to do a lot more thinking about how to set up my business, especially in terms of driving my own focus, but doing the drawings brought this to light.’

Cheryl

Cheryl is a medical doctor who works in the emergency department of a general hospital. She did two role biography drawings nearly two years apart in two different programs. Although the two drawings are similar, she felt that the second one reflected more complexity. In the time between the two drawings she had done intensive experiential learning in socio-analysis. The discussion reported in this paper took place some months after the second drawing had been done and shows how role biography drawings can also be used at a later date than when they are first drawn. It seems from the work with Cheryl that new information and learning can come on returning to the drawings. Cheryl could broadly remember her initial associations to the drawing, but also used the time with me to make current associations. She first explained the meaning of the drawing to me and then added her current reflections.

First Drawing



Cheryl drew an ear, an eye and a heart to begin her role biography. These were to become a strong motif throughout the drawings. She said that as a baby and small child she took on the role of hearing and seeing and feeling the tears in the family.

‘That is how I’ve learned and how I work’ she explained. She believes that her sensitivity to feelings was an important ingredient in her becoming a doctor and working with the suffering of others.

As she grew, she also took on more practical roles. These are represented by the broom and the ironing board. But the practical roles were aimed at ‘smoothing things out; keeping things clean and tidy; working out problems.’

In the center of the picture she represents her ‘fantasy roles’. She took ballet lessons and played the piano. She also imagined herself as an opera singer. Amongst these is a drawing of herself as a doctor. ‘I was very young when I decided to be a doctor’, she explained, ‘perhaps six or seven’. There had been a doctor who visited her home while they were living in the country and she had been very impressed by him. In her fantasy picture she holds a stethoscope to her own heart, indicating her passion for medicine. At the left of these representations she depicts herself playing with other children. Play was ‘off to the side’. She spent more time on her own with her imaginings and fantasies.

To the right of the picture are two more sets of ear, eye and heart. These she felt permeated her work life as an adult. Her work involves her in seeing and hearing patients and their problems, but also involves her feelings and how she uses them in her work. A picture of the world appears at the top right hand side of the drawing. On looking at this she saw it as a ‘female in the world’. The globe is drawn as the female sign. It also represents her as a team player. She explained that she played a lot of sport as a teenager and young adult. Now she feels what she learned and experienced then is related to her capacity to be part of a medical team.

Having explained the drawing she studied it as a whole. Her first comment was that she was surprised that there were no books in the drawing. Her studies had taken a great deal of time in her life, yet she hadn’t represented them. She then looked at the lower right hand section of the drawing and noted that she had drawn a ‘heart within a heart’. She recognized how much the drawing was representing pain, beauty, joy and tears. Although her work involves having to use her intellect she recognized how much she uses her ‘heart first – learning at the heart level and using my head to interpret later.’

The second drawing



This drawing was done about four months prior to our discussion. On the upper left hand side the biography begins with hearing, seeing and feeling. But in this drawing, the eyes are looking inward more than outward. This time there are no tears.

As with the first drawing, she goes on to draw the practical work she did in the family. Once more there is the broom and the cleaning. This time cooking is added and a tea-towel with a cup and saucer. Behind this, faintly drawn is a large hand.

Just to the right of this are depictions of a ball, a figure at a desk at school, a piano and lots of small figures actively running around playing sport. On looking at the drawing she reflected 'It's as though I've taken up quite different roles with different parts of myself. First the seeing, hearing and feeling, next I'm used as a helper with my hands and my strength. In the next part I'm using my feet in team sports and then finally my brain at school in my studies.'

The bottom right hand part of the picture shows her life as a medical student. Here we see the books, the study and the first depiction of the doctor with eyes, ears, heart and a stethoscope. There are question marks around the students, indicating her questioning of herself as a scholar. The doctor as helper is at the centre of this cluster of drawings at this stage of her life. She felt that there was a 'simplicity around life as a student.' Her parents bought a house in the city and she lived there some of the time and away from home, alone, some of the time.

The section at the bottom center of the drawing is a complex series of trees, figures, lines, hearts and swirls. She represents sad eyes looking inward, bright light sunshine and flowers, a stethoscope listening to a heart. It is a mixture of sadness at the suffering in the world and hope and joy in looking at growth. This represents the time in her life when there were 'many questions, growth and lots of people.' A strong purple feminist arrow leads out of this back to her heart.

She then looked at the whole picture. 'I see so much sadness, trauma and pain in my work', she said. In this picture the eyes are turning inward and don't have tears like they had in the first picture. 'Sometimes tears are not an acceptable way of connecting.' She spoke of how in her work she had to maintain professionalism and balance this against her feelings although they were always there. She noted that the second picture had less of what she had called the 'fantasy part' than the first. With some regret she talked of the intensity of her work leaving little space to be fanciful. 'Someone else will play the pianola.' She also noted that in the second picture she was the doctor. In the first she was the fantasy doctor of her childhood.

I asked her what she had gained through the drawing process. She said that she now had a greater sense of 'who I am in my work and how I became who I am. It opened up that.' She mused, 'it's a privilege to have this sort of background that's exposed me to heartfelt knowledge.' She remembered again the doctor who had come to her house when she was small. 'There was pain in the house. The doctor came and made things better. I wanted to do that.' She said that the drawings had brought back memories and that she had not put them all together in this way before.

It seemed to me that Cheryl had integrated her early experience in her family and the roles she had taken there into her current work role as an emergency physician. The motif of eyes, ears and heart expressed the way that she had combined intellectual and emotional capacities. Cheryl had told me that she always felt different from other children and had taken the emotional pain of her family into herself. This became focused as a vocation when she met the doctor who had helped her family. Much of her medical training had emphasized a more distant, clinical approach to patients than she was able to feel. However, she is able to accept her own approach and sensitivity to patients in the emergency ward as an important part of the psychological as well as the physical healing process. Understanding the role she plays within the medical system and its roots in the family system has helped her to more readily use her psychological sensitivity professionally.

CONCLUSION

Role biography provides a method for understanding the impact of various roles taken throughout life on the client's current work role. This can give the role holder a better sense of his or her uniqueness in role. It can also give a fuller understanding of where valencies in role have their origins. New roles are not taken up in a vacuum. The person has a history of role taking.

Exploring role biography requires an openness by both client and consultant to the meanings that might emerge. Interpretations made early in the process, or from the consultant rather than the client may inhibit this, or worse still, lead to 'wild analysis'. The use of working hypotheses (Lawrence, this volume) is needed. The consultant should be trained in systems psychodynamic (socio-analytic) methods where sensitive listening, an understanding counter-transference and the use of reflective space are emphasised. This is because a major way the role biography

works is through the client's coming to explore, make conscious and understand their own transferences from role to role.

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