

IMPRISONED IN ROLE

Nick Luxmoore explores how to help young people who, despite the infinite variety of other roles available to them, get trapped in one particular role – and the implications of this work for counsellors themselves

Otto has his story and he's sticking to it. 'I'm angry all the time,' he says, as if reciting something he might have been told by a parent or teacher. 'I can't stop being angry. It's the way I am.'

And Cary has her story. 'I'm an anxious person. I get panic attacks. I've tried everything, but I guess I've just got to learn to live with it. It's how I've always been.'

Young people come to counselling with an autobiographical story. Usually the story is a rigid one that needs unpicking and thinking about afresh. In it, the young person is stuck, trapped in a role from which there seems to be no escape. 'I'm angry all the time... I'm an anxious person... It's how I've always been...'

The theory is that we begin to develop a repertoire of roles from the beginning of our lives and that the person we become – our 'self' – is usefully thought about as a collection of roles. 'Roles do not emerge from the self, but the self may emerge from roles,' writes Moreno¹. So a baby develops a crying role, a sucking role, a kicking role, a smiling role, a frustrated role. Through projective play, a small child might extend this basic repertoire, developing – for example – the roles of fighter, charmer, helper, spoiler, helpless slave, supreme ruler and so on. The wider the repertoire of roles we learn to play, the more resourceful and responsive we can be when situations challenge us later in life. But these roles only develop and become part of our repertoire when we attempt to

play them and they're recognised by another person. We need that person as an audience, as a mirror reflecting us back to ourselves, confirming that we are indeed playing these roles in way that's recognisable and understandable to someone else.

Trouble starts and young people start coming to counselling when they find themselves playing a narrow repertoire of roles or, like Otto and Cary, find themselves stuck in a particular role, unable to escape. So Otto is 'angry all the time' and Cary is reduced to being 'an anxious person'. Other young people might find themselves perpetually playing the role of joker or baby or cynic or group organiser or shy person or person-who-doesn't-care. Roles become entrenched from an early age because they suit us at the time or because they're the only roles that get an audience's attention or approval. If anger is the only thing that gets a response, then a baby learns to be angry. If silence always gets adult approval, then a child learns to stay silent. Sometimes we learn a role because, in the family system, it's allocated to us by the unconscious workings of the family dynamic. For example, if one sibling is firmly established as The Good Child, a second sibling might find himself having to play The Bad Child or The Disappointment or The Family Problem. Roles are interdependent: we play them in relation to the roles played by other people. So if a counsellor is established in the role of Having All The Answers, a young person coming to



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counselling is likely to take on the role of Having No Answers.

Seeking the origins and recognising more

Before we can help anyone to escape from the shackles of a stuck role, we have to understand something of how it came into existence. Otto, it transpires, has perfectly good reasons for feeling angry. Before they split up, his father used to hit his mother while four-year-old Otto looked on, unable to do anything about it. Now Otto swears that he'll kill his father if ever they meet and, in the meantime, enacts his vengeance at the expense of a series of bemused teachers. The role of Angry Otto has become familiar: it's a safe and powerful role, but it's also a restricting role if Angry is all that his teachers ever get to know about Otto.

Our second task is to tease out and begin to recognise the other roles that a young person might be capable of playing. I say to Otto that he has good reasons for being angry, that his anger makes sense. I suggest to him that he's probably also a very loyal person.

'I always stick up for my friends,' he agrees.

'And when you're with them, I imagine that you're also good fun...'

He shrugs, uninterested in this, telling me instead about how he's going to beat up the boy who's been saying rude things about him.

I listen and let it go. We've established that he's not only Angry Otto but also Loyal Otto. The possibility of being Good Fun Otto is evidently too much for today. But we'll come back to the possibility of Good Fun Otto in the weeks ahead as we continue to broaden the repertoire of how he's allowed to be, at least in counselling. I'll remain interested in Angry Otto but

will also be interested and keen to recognise other roles he might be capable of playing: Chatty Otto, Kind Otto, Laughing Otto, Otto-Who's-Interested-In-History, Otto-Who-Sometimes-Kisses-His-Mum-Goodnight, even though at the moment he's unconfident about being seen to play any of these roles in public. In counselling, we can begin to practise a whole miscellany of roles.

With 16-year-old Cary, our work will be similar. Her anxiety is all-consuming, crippling, and yet keeps her safe. It stops her ever making romantic attachments and stops her taking exams because she's too anxious to go into the examination room. In that sense, Anxious Cary protects her from the possibilities of sex and from academic failure, and this may have suited her in the past. The trouble is that, now, she finds herself struggling with the constraints of the role, wanting to break free but afraid to break free. If she weren't so stuck in the role of Anxious Cary, she might be able to be angry, sexy, funny, gregarious, challenging: she might be able to play all sorts of other, as yet undeveloped, roles. Developing any of these roles will start by having them recognised by her counsellor in the same way that a baby develops an initial role repertoire under the mirroring, recognising gaze of a parent figure. Counselling will be a chance to practise roles she's not yet ready to play outside the counselling room. In the counselling room, she works hard to convince me that anxious is all she is. But whenever there are glimpses of other fledgling roles – Cary Who Likes Singing, Cary The Bad Tempered, Cary The Good Friend, Cary The Argumentative, I recognise them quickly and am clearly interested in them. And whenever we've spent time talking about these things, she quickly gives me a long tale of anxiety, as if to remind me that she's still officially Anxious Cary and I'm not to forget!

Is anyone all they seem?

We develop and jettison roles as we go through life. A few we retain because they continue to protect us or are especially rewarding but, with luck, we're able to slip in and out of roles appropriately and skilfully like so many chameleons adapting to the challenges of changing circumstances.

Our ability to do this depends, in part, on the extent to which the people around us are able to slip in and out of roles themselves, comfortable with their own infinite variety. I recently disclosed to a young person that I'd probably be spending New Year's Eve, not out celebrating with friends, but at home watching a box set. 'Preferably,' I added, 'something with lots of killing!'

Her eyes widened. 'You're joking, aren't you? You don't really watch stuff like that!'

I promised her that I was no different from lots of other people when it came to car chases, shoot-outs and murders.

She said nothing, but I sensed her disappointment that someone she respected as a serious-minded counsellor (the role in which I'd cast myself) could be so base. It was as if I'd betrayed her by not sticking to my familiar role.

There's a time and a place for disillusioning young people and perhaps I misjudged this. But who other people are – who they *really* are – is a preoccupation for young people fascinated by the secret lives of parents, teachers, friends, and fascinated by the possibility of having secret lives themselves. 'What am I like *really*? What do I *really* feel? What do I *really* want?' They play with the idea that they may not be all that they seem and yet sometimes we do them no favours by suggesting that there's a quintessential self hidden away somewhere inside them. 'You're not yourself!' we say when they're unhappy or angry or behaving in unusual ways. And when they're caught up in a dilemma, we advise them, 'Be true to yourself! Listen to yourself! Do what's right for you!' We exhort them to realise their 'full potential', as if potential was pre-determined and finite rather than fluid and constantly subject to the capricious, emergent effects of experience. We talk of 'self-actualisation', as if we reach a point in our lives where our 'true' selves are finally revealed.

The idea that people are complex, capable of playing many different, changing roles, and that they may not be all that they seem, provokes mixed reactions in young people. They're fascinated, for sure, but at other times they'd prefer things to remain simple with other people clearly and narrowly defined. They'll readily accuse each other of being 'two-faced' as if it's a surprise that someone is capable of saying one thing to one person and another thing to another person. I suspect that these accusations are fuelled less by genuine surprise than by the disappointment that it's no longer possible to live in a child's world

where people are simply who they're supposed to be, fitted out with 'characters' and 'personalities', deploying a limited and predictable repertoire of roles.

Different young people are ready to be disillusioned at different times, and confessing to my secret enjoyment of violent box sets may have been too much. But we give young people permission to enlarge the repertoire of roles they can play when we're able to acknowledge our own complexities and contradictions. The idea of an 'authentic' self waiting for a young person somewhere just out of reach isn't very helpful. Nor is the experience of being with a counsellor who, in the interests of consistency, strives to be the same every week, never wavering in his or her demeanour in a room that also never changes from week to week. We know from neuroscience² that a depressed parental face is likely to be internalised and copied by a baby. So when Winnicott³ writes about the importance of a parent and child playing together, he's writing about a role repertoire developing through this playfulness and interaction. Moreno⁴ describes anxiety in this way: 'Everybody is expected to live up to his official role in life; a teacher is to act as a teacher, a pupil as a pupil, and so forth. But the individual craves to embody far more roles than those he is allowed to act out in life [...] Every individual is filled with different roles in which he wants to become active and that are present in him in different stages of development. It is from the active pressure which these multiple individual units exert upon the manifest official role that a feeling of anxiety is often produced.'

And the counsellor's role?

In order to help young people like Cary and Otto, counsellors need to avoid becoming trapped in a role themselves. Like parents and children, counsellors and young people have to learn to play together. Of course, in the early days when a young person is new to counselling and is most baby-like in the relationship, his or her counsellor will need to deploy a more limited repertoire of roles, letting the 'baby' absorb things slowly, not going too fast and not overloading the baby with too much new experience. But as the 'baby' becomes more confident, the counsellor has to respond, not only by mirroring and affirming the young person's expanding repertoire but by initiating and modelling new role possibilities.

This begs questions for counsellors about self-disclosure. How much should I remain in role as the solid, reliable attachment figure who says nothing or very little about herself? How much should my focus stay always on the young person, and where does this fit with Winnicott's ideas about learning and development through playfulness and interaction? How much do young people get stuck in *counselling* because, in fact, *the counsellor* gets stuck in a role

from which he or she can't escape? And if I were to be more spontaneous and (after careful scrutiny) sometimes say a little more about myself, is this young person ready?

I'm not arguing for counsellors to start off-loading their own pathologies onto unsuspecting young people. Absolutely not! But given what we know about mirroring and neuroscience and the brain developing through interaction, I do wonder whether the old psychoanalytic assumptions about remaining opaque and disclosing nothing, assumptions inherited by many counsellors, sometimes create a stasis in the counselling room analogous to a baby trying to develop new roles under the gaze of a parent who remains impassive: never surprised, never delighted, never aghast, never initiating anything herself.

One day, I arrive to meet with Angry Otto only to find that our normal room has been taken by someone else.

Instead of staying tight-lipped, I curse. 'God, it's so annoying when that happens!' I say to him. 'We've been in that room for weeks and they don't even say sorry!'

'Doesn't really matter,' he says calmly. 'I don't mind meeting in a classroom.'

Because roles are interdependent, I think that the experience of his counsellor taking on the angry role frees Otto to take on the role of Placatory Sensible Person Dealing With A Setback. I haven't seen him play this role before. Usually, *he's* the one sitting there cursing a whole series of recent setbacks and *I'm* the one playing the role of Placatory Sensible Person.

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With Anxious Cary I learn to remember little things like the name of her budgerigar, her favourite meal, her most hated TV character, the book she's reading, her dream holiday destination, her favourite type of chocolate. Our conversations about these everyday things become opportunities for us to laugh, agreeing with each other, disagreeing vehemently, enthusing together and separately. In short, we start trying out new roles together.

Growing up, it's easy to get stuck as Angry Otto or Anxious Cary, as the academic or sporty person, as the drama queen or disruptive student, as the disengaged boy or shy girl. It's tempting to play these roles because they're familiar ('If that's what you think I'm like, then that's what I'll be like!') and yet it's frustrating to be typecast. Young people's attempts to try out new roles only succeed when the new roles are recognised by other people happily playing a variety of roles themselves.

Nick Luxmoore is a school counsellor, psychotherapist and author. See www.nickluxmoore.com

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