



COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES
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FIXED-ROLE THERAPY

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Definition: Fixed-role therapy encourages the client to enact a new role (written by the therapist) for about two weeks in order to try out alternative views of the self and the world.

Elements: The therapist asks the client to write a short self-description, as if written by someone who knows him/her well. Based on this the therapist, before the next session, writes a fixed-role sketch of someone with a new name whom the client might enact in and between sessions. This sketches someone not ideal or the opposite of the client, but adds features which differ from the client's main existing ones and offer testable predictions, e.g. that appropriate expression of feelings will not lead to rejection. It includes an attempt to understand other people's viewpoints.

The therapist shows the client the fixed-role sketch, asks if the character portrayed is plausible and not too threatening, and may redraft the sketch until the client finds it acceptable. The therapist then asks the client to 'become' the new character for two weeks while his/her current self is 'on vacation', during which time the client sees the therapist up to 5 times a week for brief sessions to rehearse the new role in first superficial and then progressively more intimate interpersonal situations. The fixed-role exercise allows clients to experiment with new behaviour in and between sessions while protected by 'make-believe'.

Application: In individual, group and couple therapy.

Related procedures: Experiment; personal-construct psychotherapy; psychodrama; rehearsal; repertory grid technique; role play.

1st Use? Kelly (1955)

References:

1. Bonarius JCJ (1970) Fixed role therapy: A double paradox. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 43, 213-219.
2. Epting FR, Nazario A Jr (1987) Designing a fixed role therapy: issues, techniques, and modifications. In RA Neimeyer & GJ Neimeyer (eds.), *Personal Construct Therapy Casebook* (pp. 277-289). New York: Springer.
2. Kelly GA (1955, pp. 360-451) *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. New York: Norton (republished by Routledge, 1991).
4. Winter DA (1987) Personal construct psychotherapy as a radical alternative to social skills training. In RA Neimeyer & GJ Neimeyer (eds.), *Personal Construct Therapy Casebook* (pp. 107-123). New York: Springer.

Case Illustration: (Winter, 1987)

Tom was referred for continuing to feel inadequate despite extensive past treatment. In the second pre-therapy assessment session, a repertory grid (see clp entry) and other personal-construct methods such as Tschudi's ABC technique, identified Tom's dilemma of wanting to be assertive yet viewing assertive extroverts as demanding and aggressive. The therapist discussed its origin in childhood experiences

and used fixed-role therapy in sessions 6-7 to help Tom see himself differently. The therapist asked Tom for a written self-description, as written by someone who knew him, which in summary was:

‘I’ve known Tom 20 years since our schooldays together. He was a swot who pestered me for help with maths. We fished together, and in later years went to concerts and drinks with friends. He envied my settling in a good job while he after 5 years at university never settled down. Tom wasn’t good company with my friends, longed for a girlfriend, joined clubs to meet women, and seemed unhappy with his girl friend. After breaking up he’d return to my social scene for a week then disappear for weeks. He was usually quiet, depressed and reticent. He stopped self-employment, preferring steady work with a company yet was anxious - it wasn’t what he wanted, just like his tagging onto my friends. He moved away but remained unhappy there. When we have a drink he looks miserable, worries whether he’ll marry and have children, and says little.’

The therapist now sketched a fixed-role character ‘Roy’ which ignored searching for a girl friend and reframed as strengths what Tom saw as impediments e.g. Tom’s serious intensity became Roy’s *‘passion and conviction which earns respect. He strives to work hard and have fun as best he can’*. Tom’s tennis skills anticipating other players’ moves were generalised into Roy’s *‘ability to see the world through other people’s eyes. He mixes with many kinds of people who usually reciprocate his curiosity, and develops rewarding relationships.’* Tom’s worries were reframed as *‘Roy naturally has disagreements and disappointments but learns from those and looks forward without brooding on misfortunes. He’s committed to causes yet tolerant of other people’s right to differ.’*

On seeing the therapist’s fixed-role sketch of ‘Roy’ Tom thought it fitted his own recent new social behaviour. He said he also wanted to show more interest in people without seeming ‘nosey’; to help that, Tom carried the sketch in his pocket and referred to it before entering new social situations. By session 8, the final one, Tom no longer saw assertive extraversion as undesirable, and felt more comfortable socially.