The effects of role-reversal during the discussion of opposing viewpoints

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George Herbert Mead in his classic work, Mind, Self and Society (1934), developed the thesis that mind, self, and consciousness emerged as a result of man’s enlarged capacity to “take the role of the other” through his use of significant symbols. The importance of the ability to take the role of the other for human communication and cooperation has also been stressed by theorists who have been concerned with ways of facilitating the resolution of intrapsychic, interpersonal, or international conflict. These theorists (Moreno, 1955; Cohen, 1950, 1951; Rogers, 1952; Rapoport, 1960; Deutsch, 1962) have advocated role-reversal as a means of reducing conflict. “Role-reversal” is a discussion procedure in which individual A presents individual B’s viewpoint while individual B reciprocates by presenting A’s viewpoint. They have postulated that such mutual taking of one another’s role alleviates conflict by such processes as: reducing self-defensiveness, increasing one’s understanding of the other’s views, increasing the perceived similarity between self and other, increasing the awareness of the positive features in the other’s viewpoint and the dubious elements in one’s own position.

Other approaches to understanding the processes stimulated by role-reversal have arisen from the experimental study of attitude change through role-playing. Studies (Janis and King, 1954; King and Janis, 1956; Culbertson, 1957) have shown greater modification of attitudes after active role-playing than after passive exposure to the same persuasive materials. King and Janis (1956) attributed the greater effects of role-playing to improvisation of one’s own arguments in support of the assigned conclusions. They postulated that improvised arguments originating with oneself may be less apt to evoke implicit interfering responses than externally-imposed persuasion and may be hand-tailored to suit the individual’s own motivations. Shifting one’s attitudes to conform to a role-performance has alternatively been interpreted by dissonance theory as a means of reducing cognitive dissonance arising from the knowledge that one’s public behavior is discrepant from one’s private beliefs. Janis and Gilmore (1965) have stressed the role of positive incentives in motivating a “biased scanning” that increases the salience of arguments which would support the enacted position. However, the studies proceeding from the role-playing formulation have been concerned with the self-persuasive effects ensuing upon a single individual’s arguing for a position at variance with his private
ROLE-REVERSAL DURING DISCUSSION

The experimenter rated each role-reversing subject on a nine-point scale for role-playing adequacy and involvement after five minutes and at the end of 20 minutes. The basic criterion of the ratings was the extent to which the subject resembled a person arguing for a view to which he was sincerely committed.

Immediately after either role-reversal or self-exposure, subjects indicated their current position on the issue. After they had responded to the attitude measure, they noted any perceived changes in their private attitudes.

All subjects were then given an undefined amount of time to discuss their respective viewpoints with the goal of writing a mutually agreed upon joint statement on the issue. They were to assume that the statement would be published in the local newspaper with their signatures affixed. Time to write the statement was recorded; all pairs were stopped after 30 minutes of attempting to reach agreement. Subjects then filled out a postexperimental questionnaire which measured, among many other variables, current attitudes on the issue. Two weeks after the experimental sessions, a mail questionnaire again tapped attitudes on the discussion issue and self-perceived attitudinal changes.

INSTRUMENTS

The major research instrument consisted of the questionnaire which was administered to the subjects at the end of the entire discussion. It measured: (1) a multiplicity of attitudes toward the other, such as the other as work partner, as friend, his similarity to the self as a person and in terms of basic values held, and various factors derived in a priori fashion from Semantic Differential scales (Evaluative, Strength of Viewpoint, Involvement, and Identification).? (2) attitude change toward the other's position and acceptance of the objective validity of his position, as measured by several indices; and (3) the degree of mutual insight gained into and mutual desire to understand one another's views.

Attitudes toward the self during the course of the discussion were gathered on the same a priori factors as utilized for attitudes toward the other.

Additional measures were taken to provide information on the process of role-reversal itself so as to perform internal analyses on correlates of role-taking skill. The impact of role-reversal was assessed by retrospectively measuring, at the end of the discussion, change during role-playing in each person's feelings of ability to understand the other's viewpoint, respect for the other, and willingness to perceive a possible agreement.

After collection of the data, several ratings were obtained by averaging the scores of two judges who made independent ratings. Ratings of emotional involvement in one's initial attitude position, defined by the importance of the values implicated in the attitude position, resulted in a reliability of .77. These ratings were done on the paragraphs, written by the subjects before any discussion took place, which described the reasons for their attitudinal position.

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Ratings of the joint statement for extent of mutual agreement on basic values and adequacy of the resolution of the conflict produced reliabilities of .51 and .85, respectively.

**SUBJECTS**

An opinion inventory was administered in undergraduate and graduate classes which measured, for each of six issues, the direction and intensity of the student's opinion, the amount of information that the student believed he had on the issue, and how much the student personally cared about the issue. Students who indicated that they were "cared" or more, that they felt at least "moderately informed," and were either quite favorable or quite opposed to "euthanasia" or to "teachers' strikes" were selected to be in the pool of eligible subjects. Discussion pairs were composed by drawing one subject who was on the favorable side and one subject on the unfavorable side of an issue from the pool of eligible subjects. Pairs were randomly assigned to the two discussion techniques.

In all, 50 pairs of students were used as experimental subjects, with 30 discussing the right of teachers to strike and 20 debating the legalization of euthanasia. Teachers doing graduate work at Teachers College, Columbia University, comprised the bulk of the sample. Males and females were equally represented, except that 75 percent of the subjects in the euthanasia role-reversal condition were females. (However, the females did not differ from the males in their attitudes towards euthanasia.) Race and educational level were adequately controlled for by the random assignment.

**Results**

After homogeneity of variance was checked by the F Max test (Winer, 1962), analyses of variance were performed to test the main effects of discussion method and issue and their interaction. The analyses were computed using the mean score of each discussion pair in order to allow for the interdependence between scores of a given pair.

**EFFECTS OF THE DISCUSSION METHOD**

A total of 36 analyses of variance were performed to test the hypotheses about the greater effectiveness of role-reversal in establishing attitudes by the participant to the other participant. There were no main effects as predicted. Rather, as Table 1 shows, self-presentation provided significantly greater "feelings of being understood by the other" than did role-reversal, as indicated by "perceiving that the other understood one's original position more fully" and that "the other gained more insight into one's position during the discussion." Self-presentation also created greater change than did role-reversal in the convincingness of the other's reasons for his final as compared to his original position (this index was obtained by dividing actual change by possible change, either positive or negative, to control for differences in initial level). However, individual comparisons revealed that only among the pairs discussing the legalization of euthanasia was self-presentation significantly superior to role-reversal in fostering feelings of being understood by the other and a more favorable assessment of the other's final position.

At the .10 level, presenting one's own viewpoint initially produced more favorable perceptions of oneself during the discussion than did arguing for the other's position; as with the above variables, self-presentation was accompanied by more favorable self-evaluations than role-reversal to a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Means of Significant Analyses of Variance and Individual Comparisons by Experimental Condition</strong></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes toward other:</th>
<th>T.S.</th>
<th>Eth.</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other chose first</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>2.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived other's understanding of own original position</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived insight of other into own position</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to understand other</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived desire of other to understand me</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>3.20</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Attitude toward other's position:</th>
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<th>Eth.</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>Significance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-role-reversal attitude change</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-discussion attitude change</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>4.40</td>
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<tr>
<th>Absolute change indices (actual change divided by possible change):</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convincingness of reasons for other's final as compared to original position</td>
<td>+1.95</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>+1.35</td>
<td>+4.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre- vs. post-discussion probability that a reasonable person could hold other's original views</td>
<td>+0.35</td>
<td>+0.13</td>
<td>+0.09</td>
<td>+2.13</td>
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</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude toward self during discussion (derived from Semantic Differential)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative I</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluative II</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strength of Viewpoint I</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation (variances not homogeneous)</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>2.47</td>
</tr>
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</table>

D = Discussion method main effect.  
I = Issue main effect.  
D X 1 = Interaction.  
* Significant in the reverse direction from that predicted.  
** Significant at the .05 level.  
*** Significant at the .01 level.  
Note: On all variables except attitude change a low number indicates a more favorable rating. A high number indicates greater attitude change towards the other.
TABLE 2

Proportion of Pairs Completing Joint Statement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role-reversal</th>
<th>Self-presentation</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Probability of difference between proportions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers' strikes</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euthanasia</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

marked extent only among the pairs discussing euthanasia.

Our predictions about the effects of discussion method were also reversed among teachers' strike pairs with regard to own and other's motivation to comprehend one another's views. Teachers' strike discussants felt more desire to understand the other and perceived the other as more motivated to understand them (p < .05) after an initial period of defending their own views than after arguing for the other's views.

The behavioral index of resolution of the attitudinal conflict was the completion of a statement containing mutually agreed upon recommendations on the issue. Despite instructions placing pressure upon all subjects to reach agreement, only 52 percent of the pairs in the role-reversal conditions completed the joint statement, whereas 80 percent of the self-presentation pairs completed it, a difference significant at the .01 level (Table 2). Thus self-presentation, under the conditions in which it was used in this experiment, was a more potent procedure for producing agreement despite an initial conflict of attitudes than role-reversal.

With regard to attitude change as with agreement, role-reversal was seemingly ineffective not because it had no effect, but rather because the procedure with which it was contrasted, self-presentation, also produced attitude change towards the opposite viewpoint. Table 3 shows that 40 percent of the self-presentation pairs and 34 percent of the role-reversers shifted towards agreement with the other after the initial 20 minutes of interaction. After conclusion of the entire discussion, about 44 percent of those presenting their own views and 40 percent of the role-reversers changed towards agreement with the other's position.

EFFECTS OF THE ISSUE

The issue under discussion appeared of consequence for the outcome of interaction in the dyads, especially for those pairs initially presenting their own viewpoint. As shown in Table 1, discussing euthanasia produced greater attitude change towards one another's position than discussing teachers' strikes after the conclusion of the entire discussion (p < .001) and tended to produce greater attitude change after the first 20 minutes of interaction (p < .10); both of these main effects were largely due to greater attitude change among those self-presentation pairs who discussed euthanasia rather than teachers' strikes. The greater attitudinal reconciliation among euthanasia pairs was accompanied by more favorable attitudes towards one another. Euthanasia pairs who defended their own views liked one another as friends more than teachers' strike pairs who defended their own views, and were more convinced by the other's arguments from original to final position.

Table 4 shows that discussing euthanasia resulted in a more objectively and subjectively satisfactory resolution of the attitudinal conflict through the joint statement than did discussing teachers' strikes, and that, as with the above variables, this difference was more marked among the self-presentation pairs. Euthanasia pairs were more satisfied (p < .01) with the joint statement they completed than were the teachers' strike pairs. Furthermore, eutha-
nasia pairs who presented their own views produced a joint statement rated as more adequate a resolution of the conflict (p < .05) than teachers' strike pairs who presented their own views.

Although there is no direct evidence of differences between the issues accounting for the greater reconciliation of attitudinal differences between euthanasia pairs, subjects who were selected to discuss euthanasia did differ in several ways from subjects selected to discuss teachers' strikes. As shown in Table 5, euthanasia subjects were considerably more emotionally involved in their initial attitude position than teachers' strike subjects, as indicated by the rated importance of the values implicated in their reasons for their beliefs. Also, euthanasia pairs were significantly more skillful at and involved in the role-reversal, according to the experimenter's ratings. It is also likely that, for the subject population used, euthanasia was less apt to have been a topic of prior public discussion than the legality of teachers' strikes.

**INTERACTION BETWEEN DISCUSSION METHOD AND ISSUE**

Some of the data also suggest an interaction between discussion method and attitudinal issue which merits further study. It appears as if role-reversal was a better procedure with the issue of teachers' strikes and self-presentation was more effective with euthanasia. Role-reversal produced greater increase in feeling convinced by the other's arguments from original to final position with teachers' strike pairs, while self-presentation produced greater positive change with euthanasia pairs (p < .01). It has already been noted that self-presentation resulted in feeling more fully understood by the other when discussing euthanasia than did role-reversal.

This interaction between discussion method and issue was most consistently seen in the subjects' evaluations of themselves during the discussion on the semantic differential scales (see Table 1). Teachers' strike pairs who reversed roles felt that they had made a more effective presentation (p < .05) and felt more motivated (p < .05) than teachers' strike pairs who presented their own viewpoint, while euthanasia pairs who defended their own position felt more effective and motivated than euthanasia role-reversers. Favorability of self-presentation, as shown by ratings on the evaluative scales, showed the same interaction at the .10 level. Inspection of the individual comparisons reveals that reversing roles on euthanasia led to less favorable perceptions of oneself and one's presentation than presenting one's own views on euthanasia, and that, for those engaging in role-reversal, discussion of euthanasia elicited less favorable self-perceptions than discussion of teachers' strikes. Both sets of comparisons suggest that the necessity to argue for the other's position on euthanasia produced discomfort with the situation or possibly even guilt which was reflected in the negative perceptions of oneself in the situation. Since euthanasia pairs argued for the other's position with greater involvement than teachers' strike pairs, it is conceivable that the former's tendency to view themselves during the discussion as less understandable, effective, and clear was an externalization of internal conflict about their own beliefs arising from the intense role-playing.

**EFFECTS OF ROLE-REVERSAL SKILL**

In order to allow for the interdependence of scores within a discussion pair, the experimenter's mean role-reversal rating (derived from ratings made after five and 20 minutes of role-reversal) for each subject were summed for each pair and a Pearson r was computed between the total role-reversal skill of the pair and the pair's mean score on each of certain other variables. Table 8 shows that the role-reversal skill of teachers' strike pairs was correlated with attitude change toward one another immediately after the role-reversal (p < .01) and after conclusion of the discussion (p < .05). Skill at taking one another's role on teachers' strikes also tended (p < .10) to be related to feelings of having acquired insight into the other's position during the discussion.

Among euthanasia pairs, for whom the smaller number of pairs studied made the finding of significant relationships less likely, role-reversal tended (p < .10) to correlate with greater attitude change toward one another's views after conclusion of the discussion. It is of interest, in the light of previous evidence that role-reversal on euthanasia may have produced discomfort, that there was virtually no relationship between the role-reversal skill of euthanasia pairs and attitude change immediately after the role-reversal. A curious finding was that the higher the role-reversal skill of...
even may have limited the effects of both role-reversal and self-presentation by our subject selection procedures. Unlike previous studies, subjects were preselected for their extreme attitude positions and high involvement in the issue. In addition, subjects in our experiment discussed issues of some emotional import to them. Many of the subjects discussing the right of teachers to strike were themselves teachers, while euthanasia implicated the religious values and affiliations of a sizable proportion of the subjects. These factors probably accounted for the tendency of all subjects to modify their original attitudes only minimally. Although the attitude change which occurred was generally toward agreement with the partner, subjects in the condition showing maximal attitude change shifted an average of only 1.40 scale units above zero change.

Another feature which distinguishes this study from previous ones on role-playing is that several experimental procedures were likely to increase the saliency of initial attitudes. Each subject was confronted with another holding a viewpoint opposing his, a situation likely to make him more aware of his original convictions. The necessity of presenting one's own viewpoint in order to reach the joint statement may have reminded the role-reversing subject of the position he had held prior to role-reversal. To change one's mind publicly and drastically at that point may have felt, to some, like admitting that they were easily swayed in their beliefs. Still another experimental procedure that may have minimized differences between role-reversal and self-presentation was the instructional set provided by the experimenter. Subjects in all conditions were instructed to try to reach a mutually acceptable joint position on the issue they were discussing. This may have oriented all subjects at the outset toward understanding the other's positions more fully in order to find areas of agreement.

The superiority of self-presentation over role-reversal on certain variables may have been spuriously produced by the technique of role-reversal used. Role-reversers had to argue for the other's position without foreknowledge of the other's actual reasons for taking this position. If, during role-reversal, the other presented erroneous reasons for one's own position, then it is understandable why role-reversers felt their original position was less fully understood by the other than those defending their own viewpoint. This may have been more apt to occur when subjects reversed roles on euthanasia, an issue which, recently, at least, has been less often publicly discussed than teachers' strikes and for which there may have been less knowledge of different reasons for asserting and dissenting views. Indeed, inspection of the open-ended reasons given by subjects for their position suggested that there was a greater diversity of reasons both favoring and opposing the legalization of euthanasia than was true of the teachers' strike issue.

The consequences of role-reversal appear to be conditional upon one's own and the other's skill in role-taking. There is some evidence in our study that, when role-reversal is done skillfully, it is a useful technique for inducing attitudinal change in a conflict of attitudes. Perhaps skill at role-reversal requires some training since, unlike the self-presentation method, most people are unpracticed in it.

Our findings may also reflect the possibility that role-reversal is more effective than the usual technique for some kinds of issues, but less effective for others. The current study suggests a hypothesis which we believe warrants further study. This hypothesis accounts for the greater efficacy of role-reversal on the teachers' strike issue and of self-exposition on euthanasia. Role-reversal may have been relatively more effective than direct argument on an issue like teachers' strikes in which there was exposure to prior public discussion. On such a public issue, one might have built up arguments favoring one's own position, counter-arguments against the opposing viewpoint, and stereotypes of those holding the opposing point of view. Direct argument might tend to elicit existing defenses and, as a result, harden the defended position, while role-reversal might force one to develop and consider new arguments which one has not already discredited. This may be seen in the slight tendency toward greater attitude change after reversing roles than after defending one's own views on teachers' strikes.

In contrast, direct discussion may be relatively more effective than role-reversal on an issue like euthanasia which has not been the subject of much public discussion and which is linked to central moral and personal values. Direct discussion might not encounter strongly prepared defenses since the person may not have participated in debate on euthanasia, either personally or vicariously. However, reversing roles on such a moral issue may prove sufficiently uncomfortable to elicit negative feelings towards oneself and the ideas developed in favor of the opposing viewpoint, because one has to express views morally repugnant to oneself.

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