

# Reciprocal roles: the mother of all ideas

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One idea stands head and shoulders above the rest in Tony Ryle's broad and integrative contribution to psychotherapy. It is the idea of reciprocal roles. It is the mother of all his other ideas and the one which came first as mentioned in the brief but brilliant 1975 paper (Self-to-self, self-to-others: the world's shortest account of object relations theory) which was published in *New Psychiatry*. In the same year the cognitive relational foundations of what would shape up as CAT were laid out in his *Frames and Cages* book (Ryle 1975). Reciprocal roles are the relational glue which bring a dynamic psycho-social life to other ideas such as procedural sequences, multiple self-states, collaboration and transference. Without reciprocal roles, CAT's cognitive, relational and pragmatic approach to psychoanalysis would dissolve into an eclectic soup.

This tribute to Ryle's creativity asks how reciprocal roles developed and what Ryle wanted us to do with them. I want to point to reciprocal roles framing a relational approach to mental health reaching beyond the confines of the therapy room. I note how their importance comes alive in mapping.

Tony Ryle intended reciprocal roles to help us to think relationally; to see how our self-knowledge is derived in relations with others; to understand that we learn the steps to both ends of the reciprocal even if we only dance at one end. As highlighted in the 1975 paper reciprocal roles come in pairs at least if not threes: I can experience neglect, whilst imagining care and judging myself harshly.

Ryle starts his *Frames and Cages* book with a salutary sentence "People are hard to understand." He goes on to say how we simplify, or narrow, our focus in response to complexity. And in the title, is the elegant warning that the ideas and models we use can be enabling frames or disabling cages. Reciprocal role descriptions work best when they help

us wander back and forth along the relational dimensions of big picture and detail, past and present, self and other, inner and outer realities, ideas and feelings. They offer a visual tool that can be used to map our ways in and out of the multi-layered, multi-sourced relational interplay between minds, bodies, cultures and society. In their versatility, reciprocal roles take us to the relational origins and mother space of our early development (Trevarthen 2017, Reddy 2008, Stern 1985) our shared ideas (Bruner 1968), joint activities (Vygotsky 1962) our dialogic emotional brains (Panksepp 2012) and our collective, long story of human evolution (Donald 2001).

Also, with reciprocal roles Tony Ryle created a tool for a general self-other language (he called it a 'common sense language' in the 1975 paper) that spoke out across professional jargon and mystification and spoke for a language close to our ordinary human psychology. He was concerned with an intermediate level of analysis – not too abstract and not too detailed which could, in partnership with the client achieve a surgical accuracy and incisiveness. Reciprocal roles get two mentions in the 1975 paper and allow an exploration of multiple positions such as seeking ideal care whilst also feeling neglected. It includes a third position which he called the central part of the self but might be recast now as the observing eye or the third, 'consciousness raising' reciprocal role of compassionately negotiating to kindly understood.

It can be deduced from the Frames and Cages book that reciprocal roles arise from using Kelly's grids to research Ryle's relational approach to psychoanalysis within a student health service. In homing in on the idea of the two poles of reciprocal roles he offered a loose template for saying and seeing how we internalise and reproduced a sense of ourselves from early pre-verbal interactions. He is already seeing psychoanalysis, courtesy of Guntrip (1971) and Fairbairn (1952) in relational terms and is ahead of the wave that Stephen Mitchell (1988) will later refer to us as the relational turn in psychoanalysis. Stephen Mitchell writing from the heart of the interpersonal approach to psychoanalysis in New York drew out, what in hindsight we might now call, the double dialogue between inner and outer worlds. Ryle with the embryonic concept of reciprocal roles was already there but with a triple dialogue in mind

between what was within us dynamically, between us interpersonally and around us socially and culturally. From this, it was a small step in the creative exchange a decade later between Tony Ryle and Mikael Leiman to add the dialogic influence of Bakhtin and Vygotsky to this psychoanalytic view. In 1982, Ryle takes a narrower track with the book aiming to be a general model of psychotherapy using the procedural sequence model. The book makes no reference to the reciprocal role idea and is much more at the cognitive end of the future CAT integration. It may well be that - without the influence of Mikael Leiman and the 'dialogic' and social formation perspective of the Russians - the earlier reciprocal role idea with its relational emphasis and future breakthrough to mapping and diagrammatic reformulation would have been lost.

In *Frames and Cages*, Tony Ryle hints at a psychological geography "it is usually helpful to display these components in the form of a graph or map." "These maps may summarise, in the same diagram both construct and element relationship." (p35 *Frames and Cages*).

Whether we do it with in our heads, with our hands or on paper the naming of reciprocal roles is a mapping and tracking idea. Like any map it should not be confused with the landscape it describes. It is, as Ryle said, a necessary simplification. It is mapping and tracking the relational intelligence which flows within, between and around us. What Colwyn Trevarthen calls affectionate, intersubjective intelligence when referring to our early interactions. Relational intelligence is the partly felt, partly formulated, partly coherent, mostly unconscious stuff of life through which we show, share and know ourselves and the world. Reciprocal roles track this mother space of all our subsequent human ways of know

It is also apparent that in the process of seeking a 'common sense' language that can reach across the professions, Ryle was pointing to a relational approach more widely to Mental Health. He crafted a relational notation that could readily be drawn out and talked over. Reciprocal roles are a great conversational and reflective aid. They help focus attention, see the interplay between real and imagined, past and present dynamics. Like most CAT practitioners I have used reciprocal role mapping for inner realities and social identities, for

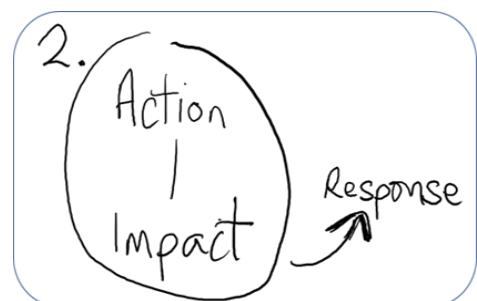
tracking the story around one small symptom, for conflict resolution for creative writing and for my own daily mindful mapping practice. Indeed, where ever there is a need to engage with the flesh and bones of our collective relational intelligence the reciprocal role notation is at hand.

As already suggested the reciprocal role idea found its true theatre in the process of what Ryle called diagrammatic reformulation. I am going to finish this valediction by going briefly through the notation, in four steps, for drawing out a reciprocal role. The first relational parallel with reciprocal roles also parallels Daniel Kahneman's distinction between thinking fast and thinking slow (Kahneman 2011). I am listening to a story retold conversationally with all the



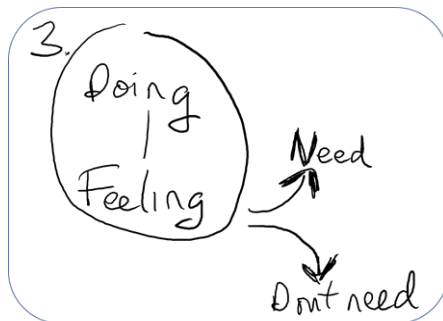
messy asides about how and why which comes with it. In my mind, I am listening out for the action and reaction (he did this to me so I did that back) that is our fast brain response to experience. If I can get words on paper as in figure 1 it is only a stepping stone to wondering out-loud how the reciprocation

can be unravelled into the three-point foundation of a reciprocal role procedure in which between the action and the response is inserted the intervening variable of the impact emotionally of the action. For example. "He hit me, I hit back". "But how did you feel when he was hitting" (finger in the action end of the reciprocal role). "I felt, I don't know, I felt scared, angry, insulted." (pen puts those emotion words at the impact end of the reciprocal role in figure 2. This opens the door to recapping with: "So he hit you?" (finger touches the Action end of the reciprocal role in figure 2. and then traces to the impact end whilst pointing to the feelings written out there and I ask. "So, feeling that impact there how did you respond? This delicate unravelling (simultaneously in a sensitive dialogue and on paper) of the knots of the



reciprocal role along procedural lines is modelling another reciprocal role of compassion and curiosity which can be similarly mapped out as depicting where we are right now (hopefully). These simple acts of triangulation, feelings felt, then said and then seen written out on paper

are acts of externalisation and rendering transparent stuff that is otherwise said 'off pat' unmarked and unseen in the automatic responses of the day. The next step is to trace one (there can be more) of the procedural or dialogic sequences that tell the story of the response

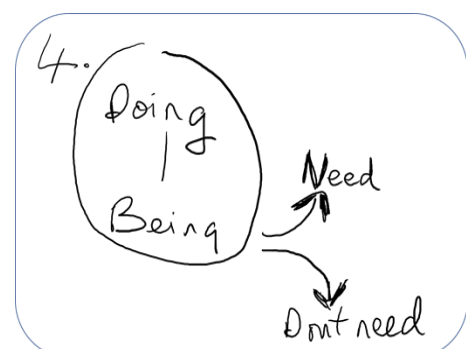


to the impact of the action. As in figure 3 my attention as the mapper is shifting from the action, impact and response of the moment in the story to the recurring pattern emerging from the mapping. The shift in language to doing and feeling implies a regularity to what others (or

me) are doing. Doing is a lovely open word. What are you doing? How are you doing? He is doing me in? In response to the repeated doings of times now and times past there are the reciprocations of repeated feelings.

Whilst there are many ways of tracking a procedural or dialogic sequence in response to feelings depicted at the bottom end of a reciprocal role, the one that connects most for me is asking what did you need or not when you were feeling that there on the map because you or someone else was doing this. As a sentence written out or said in a vacuum this sounds cumbersome but said alongside pointing movements with fingers and pens across the paper it is an invitation to find words for feelings. The phrase 'what I need', takes me to a 'hoped' for, okay or idealised place (with their own reciprocal role procedures to be mapped out in turn). The phrase 'what I don't need' takes me to ideas about my situation, actions and consequences that would take me to a feared place.

What is in my mapper's mind next within the notation of the reciprocal role idea is that what is being done at the doing end is of such regularity and familiarity in the person's sense of self that it is 'as if a role' and the feeling



it evokes at the bottom end of the reciprocal role is a state of being. As the therapeutic mapper, I will ask, pointing to the top end of the reciprocal role in figure 4. "When you are here, doing

this or having this done to you, who are you being down here or what state of being are you in?

Reciprocation is at the heart of infant development and relational intelligence through life. This paper has suggested it is the mother of ideas but the more I have worked with it in mapping I have found we need a second concept to describe our relation to the space and activities which are not reciprocation. Infant observation (my evidence base is from close contact with my three-month old grand-daughter) shows a shimmering and hovering between reciprocations (feeding, holding, playing, crying). This shimmering and hovering is led by the eyes and ears in response to sight and sound. It feels like a capacity for circulation and to wander and return that builds secure attachment. There is, to borrow Nietzsche's evocative image of being in the 'no-longer-not-yet', a transitional space between reciprocation and disconnection, language and thought, sign and gesture, where the eyes wander, the voice croaks and a search is on for a conscious movement which alights here and there through a series of fleeting reciprocations before, so to speak, returning to anchor. It is in the tenderness, openness and vulnerability of such circulation that moment of attuning development or moments of therapy can occur. For reciprocation to truly come alive in and between roles and procedures we need to work with our maps to see how much we have a healthy, conscious and 'in dialogue' capacity to circulate.

In reciprocal roles Tony Ryle found the language and tools for expressing his social and relational view of the human condition. Putting them down on paper together helps us see what we are saying. He gave us an aid to relational imagination. Thank you so much Tony Ryle.

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