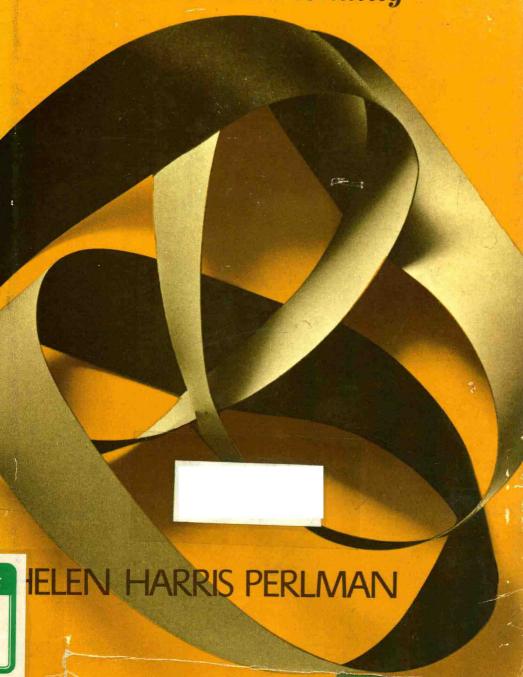
PERSONA

Social Role and Personality



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HELEN HARRIS PERLMAN

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PERSONA SOCIAL ROLE AND PERSONALITY

In Memory of My Mother and Father

Annie and Lazer Harris

Who Understood Love and Work

Since no one is someone without a disguise And the truths of the parlor in the bedroom are lies And my everyday self is a shoddy disgrace I have put on these masks to show you my face

Maurice English, Midnight of the Century

And if ever the suspicion of their manifold being dawns upon men of unusually delicate perceptions . . . they break through the illusion of the unity of the personality and perceive that the self is made up of a bundle of selves As a body everyone is single, as a soul never.

Hermann Hesse, Steppenwolf

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Division of Labor

The child-wife begets the father-husband, the babe creates the mother in the womb, the twisted help to twist their Torquemada, Abel's cringing guarantees his doom.

Each takes the end of what the other tugs at, the sister's greed calls out the sister's greed; fear, love, and dominance are given to any worthy and to all in need.

We are defined by everyone around us, each man expands where other men give in; the sainted must have devils to improve on, and devils, saints, the more to relish sin.

John R. Platt, Perspectives in Biology and Medicine, Spring, 1963

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PART ONE

SOME FOREWORDS AND AFTERTHOUGHTS





Some Forewords and Afterthoughts

A foreword is always written afterwards. When a book's last sentence is written (incredulous relief mixed with separation reluctance) there rise up all those haunting doubts and half-expressed, cast-off, or disregarded ideas and they ask the author, portentously, "Have you really said what you meant to say?" "Is it worth saying?" and, worst of all, "Will anyone care?" So it has become customary for editors to allow the writer one more chance to look backward across what he has set down and to look outward to the persons he hopes will be his readers and to say, in effect, "Look—here's what this book is meant to be about, and let me explain to you why I thought you'd be interested and why I committed this or that sin—and—." Thus this.

The central idea that binds these essays together is an old one. It is simply that human beings are nurtured, developed, shaped, socialized, cut down or built up from birth onwards by their daily intercourse with those other human beings and those circumstances and conditions that they experience as potent and meaningful. It goes on from this to propose that these transactions between the individual person and his dynamic environment (physical, psychic, social) are not haphazard and random, Rather, for the most part, they are contained and aligned by socially defined position and their functions—by roles. Role tasks and role relationships and their interchange of actions and affects, when they are felt as vital by the persons involved in them, are the overt forms in which personality needs find expression, thwarting or nourishment. But our vital roles have been given very little study, either by insightful observation of everyday lives or by careful clinical research. It is as though Freud's maturity criteria-to be able to love and to work-seemed to make such utter common sense that roles in which men work and love and the ways in which

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roles affect the inputs and outcomes of working and loving have simply been taken for granted. So, to the idea of role as shaper and shaker of personality I have brought the insistent wish to look at what work and love roles are made up of and how they affect personality.

This has seemed to me to be of particular importance in the understanding towards the enhancement of adult life. Most psychodynamic theory leaps adroitly from adolescence to senescence. All those years in between, of young and middle adulthood, have scarcely been scratched for their dynamic contents, even though we carry our most emotionally charged and socially valued roles over their span. This is why I have pondered on what's in a role—especially those that are undertaken and valued in adult life.

What's in a role, in a vital role, is a *person*, with his mind, body, feelings, and, always, at least one other person. "Persona" expresses this merger. Persona is the Latin word for the masks used in the Greek drama. It meant that the actor was heard and his identity recognized by others through the sounds that issued from the open mask mouth. From it the word "person" emerged to express the idea of a human being who *meant* something, who represented something, and who seemed to have some defined connectedness with others by action or affects. (We still use "person" to connote this: we say of an infant who begins to show signs of awareness of self in relation to others, "He's becoming a *person*.") A person makes himself known, felt, taken in by others, through his particular roles and their functions. Some of his personae—his masks—are readily detachable and put aside, but others become fused with his skin and bone.

I first became interested in social roles (as I have written elsewhere) many years ago, in the midst of a dance. It was a square-dance party, large enough so that some of us were strangers to one another. Within one square was a man who was the despair of us all: he went right when the call was "left," he skipped when he was to "stand," he bumbled, collided, stood bewildered—by the round's end he looked like nothing so much as a defeated mouse. One of us went to our host to ask who this poor soul was. "Oh, that one!" he said. "He's X, the famous physicist." What happened? Attitudes and actions in the whole group somersaulted. This was no dancing imbecile—this was a dancing brain; no dolt, but a genius! Warm indulgence toward him took the place of annoyance, eager helpfulness rushed in to fill the vacuum of tolerance. But more than this: in his role as dancing partner Mr. X was inept, apologetic, uneasy; but when he was in his major

work role of internationally recognized scientist, he was competent, keen, serenely self-confident. Which, I asked myself, is the *real* Mr. X? How much imprint, I wondered, does a particular role make on a personality? How many adults could know themselves and be able to present themselves as "I am——" without following it by some role designation?

At about this time, along with a number of older and wiser social workers, I had been searching for the particular identity of social casework and role of the social caseworker. I had coined a phrase "put the 'social' back into social casework" that became a popular self-other exhortation among social workers. But had anyone been ungracious enough to press me to say what I meant, I am not sure I could have produced much beyond a belief that we needed to turn from exclusively intrapsychic explorations to exploring person-toperson and person-to-social-situation dynamics. Already this was occurring in a few far-sighted agencies about the country, and in the next fifteen years a flood of social science propositions and findings rolled across social work and into its open stream beds. Among the many notions, ideas, and findings that sociology and social psychology and their sister sciences poured forth, the concept of role, it seemed to me, held most ready usefulness for me and fellow caseworkers-and for other professional helpers too-in our job of understanding the individual person's psychosocial problems to the end of improving the adequacy of his social functioning and of his sense of well-being.

Some transmutations had to take place to bring "role" into practical use. Its usage in the writings of social science not only reflected many variations in its conception and meanings but it was often dealt with at levels of abstraction that made it seem quite remote from the flesh and blood and spirit of real people. I tried, then, to define and describe "role" in terms useful to those who were to use it as a framework for action. I confess that the fact of its multiple and not always consistent definitions among those who fathered it seemed to give me sanction to select its relevant lineaments.

One further personal slant characterizes these essays. I make haste to acknowledge it, with a few explanations that may or may not serve as excuses. It is my persistent belief, not in man's "perfectability," but in his "improvability." This is born, I suppose, of some congenital optimism and hopefulness, but it is maintained by the knowledge that man's improvement does happen and can be made to happen. I hold

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this belief with what is perhaps a fierce cheerfulness (or cheerful fierceness) in the face of my growing concern about the pervasive defeatism and nihilism that lies like a palpable shadow over our society today.

To view all of living as "absurd" ends in emptiness; to see it all as trivial ends in cheap cynicism; to seek for some tensionless state of harmony or for some continuous state of ecstasy ends only in depression. Among the creators and communicators of our culture there has for too long been an infatuation with what is sick, and now in many places sickness and deviance is being put forth as the only true expressions of "reality." Even among those of us professionally committed to raising the level of human life and enriching human experience there has of late been a fascination, a fastening on, in a literal sense, with death and grieving and mourning. To face and accept death as a fact of life is basic to living in full appreciation of what life holds. To enable people to weather and work up through the inevitable black pit that death and separation gouges into the spirit and viscera of the living is a sober and skill-requiring responsibility for those who would help others. One cannot underestimate such agonies nor such efforts at reparation. My plea only is that this not be all.

Our need, it seems to me, is to come closer to life, to the everyday living experience of the everyday common man and what this may hold of health-giving properties, of opportunities for sensing and savoring and enjoying his work and love relationships in some greater degree than at present seems to be the case. We need some closer, more sensitive examinations of the small details of daily living: What are its unnecessary hurts, its untapped—or actually present rewards? Its lifting moments that people may learn to be aware of and value and celebrate? We will not achieve "health" or "happiness" or even making things "better" by probing only sickness, problems, decay. Such probes and their consequent actions are necessary. But it is necessary beyond this to do what we have thus far let slip: to find in the daily operations of men and women the means by which they can feel recognized, competent, loved; to blow the obscuring dust of familiarity off them and lift them to the light for keener appreciation of what they hold; and, because they will always be found less than perfect, to work both toward making those means better and toward freeing the push and stretch within the human beings who use them. "We'll make yes" says the poet e. e. cummings.

In a way this book is a self-indulgence. It is freely written. I chose

the essay form rather than the tight structure of treatise or textbook because essays are literally and simply "tryouts," "attempts at." This is all I present: ideas, notions, beliefs, hunches. glimpses of aspects of people in the vital roles of their adult life and such implications for professional helpers as seem to evolve from this viewing stance. Such "hard research" as supports some of its hypotheses has been the work of others on which I have drawn.

I have tried to write as simply as I can because I wanted to avoid the self-deceptions that so often accompany professionally ritualized words and because simplicity is the test of whether something makes plain honest sense. I am afraid I have not always been successful some ready shorthand words like "ego" have sneaked in and have been allowed to stay for want of adequate substitutes. But I have hoped that each reader could translate what he reads into the particular language of his particular professional endeavors.

Despite these disclaimers, this is, I hope, a professionally responsible effort. My professional life has been a rich and varied one. In my years of casework practice my clients were a varied group. They ranged from middle-class European intellectuals newly migrated to this country to lower-class Negro cotton-choppers newly migrated from a southern plantation to a northern slum; from three-year-old twins wrested from their psychotic mother and placed in a foster home to frail old women pushed out of family life and into "homes for the aged"; from the man ravaged by guilt to the man ravaged by rage; from families, black or white, struggling to maintain some secure footing under duress to families tearing themselves apart. In all these experiences, and in work as consultant to other social workers, and as supervisor and teacher too, I have had some small part in trying to release and channel people's innate push and capacities toward less personal pain or more personal gratification, less interpersonal conflict, more interpersonal competence. Along with such efforts I have been a close observer too, if only because action must be guided by what one sees is happening. Among the many clamorous thoughts that my observations called forth is the one that motivates the writing of this book. It is that we—all of us professional helpers, doctors, nurses, teachers, ministers, social workers—have not attended closely enough to the powers for both good and evil that are at work in the immediate present, in the everyday facts of everyday life. Such powers are contained in people's major life roles. So they need study.

Am I making too much of the concept of role? I have asked myself

this question in the course of my work on this book. Does it hold real

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utilitarian value? I am not sure. I remind myself only that all human phenomena seem commonplace or trivial until they are closely examined in their many facets and depths. So childhood seemed to be simply a period of littleness into growth, innocence into knowledge, paradise into purgatory until Freud (father and daughter) and Erikson and Gesell and many others along side them began to explore and explain its depths and forces.

One's thinking is built on the groundwork and insights of others, and one's work is made possible by the cooperation of those others with whom one's living is entwined. So the people to whom I am indebted are more numerous than I know. Beyond my deep-sunk roots in Freud and Dewey I have drawn heavily on the illuminating works of Erik Erikson and in recent years upon the brilliant and buoyant insights of Robert W. White who, it seems to me, "makes yes." My thinking about adult life has had some underpinning by the continuous small-block-by-small-block building of research on adults within the University of Chicago's Department of Human Development under the leadership of Robert Havighurst; and I am particularly grateful to the recent work of Bernice Neugarten and her associates there. Within my own sector of the University, the School of Social Service Administration, I have experienced among my colleagues that climate of interest and support and those delights of unhostile questioning and probing challenge that are the basic precondition for risking oneself in the hazards of putting notions and propositions into writing. Alton Linford, the School's dean, deserves special mention as a dean whose encouragement to his faculty's creative efforts is underpinned by his concern and arrangements to make such efforts feasible. And especially am I grateful to those students who, in our doctoral seminars, thought and questioned together with me on the subject matter of this book.

To Maurice English and John Platt go my gratitude for their allowing me to use their poems. As poets they understand and can express more sentiently than we who plod in prose the swift interpenetrations of acting-feeling-being.

Mrs. Juanita Brown, my secretary, has, with grace and competence, dealt with all the labors that attend on making a book out of page upon page of script and scratch.

And, always, my gratitude to my husband, Max, on whose life this effort impinged many times and who, throughout, has remained my best friend and gentlest critic.



SOME THEORETICAL SPECULATIONS