Role-Playing

Imagination is one of the most important, but perhaps most underrated, aspect of academic research. Role-playing – i.e., pretending you are someone else in a different social environment – is a valuable research and teaching tool that taps your most creative and playful resources. You probably did this as a kid, pretending you were medieval royalty, a pirate on the high seas or an astronaut exploring another planet. While this might be great for kids, can it really be an educational experience for adults? You bet!!

Remember, the task of a social scientist is to understand human behavior. However, asking people why they do what they do is often not possible (because they have passed away) or practical (because people may strategically misrepresent their actions). To compensate for these difficulties, social scientists must make a variety of assumptions about the motives and beliefs of actors. To do this more accurately, it is helpful to "step into the shoes" of others. This is where role-playing and imagination become important. It could be argued that scholars run the risk of imposing their own values, motives and beliefs on the individuals they study, and that role-playing is a "dangerous" act. This may be true, but what is the alternative? You are going to make assumptions about the behavior of others anyways. Explicitly using your imagination to role-play an individual will make you more conscious of your own biases and force you to "let go" of these predilections.

Here is a step-by-step process to role-playing. This is only a suggested process. You may find different ways to approach role-playing.

- **Cast of characters.** Write down all of the potential actors (individuals or groups) that are important in the situation/event you are studying. A study of Congress may include congressional representatives, the representative's constituents, interests groups, the bureaucracy, the president, and interest groups. Perform "triage" – i.e., decide which groups are more important than others and focus on the most relevant groups (at least initially).

- **Motivation**. What are the primary goals of each of the actors you just listed? Write them down. You might want to include basic values (e.g., actor A prefers justice over liberty), more specific goals (e.g., expanding healthcare to the poor) and instrumental goals (e.g., getting re-elected, maintaining a bureau's budget).

- **Beliefs.** What do you think each actor thinks about the other actors' motivations? This process asks you to move one more level into the role-playing exercise – i.e., imagine yourself imagining your character as another character. What other beliefs might each actor have (e.g., past experiences informing how other people behave, strong ideological predispositions)? Write all this stuff down.

- **Power.** What tools or resources does each actor have for accomplishing his/her goal? How does this power compare to others? Write this down too.

- **"Mock battle."** Now imagine the situation/event you are studying as playing itself out without any reference to what really happened. This may be hard, because you already know what happened, but at least try to understand the various actions of each actor leading up to a final outcome. Try engaging in a counterfactual – i.e., intentionally changing some of the goals, beliefs, power resources, or actions to think through how things might have been different.

Doing all of this will help you gain a better understanding of the situation. And it is fun too.

Also remember that role-playing is a great teaching tool. Divide students into competing groups of actors and have them go through the process above. Bring all the groups back together to play out history. If you are doing a research project, design a classroom assignment around your study. Since the students are not likely to know the outcome of the event you are studying (unless it is a major historical event), this actually will help you avoid predetermining your role play exercise. Students, in the process of negotiating with one another, might come up with different "paths" leading to different outcomes. This very well could help you set up your research question as an interesting counterfactual puzzle. "Why did actor A do X, when many people would have expected this group to do Y?"
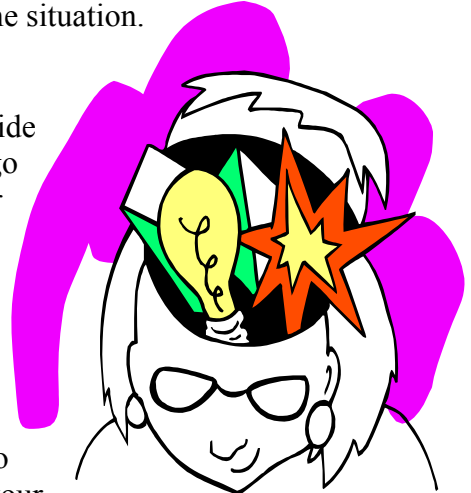
In the final analysis, role-playing is just plain fun. And shouldn't a big part of our career be devoted to enjoyable activities?