



‘My soul stands now planted’

**Rooting, Re-rooting and Self-Constitution
in Organizational Role-taking**

Dr. Shely Halachmi Sussman

**The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations
Lunchtime Talk - July 22nd, 2026**

This talk aims to...

Offer a framework and a language for understanding the **lived experience of self**, as a central dimension of organizational life, and show the **pragmatic function of experience** in the process of organizational role-taking



Agenda

- Talk & QA
- Work in groups
- Discussion



Presentation Road-Map

Conceptualize organizational role-taking as an active process of self-constitution, emerging from subjective experience and its personal meaning.

1. Pragmatic Self

2. Modalities of Self-Experience and their Constitutive Functions in Role-Taking:

- experience of transition – bridging gaps of in-between
- experience of containing and being contained
- experience of space, both internal and external

3. Ethical Dimension of Self-Constitution in Organizational Roles



Think of a role you've held in an organization...

Presentation Road-Map

Conceptualize organizational role-taking as an active process of self-constitution, emerging from subjective experience and its personal meaning.

1. Pragmatic Self

Experience of self as a lens for understanding the complex act of organizational role-taking.

2. Modalities of Self-Experience and their Constitutive Functions in Role-Taking:

- experience of transition – bridging gaps of in-between
- experience of containing and being contained
- experience of space, both internal and external

3. Ethical Dimension of Self-Constitution in Organizational Role



The Language of Experience

Role-Taking

grasp: understand, realize

grasp: fill, inhabit, seize

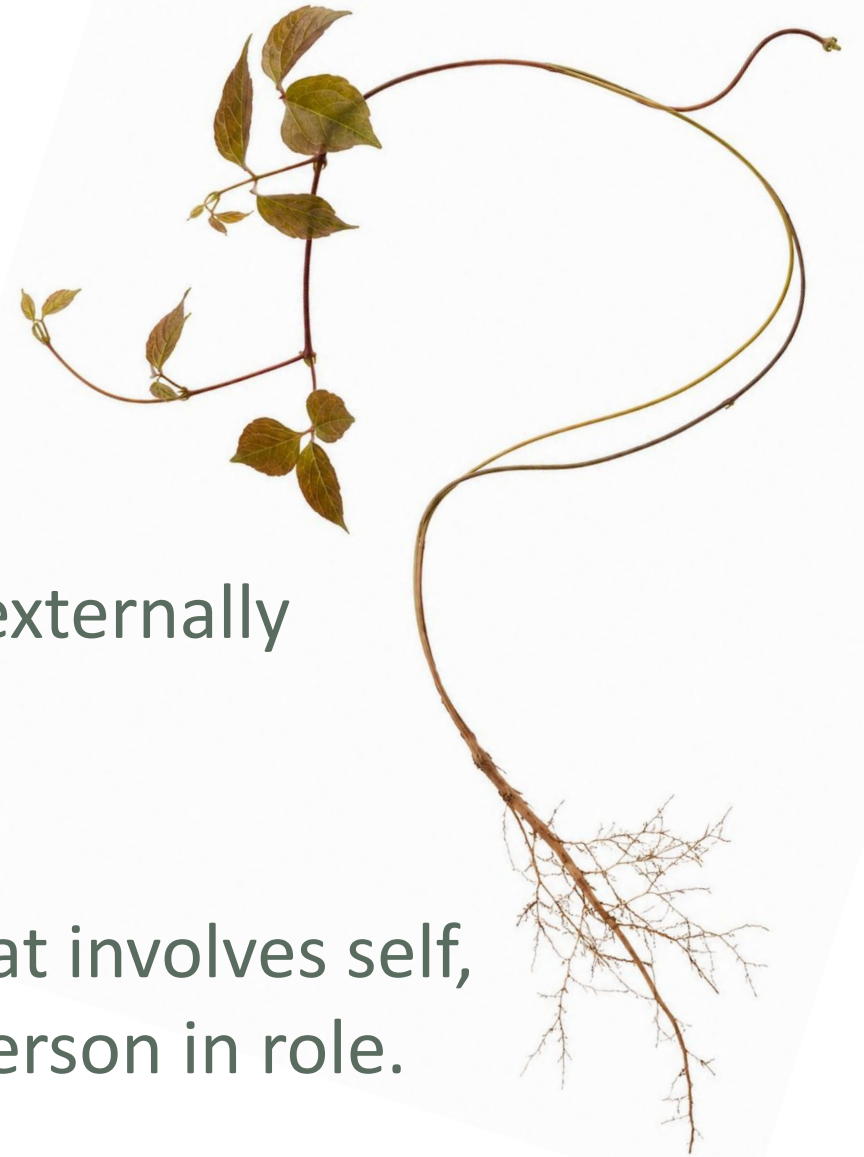


The Language of Experience

Role-Taking

“Taking on” a role – as in aligning with an externally defined position or job description.

“Taking up” a role from within, in a way that involves self, personality, unique characteristics of the person in role.



“My soul stands now planted”

Experience of Self in Organizational Role-Taking

“I remember, for instance, that one evening when I was a youth, my father read aloud from a Boston newspaper that part of Lord Gifford's will which founded these four lectureships. **At that time I did not think of being a teacher of philosophy: and what I listened to was as remote from my own life as if it related to the planet Mars.**

Yet here I am, with the Gifford system **part and parcel of my very self**, and all my energies, for the time being, devoted to **successfully identifying myself with it. My soul stands now planted** in what once was for it a **practically unreal object**, and speaks from it as from its **proper habitat and centre.**”

James, Varieties of Religious Experience, A Study in Human Nature, 1902



The pragmatic “cash-value” aspect of “experience of self”

What does the experience of self make possible?



Self-Constitution

as a process of realizing/making real

“My soul stands now planted in what once was for it a practically unreal object.”



Presentation Road-Map

Conceptualize organizational role-taking as an active process of self-constitution, emerging from subjective experience and its personal meaning.

1. Pragmatic Self

2. Modalities of Self-Experience and their Constitutive Functions in Role-Taking:

- experience of transition - bridging gaps of in-between
- experience of containing and being contained
- experience of space - both internal and external

3. Ethical Dimension of Self-Constitution in Organizational Role



Role-Taking as Experience of Transition: Between Disruption and Connection

"In turbulent waters, between two shores"

"Someone alone in a small boat at sea. On a raft. Trying bit by bit to reach a safe shore [...] and along the way, there are some storms."

- Avital, Mortgage Contract Examiner at a bank, eight months in role

Caesura

A psychoanalytic model of human experience

“There is much more continuity between intra-uterine life and earliest infancy than the impressive caesura of the act of birth allows us to believe.”

Freud, 1926 in Bion, Caesura

Caesura

A psychoanalytic model of human experience

“Thus we have returned to this problem of how to transcend the caesura when one is in movement from one state of mind to another; how to surpass the various obstacles in the course of a psychological or spiritual journey of development.”

Bion, Caesura

Narrative of Role-Taking as Experience of Transition: Between Disruption and Connection

“You are required to immediately delete it from your signature, delete the role title!”

“I felt like, okay what am I doing here, so who am I, what is my role?... I have a feeling like part of my identity has been erased.”

- Hanady, Project Manager and HR coordinator, 7 months in role

Narrative of Role-Taking as Experience of Transition: Between Disruption and Connection

This narrative demonstrates three connected caesural experiences, enhanced by experience of self-identity in role:

- Void between self and organization
- Void between self and other in minority-majority situations
- The tendency to perceive past and present as disconnected

Role-Taking as Experience of Containing and Being Contained

"An empty, abandoned room filling with flourishing plants"

"I walked into an **empty, temporary room** that November. It's depressing to enter a room that someone moved out of. And the corridor where our offices are, it can feel cold and lonely (*laughs*). But I realized I'm in the **"center of the vessel"**, and there was this sense of excitement, of potential."

- Osnat, Deputy Director of the Educational Psychological Service at a local municipality, one year and three months in role

The Container–Contained Relationship

A psychoanalytic model of human experience

“The psycho-analytic problem is the problem of growth and its harmonious resolution in the relationship between the container and the contained, repeated in individual, pair, and finally group.”

Bion, Attention and Interpretation

Container–Contained: Organizing the Experience of Self in Role

“Mystics appear in any religion, science, time, or place. Such persons ‘contain’ the ‘messianic idea’ or the ‘messianic idea’ may ‘contain’ the person who is sought to incarnate, represent, or manifest the messiah”

“The problem posed by the relationship between the mystic and the institution has an emotional pattern [...] to which the human personality would be found to approximate.”

Bion, Attention and Interpretation

- **Role functions as a container** that contains the self
- **Individual functions as a container** for the role

Narrative of Role-Taking as Experience of Containing and Being Contained

Individual functions as a container for the role

"I don't know if it's me, or the situation, or both, but somehow it always turns out that I have to swallow these organizations and make sense of them."

- Yaniv, Head of Department at a college, 2 weeks in role

Role-Taking as Experience of Space, both Internal and External

"Creating an already existing world"

"As I became more engaged in tasks, I gradually began to feel that I was truly in the role. One particular week was intense with a conference, a podcast, and an interview I produced, all new to me, that's when I felt I was no longer behind the scenes."

- Hila, Account Manager, marketing department of a museum, four months in role

Potential Space

A psychoanalytic model of human experience

"In the development of the individual infant living arises and establishes itself out of not-living, and **being** becomes a fact that **replaces not-being.**"

Winnicott, The maturational processes and the facilitating environment

Narrative of Role-Taking as Experience of Space: Internal and External

"It's a bit like a cocoon. At first, it's hard to be in a place where you can't really do anything... A cocoon in the sense that you're spinning more and more threads, learning... It's all about doing. Once I'll start projects, I'll feel that I exist."

- Shira, Learning Designer at a high-tech company, three weeks in role

To sum up modalities of experience...

Role-Taking as Experience of Transition: Between Disruption and Connection

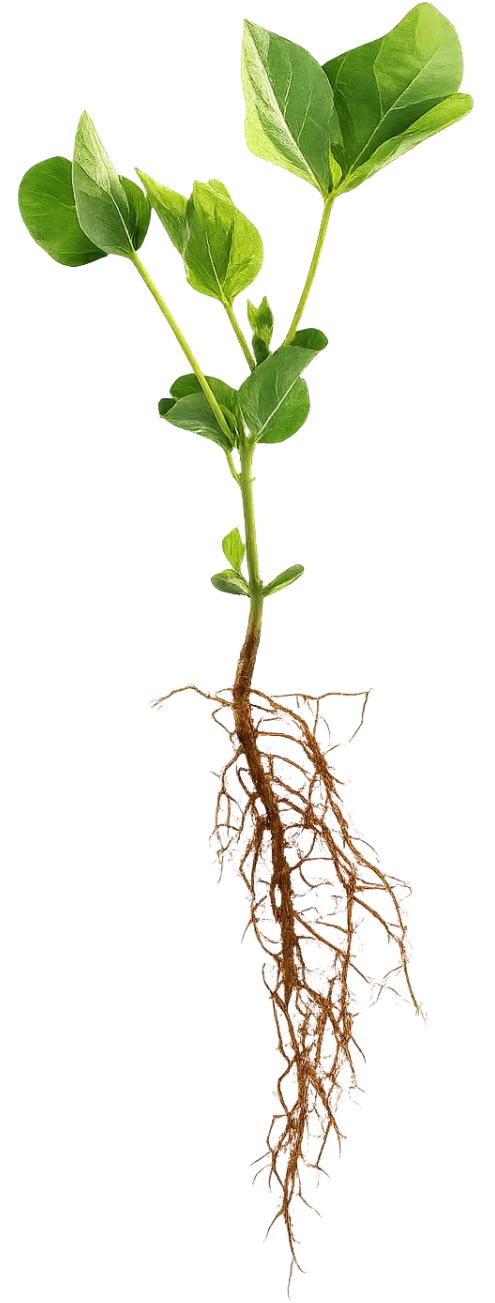
This modality of experience serves a **function of bridging and navigating gaps in sense of self**, as they emerge in role-taking.

Role-Taking as Experience of Containing and Being Contained

This modality of experience serves a **function of transforming experience into a coherent sense of self** while fulfilling a role.

Role-Taking as Experience of Space, both Internal and External

This modality of experience serves a **function of mediating connection to organizational reality** while **preserving separateness and authenticity of self** in role.



Presentation Road-Map

Conceptualize organizational role-taking as an active process of self-constitution emerging from subjective experience and its personal meaning.

1. Pragmatic Self

2. Modalities of Self-Experience and their Constitutive Functions in Role-Taking:

- experience of transition – bridging gaps of in-between
- experience of containing and being contained
- experience of space, both internal and external

3. Ethical Dimension of Self-Constitution in Organizational Role





An Ethics of Organizational Role-Taking

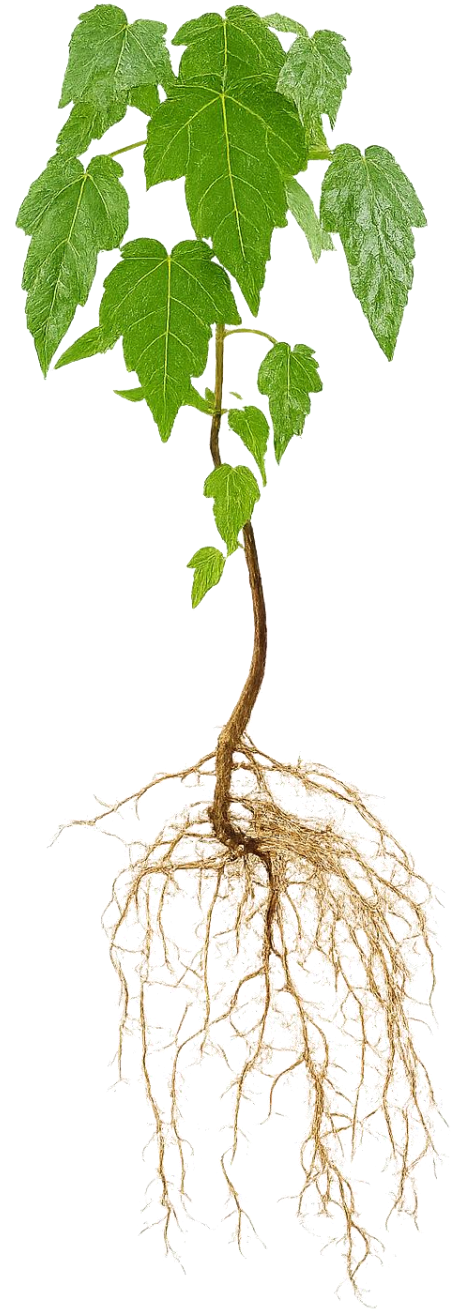
To wrap up...

Organizational role-taking involves a process of **self-constitution**.

In this process of self-constitution in role, **experience of self** plays a central role.

Different **modalities of experience** serve distinct functions.

Experience of self is at the core of our humanity. Far from being irrational or merely subjective, it enables the constitution of an authentic and coherent sense of self, capable of action, creativity, innovation, and moral agency within organizational life.





In Groups

- Reflections & associations to the notion of self-constitution in role and the way experience functions for us in the process of taking up a role.
- Implications for you in your work: OD & HR professionals, managers leading teams, individuals taking up roles...
- How could organizational discourse include the language of self-constitution in role? Can you imagine it?
- Anything else you wish to discuss, whatever sparked your interest...



