Chapter 3

Recipients Are Responsible Donors Too: On Plural Actorhood and Role-Switching

A common categorization of the population of organizations in the field of development aid is one of differentiating between "donor organizations" and "recipient organizations." The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) justifies and enhances this distinction via classification codes that clarify what can be counted as aid provision by a donor, categorizing only funds that go to the least developed countries as eligible Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). The flow of aid money is thereby classified, in various tables and statistics, as donor/aid-provider funds or aid-recipient/partner funds. Considering these classifications, it is not surprising that international commitments adhere to the terminology and distinction between "donors" and "recipients." These money flows, the amounts, frequency, etc., are issues that have long drawn a lot of research attention as well as practitioner discussion on the wider topic of donor–recipient relationships (see for example Dietrich, 2013; Fielding & Mavrotas, 2008; Dole et al., 2021).

A shortcoming in previous academic literature, as well as in policy and practitioner conversations, however, is the lack of problematization of the common notion of two distinct types of aid organizations – donor organizations and recipient organizations – that are key to development aid governance and operations. This simplified categorization rests on an assumption that one set of

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organizations only make decisions on money to be transferred from them (donors), and another set of organizations only receive this money (recipients). It is reasonable to trace this assumption to the rational contractual ideal, according to which, ideally, it should be crystal clear who the two main contractual parties are and what responsibility is to be allocated to each party. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, in practice, there tend to be numerous organizations involved in the implementation of development aid projects. So, if there can be only *one* donor and *one* recipient, who or what are the others involved? Some previous conceptualizations use the terms "primary donor" and "final recipient" for these two main parties, and then make sense of the other organizations "in-between" by referring to them as "intermediaries." In actual practice, however, it has proven difficult to find such intermediaries whose behavior differs from that of the "donors" or "recipients." When looking at actual behavior in the field of development aid, including decisions taken, we argue that viewing most aid organizations as both donors and recipients, in the sense that they both receive money from others and make decisions on the further transfer of those funds to the next organization(s) in the hierarchical chain of contractual relations, adds conceptual clarity to the analysis of the interorganizational relations. In order to problematize the common and at times taken-for-granted notion that certain organizations in the field are donors only, others are recipients only, and still others intermediaries only, we turn to classic sociology on identity and social roles to explain why we found no "intermediaries" yet plenty of recipients who are also donors responsible for providing funds. And these roles are not only played by the organizations involved. In fact, they cannot do it unless their staff do the same (see also Chapter 8). This is why we must start off with theory about human identity.

Plural Actors With Multiple Identities

The modern concept of identity can be defined as an awareness of oneself as a unique entity, separate from others (Harari, 2015). In practice, however, this ideal-typical definition is continuously challenged when one's personal identity meets the complexities of social interaction. In social contexts, one's identity constantly competes with or is complemented with the identities of collectives, groups, and organizations to which a person belongs, such as one's family, friends, community, employer, church, gender, age group, sports club, nation, etc. Much like a Russian babushka doll, each individual has many layers of identity, most of which are tied to the groups and organizations they belong to (as a family member, employee, citizen, etc.). As Lahire put it (2011, cover):

> The actor is analysed as a student, worker, consumer, spouse, reader, sportsperson, voter etc. However, in societies where people often live through simultaneously and successively heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory social experiences, each individual inevitably carries a plurality of roles and manners of seeing, feeling and acting.

Today, there is agreement among social scientists that we should avoid the extreme positions of identity theory: both that of the under-socialized individual with complete free will and that of the over-socialized "cultural dope" with no "own" will at all (Ahrne, 1993; Etzioni, 1988; Granovetter, 1985). Just as with the Russian doll, we can acknowledge that we may all have an innermost core of personal preferences and traits but would not be "who we are" as individuals without the all-important external expectations on one another's behavior. Seen from a social constructivist perspective, identity is foremost shaped by society as a result of social processes and relations where a person interacts with her environment, with society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). And unlike the stable materialization of a Russian doll made of wood, the shaping of our identities is a dynamic process where notions of "who I am" are constantly constructed and reconstructed in reflexive processes with others in the social contexts in which we spend our lives.

In essence, this means that one's identity is defined not only from within (i.e., "this is who I see myself as") but also highly defined in processes of social interaction (i.e., "this is who you see me as, in this particular situation") where different identities are called for in different situations. Hence, an individual's social identity tends to take slightly or even drastically different shapes from one context and type of situation to the next, depending on how others view that individual there. Although the word "identity" stems from the

Latin *identitas*, meaning similar or the same, we must be somewhat mindful of the commonplace illusion of a single, stable self as Goffman explained in this critical and ironic quote from his classic piece on the presentation of self in everyday life (Goffman, 1974, pp. 293–294, see also Goffman, 1956; Lahire, 2011 p. 15):

> We come to expect that all these acts will exhibit the same style, be stamped in a unique way. [. . .] Surely it is reasonable to say that each utterance or physical doing that the individual contributes to a situation will be rooted in his biographical, personal identity. Behind the current role, the person himself will peek out. Indeed, this is a common way of framing our perception of another. So three cheers for the self. Now let us try to reduce the clatter.

It is true that our identity changes over time, as life progresses and we get older. But one's identity also changes in the present, as we go from one social context and situation to another and adjust to the expectations encountered there. So, socially, a single human body bears heterogeneous identities and schemes of action. In this sense, we are "plural actors" (Lahire, 2011), a concept that has the potential to shed light on our ability to perform several equally genuine social roles. As Lahire put it (2011, pp. 15–16):

> The commonplace illusion of singleness and invariability. [. . .] Everything happens as if there were a specific symbolic and moral profit . . . in believing oneself "identical" or "faithful" to oneself at every time and place, whatever the events experienced or tests undergone ("I've not changed"; "I'm always the same"). . . . Socially, however, the same body passes through different states and is the irrevocable bearer of heterogeneous and even contradictory schemes of action and habits.

Instead of falling for the myth of the single, core identity, we must learn to embrace and value the "holding of multiple roles and being of many things," each as genuine as the next (Fredriksson, 2021, 2023).

Masters of Social Games

A key characteristic of *Homo sapiens*, as a species, is our great ability to perceive and to learn, from an early age, how to perform a range of different roles suitable for a range of different social identities that are in turn expected as part of the "role set" of different "social games." The family game, the school game, the market game, the community game, and the nation state game are some of these all-important social games in which most of us take part in our everyday lives (Harari, 2014). Each of these social games has not only a basic set of rules we must follow but also a basic set of lead roles. For example, children and parents are key roles in the family game, the roles of teacher and student dominate the school game, and the seller and buyer make up the basic role set of the market game.

By acting in the roles and following the rules of a social game, we pursue social rewards (Abrutyn & Lizardo, 2022). Generally speaking, in all of these social games, adapting to the social expectations in play is a winning strategy that allows us to score high on social legitimacy and long-term survival (Ahrne, 1993). The fact that people generally follow the expected "logic of appropriateness" on proper behavior "for someone like me, in a situation like this" (March & Olsen, 2010) hence offers a powerful explanation to social behavior. Each of the social roles and the relationships acted out within them represent "an entire institutional nexus of conduct" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 92), and hence, a bundle of expectations of proper behavior that we learn, internalize, and then typically come to take for granted. This great ability of ours – to perceive, learn, and flexibly perform the different social roles expected of us – is fundamental to the human ability to coordinate quickly, also across vast distances, and it is through this special ability that we create and recreate society through our social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Harari, 2014).

The Creation of Organizations as Actors in Social Games

Another of *Homo sapiens*' key characteristics that has had far-reaching implications for society is our innovation of the nonhuman "juridical" or "legal person". As rights- and duty-bearing juridical persons, organizations are able to do many things physical human persons can, such as enter into contracts of rights and obligations, own property, and be sued (Deiser, 1908; Dewey, 1926; William, 1911). And like contemporary individuals, organizations are actors in the sense that they can have characteristics like autonomy, clarity of purpose, decision-making capacity and sovereignty, technical action capability, and effective self-control (Meyer & Bromley, 2013). In the words of Brunsson (2022, p. 10):

> The organization defined as a legal person does not consist of people, nor of their interaction, but is a person in its own right. But this person can have relationships to physical persons. Fundamental for organizations understood in this way are not the possible relationships that people may have to each other but the relationship they have to the organization, for instance, as employees in a firm or member in an association. The relationships that employees or members may have to each other are indirect: they are created by their relationship to the organization. They are expected to work for the organization, not for each other.

Organizations and affiliation to organizations grant humans opportunities to collect and mobilize resources (Ahrne, 1993), and we tend to think of organizations as our invention and property, as if they were in our control. It is vital, however, to also acknowledge that we humans have become highly dependent upon this creation of ours, and that our society is an "asymmetric society," in the sense that legal persons dominate physical ones, not least when it comes to ownership (Coleman, 1982). It is fair to say that just as humans have decided upon the conditions of actorhood for organizations, so too have organizations come to define the conditions for much of our interaction and collaboration.

Considering the complexity and uncertainty of development aid, as well as the vast amounts of money being transferred, it comes as no surprise to find that organizations are key actors in the social game of development aid. No matter where we look in the system of interlinked contractual parties, we find a plethora of aid organizations playing the social game of development aid through the decisions they make. When doing so, however, each organization is dependent on its relationships with its employees and other professionals (i.e., physical persons) who enable the organization's decision-making and act on its behalf. As Brunsson puts it in a recent essay (2022, p. 13):

> Legal persons differ from physical ones in the sense that they cannot quite do anything on their own. They must be represented by physical persons. [...] Legal persons do not do anything spontaneously or by reflex. One or several physical persons must decide what the organization will do.

Hence, in their joint endeavor to recreate aid organizations and adapt them to the role scripts of the donor and recipient roles, aid bureaucrats and aid organizations are mutually dependent. Let us now take a closer look at some key features of this institutionalized role set of the donor and the recipient.

The Social Game of Development Aid and Its Key Role Expectations

The various principles, standards, and accountability measures developed by the OECD and United Nations are key sources for understanding contemporary norms and expectations regarding donor and recipient behavior. The principles and indicators of the OECD Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, for example, describe norms of appropriate behavior for organizations in the donor and recipient roles, with a particular focus on efficiency. Other examples include the OECD DAC Blended Finance Principles Guidance and United Nation's Addis Ababa Action Agenda, which define appropriate behavior for the private sector, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), governments, etc. The various accountability measures set up to monitor the different principles, standards, and guidance documents further support the socialization of different actors to conform to these normative role scripts.

Although expectations regarding appropriate behavior are high for all aid organizations, those in the donor role face particularly high expectations to live up to a rational-bureaucratic ideal where relations should be formalized, impartial, and kept at arm's length, and where transparent, standardized control procedures and documentation are considered crucial to assessment and accountability (Eyben et al., 2016; Martens, 2005; Pollit & Bouckaert, 2017; Shore & Wright, 2015). Moreover, the OECD DAC Peer Reviews, for example, put pressure on nations in the donor role to adhere to the international principles and standards. These assessments of how efficiently DAC member nations manage their development programs have been carried out for over 30 years now. Conducted periodically, every 5–6 years, by the OECD DAC Secretariat and two other agencies, the peer reviews put additional pressure on organizations in the donor role to behave properly. It is important for nations to come out well in peer reviews and other types of comparisons of adherence to standards and principles in the field, as a negative review can lead to reputational damage.

Expectations on organizations in the donor role to manage difficult decisions related to funding and project assessments are thus high. A comparison can be made here to the social game of the market, where competent buyers must be neither naïve nor over-trusting (Laroche et al., 2019). Large sums of taxpayer money are circulating, and high demands are placed on independence, feedback, and corruption control. Therefore, as described in this volume, organizations in the donor role are expected to create a sense of certainty about their projects and the money involved (Riddell, 2007).

If we apply Knobloch and Solomon's (1999) four sources of relational uncertainty (see Chapter 2), we find that, as the "manager" responsible for the interorganizational aid relation, the organization playing the donor role is expected to demonstrate decision-making authority and both to clearly define the relationship and to provide clarity on its goals, norms, and the ways in which it will be evaluated. And while an organization in the donor role should, ideally, also possess domain-specific knowledge, according to our informants, this ideal is a less pronounced part of the role script nowadays (see Chapter 5).

For organizations playing the recipient in the social game of development aid, on the other hand, the main difference is that, in the recipient role, it is now expected, especially by the local institutional environment, that they defend and praise specific local circumstances and domain-specific knowledge and justify any exceptions from general rules, as the path forward to good results in aid projects (see Chapter 5). Despite much policy talk about aid serving the needs of the recipients, however, previous research has concluded that donor interests typically outweigh recipient needs (Eyben et al., 2016; Jacobsen & Sandvik, 2018). Indeed, the very same international general principles and standards noted above as being critical for organizations acting in the donor role also apply to those in the recipient role. In terms of rewards for role-following behavior (Abrutyn & Lizardo, 2022), organizations in the recipient role are expected to be thankful and obedient toward donors, since recipients must not "bite the hand that feeds them" (Fisher et al., 1982). In practice, this often means that the governments of developing countries need to show that they have credible plans, such as a Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) to combat poverty and a National Determined Contribution (NDC) climate action plan to reduce emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change. Throughout the implementation of any aid project, the actions of organizations in the recipient role are also continuously monitored, meaning that they too need to demonstrate that they are working toward the agreed-upon goals and following the principles and standards set. While organizations in the recipient role are expected to follow the various principles stated above, they are also expected to have all sorts of financial management procedures, auditing rules, and performance-monitoring rules in place. Thus, for an organization in the recipient role, following international norms and other expectations is a matter of survival because organizations that do not follow the rules cannot expect aid-funding decisions to go through.

Role-Switching

Since aid organizations need to play a number of different roles and adapt to different, more or less institutionalized role scripts (Abbott et al., 2017; Brès et al., 2019; Furusten, 2023; Hale, 2020), a critical aspect of aid bureaucrats' professionalism is making their organizations fit to play these roles properly. Although the phenomenon of role-switching is common within the realm of complex transnational governance (Brès et al., 2019; Fredriksson, 2021), research on how aid bureaucrats handle and cope with the multiple roles of their organizations in everyday practice remains scarce (Alexius & Vähämäki, 2020; Wallace et al., 2007).

A close comparison can be seen in the market game of the stock market, where the same person or legal person needs to be able to switch, sometimes from minute to minute, between the two key roles of seller and buyer (Aspers, 2011). We have similarly found that most organizations in the vertical chain of contractual relations in the aid game also exhibit this duality (see Fig. 4 below), with organizations playing the roles of both recipient and donor, both rule-follower and rule-setter and, in relation to results, both

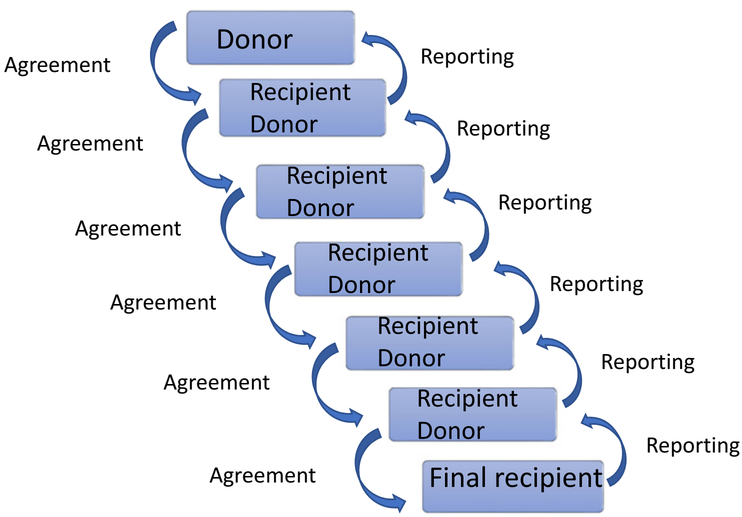

Fig. 4. The Aid Organizations as Plural Actors That Switches Roles.

auditee and auditor. When playing the recipient, aid bureaucrats help their organization interpret what it needs to do in order to receive further funding. When switching roles, to act as the donor, aid bureaucrats then do their best to help the organization turn its attention to regulating what the next actor in line has to do in order to obtain funding (see Fig. 4).

To give an example, in one of our interviews, we asked a Swedish Chemicals Agency project manager whether he perceived any difference between how the agency (in its recipient role) was governed by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), and how the agency (in its donor role) governed its partner organizations. As the project manager put it:

> Basically, I think that we think alike. That you have these control systems to make sure that things are done right, that the money is used in the right way, that you prioritize the right things, and so on. I don't see that there's a huge difference between [the two], actually.

With respect to Sida's roles, in relation to the Swedish Chemicals Agency (KEMI), for instance, Sida plays the role of the donor who sets the rules and regulations. In its relationship with the Swedish government, however, Sida plays the role of the aid recipient that follows the rules and regulations of government directions and directives. In this relationship, it is the individual bureaucrat at the Ministry who does her best to responsibly act out the donor role. And at times, it is clear that it is indeed the person, rather than the organization, who makes the final call. As Sida's unit head described:

> I sometimes receive quite clear directives... about the kind of results reporting the Ministry for Foreign Affairs wants. Sometimes there aren't that many comments. It may be that there is no entirely clear policy as concerns, well, the Ministry's expectations regarding results reporting. It's more the case that the official responsible ... *she's* the one who demands concrete results and an understanding of our operations.

Hence, aid organizations like Sida, UN Industrial Development Organization (Unido), and International Science Programme (ISP) are not only donors but also recipients, depending on the specific relationship or situation. Following this institutional analysis, we conclude that aid recipients can be found in the wealthy, Swedish context too. However, why is this relevant for the research questions of this volume? And how do plural actorhood and role-switching contribute to explain how uncertainty is responded to? A more exhaustive illustration of how plural actorhood and role-switching play out in interorganizational aid relations may be helpful here.

In the fall of 2017, the management of Union to Union, a Swedish federation of unions engaged in development aid, took the decision to follow Sida's new Trac tool, an internal set of instructions influenced by Sida's facilitation agenda and a wave of trust-based management in Sweden at the time (see Chapters 2 and 4). The new instructions stated that organizations receiving funds from Sida no longer needed to submit a specific results matrix. Union to Union was informed of this new directive at Sida's official Reclaim the Results development dialogue seminar on February 14, 2017, a gathering that one of our informants called a "revival meeting" since Sida representatives at the seminar spoke warmly in favor of other "softer" methods as an alternative to the stricter results-based management (RBM) and measurement methods (see Chapter 4). Sida's director-general told us that the seminar was organized because some partners had expressed a perceived lack of clarity concerning Sida's view on RBM and other requirements and, as he put it, he wanted to make Sida's position clear:

> Partners need to apply their own RBM methods. RBM is for your own sake, to maximize your results. Therefore, Sida has no specific requirement for a certain results matrix. Sida is pro whatever method helps us see the results achieved.

The gathering was well-attended, and Union to Union was one of close to 250 organizations with representatives at the seminar who received this message. When Union to Union's representatives opted to follow Sida's recommendation in its upcoming application process, however, they were met with suspicion and correction on the part of Sida officials. As the Union to Union program manager recalled:

> The new guidelines stated that we didn't have to submit a results matrix at the aggregate level. So we chose not to... But then our Sida officer called and said "No, but that's not going to work." [I replied]: "But the guidelines say we don't need to ..?" [The officer again]: "Yes, but then I don't know how to evaluate. Oh no!"

We also spoke to the Sida officer in charge to get her version of what happened. Her conclusion was that there must have been a misunderstanding. Although the guidelines had indeed been changed in some respects, according to her, this did not mean that Union to Union did not need to submit some form of account of their set targets and expected results. As the Sida officer put it:

> We can't write blank cheques. There has to be some substantial accounting. We have a major responsibility you know.

Union to Union managers' astonishment and disappointment is understandable considering the message delivered by the director-general at the Reclaim the Results meeting and the formal decision Sida took to change its guidelines. Yet, as the citation above indicates, Sida's senior aid bureaucrat is simply keen to play her role as a representative of a responsible donor organization. She is only trying to do her job professionally and to honor and respect the confidence placed in her by using the taxpayers' money responsibly. An indication of the degree to which this role-scripted behavior has become institutionalized among aid bureaucrats is revealed in an interview with another unit head from Sida:

> We [Sida as an organization] have been open to letting our partners design their own management tools. However, I believe that there are many program officers here who are so used to talking about indicators and there being baselines and how to

> assess matrices... We're simply used to talking in these terms, output and all that.

Another telling quote comes from Union to Union's program manager where she recounts her reaction to the Sida officer's unexpected demand for the results matrix:

> So then we were given until November 11th to produce a results matrix [for Sida], and we learned that on October 20th or so. It wasn't actually that difficult though, in the sense that... we'd already requested result matrices from our applicants. So, in every application we'd received, there was already an LFA [Log Frame] matrix...

Here, we see how the same bureaucrat perceives the same control method differently, depending on the role her organization is expected to play. While, from a recipient point of view, the Union to Union program manager was happy to skip filling out a result matrix, when switching roles and acting on behalf of her organization in the donor role, she reasons and acts similarly to Sida and Foreign Affairs Ministry aid bureaucrats. As a proper, responsible bureaucrat, she makes the exact same decision as others in the donor role had – to not forgo the management tool.

As we see in the examples above, our interview data show how an aid bureaucrat who expresses a wish for fewer control technologies and less oversight for her organization in the recipient role nevertheless decides to retain or even add more control measures and oversight when the organization switches to its donor role. What seems unreasonable from the perspective of the rule-following aid-fund recipient can thus seem perfectly reasonable, or even necessary, from the perspective of the rule-setting donor.

In a similar study of how results reporting requirements were translated in a contractual relationship between three organizations – Sida, Forum Syd (a Swedish international development NGO) and an organization in the final recipient role in Asia – Laurén (2019) found that the frequency of required reporting and requirements for detailed data increased from the first organization in the donor role (Sida) onward. And, as the organizations in the interorganizational relationship switched roles and turned from recipients into proper donors, measures used to facilitate and reduce reporting successively faded out. These and similar findings suggest that, despite calls for more simplification and less control, these changes are not necessarily occurring in aid relationships. But why not?

Our argument here has been that the institutionalized expectations (Furusten, 2023) and social scripts embedded in the social game of development aid's key role set are an important part of the answer. Institutionalized expectations on aid organizations influence whether bureaucrats assigned to enable the decisions of their organization see a particular control method as a source of trust or a sign of distrust (Schepker et al., 2014; Verburg et al., 2019). The concepts of plural actorhood and role-switching open the way to a more complex understanding of the identities of the organizations involved, and the ensuing, more elaborate understanding allows us to explain why an aid organization that crumbles under the heavy burden of control and measurement requirements may nevertheless decide to use such requirements and possibly even add more of the same kind, when passing the agreement to the next organization acting in the recipient role. With respect to the issue of obsessive measurement disorder (OMD), this implies that, rather than being reduced, control measures and oversight may be kept the same or even increased as an aid project moves along from the first organization who acts in the donor role to the final organization(s) who act as recipients.

Despite this pattern, however, we did not find as many instances of OMD as we thought we would. But why not? As will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 6, one explanation for this is found in the waves of reform in the field, i.e., the general historical pattern that after a period of governance reforms with an intensified focus on measurements, comes a period when aid bureaucrats resist and react to the administrative burden, and new forms of governance are introduced. Thus, because the role of the professional bureaucrat is such a common one for the many people working in the field, as well as a role found at all levels and in most of the organizations represented, taken together, our cases also depict the professional bureaucrat as a pragmatic and stabilizing factor in the aid system.

As will be elaborated in later chapters, we believe that the influence of the bureaucrat role script also plays an important part in explaining why we do not see more OMD in this complex system. Part of the bureaucrats' professional role involves actively working to turn their organizations into proper donors and recipients, dressing their organizations to perform in each of the roles. And as we also elaborate on in the coming chapters, they seem, for the most part, to do this without consciously experiencing either "role ambivalence" (Merton, 1976) or "role distance" (Goffman, 1959, 1967).[1] Rather, from our viewpoint, the aid bureaucrat seems to remain the steady state, true to their core professional values. They are neither donors nor recipients. They are, above all, pragmatic bureaucrats.

[1] *Role distance*, as coined by Goffman, refers to a performer's detachment from a role he or she is performing. An important distinction is thus made between the existence of expectations on how the performer should perform the role and the performer's commitment to that role – in other words, the act of presenting oneself as being removed from or at a distance from the role one is being required to play.