

## The Drama Triangle and Power (1)

In 'Games People Play' Eric Berne tells us about Transactional Analysis. (A great read for all Health Professionals). TA is based on three concepts that set it apart from mainstream psychology.

1. People are born OK
2. People in emotional difficulties are nevertheless full, intelligent human beings
3. All emotional difficulties are curable, given adequate knowledge and the proper approach

He postulated that everyone begins life from the healthy position of "I'm OK, you're OK", that we all begin as little princes and princesses and are only turned in to frogs by our early experiences in life.



### Intimacy

All human beings crave intimacy; a connection to life and often to other people. As small children, we especially need attention and nurture. The unit of attention Dr Berne calls a 'stroke', and by the giving or withholding of strokes, we are domesticated, like puppies and kittens, into acceptable patterns of behaviour. Small mammals, deprived of love and affection, can die even if fed and watered; humans develop dysfunctional behaviour instead. Through this domestication process of education, we are moulded by those who love us, those who teach us, and those who wish to manipulate us. Consequently, we absorb society's patterns of thinking, often unconsciously. Through this process, we may adopt certain patterns of behaviour to obtain strokes. On the whole we look for 'nice' strokes but also sometimes for 'nasty strokes'. You see, to be ignored is actually more painful than to be criticized. Sometimes, as a result, many of us become 'little pleasers'. A few of us may become 'little rebels'.

The wisdom of the young: As one seven year old child said to her parents on a walk at the seaside, when complimented upon her good behaviour: 'I don't have my big sisters here, so I don't have to play up to get your attention' – obviously an old soul who had already studied TA!

### Persona

Each of us has three persona (aspects of personality) – 'parent', 'adult' and 'child'. Our 'parent' can be wise and guiding or bossy and dominating, our 'adult' makes sensible decisions based on all the data and our 'child' can be free and creative (or whining and manipulative). It is up to us which state we choose to be in (and how to relate to other people).

Where is the 'power' held? We each carry our own power. In 'adult' we hold it and relate to others at an equal level (even if we are older, more senior, etc). In 'parent' we take not just our own power, but also that of the other, whilst in 'child' we give our power away! Some people like taking the 'child' role, some 'parent' and so on

When we relate to another person, an 'adult'-'adult' relationship is safe and fair with equality of power – whilst 'parent'-'child' and 'child'-'parent' involve unequal power dynamics. It is up to the 'parent' to use the 'power' entrusted to them wisely and to seek to help the 'child' grow into 'adult'. Finally, it's up to the 'child' NOT to manipulate.

The trouble is, as Health Professionals, (including senior ones) we are often attracted into the role of 'parent' by our patients, staff or other grades and worse still, we may sometimes take the role too seriously!

The danger of taking any role is that we can become tempted into the Drama Triangle...

Doctors may have considerable 'personal power' but often forget the vast quantity of 'role power' that we have (and that people ascribe to us).

Have you ever felt let down, upset, guilty, angry, frustrated, sad or hurt? Chances are, you may have been pulled into the Drama Triangle. The Drama Triangle is all about relationships – relationships with unequal power, and manipulation. Every dysfunctional interaction takes place around the drama triangle.

Good consultations ensure effective communication. However, there are some simple factors that are easily overlooked, that can easily turn a good consultation into a poor one. A series of dysfunctional consultations can lead to physician exhaustion and burnout. If we want good communication, then we must be aware of the Seat of Power and the Drama Triangle, and the Five Agreements.

**The Seat of Power and the Drama Triangle:** "Every profession is a conspiracy against the layman", said George Bernard Shaw in *The Doctor's Dilemma*. This applies to all consultations –but for this example, we will imagine a meeting between Doctor and Patient. Two people approach a consultation, both independent adults. The expert knowledge lies with the professional. However, the layman, through ignorance, fear or anxiety, sometimes may give away his power of autonomy. It is up to the professional to share the power as much as possible or at any rate, only to use it wisely for the patient, and then to hand it back, finishing the consultation with both people as independent adults once more. Otherwise, patient and physician enter the Drama Triangle of relationships (Karpman, developed by Edwards) **Karpman, S. (1968). Fairy tales and script drama analysis. Transactional Analysis Bulletin, 7(26), 39-43** [http://karpmandramatriangle.com/dt\\_article\\_only.html](http://karpmandramatriangle.com/dt_article_only.html), Edwards, Gill. *Conscious Medicine*, Piatkus 2010, pp130-133

Nearly all patients take the role of adult by look for a sensible solution and appropriate support. Just occasionally, patients (or health professionals!) may feel anxious, fearful or worried and take a child role - which if taken to extremes, is a 'victim state'. PLEASE NOTE THAT THE HIGHEST ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL IS TO RECOGNISE ANY IMBALANCES, AND ALWAYS TO GUIDE THE CLIENT / PATIENT BACK TOWARDS ADULT. This explanation is to help us understand psychology as it works; it is about avoiding any blame culture by understanding, and creating a supportive 'appreciation culture'.

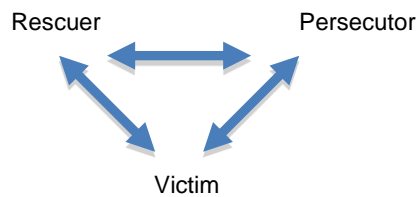
Furthermore, please note that this analysis ONLY applies to the occasional difficult consultation or interaction. The majority of your interactions will go smoothly, be 'game-free' and go nowhere near the Drama Triangle. Still, it's worth knowing about the issue, in case it traps you unawares.

**The Drama Triangle** has three roles: one 'child', and two 'parent'. The 'child' can give away their power to a 'parent', and can play 'victim', using the script: "If you help me / save me / protect me, I will give you my power (and my approval)". The person playing 'parent' (very often the physician) takes the power and becomes 'rescuer' (doctors go into medicine to help people get better). The underlying assumption may run "If you give me your power, I will protect and help you (as long as you also give me your approval)". The unspoken dilemma is that often the doctor's inner 'child' may crave the approval of the patient's 'parent.' This is an unstable dynamic. Unfortunately, in the patient's eyes, there are only two types of doctor: good and bad or even 'the best in the world' and 'rubbish'.

Beware when you hear the words "you're a good doctor, you're such a good doctor, you're a wonderful doctor" because you may be entering the Drama Triangle. Even worse, you may be being seduced by well-meaning flattery into standing upon a rising pedestal until the patient decides to change their approval to criticism, WITHOUT THE DOCTOR DOING ANYTHING DIFFERENT...

And what happens to people on pedestals? They can fall or be pushed off...

What is the difference between the two types of doctor (the best in the world and the worst)? Half a second, because that's how long it takes the patient (who unconsciously took the role of victim) to change their mind about the doctor (who unintentionally took the role of rescuer), take back their power, and change role into 'persecutor' "You nasty person, you took my power and abused me, now I'm going to abuse you".



It is very easy to be enticed into, and then chased around, this triangle of dependency. When people use the triangle as a life script or when a patient sees the illness (cancer, pain, any other condition, or death) as 'persecutor', the health professional as Rescuer and him/herself as 'victim' – you can see that everyone is doomed to failure in this scenario. Nobody can win!

It may take considerable skill for the physician to help lift the patient out of the 'child' role of 'victim', yet can be part of the most rewarding aspects of medicine.

Unconscious collusion in the Drama Triangle is emotionally draining and may lead towards health professional burnout. It certainly leads to mutual patient and physician dissatisfaction. An understanding of these dynamics can illuminate consultations and help avoid both complaints and emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion in the care-giver can lead to self-medication or other dysfunctional coping strategies.

Worst of all, professionals can easily be trapped into persecuting fellow professionals, especially if they are of a different 'tribe', – think: physicians vs surgeons; ward-based doctors vs Emergency Department, pathology or radiology; 'the juniors'; 'the management', 'the GPs' – or 'the complementary therapists'. Beware this trap - it's very easy to fall into. The answer of course here is honest communication and understanding. Interestingly, acupuncture has had tough times to different degrees from Western-based thinking but this is partly because to understand it needs an understanding of information and physics, not the narrative of chemistry that pervades orthodox pathology and therapeutics. "Different tribe? Let's persecute them!" (Alternatively, we could choose to act as wise adults and grow beyond these games).

The worst engagement in the Drama Triangle is if the Health Professional starts to "blame the Patient" – rather than understand them – we see this sometimes in cases of Medically unexplained Symptoms (MUS). Actually, MUS may mean that our framework of understanding is insufficient to explain the patient's condition.

So how do we get out of the Drama Triangle? Be true to ourselves (which means Knowing Ourselves), use the Five Agreements, and understand the Drama Triangle fully (Gill Edwards' insights). We'll look at these in the weeks ahead.

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