The Drama Triangle: An Attempt to Resurrect a Neglected Pathogenic Model in Family Therapy Theory and Practice

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Among various models relevant to family theory and practice, two are relevant to both endeavors. The Attachment Model has been extremely fruitful in attracting world-wide attention and research. The Drama Triangle, on the other hand, composed by reactive and manipulative Victim, Persecutor, and Rescuer roles—originating in 1968 by S. B. Karpman—has not received the attention and interest it deserves from the family therapy profession. This neglect has occurred in spite of its pervasive presence in fiction (movies and novels), religion and politics, and in the justice and legal systems. In real life, this triangle is evident where emotional, sexual, and physical abuse are present. Both models, however, have received prominence in relational competence theory (L’Abate & Cusinato, 2007). Its clinical applications to family therapy practice should yield ample dividends by conceptualizing dysfunctional processes in ways that could not be perhaps achieved through other known relational models, including attachment. Implications of this triangle for family practice are illustrated by the case of a family where this triangle was present.

This feeble and perhaps futile attempt to resurrect one model from Transactional Analysis (TA) literature seems ill-advised and unlikely to be of interest to current journal editors and readers. Nonetheless, conviction about its soundness and relevance to family therapy theory and practice makes this

A bibliography of secondary sources (i.e., chapters) related conceptually to the 16 models of the theory (L’Abate & Cusinato, 2007) is available on request from this author.

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chancy endeavor worthwhile and open to the critical opinion and skeptical scrutiny of peers: journal editors, referees, and hopefully, readers.

The literature of family therapy theory and practice is full of past (Gurman & Kniskern, 1981, 1991) and present theories and models (Sexton, Weeks, & Robbins, 2003). Strangely enough, two relational models have not been included in that literature: attachment and Karpman’s (1968) Drama Triangle. While attachment has received a great deal of attention in the research literature around the world, but not in family therapy; the second model has not received the attention of theorists and therapists that, according to this writer’s humble opinion, it deserves.

Both models are included in a relational competence theory that can be applied in prevention and family therapy. Attachment has been linked from the outset of relational competence theory as part of the Selfhood Model\textsuperscript{11} described in detail in past sources. The Drama Triangle occupies a complete Model\textsuperscript{14} model in its own rights (L’Abate & Cusinato, 2007). However, this triangle has not produced relevant conceptual connections or empirical evidence in communication, psychological, relationship, and sociological sciences. A bibliography of secondary sources, i.e., chapters to support linkages between the models of relational competence theory and external sources failed to find any linkages to the Drama Triangle\textsuperscript{*}; hence, the need to evaluate at least the face validity of this triangle before submitting it to therapeutic practice. We should validate models before applying them to dysfunctional relationships (L’Abate & Cusinato, 2007).

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to update and expand on Karpman’s (1968) original Drama Triangle composed of Victim, Persecutor, and Rescuer roles or scripts. Karpman drew his examples from the Grimm Brothers’ fables and fairy tales that are replete with examples of this triangle. In addition to Karpman’s original examples, examples from fiction, movies, religion and politics, and the judicial/legal systems illustrate the face validity of this triangle. In spite of its pervasiveness and its face validity in real life, there is not yet empirical and clinical evidence to support its validity to justify its application in family therapy practice. Consequently, one needs to rely on whatever has been published responsibly about this triangle to support empirical validation first and subsequent clinical applications in family therapy later.

This pathogenic triangle is constituted by three intrinsically and simultaneously connected roles found in most, if not all, individuals involved in family dysfunctions. In such relationships all three roles are enacted by self and other parties at the same time, without an awareness of or control over their damaging consequences. Each participant in an intimate (close, committed, interdependent, and prolonged) role plays the Victim, and can be perceived as a Persecutor or Rescuer at the same time, depending on who does or says what. For instance, one partner may perceive herself as the Victim, while being perceived as a Persecutor by the other partner who was
seen originally as a Persecutor. If one partner perceives oneself as the Victim of one’s parents as Persecutors, she or he may perceive originally her partner as the Rescuer. However, when the original perception still remains in the first partner's perception without resolution, the triangle may be repeated from one generation to another. The reactive quality of this triangle leads to its repetition from one relationship to another.

Unfortunately, the fluid and seemingly evanescent nature of roles in the Drama Triangle presents serious difficulties for any kind of empirical research (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). These difficulties and publications about this triangle in a non-mainstream journal made it impossible to expand its influence outside a limited circle of theorists and professionals.

Even more unfortunately, the neglect of this model by the relevant family therapy literature has rendered it impossible at this time to find empirical evidence to support its validity even though its pervasive existence is all around us. To make up for lack of direct empirical evidence, this paper reviews the extant literature and includes examples of this triangle in (1) fiction, movies and novels; (2) religion and politics, and (3) the justice/legal systems as indirect (face validity) support for the relevance of this triangle in family therapy.

FICTION

Movies are so imbued with this triangle that we cannot conceive of fiction without the ever present repetition of these three roles in different customs, sexes, plots, and themes. Harry Potter's books and movies, for a recent instance, are essentially based on this triangle. Any murder, spy, or mystery story casts the detective or spy/agent as the Rescuer who helps the Victim from a Persecutor. The latter, when caught, becomes the Victim of the legal system. Dickens, among numberless other writers, introduced the hero as a poor, defenseless Victim of a cruel and vicious Persecutor to be eventually saved from a fate worst then death by a (rich) Rescuer. Should one go on? Indeed, it would be relatively easy but time-consuming to connect all the possible variations from the roles derived from this triangle in Table 1 to a variety of movies and novels. Variations on these roles are played every day in front of our eyes on television or movies.

RELIGION AND POLITICS

When both religious and political systems collide and collude, destructive issues of power emerge. When religious beliefs are no longer kept separate from politics, the combination has evolved in power struggles with deleterious consequences throughout history. Furthermore, most religious systems, including Christianity, are based on a negative attribution about the
TABLE 1  Pathogenic Roles: Expansion on Karpman’s Drama Triangle*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persecutor</th>
<th>Rescuer</th>
<th>Victim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Judge</td>
<td>Therapist</td>
<td>Criminal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Know-it-all or “I know better”</td>
<td>Defendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juror</td>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>Invalid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policeman</td>
<td>“Big Daddy”</td>
<td>Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriot</td>
<td>Tycoon</td>
<td>Drug addict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detective</td>
<td>Peacemaker</td>
<td>Servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preacher</td>
<td>Red Cross Nurse or Paramedic</td>
<td>Martyr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executioner</td>
<td>Saint</td>
<td>Sinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquisitor</td>
<td>Superman</td>
<td>Culprit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppressor</td>
<td>Superwoman</td>
<td>Poor-little-me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspector General</td>
<td>Wholesaler</td>
<td>Innocent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrogator</td>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>Oppressed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adapted from L’Abate (1986). Note that these roles should not be considered as related horizontally. For instance, a Persecutor/Oppressor should not be related to a Rescuer/Tycoon, or Victim/Culprit on a different line but not to a role on the same line.

incompleteness, sinfulness, and wickedness of humanity, i.e., Victims in dire need to be rescued from the evil influence of a persecuting demon or Satan with an attribution of miraculous forces attributed to a powerful Rescuer or Savior.

Throughout history, in the name of religion combined with politics, the most nefarious deeds in history have been perpetrated and perpetuated. Whether there are Catholics versus Protestants in Northern Ireland, the Taliban in Afghanistan, or Sunnis versus Shiites in Iraq, each side has assumed the role of Victim and Persecutor in trying to rescue and save the importance of its own version of how religion should be practiced against the perceived or real threats from the other side. The recent war in Iraq illustrates vividly the presence of this triangle at the international level. A supposedly imminent and real danger from weapons of mass destruction to the United States of America was perceived as being as real to the United States as the events of 09/11; thus, the United States became “the Victim.” Saddam Hussein became the Persecutor, turning the USA into a Rescuer of Iraq. Hanging him did not contribute one iota to a resolution of this triangle or other triangles. In that country, Americans apparently are now considered either as Persecutors by some factions or as Rescuers by others. Our armed forces are now embroiled in a variety of triangles, all deadly from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.

THE JUSTICE AND LEGAL SYSTEM

The justice and legal system are fundamentally based on this triangle. A real or perceived Victim engages a lawyer as the Rescuer to be saved from a real
or perceived Persecutor, who in turn has to hire a lawyer to be defended. The Courts, then, are given the role of being the ultimate Rescuers, where losing parties perceive themselves as Victims of the system. Many inmates in prisons, for instance, perceive themselves as the Victims of what they see as an unfair system, without any regard to the Victims of their own behavior.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

A survey of major family therapy treatises (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997; Gurman & Kniskern, 1981, 1991; Lubin et al., 1988; Sexton, Weeks, & Robbins, 2003) failed to find any reference to this triangle by name or by its three pathogenic roles. A survey of major treatises in communication and relationship sciences also failed to find any reference to either this triangle or its roles (Boss et al., 1993; Duck, 1988; Knapp & Miller, 1994), except for references to abuse, aggression, and violence, as if these processes took place without any victims or perpetrators. There were exceptions. There were references to Victims but not to perpetrators in generic violence (Greene & Burleson, 2003; Fletcher & Clark, 2003), and Victims and perpetrators in family violence (Pinsof & Lebow, 2005). None of these references, however, included the roles of Rescuers and methods to rescue Victims of aggression and violence.

The vast literature on emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, let alone criminality, attests to the presence of Victims and Persecutors/Predators/Perpetrators. However, no Rescuers appear in this literature except for mental health professionals. They oftentimes assume the role of Rescuers, thus perpetuating the repetition of the same triangle from one setting to another. In other words, researchers and scholars have reviewed parts of the triangle but considered only one or at most two roles without considering the whole triangle. It is assumed, of course, that either religion, the mental health, or the judicial/legal systems become the Rescuers for Victims.

Apparently, according to sources cited above, relationships in general and in families in particular do not contain connections and links among Victims, Persecutors, or Rescuers. How could that happen? One is at a loss to explain such a neglect, except that the original paper was not published in a mainline journal. The expansion of this triangle in Table 1 (L’Abate, 1986) appeared as a model in past publications until the present (L’Abate & Cusinato, 2007). However, this expansion failed to attract sufficient attention or interest in the family therapy community to warrant research to evaluate the validity of this triangle. Apparently, this triangle is so much in front of our eyes that we take it for granted and fail to include it in our conceptualizations of reactively repetitive family dysfunctions. How can we intervene with dysfunctional processes if we do not have a clear conceptualization of their structure?
A search of Internet Galileo (PsycARTICLES and PsycINFO in EBSCO Host) yielded 30 entries that referred to Karpman’s original paper. Most if not all of them were published in the Transactional Analysis Journal. This limitation may explain the failure to expand this model outside of that journal. Of course, in many instances this triangle is connected to Berne’s (1972) then popular original distinction of Adult, Child, and Parent roles as an ancillary but outdated model of relationships. Both triangles have been expanded and applied to cultural and historical events (Thompson, 1977). From those online entries only selected references are grouped into three parts: (1) theory; (2) positive reframings of the triangle; and (3) family therapy practice.

Theory

In theory, Allen and Allen (1988) used the bombing of Oklahoma City as an example of how the triangle occurred on this sad occasion by adding one more role of bystander to the three roles of the triangle. By revisiting Oklahoma City 10 years later, Allen (2006) was able to detect (subjectively) how time had allowed a transcendence of the original trauma producing posttraumatic growth as people were able to grieve from a lost sense of personhood by constructing a new one. McDowell (1975) applied the drama triangle to characterize police-citizen encounters in terms of the three manipulative roles played by both police and citizens. Developmentally, Jacobs (1990) traced early childhood distortions to a symbiotic process with nationalistic obsessions, unstable loyalties, and indifferent to reality. Jacobs (1996) expanded the drama triangle to larger social institutions, particularly penitentiaries as well as to individuals, i.e., stalkers, terrorists, and dictators. Kruse and Kruse (1994) illustrated how the Suzuki method of violin teaching may become embroiled in a possibly dangerous triangle of the student, teacher, and parent. This triangle, of course, is repeated daily in most classrooms when a teacher calls on students to answer questions regarding homework assignments or general knowledge. This process puts the teacher in the Persecutor role and the student in the Victim one. However, underneath the outward expression of bravado and arrogance in antisocial personalities, under that façade lies a negative self-image (Sigmund, 1999).

The victim role can be differentiated into two types (English, 1976). Type 1 receives attention as a constant complainer and patient long sufferer. Type 2’s self-sufficient appearance may cause less concern but under stress this type may assume the first role. The basic theoretical issue here is whether these three roles are states or traits. Are they part of an individual or are they intrinsic to interactions between two or more similarly endowed individuals?
Reframings

Positive or different refractions of the drama triangle have occurred. Carr (1989) added an elaboration of the three roles by equating them to underlying feelings. Helplessness underlies the Victim. Aggressiveness (should it be hostility?) underlies the Persecutor. Helpfulness underlies the Rescuer. From this triangle arise five possibilities, rescuing the Child, Parents, Mother and Child, Father, and Family. By the same token, Weeks (1979) equated protectiveness with the Rescuer, persecution with the Persecutor, and powerlessness with the Victim. Choy (1990) offered a more positive alternative to the drama Triangle by eliminating the discounts that derive from it by suggesting assertiveness, autonomy, and caring as another triangle. Nonetheless, the suicide Victim (Douglas, 1986) becomes a Persecutor to whoever is left behind to grieve and feeling guilty for possibly having produced the suicide, thus completing the triangle. Le Guernic (2004) suggested that fairy tales provide children with different relationship models but a more positive triangle should be considered instead of the drama triangle.

Therapy

In therapy practice, among other connections to marital (Zerin, E., 1983) and family therapy (Weeks, 1978; Zurin, M., 1988). Fulkerson (2003) connected the triangle with choice theory and reality therapy. Analyzing script roles in the triangle allows therapists to avoid becoming involved by assuming the Adult cognitive role rather than the punitive Parent (or Persecutor) or the helpless Child (or Victim) role (Jaoui, 1991). This possibility is emphasized by Justice and Justice (1993). In the judicial or legal systems the therapist may end up assuming one of the three roles in the triangle. Allen and Allen’s (1988) suggestion about the bystander role was expanded by Clarkson (1993). He gave 12 examples of the bystander role to avoid becoming involved in the triangle, a position that should be taken by most therapists. Hawker (2000) discussed how useful this triangle is in working with domestic violence. This triangle serves as a cognitive structure to work with clients, volunteers, staff, as well as in education and cultural organizations. Respect for the woman’s own perceptions, coupled with a plan for her safety if she returns home, helps to keep counselors from participating in the triangle. Non-participation also sends the strong message that the woman is capable of making her own decisions. This triangle is also useful in helping social service workers to understand how their interactions with Victims of domestic violence may inadvertently embroil them in it.

Finally, an ingeniously simple empirical test of this triangle was reported by Pasternack and Fain (1984). They enlisted 90 undergraduates to participate in a task in a laboratory setting. After completion, participants were asked whether they would like to volunteer for a second experiment. Here the
experimenter switched between two different roles: Victim or Persecutor. Predictably, more students responded favorably to the first rather than to the second role by assuming the role of Rescuer, i.e., helping the experimenter. In spite of this simple attempt to find an empirical basis for this triangle, its validity remains an open question. It needs to be resolved one way or another before applying it to families in crisis. A more stringent and controlled replication of this test seems crucial to establishing the validity of this triangle.

**IMPLICATIONS OF THE DRAMA TRIANGLE FOR FAMILY THERAPY PRACTICE**

L’Abate’s (1986, pp. 90–96) expansion on many variations from these three roles is replicated in Table 1 and, as already noted, has become a formal model among 16 models in relational competence theory (L’Abate & Cusinato, 2007). This table became also the basis for the first practice exercise in a written workbook or protocol for relational depression. It can be included as an application in the therapy office and as homework assignment in systematic family therapy, including prescription of the triangle as homework assignment (L’Abate, 2009).

Once the pervasiveness of this triangle is observed in a family where abuse in its many forms, be it blame, externalizations, physical punishment, incest, or other types of abuse are present, it is easy to discover who the Victim and Persecutor are. What is more difficult to find is the Rescuer, because oftentimes there is no apparent Rescuer. However, in any dyad, each party is playing all three roles at different times and in different situations. If and when a Rescuer is present, his or her efforts are half-hearted, ineffective, discounted, or futile. For instance, consider an intact family composed traditionally by two parents and twin children of different gender. The son was a very conforming, obedient, and sociable child who produced no educational or social problems. The sister, on the other hand, was extremely rebellious, never cleaning up her room, not helping in family chores, and purposely making friends below the educational and socio-economic status of the parents. The daughter’s rebellious behavior was accepted by the mother almost unconditionally. When the father, however, attempted to correct or criticize the daughter’s behavior, the mother intervened on her behalf finding excuses and rationalizations for her behavior. However, these roles sometimes were reversed. If and when the mother tried to correct and criticize the daughter’s behavior, complaining to the father, he would intervene on behalf of the daughter. When one felt victimized by the daughter, the other came to her rescue. The daughter saw herself as the Victim of both parents, whom she criticized for what she perceives their abusive ways, their materialistic values, and their conformist and traditional attitudes. She typified Wallman’s (1976)
injunction against angry feelings as a result of feeling persecuted by one parent and rescued by the other. She could not tolerate anger expressions in any form. When the parents attempted to enter into family therapy on her return from not completing college, she refused to attend accusing the father of being the one who needed help the most. One could argue that each member of this triangle, except the brother, was playing all three roles by how they fluctuated in relation to each other, providing an unstable and ultimately destructive atmosphere for the whole family.

The long term outcome of this conflict eventually produced a dependent daughter who denied her dependency but who relied on her parents’ financial support as a full-time single mother devoting all her energy to caring for her own daughter conceived out of wedlock. She lived in a completely borderline lifestyle that made it impossible for her to be and become employable and employed. Repeated requests from her parents to get help were rejected. Consequently, the parents sought therapy as individuals and as a couple. Both parents, however, continued to support the daughter financially for the sake of the granddaughter who became their pride and joy. The father eventually gave up being one part of the triangle by relinquishing the role of Victim and being perceived as the Persecutor. He gave up the whole triangle to accept the status quo. By relinquishing his participation in the triangle, the father was able to perform his role as husband, father, and grandfather in a more effective fashion than heretofore, thus vastly reducing the level of conflict in the family.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the pervasiveness of this triangle, the family therapy literature has neglected to acknowledge its influence in family dysfunctionalities. If intimate relationships are analyzed and researched as contents rather the processes, of course, it will be impossible to find and observe this triangle. If, however, family therapists observe the interactions among members of dysfunctional families as processes with this triangle in mind as a blueprint, it will be relatively easy to discover it, observe its pernicious influence, and perhaps intervene more effectively.

REFERENCES


