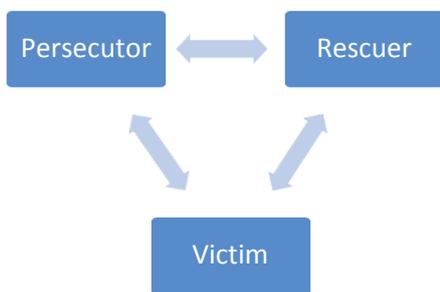


Moving from a stuck narrative to a dynamic narrative

The Drama Triangle

A helpful tool for attending to hidden processes in supervision is the 'Drama Triangle' developed in 1968 by Stephen Karpman, a Transactional Analysis trainer, as a way of describing the 'dance' that occurs whenever we make someone else responsible for how we feel. According to Karpman, any time we don't take responsibility for our feelings we are acting in a part of the Drama Triangle.

The roles of the drama triangle are: Victim, Persecutor and Rescuer. Some people adopt a role as a life stance. Others find themselves (unwittingly) adopting a role or moving between them in a given interaction, particularly in times of stress.



Karpman shows the relationship between these three roles by putting them on an upside down triangle. This shows the Persecutor and Rescuer in the one-up position that they take to the Victim.

The arrows on the triangle show that transactions between each pair move in both directions – but also how the drama in the Triangle comes from the switching of roles which can also happen in both directions.

VICTIMS

- act out a role of helplessness, complaining or dependency
- don't take responsibility for themselves
- are not good at taking advice
- play out the 'YES BUT' game.
- can often feel overwhelmed by their feelings

Mantra: *It's not fair*

Theme tune: *Nobody knows the trouble I've seen*

RESCUERS

- act out a role of saviour, fixer or rescuer
- are generally patient, understanding and responsible
- they tend to avoid conflict at any cost and jump in to smooth troubled waters
- tend to put others first but by doing more than they really want to and **can resent caring**
- but sometimes feel taken for granted or guilty due to unrealistic expectations of what they actually **can** do as opposed to **would like** to do to help

Mantra: *Where's the fire? Cos I've got to help!* **Theme tune:** *He ain't heavy he's my brother.*

PERSECUTORS

- act out a role of bully, punisher, judge
- are generally angry and aggressive
- enjoy conflict and the buzz they get from tension
- have fixed ideas about right and wrong
- are not usually in touch with their feelings
- have little remorse about their actions since 's/he, it deserved it'

Mantra: *You had it coming to you*

Theme tune: *Rambo Three soundtrack*

How can we move forward?

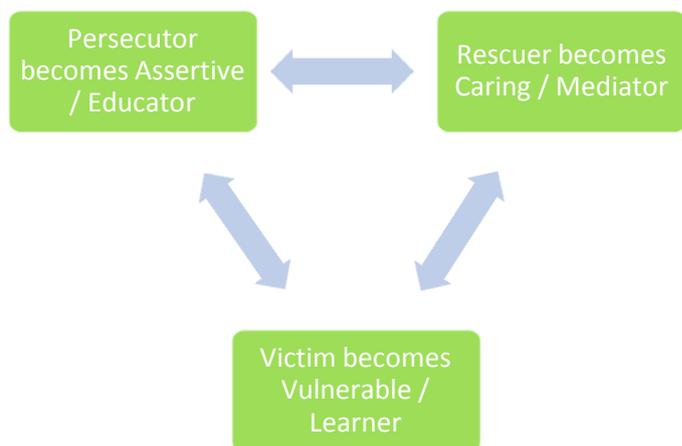
As the drama triangle is played out, people change roles or tactics – which forces others in the triangle to match this change by switching themselves. Sooner or later, for example, the **Victim**, sick of the one-down position, turns on the **Rescuer**. Or the **Rescuer** becomes fed up with a lack of appreciation of their efforts and starts to persecute. Nevertheless the Drama Triangle remains in place and the narrative is stuck.

The ‘stuck narrative’ of the drama triangle can be addressed at three different levels:

1. Identify the cycle – this may be enough for one or more people to step out of role.
2. Refuse to ‘play the game’ any more. If just one person stops playing the game cannot go on.
3. Look at what the payoffs of the game are – how does playing this game protect me from my own anger and vulnerability?

Once the third level of insight has been reached it is possible to transform the Drama Triangle into a dynamic narrative: one or more participants begin to acknowledge their own anger and/or vulnerability and take responsibility for these instead of only seeing them in the others.

For example, the **Rescuer** has got hooked into trying to save the **Victim** because they cannot acknowledge their own vulnerability (seen only in the **Victim** – ‘Poor you’) or need to avoid feeling angry (so they only see anger in the **Persecutor** - ‘How can you be so cruel?’). If the Rescuer realises this and changes their approach the cycle is broken. With increased awareness of all participants, a new Triangle can be formed with each making a positive contribution:



Coaching literature calls this the **Winners’ Triangle** because each of the three roles is ‘OK’, relying on acquiring new skills.

Davys and Beddoe call it an **Empowerment Triangle** where, again, each of the roles shifts to a constructive mode. The roles of the Drama Triangle each have their equivalent role in these new, dynamic triangles as below:

Drama Triangle Role	Winners’ Triangle Role	Empowerment Triangle Role	Skills to be Developed	Means of change
Victim	Vulnerable	Learner	Taking responsibility; problem solving	Growth In self-awareness
Rescuer	Caring	Mediator / Facilitator	Listening; acknowledging own needs	
Persecutor	Assertive	Educator / Consultant	Considering different views; self-confidence	

Any technique that the **Vulnerable** person can use to get themselves thinking about options and consequences is valuable. In the **Caring** role the development of listening skills used with *both* the **Vulnerable** and the **Assertive** person is required. Good listening is frequently the only **Caring** response needed. **Assertiveness** is about getting your needs met without punishing. Self-awareness is essential – and grows – in in all three roles.

Further reading:

Stephen Karpman, (1968), ‘Fairy tales and script drama analysis’, *Transactional Analysis Bulletin* 7 (26) pp 39-43.
 Davys and Beddoe (2010), *Best Practice in Professional Supervision*, pp 171-6
 Hawkins and Shohet (2012) *Supervision in the Helping Professions*, 4th edn, pp 123; 223-5
 Leach and Paterson, 2010, *Pastoral Supervision: a Handbook*, chs 3 and 4