

Practitioner Perspective

The Drama Triangle and Healthy Triangle in Supervision

By Emma Redfern



In a world post-Trump, the pandemic and the killing of George Floyd, more than ever the Delphic maxim 'know thyself' holds true for psychotherapists and clients alike. Understanding the Drama Triangle helps us come to know how problematic, defensive aspects of human nature may be affecting our relationships with ourselves and others. The Healthy Triangle sheds light on what being emotionally healthy might look like in the therapy room and beyond

Introduction

In this article I will introduce the reader to a two-part piece of theory that informs my therapy and supervision practices. The Drama Triangle highlights unconscious processes that are often live in problematic interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. The Healthy Triangle provides a brief

map of what being psychologically or emotionally healthy might look like for client, supervisee or supervisor. In 10 years of psychotherapy supervision, I have discovered that many supervisees do not know or adequately understand the theory behind the triangles, nor their usage. This will be explored in the article, alongside two examples from

my supervision practice of working with Drama Triangle dynamics in the hope that Healthy Triangle ways of being will emerge. The article will reference writers in the field of supervision including those who write about the Drama Triangle and Beneficial Triangle (on which the Healthy Triangle is based).

Introducing the triangles

The Drama Triangle was conceived by Steven Karpman (1968) and is based in Transactional Analysis (TA), which was developed by Eric Berne in the 1950s. Berne hypothesised that by the age of four or five a child has developed a 'life script' influenced by what they are told, what they have experienced or had happen to them and how they have interpreted those events. This 'script' is basically a belief about who they are, how they experience and relate to people and the world and how people and the world relate to them. Another of Berne's concepts is that of 'games' people play in which unconscious beliefs drive a person's behaviour "in such a way as to result in either contributing to or causing situations to occur that evoke a familiar feeling, usually negative," (Centre for Supervision and Team Development, 2009, p. 10).

If a young child experiences adverse childhood experiences and has been harmed, they are what I would term 'a true victim', and without appropriate therapeutic intervention as an adult they may find themselves relating to the world from any of three scripts or roles: Victim, Persecutor or Rescuer. Such a person automatically 'needs' or

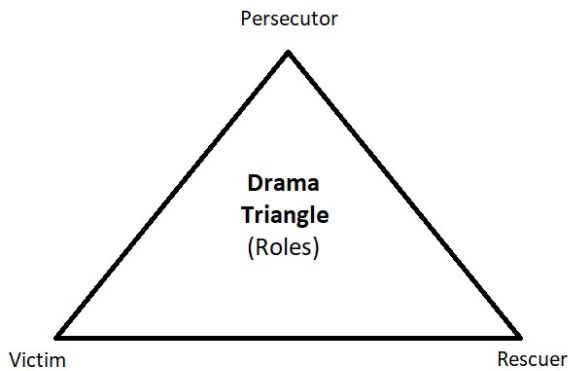


Figure 1: The Drama Triangle

'recruits' other participants to fill the complementary roles. For example, a Victim 'needs' a Persecutor and a Rescuer's *raison d'être* is rescuing Victims (or incompetents).

Most of us may have a tendency towards one of the three roles, but rapid switching of position on the triangle is all part of the painful, problematic and dramatic nature of the dynamics. I conceive of the roles as maladaptive and conflicting attempts to get needs met and protect oneself from emotional pain that has already happened due to past trauma and/or abuse and to defend against current and future emotional pain. Hughes and Pengelly (1997) writing about supervision of front-line services in turbulent environments give their explanation of the roles as intending to be helpful by 'splitting off' unwanted aspects of oneself:

- the Persecutor splits off (i.e. avoids experiencing) personal vulnerability that is projected onto the Victim;
- the Victim splits off their own hostility and anger, which is projected into the Persecutor and splits off their sense of self-responsibility and personal competence, which is projected into the Rescuer; and
- the Rescuer cannot bear vulnerability and hostility in him/

herself and unconsciously projects these into the other two roles on the Drama Triangle, while also then seeking to Rescue the Victim in such a way as to 'remove both hostility and vulnerability from the scene' in general (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997. p. 101).

It is worth noting that although the Drama Triangle is generally used to plot the interplay between people, it also exists and is active inside a person (which has not been evident to me from the literature). Many of us will probably be able to recognise the persecution of an 'Inner Critic' ('You're lazy', 'You fatty!') and the 'Ouch!' of the inner Victim, followed perhaps by the soothing/numbing response of an inner Rescuer ('Stuff it, I'm going to eat what I like and watch a box set...').

My humanistic integrative training has taught me that the Healthy Triangle is a development of the Beneficial Triangle of Proctor and Tehrani (2001, p. 177). In the Healthy Triangle, the Victim corner of the triangle is replaced with being vulnerable; the role of Persecutor is replaced with being potent or powerful and instead of needing to Rescue, one is responsive and responsible to oneself. Note that vulnerability does not mean weakness in the sense of Achilles heel. Vulnerability is positive, protective and desirable. To be vulnerable has specific connotations

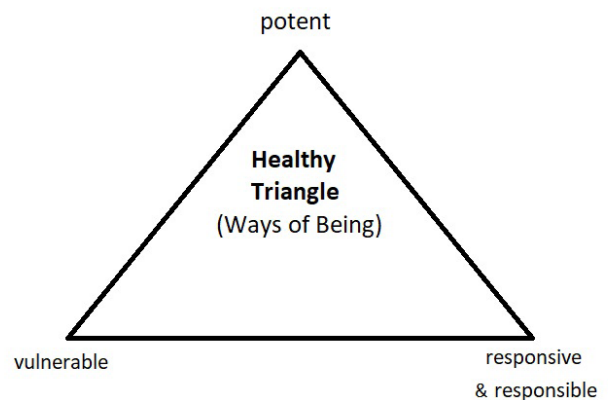


Figure 2: The Healthy Triangle

in therapy, including to recognise, validate and be curious and open towards one's emotions and one's intrapsychic world (Brown, 2012).

The Healthy Triangle differs from the Drama Triangle in not focusing so strongly on interpersonal dynamics. Someone on the Healthy Triangle inhabits all of the corners. However, when I am able to manage my vulnerability, potency, responsiveness and self-responsibility while alone and with others, those around me may feel more able and encouraged to mirror that also.

I encourage therapists to share both triangles with their clients:

- In the Drama Triangle, clients can recognise themselves and their problematic relationships (intrapersonal and interpersonal). They feel seen, heard and understood while also gaining additional clarity about the persecutor-rescuer-victim dynamic.
- In the joint recognition that, being Victim, Rescuer or Persecutor is understandably painful and problematic, the need and desire for moving towards Healthy Triangle ways of being can be explored.
- Sharing the Healthy Triangle alongside the Drama Triangle offers an opportunity to discuss together therapeutic goals

or aims and how to use the therapeutic relationship and therapy modality to achieve these.

- Without knowledge of vulnerability and its specific meaning in therapy, both client and therapist can mistake being Victim for 'how clients are supposed to do therapy'.
- Sharing the triangles gives therapist and client a shared language in which to explore relationship dynamics.
- Sharing the triangles provides an additional means of assessing progression in therapy.

The role of supervisees

As a therapist, I have found this theory to be highly relevant and useful in working with clients. Although I do not mould supervisees in my image, I am aware that most supervisees are aware of the Drama Triangle and although some know both triangles, most of them do not use them in their client work. As Michael Carroll (2014, p. 18) writes of supervisees: "Knowledge and skills do not always find their ways into practice" and misunderstanding, lack of confidence or ability to share from the Healthy Triangle may be part of this.

A common theme among supervisees is their belief that three people are needed to be on the Drama Triangle when, although there are three roles, the dynamics may be enacted inside a single person, between groups of people or nations. Even things and concepts can be enrolled on the Drama Triangle. Also, each person may enact more than one role simultaneously or consecutively. Other supervisees are unwilling to share the triangles with clients because the clients are already impacted by Drama Triangle

As therapist, supervisor or supervisee, I am a wounded healer

dynamics: 'I don't want to shame the client' (they may see the client as Victim and fear acting as the Persecutor) or 'The client won't accept what I'm saying so there's no point' (the supervisee may be feeling like a helpless Victim to a controlling client).

One response to the above is that I will model for the supervisee being a therapist on the Healthy Triangle introducing both triangles to the client by drawing each triangle on a sheet of paper as I explain them.

The wounded healer

As therapist, supervisor or supervisee, I am a wounded healer. In my private practice, most of the supervisees I work with also have wounds. Therapists struggle with issues of competence, feelings of failure, dominant inner critics, the need to improve, 'get it right' and feel successful. All of which can, at times, lead to being on the Drama Triangle either with clients, the organisation and/or in supervision. In addition, these dynamics are part of the cultural heritage of both the UK and Ireland in the British Isles – think British Empire, world wars, global conflicts and terrorism, the Northern Ireland conflict, the Irish Potato Famine, flu epidemics, and so on. All helping professionals and helping organisations are liable to be affected by these extreme roles. As Hughes and Pengelly (1997, p. 103) state: "In courses for supervisors, we have observed that feeling caught up in a persecutor-rescuer-victim interaction is one of their most common experiences; this is often the concept they most quickly perceive as relevant. ... mirroring upwards from case dynamics, or downwards from

organisation dynamics..."

Supervision is the thinking space in which to recognise (and work with, as appropriate) Drama Triangle dynamics whether they are live in the therapeutic or supervisory relationship, or both. Hereunder are true-life verbal clues to the different dynamics.

Possible examples of Victim dynamics

- Supervisee needs Rescue: 'I've been working with X for six years but now that I'm trained in IFS/EMDR/AEDP... it's going to be so much easier/better/more effective.'
- Feelings of overwhelm: 'There's just so much there. We've only had two sessions on what's going on for him now. We haven't begun to look at his childhood, which I know was horrendous and we've only got 10 sessions!'
- Helplessness and hopelessness in the supervisor: 'Well, if the supervisee's description is correct and the client really is in such a mess, then I don't know what she thinks I can pull out of the hat. And how does a trainee get to work with such a complex client anyway? It's hardly fair.'

Possible examples of Rescuer dynamics

- Colluding with deflections and minimising: 'He needs to keep his phone on for work and he checks it regularly whenever we get close to anything painful/significant/uncomfortable.'
- Agreeing with the client who says they cannot afford to pay a reasonable amount for sessions, while somehow not seeing the client's expensive haircut and colour, permanent manicure, expensive jewellery and holiday tan.

- Treating the supervisee as ‘special’ compared to others: ‘I know I see this supervisee more often than any other, but she has such a difficult client at the moment.’

Possible examples of Persecutor dynamics

- Supervisee/supervisor playing ‘blame the client/supervisee’ : ‘She’s really well defended’; ‘He just won’t engage, if I ask a question, I get a one-word answer’; ‘I rush to get there after the meeting each week and they can’t even be bothered to ring if they are running late and not coming.’
- Supervisor’s controlling behaviour towards supervisee: ‘You can’t say that’; ‘You don’t mind if I take this phone call/eat my lunch do you?’
- Supervisee’s bullying behaviour towards the supervisor who persists in disagreeing with them: ‘You’ve never liked me, you’re smug and patronising... I quit.’

Examples of Victim and Persecutor in supervision

Hughes and Pengelly (1997, p. 76) believe supervisors need to develop an ‘in and out’ position such that we are sufficiently close to the supervisee’s situation, while also being at a distance for a more ‘meta’ perspective. In this way, it is possible to spot Drama Triangle dynamics and give them attention rather than merely enact them.

Example: A recently qualified supervisee who works with clients likely to be on the Drama Triangle is presenting a new client. It seems clear to me that parts of the supervisee feel overwhelmed and inadequate in the therapy relationship (Victim and Persecutor) and she is beginning to enrol me as Persecutor as I explore her

I hope to empower the supervisee to take responsibility for finding a Healthy Triangle way to be with the client

interventions with the client. I notice she cringes, turns her head away from me and looks at me in disbelief as I find myself reminding her to introduce the Drama Triangle to the client. It is likely that we are ‘mirroring’ (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997, pp. 83-87) the therapeutic relationship (or enacting a parallel process, Hawkins and Shohet, 2012). Gradually, I pull back from teaching and dialoguing into facilitating using a more active/dramatic intervention (Williams, 1995). I hope to empower the supervisee to take responsibility for finding a Healthy Triangle way to be with the client.

Supervisor: ‘How do you feel towards the client? Which of the triangles would you say you are on?’

Supervisee: ‘Um... I said I was working too hard so that suggests I’m Rescuing. I’m taking too much responsibility.’

Supervisor: ‘Yes, and what else?’
Supervisee: ‘Well, I had those thoughts about the client being to blame and was worried that I might be persecuting.’

Supervisor: ‘Yes, and ...?’ [No response] ‘I’ll replay how I perceived you presenting the client: ‘And there’s just so much, and I don’t know where to start, and she won’t engage, and I don’t know why she’s coming, and there’s stuff she hasn’t told me...’

Supervisee: ‘Victim, I’m reacting like a Victim. I’m putting too much pressure on myself [internal Persecutor] to do too much in only 10 sessions with someone who’s never had counselling before.’

Supervisor: ‘Yes, you presented as a Victim of the enormity of the task and this may mirror the client.

How could you relate to yourself and to the client in a different way from the Healthy Triangle?’

Supervisee: ‘Well, I’m not going to tell the client I feel like a Victim.’

Supervisor: ‘No, indeed, leave the client out of it for a moment, focus on you and how you can change how you feel towards the client and the work.’

Supervisee: ‘I could take the pressure off myself. But I don’t want to just sit there and talk about her kids and the things she does with them. I’m not going to go all fluffy.’

Supervisor: ‘OK, and let me just offer that back to you’ [using playful acting parts]:

Stretching my right arm out to the side, acting like I’m carrying a heavy weight in the right hand, ‘Aggggh, it’s so heavy!’

Leaving that hand in place and moving my head to look at my outstretched left arm, “And over here we have (in a singsong childish voice) all light and fluffy and airy fairy” (wafting my hand around in a kind of inconsequential, dismissing kind of way which, thankfully, amuses the supervisee).

Finally, bringing my head back to central and looking ahead and up and down to myself sitting in the chair “and where I’m sitting between the two...?”

Supervisee: ‘Ah, I can be a bit black and white.’

Supervisor: ‘Yes?’

Supervisee: ‘So maybe there’s a new middle way I could be with this client.’

Supervisor: ‘Yes? What might that look like? How could you relate to this client from the Healthy Triangle rather than the Drama Triangle?’

Supervisee: ‘I don’t know...’ [And why should she, this seems to be a new place in which she finds herself.]

Supervisor: ‘Do you know *Beyond Therapy* Erskine et al? They write about the eight needs of relationship.’ [I suggest a book

from the reading list for her training. However, ultimately, I trust the supervisee to come up with her own 'new middle way' as she calls it.]

Supervisee: 'I'll have to think about that, how I could be with her and not expect so much of myself and therefore her and not be angry [Persecutor] with her and myself [Victim] for not doing any work.'

A benefit of the Healthy Triangle is that being vulnerable, potent, responsive and responsible to oneself are hallmarks and outcomes of any effective therapy. The two-part concept of the Drama Triangle and the Healthy Triangle crosses theoretical boundaries and can be thought of, explored and worked with different schools of therapy, such as Integrative, Transactional Analysis, Psychoanalytic, Internal Family Systems (IFS) and others.

The impact of supervision

Williams (1995, p. 47) exhorts supervisors who wish to make an impact in supervision and facilitate change to inquire from one supervision session to the next "about the fate of their proposed interventions". Thus, it is important that the supervisee updates me about any impact the previous supervision session may have had on her work with the client she introduced. The supervisee tells me of a new yet fluctuating sense of presence with and compassion for the client. The supervisee inhabits a 'new middle way' in the first session post-supervision that she believes enabled the client to be briefly vulnerable. However, a couple of sessions later the supervisee is again struggling with activated parts of herself.

Training in Internal Family Systems therapy has provided me with the tools to employ an active imagination in my work (Anderson, 2017). With the client in a safe room in her imagination, I facilitate the supervisee in noticing her own

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responses (anger and irritation - Persecutor) when the client 'does what she does' (keeping it light and steering clear of emotional areas - Rescuer). Having those responses move behind her and thus away from the client; and then turning back to the client only to find she can now do so from an open-hearted, centred place that feels enjoyable. Also, from there, she is able and willing to connect with the client in her mind's eye where she is at. Interestingly, the supervisee then experiences the client spontaneously being moved to tears and herself being present with the client as she cries. In this way the supervisee herself experiences a new way of being with herself and (in imagination) the client.

We now wait to see how this impacts reality.

Conclusion

My intention has been to show that a working knowledge of the two triangles is valuable for supervisor, supervisee and client and to give examples of working with Drama Triangle dynamics in supervision. It has not been my intention to show my interventions as either 'correct' or 'complete', but as responses in and to the moment. My interventions are offered with a sense of uncertainty and "ordinary vulnerability with its inevitable sense of worry and doubt about what to do" (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997, p. 100), but 'doing' anyway with trust in the strength of our relationship and believing in the power of creativity and presence. ☺

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