

Untangling the Drama Triangle Using the Circle of Restoration

Linda Condon, LMHC, TEP¹

The Karpman Drama Triangle provides a clear description of roles that can assist psychodramatists in exploring through action interventions more satisfying interpersonal connection. This article will examine the dysfunctional, unconscious dance of the roles of Victim, Rescuer, and Persecutor. Psychodrama provides an excellent avenue for developing more satisfying roles that the author describes as the Circle of Restoration. A variety of action interventions will be suggested and explored for assisting clients to shift off of the Drama Triangle to healthier roles of expression, action, and connection.

KEYWORDS: Transactional analysis; psychodrama; action interventions, Karpman Drama Triangle.

INTRODUCTION

The Karpman Drama Triangle is an interpersonal dynamic first written about in *Transactional Analysis Bulletin* in 1968 by Stephen Karpman (Karpman, 1968). Since then, many therapists have written on, researched, and adapted this dynamic in an effort to assist clients who struggle with addictions (Evans, 2010; Karpman, 1981, 2007), trauma (Hudgins, 2004), marriage and family issues (Whitfield, Park, and Prevatt, 2006), workplace problems (Chism, 2011), and a variety of other interpersonal difficulties (Casey, 2003; Forrest, 2008; Harper, 2003; Orniss, 2004; Weinhold and Weinhold, 2008; Namka, 2004; Zimmeroff, 1989).

According to J. L. Moreno (1946), a role is a cluster of culturally assigned behaviors. It is a natural fit for psychodramatists to create a variety of action interventions to explore the dysfunctional behaviors of the Drama Triangle roles of

¹ Linda Condon is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor and Trainer, Educator, and Practitioner of Psychodrama who has a private practice in Clearwater and St. Petersburg, Florida. She is the author of *The Warm-Up Ring: Keys for Energizing Your Group* and has written a chapter on bibliodrama in *Interactive and Improvisational Drama*, edited by Adam Blatner and Daniel Wiener. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the author at 2641 Harbor Circle, Clearwater, Florida 33759. E-mail: Lincondon@yahoo.com.

KARPMAN DRAMA TRIANGLE

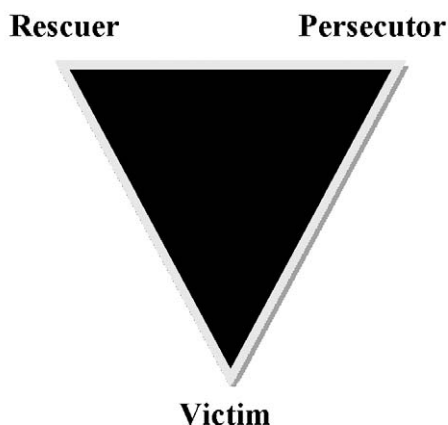


Figure 1. Karpman Drama Triangle.

Victim, Rescuer, and Persecutor. Psychodrama provides an excellent avenue for role training the more satisfying roles that I will describe as the Circle of Restoration.

One way to look at the Drama Triangle dynamic is to see it as a spiral which begins first on the interpersonal level. We are role trained by our primary caregivers as we were guided by them through doubling, observed them interacting with others through mirroring, were told to behave, or reacted to something that was done to us through inadequate role reversal. The roles we learn become internalized at an intrapersonal level. Our interpersonal reality then continues to reflect what has become our internal belief system. Finally, the dynamic can also be seen as it is acted out on a cultural level and, some may argue, even on a spiritual level.

Karpman drew these roles on an inverted triangle with the Persecutor and the Rescuer at the upper corners of the triangle and the Victim at the bottom (see Figure 1). The two positions at the top are considered the “one-up” positions, whereas the Victim is a “one-down” position.

The roles of the triangle serve as defense mechanisms that people use to stay safe or to react when the ego is threatened. These roles are largely unconscious and maintained by the desire for the status quo. They rarely lead to mutually satisfying relationships; they cause pain and prevent true intimacy. No one wins in the triangle. Perpetual lies and secrets contribute to shame or internal blame. These are attempts to gain power or control. In stressful situations, these become default roles.

Although we have characteristics of all the roles, we tend to have one primary role. We can move rapidly around the different roles of the triangle. For example,

at home a person may be very domineering and even abusive in the Persecutor role, but at work that same person may be subservient.

DRAMA TRIANGLE DESCRIPTIONS

Victim

Outward Behaviors: “Power-Sucker”

- Seeks pity and looks for rescue. “(such as, a mugging)” “I can’t do it.”
- Takes insufficient responsibility for their actions and feelings. “Poor me.”
- Uses catastrophic language to describe their reality. “They make me...” “I can’t help it...” “I have to...”
- Very apt player of the “Yes, but...” game.
- Blames others for their situation, emotions, and disappointments.
- Holds people hostage in a passive or passive-aggressive manner.
- Underfunctions in taking action.
- Different from a true victim (such as, a mugging); more an attitude of heart or a habitual way of relating to the world.

Family of Origin:

- Victims are frequently raised by a dedicated Rescuer, or an overly permissive or protective parent who sets up expectations of helplessness. Victims become convinced that they can never take care of themselves. Alternatively, they may be raised by punishing, demeaning parents who convince them they are undeserving of better treatment and reinforce victimhood.

Underlying Fear:

- Victims have a fear of taking risks and feel inadequate.

Impact on Others:

- Creates guilt, confusion, disappointment, anger, frustration, manipulation, negative judgment, and a desire to take care of the Victim’s problems.

Rescuer

Outward Behaviors: “Power-Stripper”

- Caretaking, overfocused on others, enabling. “Let me fix that for you.” The Rescuer feels unselfish or good and his or her sense of self is based on this payoff.
- Enmeshed boundaries; “no” is a foreign language. Rescuers are often reflexively role reversed with the Victim.
- Overfunctions in connection. Taking care of others is the only way a Rescuer may know to connect or feel worthwhile.
- Needs control of others and environment. “He or she needs me.”

Family of Origin:

- Rescuers usually have learned from their original caregivers to deny their needs and care for others, so they are tuned into others’ feelings and needs. Some Rescuers try to rescue others to fulfill their own childhood desire for rescue.

Underlying Fear:

- Rescuers' greatest fear is that there will be nobody there for them. Making themselves indispensable becomes a way of avoiding abandonment. They wrestle with questions like "If I don't overfunction, will I be loved? Will I be deserving of love?"

Impact on Others:

- Creates sense of disempowerment, incompetence, feeling patronized or invalidated. The Rescuer unconsciously sends out shame: "I'll take care of you, because you aren't capable."
- Difficulty in identifying violation and irritation, because it is often disguised as love.
- A Victim may feel initial relief, then resentment.

Persecutor**Outward Behaviors: "Power-monger"**

- Blaming, shaming, punitive, sarcastic.
- Must be right, one-up, better than.
- Overfunctions in expression, often aggressive or passive-aggressive.
- In need of someone on whom he or she can project his or her own unclaimed inadequacies.
- Unable to easily take responsibility for the way he or she hurts others. Inside every Persecutor is the heart of a Victim. They tend to see themselves as having to fight the world for survival.

Family of Origin:

- Persecutors often grow up in families where they have been overloaded with scorn and shaming. Alternatively, they may have a parent who spoiled them and promoted entitlement and dominance. Some Persecutors grow up in households where the only safety was in being right, since being wrong was punished.

Underlying Fear:

- Persecutors are afraid of vulnerability and powerlessness.

Impact on Others:

- Creates a sense of worthlessness, fear, shame, belittlement, anger, and sadness.
- Causes others to feel overwhelmed, abused, and bullied.

ROLE MOVEMENT

We start from a "home base" position on the triangle, from where we most often get hooked into the game. Movement around the triangle differs depending on our home-base position. However, we engage differently depending on our home-base position. When shifting away from our home-base role, our internal experience is marked by a sense of powerlessness for the Victim, a belief of "I am helping you"

for the Rescuer, and feelings of contempt, blame, or anger for the Persecutor. For example:

- Rescuer: In home-base role: “Let me help you, I can fix that.”
 In Persecutor role: “Why didn’t you do what I told you to do?”
 In Victim role: “After everything I’ve done for you...”
- Victim: In home-base role: “Help me, I can’t do it.”
 In Persecutor role: “You should have taken care of me. Why didn’t you...?
 You’re a bad...”
 In Rescuer role: “How horrible for you. You’ll never recover.”
- Persecutor: In home-base role: “What’s the matter with you? Can’t you do anything right?”
 In Rescuer role: “What you should do is...”
 In Victim role: “You made me... If you weren’t so...”

STEPPING OFF OF THE TRIANGLE

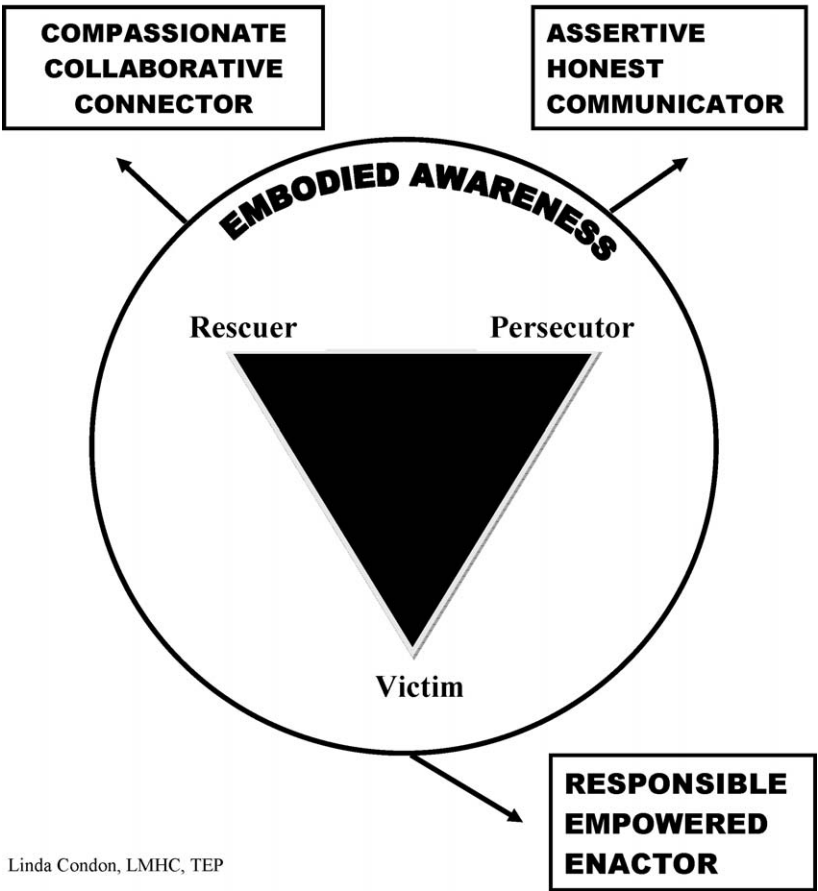
The roles and behaviors describe a state of mind, an attitude, and are held in our bodies in a variety of postures, energetically bound within our structure, and can deplete our energy field if used continuously. To shift away from Drama Triangle roles, clients will need to learn new behaviors and skill sets in order to develop more effective roles. The Circle of Restoration (see Figure 2) is a therapeutic model for developing three new roles: assertive Communicator; responsible, empowered Enactor; and compassionate, collaborative Connector. These new roles focus on behaviors associated with communication, taking action, and connection with others and within us.

Moving into Awareness

The first step towards shifting off the triangle involves stepping into increased awareness. This will open the door to developing different ways to communicate, take action, and connect, and in turn will facilitate movement toward the reparative roles of the Circle of Restoration. This awareness can be cultivated in a variety of ways:

1. Develop awareness of the Drama Triangle dynamic and the need for change.
 - A. Observe and recognize the Drama Triangle pattern of behavior.
 - B. Identify the client’s home base and increase his or her awareness of the consequences this pattern of behavior has on different relationships.
 - C. Encourage a desire for a more effective and satisfying style of relating.
2. Develop self-awareness.
 - A. Identify underexpressed, overexpressed, or unknown feelings, thoughts, and needs.
 - B. Explore the body sensations that relate to each role using body-mindfulness exercises and tracking symptoms. Breath is different in each

CIRCLE OF RESTORATION DIAGRAM



Linda Condon, LMHC, TEP

Figure 2. Circle of Restoration.

of the roles. Notice any shift in tension in the body for each role. These sensations can signal which role is emerging and can help a client avoid a typical automatic response.

C. Explore personal beliefs and possible family-of-origin experiences which have influenced the right to have or express feelings and needs.

Questions to ask to enhance awareness include: Are you tense, stiff, or anxious? Where is the tension in your body? Does your posture prepare to fight, to flee, or to freeze? Are you stuck in a relationship? Is it difficult to be honest? How do you fight? What is your communication style? What have your friends, enemies, past partners, and so on, accused you of doing? Do you whine, blame,

or shame? Do you fight, look for ways out, try to find people to fix the problem, or become depressed? What do you need to feel safe?

Developing the Role of Assertive Communicator

Some interventions for role development include the following:

1. Review the four basic communication styles (passive, aggressive, passive-aggressive, and assertive) and examine the ways they either increase or decrease Drama Triangle behavior.
2. Teach behavior for the role of Sender using the WIN formula.
 - When this behavior occurs (you say this or do that),
 - I think (the story I tell myself is)...
 - Then I feel (emotion), and
 - What I need is...
3. Assist the client in differentiating between feelings and thoughts. Discuss how thoughts, beliefs, and assumptions produce emotions. Use the containing double to explore new awareness, to wake up dissociation from behavior, and to build new internal dialogue that supports assertive behavior. “I feel the tension in my body; however, I can feel my feet on the ground, and I can take a deeper breath. I can think more clearly. I can ask for what I need.”
4. Teach behaviors for developing role of Receiver.
 - Mirror or paraphrase partner’s message, asking clarifying questions; and
 - Validate Sender’s thoughts, feelings, and needs.
5. Teach the components of the brain: Reptilian Brain, Mammalian Brain, and Cerebral Cortex. The Reptilian Brain can freeze with fear or react with fight or flight. The Mammalian Brain wants to connect with empathy, understand another’s perspective, or give and receive compassion. The Cerebral Cortex interprets situations. A traumatized person may try to manage distress by thinking a way out of pain. A stuck brain may predict the worst scenario before considering available options. The left brain may presume it is correct and the other person is wrong, thereby behaving as the “keeper of the blind spots (Ridge, 2009).” Discuss how a defensive person may move into withdrawal or react with anger when feeling misunderstood or defensiveness when threatened. Teach clients how to take effective time-outs when triggered.
6. Do repeated role training using action techniques to identify feelings, thoughts, and needs. Practice assertive expression and listening without defensiveness.

Shifting Persecutors off the Triangle

The most effective route with a Persecutor begins with effective communication skills. Learning to express feelings and needs assertively requires repeated role training with doubling. The use of role reversal helps with improved understanding of how others perceive them and increases empathy.

For Persecutors, respectful listening requires them to mirror or paraphrase what they are hearing and ask clarifying questions. Listening does not imply agreement, but rather acknowledgement, and it opens the door to problem resolution. A greater therapeutic alliance and increased self-awareness arise when Persecutors acknowledge that their role models did not equip them with these skills.

Recognizing distorted beliefs and expectations arising from their stories assists Persecutors in regulating the intensity of their feelings, especially anger. Using skill sets from dialectical behavior therapy for emotional regulation and mindfulness can be helpful with Persecutors who have anger-management issues.

Learning to listen to their internal body experience may help clients identify their internal feelings and process them more clearly. The tension and anxiety may cause problems in the temporomandibular joint, headaches, back pain, sleeplessness, and stomachaches. Teaching them to take time-outs when they become agitated and to use the time out to ask themselves “What do I want to have happen here?” can often help them to step away from intense feelings and increase mindful awareness and a sense of control. Breathing exercises, meditation, or body scanning can be helpful to move them more into a felt sense of being in control and not controlling. Objectivity may flow more clearly from their frontal cortex.

Shifting Victims Off the Triangle

Many Victims need to work through very poor self-esteem and address unresolved issues with their original caregivers in order to empower themselves. They are inevitably involved in relationships with Rescuers or Persecutors, and learning to stand up for themselves in an assertive manner is challenging and requires patience and determination.

Some helpful steps to assist Victims in shifting their behavior include the following:

1. Examine how these belief systems developed. Some of those in a victim role have been overprotected and discouraged from assuming power, while others have been convinced of their powerlessness through physical or emotional abuse.
2. Develop a plan to get their needs met. Do a “vision board” exercise, then use a future projection to strengthen and ground the perceived capabilities. List or journal accomplished goals, which also measures how regressive behavior diminishes over time.
3. Encourage recognition of anger and resentment, identify what they can do differently, and develop to meet needs. Use psychodrama (emphasis on doubling) to practice direct communication of their feelings and needs.
4. Imagining the body’s voice may allow Victims to assess internal needs, any potential sense of emptiness, or a feeling of being undervalued. Developing an encouraging double that builds self-care and respect from the inside can also be a helpful intervention. Building core strength in the belly and chest by

breathing with more fullness can increase stamina and oxygen to the brain. Yoga postures of the cat, the warrior, and the archer can assist in rejuvenating their chi and vitality to stand on their own feet. These interventions will move a person from the freeze or flight response.

5. Declaring independence from an overbearing Rescuer or disrespectful Persecutor is an important step. Those in a Victim role must first believe in themselves and their right to respect. This often requires a mirroring of respect by the therapist and persistent affirmation of their personal rights, which eventually becomes internalized.

Shifting Rescuers off the Triangle

Some steps in helping Rescuers step off the triangle include the following:

1. Identify the Victims in their lives that they believe they are responsible for fixing and pleasing. Examine how effective these relationships are. Encourage recognition of the subtle shaming message sent to Victims: “I don’t believe in you or think you can help yourself.” Rescuers usually think love is communicated through their actions and are surprised to realize they are stripping Victims of their power.
2. Explore relationships that taught responsibility for another’s happiness and encourage recognition of this distorted message. Many psychodramas with early caregivers may be necessary for a Rescuer to become convinced he or she can let go of this belief. Use a deepening double to challenge messages from early childhood, a drama that contrasts those beliefs from an early role model with one who now has had a reflective time in “heavenly rehab.” The reformed caregiver may provide new insights or permission so the protagonist may put him- or herself first and take responsibility for his or her own happiness. Encourage the development of an internal resource role that affirms:
 - “You have a right to your own happiness.”
 - “You have permission to say no, if you want to.”
 - “It’s okay to put yourself first sometimes.”
 - “You deserve to be treated with respect.”
 - “You have a right to need and want.”
 - “You have a right to relax and enjoy life even if it seemingly wastes time.”
 - “Your life is valuable and you matter.”
3. Teach them to identify their feelings and needs and to express them assertively through repeated role training. Develop body awareness of the internal energy from rescuing others, the positive excitement of “saving others” leading to the negative or destructive exhaustion from always being the savior. Where does the client feel that energy in his or her body? What symptoms has it created? What would it feel like to do nothing or pause and wait?
4. Discuss different kinds of boundaries (nonexistent ones like doormats, thick concrete walls, easily collapsible barriers, dividers that are full of holes, etc.) and the benefits of strong boundaries. Identify the healthy boundaries existing

in their lives and the new limits which need to be created and practiced. Explore the body sensations of these new boundaries and role train for the physical experience. Explore the messages that tend to lead to the collapse of boundaries and set up scenes where the client can practice maintenance.

5. Encourage the Rescuer to recognize the predictable response pattern when boundaries are established with a person in the Victim role. A Victim may cast the client in a “bad guy” role. To be successful, a Rescuer must recognize that this role does not have to be accepted. If boundaries are maintained, the Victim may be very angry, including reacting with a temper tantrum. Practice various scenarios to prepare the client to respond to these for scenarios. As this relationship continues to change, the Victim may either find another Rescuer or be forced to assume responsibility for his or her own reality. It’s the predictable pattern that happens when a boundary is set.

Utilizing the concrete, behavioral dynamic of the Drama Triangle provides many clients with a clear, concise picture of their interpersonal struggles and intrapersonal wounding. The Circle of Restoration model can assist both clinicians and clients in developing a plan of action. The Circle of Restoration is a process of body, mind, and spirit that explores moving from within to shift from the dysfunctional dynamic of the Drama Triangle to develop healthier and more effective roles of expression, action, and connection. This process creates an opportunity for more intimate, satisfying, and loving interpersonal relationships and internal connection.

REFERENCES

- Casey, J. (2003). *The dance of drama*. Retrieved 09 10, 2004, from www.joancasey.com/Article2
- Chism, M. (2011). *Stop workplace drama: Train your team to have no complaints, no excuses, no regrets*. Hoboken NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Evans, K. (2010). Unfortunate Hero, The Soldier’s Path from Trauma & Addiction. Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, November 6, 2010.
- Forrest, L. (2008). *The three faces of victim*. Retrieved 09 10, 2004, from www.lynnforrest.com
- Harper, G. (2003). *Conflict drama: Victim, villain or hero?* Retrieved 03 13, 2013, from www.joyofconflict.com.
- Hudgins, K. (2004). *Interrupting the trauma triangle*. Retrieved 04 11, 2004, from www.therapeuticspiral.org
- Karpman, S. (1968). Fairy tales and script drama analysis. *Transactional Analysis Bulletin*, 7(26), 39–43.
- Karpman, S. (1981). Few concepts in treating alcoholics with TA. *Transactional Analysis Bulletin of the Eric Berne Seminar*, 3(4), 6–9.
- Karpman, S. (2007). *The alcoholic family triangles*. Retrieved 09 10, 2004, from www.karpmandramatriangle.com

- Moreno, J. L. (1946). *Psychodrama* (Vol. 1). Beacon, NY: Beacon House.
- Namka, L. (2004). The Drama Triangle: *The three roles of victimhood*. Retrieved Month DD, YYYY, from www.angriesout.com
- Orniss, M. (2004). *Karpman Drama Triangle*. Retrieved Month DD, YYYY, from www.coachingsupervisionacademy.com
- Ridge, R. (2009). *The body alchemy of psychodrama*. Minneapolis, MN: BRIObooks.
- Weinhold, J., & Weinhold, B. (2008). *The Drama Triangle: A 3-D consciousness trap*. Retrieved Month DD, YYYY, from www.weinholds.org.
- Whitfield, C., Park, R., & Prevatt, J. (2006). *The power of humility: Choosing peace over conflict in relationships*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.
- Zimberoff, D. (1989). *Breaking free from the victim trap: Reclaiming your personal power*. Issaquah, WA: Wellness Press.