**THE KARPMAN DRAMA TRIANGLE and a Healthier Option to It**

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**VICTIM**

**RESCUER**  **PERPETRATOR**

Transactional Analysis focuses on games and stories. Karpman analyzed thousands of fairy tales and determined that in every case there were three primary roles: a perpetrator/villain, a victim, and a rescuer. (Snidely Whiplash, Little Nell, and Dudley Doright, or variations thereof.) **He felt that for a drama to occur, a character/person needed to SWITCH from one of these roles to another.** Later theorists postulated that many people in everyday life play out these roles as well.

Drama can be helpful or dysfunctional. Living a life of constant drama is rarely healthy; drama is best taken in short, situational episodes. A 3000-page novel or a 12-hour at one sitting TV drama would be too much. So also is it too much if we chronically live our lives in one or other of these roles, or if these roles become a defining characteristic of who we are.

**How does drama happen?**

The more role-switching characters do, the higher the sense of drama. For example, take this story: our hero/rescuer does a villainous act, dating a girl on a bet or under some pretense – he is a **perpetrator,** she is the **victim**. After getting to know her he regrets his actions. When he tries to **rescue** the situation by coming clean, she becomes angry and takes on the **persecutor** role. Having failed at being a **rescuer**, he is now the **victim**. He despairs and feels life worthless, so he is lured into bad company and becomes a **perpetrator**. She discovers this, sees him as a **victim**, and tries to **rescue** him. In doing so she gets into danger, once again becoming the **victim**, and he casts off being a perpetrator to **rescue** her from that. Roll final credits -- until the sequel mixes it all up again.

In many family and social systems, people do the same. They create high drama by taking on these various roles.

**A system with three required roles**

Of great importance is that this is a SYSTEM: none of the roles makes sense without BOTH of the other two. A rescuer needs a victim and a perpetrator. A victim needs a persecutor and a rescuer. And a perpetrator needs both a victim and a rescuer. Pick only two of the roles and you don’t get drama, you get something futile, or pathetic, or depressing, or aimless.

**The insight here is that if there aren’t entities in the situation naturally taking the two other roles to the one you want, you will need to either push others into taking those roles or invent something to function in them.** Often this is subtle, but if you become aware of the pattern you may find many ways in which other people push you to be a rescuer, victim, or persecutor so they can play out the role they want for themselves (or see how they characterize you or others in terms of these roles.)

**If these are the basic dramatic roles, why wouldn’t they be healthy?**

Many analyses of the Drama Triangle say that all these roles are always unhealthy. But that’s incorrect – there are times when each of these roles is appropriate. A fireman rescues someone from a burning victim. Someone is the victim of a scam. A mother yells at a child to prevent her from walking into traffic. The real issue here is one of frequency. Situations occur in which someone or something causes a person to become a victim and need rescuing – but these are rare, and sporadic at best. Like expressing anger, what is healthy on occasions can be very unhealthy if it happens frequently or regularly – if it is misused. The unhealthiness of these roles comes in when they become frequent or chronic – when they become used inappropriately.

**Healthier normal options**

Why are these roles rare? We don’t need these roles often because they are extremes. Each role has an underlying variation which is a far better (healthier) choice in the vast majority of life situations.

The Victim role, in a healthy setting, becomes the place where a person **recognizes their limitations in getting their needs and wants met and then adjusts their actions or asks for help**. The Perpetrator role becomes the place where a person **acts in integrity, whether others disagree or not**. The Rescuer role becomes the place where a person **acts out of social responsibilities and obligations to others**. We’ll look at those alternate roles a bit later on in this analysis.

**But why do people switch roles?**

Since drama is about switching roles, let’s first look at why someone would do so. None of the literature I saw on the Drama Triangle explained this, so I became curious as to WHY people switch roles -- when I find myself playing the Perpetrator, how did I get there? When I discover I’m acting out of the Victim role, what led me to that? When I fall into the Rescuer role, what tends to keep me there?

Here’s what I believe motivates the six possible changes:

When I go from **Rescuer to Victim**, it is because I have depleted myself (the Rescuer gives much more than he/she takes back). In giving to others I haven’t been getting enough for my inner self. Exhausted, I become a victim -- my needs are not being met, I have nothing left to give (or feel at risk of losing who I am).

Similarly, when I go from **Rescuer to Perpetrator**, it is because I have become self-righteous. By rescuing I have taken ownership over other people’s problems, taken on the role of fixing what is wrong in the world. It is a short step from there to self-righteousness – to the belief that my ideas are THE right ones and should be right for someone (or everyone) else. A factor may also be others’ refusal to be “correctly recued.”

When I go from **Victim to Perpetrator**, it is often because of my anger and frustration at the external world not giving me what I want or what I believe should happen. This can take the form of entitlement or a belief in being wrongfully oppressed (or not rescued). I become angry at being victimized and feel I must no longer be passive but act.

When I go from **Victim to Rescuer**, it is because I feel compelled to fulfill some socially-mandated role. I can’t stay a Victim, I have to be a Mom, or Dad, or a Good Person, or a Soldier, or a Useful Member of Society. I decide I cannot be selfish or passive. I leave my needy self and take on a role (acting not as myself but as the role) where I help others. One form of this is to become a martyr.

When I go from **Perpetrator to Rescuer**, it may be because I have become ashamed and/or excessively guilty about how my actions have affected others, but often the motivating factor is that I want to be seen as good and not bad. Rescuing is done as a means of atonement. This isn’t as positive a thing as it may sound -- my solution is to Rescue, to look good to myself or others by external actions, not necessarily by becoming accountable and changing my beliefs.

Going from **Perpetrator to Victim**, the motivation/cause is to experience or believe that I have run into something external which I cannot control, something which overpowers me. Often this takes the form of the fall that comes from excessive or misplaced pride -- the Perpetrator is not as powerful and in control as he or she believes. When going from Perpetrator to Victim the mechanism usually involves blaming others (rightly or wrongly).

FREQUENTLY BOTH MOTIVATORS TO CHANGE TO A NEW ROLE ARE AT WORK SIMULTANEOUSLY.

Diagrammed out, all these together look like this:

**VICTIM**

INNER OUTWARDLY

DEPLETION OVERWHELMED

ROLES,

OBLIGATIONS,

SHAME

**RESCUER** GUILT, ATTONEMENT,

THE NEED TO LOOK GOOD

INTOLERANCE

OF OUTER REALITY,

PERCEIVED OPPRESSION,

ENTITLEMENT

**PERPETRATOR**

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS,

FAILURE OF OTHERS TO ACT CORRECTLY TO BE RESCUE

**How does knowing this help me?**

I can now do two things:

1) predict when I or others might shift roles, by noticing which of these attributes are

getting more energy, and

2) identify what got me into a role I don’t want to be in, so I can find the way to get out.

Here are two examples:

If as a Rescuer I am not taking care of my own wants and needs, I can safely predict that I’m headed for the Victim role. If I also have a sense of being overpowered by external circumstances or forces, then I’m most assuredly headed for seeing myself as a Victim.

If on the other hand I find myself acting towards others in a Perpetrator role, the likely reasons I got there were that I’ve been feeling frustrated that the world isn’t giving me what I believe it “should”, and/or that I am thinking that my choices and beliefs are the absolute right ones for everyone in this situation – that they are refusing to come around to my beliefs which will rescue them.

Of course, all of this doesn’t really help me get into HEALTHY roles, just avoid or explain why I’m in the unhealthy, drama-triangle ones.

**How do I get into healthier interactions – what do I use instead?**

To get into healthy roles, we can use what we just learned in another way.

To get healthy, instead of just being aware of what’s going on and possibly stopping it, **we can replace each of these with healthier attitudes and beliefs.**

* If I want to avoid slipping into a perpetrator role, instead of self-righteousness, I can practice humility. I can respect that there may be many “right choices” and what seems or is right for me may not be what seems or is right for someone else.
* I also can avoid the perpetrator role by evaluating and casting away feelings of unjust oppression or entitlement which aren’t accurate to outer reality, and becoming more accepting of how chance and timing can be significant factors in outcomes and situations in life.
* If I want to avoid slipping into a rescuer role, instead of looking for atonement, I can substitute effective, self-focused guilt reduction/amends (admitting my intentional and unintentional errors and making amends, not focused on benefitting others but on doing what I need to set things right for myself).
* It will also help keep me out of the rescuer role if instead of losing myself to social roles and obligations, I can value my (and others’) uniqueness within them. Often the best help I can provide to others is sharing with them who I am as an individual, more than as a Mom, Dad, Teacher, Scientist, etc.
* To avoid slipping into the victim role, instead of going passive and losing my ability to act when I feel or experience external things overpowering me, I can learn to act in accordance with timing and external forces. I can avoid blaming externals for everything, and identify what I actually did to cause this situation and what I can actively do to get out of it or cope with it.
* Likewise, I can avoid taking on a victim role if instead of becoming depleted trying to do things for others, I use self-care and take on my own self-nurturing. I can ensure that there is a healthy balance between giving out and taking in, and that selfishness is appropriate when it comes to caring for and nurturing my sense of who I am, psychologically and physically.

**A healthier alternative to the Drama Triangle**

Taking as a whole what we’ve just looked at, I propose the following as a healthier alternative to the drama triangle. I’m calling it, for lack of better inspiration, the VITALITY TRIANGLE.

The Perpetrator role is, in essence, a place of acting in integrity – perceiving a need to act and acting in accord with your own beliefs. I’m calling this the PERSONAL INTEGRITY position. It’s not a role, it’s an aspect of the whole self that sometimes takes dominance. Humility, acceptance, and mitigating any adverse affects of your choices on others are the factors that keep this from perpetration.

The Rescuer role is replaced by SOCIAL CONSCIENCE. Our interactions with others are a complex balance between social roles and our individuality. What distinguishes this from rescuing is that we don’t take ownership of the problems of others, but instead share, in that elegant phrase from 12-step programs, our “experience, strength, and hope” with them. We recognize social connection as a two-way street, both sides rightfully engaged and entitled to respect, support, and to give and take.

The Victim role is replaced by the HUMAN CONDITION. This position recognizes the value of limitations, of times when not acting is the correct choice, and of asking for and accepting help from others or from chance, timing, and outer reality.

**HUMAN CONDITION**

**SOCIAL CONSCIENCE PERSONAL INTEGRITY**

Now the forces for change diagram out as follows:

**HUMAN CONDITION**

SELF-ACCOUNTABILITY,

NURTURING ACCEPTANCE OF

LIMITATIONS

INDIVIDUALITY

OF SELF &

OTHERS

**SOCIAL** HUMILITY,

**CONSCIENCE** RESPONSIBILITY TO OTHERS

ACTION IN ACCORD

WITH THE TIME,

RESPONSIBILITY TO SELF

**PERSONAL**

PERSONAL VALUES **INTEGRITY**

I summarize these in a companion article called [“6 Keys to a Healthy Life.”](http://www.utherapy/classes/relationship%20class/6%20keys%20to%20a%20healthy%20life)

**Why “Vitality”?**

Even as the Drama Triangle drama is created by changing roles, the same holds true here but the result is vitality. The more we change between positions here the more whole and integrated – the more vital – our lives become. It would be as much a mistake to “lock into” one of the positions here as it is to lock into one of the Drama Triangle roles.

**ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS**

**Some thoughts about the Victim role**

Karpman placed the Victim at the bottom of the triangle to indicate that this role was considered “lower” or “one-down” from the others. I haven’t done so because of the following: my belief is that the Victim role has equal power to the other roles, but that the power is **covert** rather than overt.

This goes back to previous comments about the necessity of having all three roles for the triangle to work. Even as a Rescuer needs someone to rescue and someone or something to rescue them from, so **a Victim needs a Perpetrator and a Rescuer**.  **Someone who is compelled to be in the Victim role will therefore help create the situation that draws these roles into being.**

This is not currently a politically correct view – “blaming the victim” is considered as unenlightened or somehow siding with the perpetrator. Further, since male perpetrators tend to be more common in our historically male-focused culture, “blaming the victim” is also often perceived as somehow sexist. Two essential features of the Victim role are those of powerlessness and passiveness, of not being able to properly defend or protect oneself. In some cases this is true.

However, we’re looking here at those times when the Drama Triangle is being inappropriately used – when healthier choices should be taken. In these circumstances we have quite different motivations and dynamics. Since instances of inappropriate use of the Drama Triangle are much more common than the rare times it is appropriate, it is safe to say that in many or most cases with adults who are of normal intellect, **the victim can be equally as responsible for the drama being acted out as are the other two roles.**

The confusion comes mostly because the Victim is passive -- the Perpetrator and Rescuer are the active roles. However, even as neglect is as harmful as abuse, or covert anger can be as dangerous as overt anger, so the Victim’s choice to be passive and not deal with his or her own wants and needs is a powerful and essential part of the drama. The Victim is usually not **more** responsible than the Perpetrator, but also not necessarily **less** responsible.  **In inappropriate use of the Drama Triangle both are making choices to participate.** The Rescuer is also equally responsible, which is admittedly even harder to intuitively grasp. A Rescuer also needs someone or something to take on each of the other two roles.

**Any or all of the roles will act overtly or covertly to encourage or create the other two.** For all basically normal adults, taking on any of the roles involves personal choice, whether that be conscious or subconscious. That element of choice is what makes these into roles, not unchangeable identities.

**Can’t you have just two of the roles?**

Certainly. You could, for example, have a Victim and Perpetrator but no Rescuer.

But **if there is no chance of any rescue, then you have no drama**. What you have is simply torture until the victim dies. The result is appalling, distressing, and depressing – but not dramatic unless YOU imagine yourself or someone else as a Rescuer. Equally non-dramatic is a Rescuer challenging a Perpetrator who hasn’t victimized anyone, or the rescue of a Victim who is in fact not being victimized by anyone or anything. The roles in such two-party scenarios feel lacking, uninteresting, or meaningless.

**Why are we seemingly more drawn to the dysfunctional roles of the Drama Triangle than to healthier roles?**

Part of the answer may be that we are more likely to have experienced the negative roles than the positive in our growing up. However, this still begs the question of how our parents or forbearers got into the pattern in the first place.

Possibly some of this has to do with the fact that creating a negative is more predictable than creating its opposite positive. Give me a task and I can tell you many different ways that with certainty will cause it to fail, but can’t as easily say what will with equal certainty make it succeed. Philosophers such as Popper and Kuhn argue convincingly that we can disprove things that are wrong, but never completely prove what is right.

Many psychotherapists hold a belief that we are confronted by lessons in life which we will repeatedly encounter and/or create until we have mastered them -- often these involve learning how to make positive rather than negatives choices. If this belief is accurate, then it makes sense that negative situations and roles will have more “draw” for us until we gain healthier ways of dealing with them.

It isn’t that positive roles are not compelling -- human beings do seem drawn to persons who act in full integrity with who they are, who show positive aspects of individualism even when in strict social roles, or who show the ability to assess their situation and deal directly with it, doing what they can for themselves and clearly seeking out help when needed. Interactions with or among such people are often invigorating, refreshing, or joyful.

But the way to positives in this world is often through negatives -- failures, mistakes, tragedies and trauma are often our greatest teachers, empowering us to positive heights we otherwise might not have dared or even been aware of. For me, this is the most compelling reason why the Drama Triangle seems to suck us into its roles -- before we can have the positives, we need to master the lesson in the negatives.

**Roles not people**

Of note also is that the Drama Triangle roles are just that -- personas we take on. Although they are inextricably linked, they are separate with clear boundaries between them. The linkage they have is one of co-dependence: to be complete in my own separate role, I need to connect with others who are taking the other two distinctly separate roles in the drama. While its possible for me to be my own Persecutor, Victim, and Rescuer, usually I farm two of these roles out to other people.

In the Vitality Triangle instead of roles we have characteristics -- that is, ways for me to be rather than roles for me to take on. The positions on the triangle ARE me, the me I choose to be. This is why they don’t easily conform to being named. What do we call persons who act in integrity with themselves, maintaining humility and letting go of outcomes? There is no single identity or role for this: it takes too many forms for that. So it is with the other positions as well -- they are defined by choice and function, rather than by rules for how they interact with each other.

Also of note, positions in the Vitality Triangle are much more likely to be fully integrated and interactive. I can be all three, and usually will be, without the need for outside persons. Rather than needing others for completion of the triangle task, drama, in this triangle I instead connect to others through each of us sharing who we are.

I can also choose any of the three positions **without the need to have the others be active**. While all three together make me complete as a person, they function in an integrated co-existing way, rather than co-dependently. While it would only be confusing to describe myself as simultaneously a Victim, Perpetrator and Rescuer. it makes sense to describe myself as a person who simultaneously handles my needs and wants well, acts with personal integrity, and chooses to connect with others in healthy ways.

**Why is the Rescuer a “bad” choice? Isn’t it the good one?**

Certainly it would be easy to agree that the Perpetrator and Victim are “bad” roles -- we tend to automatically associate them as such. But how can being a Rescuer be bad? Don’t we like people who rescue victims?

There are at least two answers here to discuss. The Drama Triangle is a codependent system which distorts each of its roles for the purpose of creating drama, of venting energy, rather than of resolving it. Rescuers go on to rescue more Victims, Victims become re-victimized, Perpetrators keep perpetrating. Nothing seems to improve for more than a moment. **Drama lives for drama, not for growth and change.**

To keep the cycle going, the codependency and completion of self through others has to continue as well. Rescuers continue to abuse themselves, abandoning their own needs and wants as they progress towards depletion and burnout. Victims continue to feel they are inadequate. Perpetrators do not reform. This is what is wrong with these roles when they are chronic -- they do not show progress, but only keep going around in circles.

Second, if we look closely, we also discover that none of the roles represent what we would consider to be healthy, well-functioning individuals. All sacrifice individuality and humanity to fit the role. **Ultimately with Drama Triangle roles it is the system, not the people in it, which is the most important.** Because of the inflexibility of this, it can appear that there are no choices involved, that the person IS the role, rather than that they choose it. This is an illusion created by habituation -- the choice has dropped out of consciousness, so we become unaware it is being made. Of course a Rescuer gives up healthy relationships in order to rescue, a Victim makes amazingly stupid choices in dangerous situations, or a Perpetrator so often takes on a label rather than having a human name. We don’t question these anymore, because we have accepted them as “the way things are” in a Drama Triangle setting.

**The Drama Triangle as representing dimensions**

Another way to look at the Drama Triangle is to see it as representing dimensions, in which two of the roles are similar and one is opposing.

Thus the Victim and Rescuer are “Good” and the Perpetrator is “Bad.” The Rescuer and Perpetrator are Active and Overt, while the Victim is Passive and Covert. Finally, the Victim and Perpetrator are focused on themselves, while the Rescuer is focused on others.

Diagrammed out, this is:

**VICTIM**

.

*. GOOD BAD*

*……….PASSIVE*

*……ACTIVE*

**RESCUER** **PERPETRATOR**

*OTHER- . . SELF-*

*FOCUSED FOCUSED*

These dimensions can be extrapolated upon as primary characteristics of personality.

Active/Passive, Inner-Focus/Outer-Focus, Positive/Negative. This leads to be a nice analogy to 3-dimensional space, and results in the creation of 8 essential character types. I enlarge on this in a separate article titled, no surprise, [The 8 Essential Character Types](http://www.uTherapy.net/classes/relationship%20class).

Taken over to the Vitality Triangle, the dimensions become

**HUMAN CONDITION**

*. CONNECTED SEPARATE*

*……….OUTER REALITY INITIATES*

*……INNER REALITY INITIATES*

**SOCIAL . PERSONAL CONSCIENCE** **INTEGRITY**

*OTHER- ….SELF-*

*FOCUSED FOCUSED*

**If you find this article helpful, or have criticisms or comments, I would appreciate you letting me know. You can reach me at** [**uncommon.alaska@gmail.com**](mailto:uncommon.alaska@gmail.com) **or through my website,** [**http://www.uTherapy.net**](http://www.uTherapy.net)

**I am still somewhat dissatisfied with the label “Vitality Triangle.” If you have another suggestion for what to call that, please let me know.**

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