The Karpman Drama Triangle, the Choy Winner's Triangle, and the O.K. Corral as they Pertain to Academic Achievement

J.R. Teeter

SUNY Geneseo

Abstract

Transactional Analysis has long been used in therapy settings and by coaching institutions to improve personal outcomes. It is best described as a practical application of tools to guide interpersonal interactions. Born out of Transactional Analysis is the Drama Triangle created by Stephen Karpman (1968), OK Corral created by Frank H. Ernst Jr. (1971), and the Winner's Triangle by Acey Choy (1990). These simple concepts have the potential to transform academic institutions and prevent dysfunctional relationships between faculty, staff, and/or students, which stem from the heightened academic environment and ineffective coping skills.

Keywords: student success, academic achievement

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Introduction

In 1958, "The American Journal of Psychotherapy" published Eric Berne's manuscript "Transactional Analysis: A New and Effective Method of Group Therapy". This groundbreaking work introduced the world to Transactional Analysis and how it can be used to guide therapy sessions. In his introduction, Berne states the following:

> There is a need for a new approach to psycho-dynamic group therapy specifically designed for the situation it has to meet. The usual practice is to bring into the group methods borrowed from individual therapy, hoping, as occasionally happens, to elicit a specific therapeutic response. I should like to present a different system, one which has been well tested and is more adapted to its purpose, where group therapists can stand on their own ground rather than attempt a thinly spread imitation of the sister discipline. (Berne, 1977, p. 145)

As Berne conceived it, transactional analysis is the study of how individuals function in social situations. In this respect, Transactional Analysis is a very practical form of psychotherapy that is geared towards meeting the needs of individuals as it relates to their interpersonal situations or transactions rather than improvement solely through personal reflection.

Academic institutions have long struggled to meet the psychological needs of students and often employ inadequate retention programs that treat symptoms of a problem but rarely the problem itself. In the article "Crisis on campus", Megan Leonhardt delves into the mental health challenges of college life.

American college students are facing an unprecedented mental health crisis. Three in five (60%) college students reported being diagnosed with a mental health condition by a professional, the most common afflictions being anxiety and depression, according to an exclusive *Fortune* survey of 1,000 college students conducted by *The Harris Poll* in June [2022]. That's significantly higher than the general population, only about 48% of whom say they've been diagnosed with a mental health condition. (Leonhardt, 2022)

Leonhardt goes on to discuss the challenges associated with students seeking out mental health support on college campuses acknowledging the understaffing of campus mental health services and the lack of diversity among staff while pointing out the most significant challenge comes from the students themselves, who believe their mental health issues are not severe enough to warrant assistance (Leonhardt, 2022). These findings are echoed by Boston University Assistant Professor Sarah K. Lipson and the organization she co-leads, the *Healthy Minds Network*. This organization completed the first long-term study

of college students and mental health. The study examines "annual trends for mental health and help-seeking by race/ethnicity in a national sample of college students" (Lipson, 2022, p. 138). More than 350,000 students participated by answering survey questions related to mental health spanning 373 college campuses from 2013 to 2021. Lipson acknowledges the challenge colleges face in regards to the mental health of their students with 75% of mental health problems developing by the age of 24 and the United States experiencing a decline in the mental health of students over the span of the study (Lipson, 2022). In an article published by *The Brink,* a magazine dedicated to emerging Boston University research, Lipson's findings are further explored with students experiencing "an overall 135 percent increase in depression and a 110 percent increase in anxiety from 2013 to 2021; the number of students who met the criteria for one or more mental health problems in 2021 had doubled from 2013" (Colarossi, 2022). In the study, Lipson correlates the data to conclude that students with mental health challenges experience overall diminished academic performance and are twice as likely to leave college without graduating as their peers (Lipson, 2022). Arielle Eiser of the American Psychological Association echoes the need for change in regard to student mental health services and maintains that without such services, "students with emotional and behavioral problems have the potential to affect many other people on campus, including

roommates, classmates, faculty and staff with disruptive and even dangerous behavior" (Eiser, 2011, p. 18). In simple terms, dysfunctional relationships begin among a small group of people and then expand over time to incorporate more people, which can increase the magnitude of the negative behaviors.

Growing student mental health needs coupled with campuses' inability to meet those needs calls for new tools to improve outcomes for campus communities. Transactional Analysis has given birth to such concepts as the Karpman Drama Triangle, The Choy Winner's Triangle and Ernst's OK Corral which can be quite useful in treating dysfunctional social interactions that can later lead to mental health disorders. These innovations can, and should be, moved from the auspices of group therapy sessions and further developed to benefit academic institutions and their students.

The Karpman Drama Triangle

The Karpman Drama Triangle (See Figure 1.) was developed by Stephen Karpman in 1968. Karpman was interested in acting and recognized that people often take on roles when presented with a challenging situation. This drama triangle has three distinct roles. A person takes on the role of 'victim' when they feel they cannot accomplish a goal on their own and consistently feels less than and can be perceived as less than by others. A person takes on the role of 'persecutor' when they challenge the

victim in ways that feel threatening. They consistently tell the
victim they are inadequate in achieving their goals. A person takes
on the role of 'rescuer' when they try to shift burdens placed on the
victim to themselves. This makes the victim dependent on the
rescuer for survival as the victim is unable to develop coping
strategies and is forced to depend on the rescuer for guidance and
support. By becoming a rescuer, the person is stating that the
victim is less than others and needs assistance.

Figure 1
The Karpman Drama Triangle

Note: The
Karpman Drama Triangle as it appears on the website of Listening Partnership Ltd. From
About the drama triangle - and how to escape it, by Listening Partnership in the United
Kingdom, 2023. Copyright 2023 by Listening Partnership

This drama triangle illustrates a dysfunctional relationship
where people continually switch roles dependent upon their
circumstances, and they become increasingly entrenched in their
dysfunction. A victim is not receiving the proper support and
attacks the rescuer for not being able to save them from their

situation. The victim (now a persecutor) leaves the rescuer (now a victim) and continues the dysfunction in a new triangle of people, never learning from their experiences. Because no one learns from their experience, they continue to perpetuate dysfunction in all future relationships.

The Choy Winner's Triangle

In response to the Drama Triangle, Acey Choy developed The Winner's Triangle to demonstrate supportive roles without discounting the individual's inherent worth. A vulnerable person (replaces victim) is going through a hard time, but they do not discount their own worth while doing so. They recognize their own ability to change their circumstances, and they will be fine with or without help. "I can do this" would be their mantra. An assertive person (replaces persecutor) actively meets their own needs but does not do so at the expense of anyone else. When dealing with others in crisis, they are an active coach. "You can do this" would be their mantra. A responsible person (replaces rescuer) actively helps others, but not at their own physical, emotional or mental expense. Responsible people listen to other people's problems without solving their problems for them. Like the assertive person, the responsible person offers encouragement and support, making "You can do this" their mantra.

It is difficult to step out of the Drama Triangle into the Winner's Triangle, but it is not impossible. First, the individual must recognize that they are in a dysfunctional circumstance and identify their role within the triangle. This role may shift over time, but every participant will have a dominant role within the triangle that should be apparent. Often this role is placed on the individual, so observation is key in determining how others view the individual within the given circumstances. Are they viewed as the 'victim', the 'persecutor', or the 'rescuer'? When confronting these issues, it is important to both evaluate the situation and take any necessary breaks by stepping away from the circumstances and engaging in self-care. The first reaction to a given situation is often an emotional one. Participants should relax, take a deep breath or otherwise disengage from the situation and realize that all participants are equally responsible for their circumstances. They are no better or less than the other people on the triangle.

If an individual is a victim in the triangle, they should shift their focus from being less than others and recognize they have the power to problem-solve and find solutions on their own. When they need additional support, they need to be assertive and ask for that support and the parameters of that support, so others know and understand the expected boundaries. All must recognize that others may not be able to support the individual during this difficult time, and that is okay too. The individual is capable of

handling this situation with or without additional support. They are enough.

If an individual is a persecutor in the triangle, they need to shift their focus from belittling or criticizing others to an assertive supporting role. This individual could ask the vulnerable person if they need assistance and what sort of assistance they need. An assertive and supportive individual allows others to set and respect those boundaries. In addition, they have permission to set boundaries themself through healthy communication so that everyone feels secure and not less than.

If they are the rescuer in the triangle, they need to shift their focus from trying to save others from themselves to taking on a more responsible supporting role. This involves asking others how they can best be supportive, allowing them to set boundaries and for all involved to respect those boundaries. It is an act of responsibility to ask for permission before offering assistance and only provide that help if the individual is freely capable of doing so.

The Drama and Winner's Triangles in Academic Settings

Academic settings have many challenging circumstances that allow the Drama Triangle to flourish. Recognizing these problems and shifting the attitudes of the entire college structure towards the Winner's Triangle will benefit students and their

academic support structures by demonstrating positive ways of resolving conflicts.

A good barometer to help determine whether a person is in the Karpman Drama Triangle is using Frank H. Ernst Jr.'s 'OK Corral: Grid for What's Happening' (See Figure 2.). Ernst was an early proponent of Transactional Analysis and developed it as a psychological tool. This is a simple grid of four boxes used to help determine the life position of the participant. These life positions may switch depending on circumstances, but there is always an overarching position that is dominant with the individual. The "I am okay with me, and you are okay with me" is the preferred position and is generally equated with happiness and functionality. This represents a person who is happy with themselves and happy with others. The person in the "I am okay with me, and you are not okay with me" has the potential to be in a rescuer/victim relationship as one party is okay (the rescuer) whereas the other party is viewed as less than (victim). The "I am not okay with me, and you are not okay with me" position is the most dangerous position to be in on the grid as it represents a collapse of how the self is viewed as well as the community at large. People in this category can be prone to self-harm or harming others, a dynamic that can be found in victim/persecutor relationships. The final position, "I am not okay with me, and you are okay with me," can represent a victim/rescuer relationship as the victim feels inferior

while the rescuer prefers an inferior-feeling person to be their victim. This simple diagnostic grid can help determine how people are coping with their circumstances in much the same way that a doctor may try to understand a patient's needs better by asking simple questions. Leonhardt acknowledges in her article "Crisis on campus" that students will often approach people other than counseling staff when needing additional support.

Figure 2

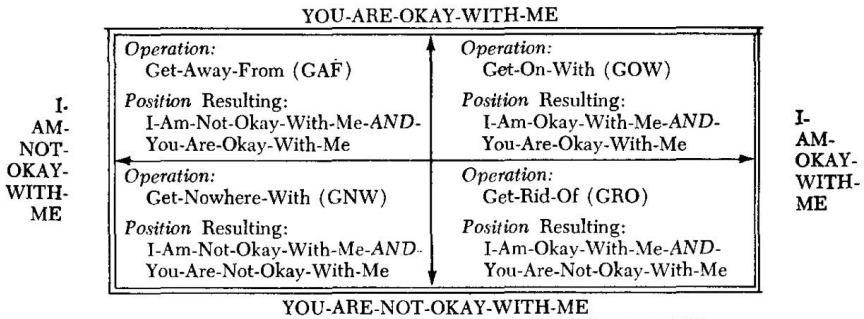*The OK Corral from "The OK Corral: the grid to get-on-with" by Frank H. Ernst.*

YOU-ARE-OKAY-WITH-ME

	Operation: Get-Away-From (GAF)	*Operation:* Get-On-With (GOW)	
I-AM-NOT-OKAY-WITH-ME	*Position* Resulting: I-Am-Not-Okay-With-Me-*AND*-You-Are-Okay-With-Me	*Position* Resulting: I-Am-Okay-With-Me-*AND*-You-Are-Okay-With-Me	I-AM-OKAY-WITH-ME
	Operation: Get-Nowhere-With (GNW)	*Operation:* Get-Rid-Of (GRO)	
	Position Resulting: I-Am-Not-Okay-With-Me-*AND*-You-Are-Not-Okay-With-Me	*Position* Resulting: I-Am-Okay-With-Me-*AND*-You-Are-Not-Okay-With-Me	

YOU-ARE-NOT-OKAY-WITH-ME

Figure 1: "The OK Corral: Grid for GET-ON-WITH"

Note: The OK Corral by Frank Ernst. From *Transactional Analysis Journal.* Copyright 1971 by Frank Ernst.

Many times, students may be more comfortable first approaching a dining hall employee, a professor, or their academic advisor than calling on the campus counseling services, especially because there is typically very few counseling staff of color or those who identify as LGBTQ+. (Leonhardt, 2022)

This makes the intervention of non-counselors key in support of those edging further into a mental health crisis. A simple

question of 'are you okay?' can be very insightful in an academic setting to determine how students perceive themselves and others. Through the OK Corral, it can then be determined where in the Drama Triangle the person resides most often, thus determining further courses of action.

Example of the Drama Triangle in an Academic Setting

The following is a simple example of a drama triangle between an instructor and two students in an academic setting. Although small in scope, it is important to recognize that drama triangles expand over time leading to further dysfunctionality among participants. A simple interpersonal interaction among peers can turn dysfunctional and draw the attention of an entire department or division over time to address the issue. Participants then form further drama triangles until the process is either stopped or the institution is enveloped in dysfunction. This dysfunctionality will continue to sweep up more participants until the issue is resolved.

Student #1 (victim) stays after class to get academic support from an instructor (persecutor).

Student #2 (rescuer) waits with their classmate.

Student #1 (victim): "Professor, I don't understand the current writing assignment. Can you help me?"

Instructor (persecutor): "I do not have time to help you on this assignment. All the expectations are clearly spelled out in the syllabus and it is not my fault if you do not understand it."

Student #1 (victim): "I am really struggling with this assignment and don't think I can do it on my own."

Instructor (persecutor): "Then I suggest you rethink your academic goals. If you cannot compete on this academic level you should drop the course and make room for a student who can understand the material and achieve.

Student #1 (victim): Thank you for your time, professor (Instructor leaves).

Student #2 (rescuer): I don't know the material very well, but I would be willing to help you write the assignment.

Student #1 (victim): But how can you help me and complete the assignment yourself?

Student #2 (rescuer): Don't worry about me. You really need the help, or else you are going to fail the course.

Student #1 (victim): Thank you so much. I really needed the help and could not do this alone.

The actions of the instructor in this scenario are not uncommon, and there are many incentives built within academic institutions to encourage such behavior. Instructors do not earn additional pay by providing extra support to students, high-demand programs have waiting lists of eligible students interested in taking the place of struggling ones, and students' poor grades or course withdrawals do not heavily reflect on the instructor's future. Being denied requested help can convince

students they are unworthy of such assistance. Should they need future academic support, they will not seek out the instructor but rather their peers, who likely will not be able to rescue them from their challenging circumstances. This situation will expand to include more students and faculty until the main student fails, the instructor no longer teaches, or the second student is no longer able to provide peer support.

Example of the Winner's Triangle in an Academic Setting

Dysfunctional relationships grow over time and become embedded in the minds of the participants. By cognitive reframing of the situation and recognizing the worth of all individual participants, people exemplify the Winner's Triangle and establish functional relationships. The following scenario mirrors the first example in terms of participants and situation. The difference is in how those participants are perceived during their interactions which exemplifies the Winner's Triangle interactions. This functionality makes the environment more stable for all participants and improves overall community outlook.

Student #1 (vulnerable) stays after class to get academic support from an instructor (assertive). Student #2 (responsible) waits with their classmate.

Student #1 (vulnerable): Professor, I don't understand the current writing assignment. Can you help me?

Instructor (assertive): I can help depending on what your needs are. What are you struggling with in the assignment?

Student #1 (vulnerable): I am having trouble writing the essay portion of the assignment and need help developing ideas for topics.

Instructor (assertive): I see. I can help with that, but my time is limited. I recommend visiting the tutoring center and scheduling time with a tutor with experience writing academic papers. Once you have a rough draft available, we can take a look at it, and I can provide you with the feedback that you need. Many students face challenges such as yours, and your problems are not unique. The college has many support services for students, and I encourage you to take advantage of all of them. Simply by asking for help, you are going to achieve more and be more successful than other students who never speak up.

Student #1 (vulnerable): "I am really struggling with this assignment and don't think I can do it on my own."

Instructor (assertive): You sound really nervous about this assignment. Schedule an appointment with the tutoring center and then schedule an appointment with me afterward. We will review your work and take whatever steps you feel are necessary to get this assignment on track.

Student #1 (vulnerable): Thank you for your time, professor (Instructor leaves).

Student #2 (responsible): I don't know the material very well, but if you need help, all you have to do is ask.

Student #1 (vulnerable): Can you go with me to the tutoring center to schedule an appointment? I've never been there before and am nervous.

Student #2 (responsible): Sure. If that's all you need, I would be happy to help.

In this example, the student recognizes they are facing challenges but are not a victim. The instructor is assertive but maintains appropriate boundaries while providing guidance. The other student provides support while maintaining healthy boundaries and respecting the limits of others.

Analysis of Examples

In the first example, the professor is dismissive and demeaning of the student asking for support. Support services exist for students, and instructors have office hours to support students through their academic challenges, but none of those services are offered. The student is made to feel less than others, and a second student attempts to rescue the first student from their crisis. This rescuer does not have the skills to help their fellow student and themself and is sacrificing their future for the other student. This will lead the Drama Triangle cycle to repeat, with participants changing roles as resentment grows and people are made to feel less than.

The second example repeats many of the steps of the first. This time, the Winner's Triangle demonstrates positive ways that challenges can be resolved. The student still approaches the conversation admitting their own vulnerability. The instructor asks for clarification to determine whether or not they can be of assistance. They have a conversation where needs are more concretely determined. The instructor encourages outside support services and agrees to assist the student once those programs are sought out. This allows the instructor to be assertive without demeaning or rescuing the student. The student is still guiding the process, and they will determine what their academic needs are. A fellow student comes in and offers support if asked. The student asks the other student to go with them to the tutoring center for academic support, and they do so. Boundaries are established and kept. The student gets the support they need without feeling less than and other characters respect each other throughout the process.

Even in circumstances in which the majority of the participants are functioning within the Drama Triangle, one person functioning within the Winner's Triangle is enough to curtail the dysfunctionality and break the cycle. Below is a melding of the first example (Drama Triangle) with elements of the second example (Winner's Triangle) to create a hybrid third example that demonstrates this notion.

[…]

Instructor (persecutor): "Then I suggest you rethink your academic goals. If you cannot compete on this academic level, you should drop the course and make room for a student who can understand the material and achieve.

Student #1 (victim): Thank you for your time, professor (Instructor leaves).

Student #2 (responsible): I don't know the material very well, but if you need help, all you have to do is ask.

Student #1 (victim): But how can you help me and complete the assignment yourself?

Student #2 (responsible): I will never offer more help than I am capable of giving. There are tutoring and other services on campus. Would you like me to walk you there and set up an appointment? You can do this. You just need a little extra support right now, which happens to everyone.

Student #1 (vulnerable): Thank you. I've been having a really tough time right now, and your help is greatly appreciated.

By having one student shift their point of view into being responsible but not a rescuer, it changes the entire dynamic of the triangle cycle. The victimized person recognizes that they are vulnerable, but not less than, and the persecuting instructor can now be seen as an educational aberration rather than the norm and is neutralized. Empowered by their own self-worth, students will

recognize they have value and that persecuting behavior is reflective of poor judgment on the part of the instructor rather than a devaluation of the student's self-worth. In addition, instructors will become aware that such conduct is not tolerated amongst their students, diminishing their standing in the educational community. This establishes a new baseline for a functional relationship. If this scenario continues with the instructor present, their power would be further diminished when the victim no longer views themselves as such. In the Drama Triangle, it is necessary for the persecutor to see the victim as such and for the victim to feel disempowered in the process. Without that dynamic, the persecutor is all bluster and lacks the authority necessary to hurt others. Also, if the victim no longer needs to rely on others for support, they can avoid interactions with those that seek to persecute or rescue them. They can now exit the triangle for more functional modalities.

Three Modest Proposals

Dysfunction in academic settings is an ongoing, pervasive issue that needs robust solutions to prevent Drama Triangle scenarios and remediate those already present in the institution. The first step would be developing campus-wide wellness programs under the banner of "'I'm okay, you're okay'" as proposed by Ernst's OK Corral and repurposed as a mental health screening tool. This wellness program can be introduced

when students participate in college orientation and academic advising and will allow the college to take the mental health temperature of the institution. Simple survey assessments are already in place in medical settings to determine mental health issues as well as intimate partner violence, as instituted by the Centers for Disease Control (Basile, 2007; NHANES, 2008). OK Corral screenings can also be used under this banner by mental health professionals, academic advisors, and other qualified staff to help understand dysfunctional relationships in their institution and illuminate problem areas.

In turn, department chairpersons, academic advisors, campus resident directors, and other staff can use their understanding of the Karpman Drama Triangle and the Choy Winner's Triangle to steer students away from challenging dysfunctional relationships into more productive ones. They can do so by encouraging the growth of self-esteem, reforming bullying behavior, and educating students on self-care techniques to ensure that their boundaries are respected and all students feel they are on an equal footing. This can include a central 'Office of Wellness' spearheading this network of efforts with the phrase 'you are enough' as their guide. Currently, academic institutions do this piecemeal often around issues of sexual harassment/assault on college campuses (Amar, 2014). A patchwork approach is not effective, and these efforts need to include the entire campus community to ensure positive growth.

The third proposal, and the most ambitious, is to train faculty and staff who have daily contact with students on appropriate ways to model the Winner's Triangle to others. This includes setting boundaries, reforming bullying behavior, and creating support structures within their departments for vulnerable students so they can get the assistance they need without feeling victimized. Similar efforts have been made for GLTIQ students under the auspices of Safe Space/Safe Zone training (HRC Foundation). Instructors are the primary contact that students have with an academic institution, so it is imperative that they engage in Winner's Triangle behavior to ensure student functionality. This change will allow students to be consistently successful in their lives and careers by teaching them to foster relationships that serve their interests in an appropriate manner. The adjustments made in interactions also benefit academic institutions by allowing them to easily reach their organizational goals in a more functional framework. The Winner's Triangle actively benefits more individuals on a regular basis as compared to the model that is prone to dysfunction and fosters academic burnout while failing to meet the needs of students in an effective manner. There are many cases in which a change in mental perspective would have prevented a crisis from occurring or being so widespread. In 2017, the University of Rochester became embroiled in a sexual harassment scandal. A professor

in the Brain and Cognitive Sciences Department was accused of sexual harassment spanning eleven years and at least sixteen victims. The formal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint, which was over a hundred pages in length, detailed the systemic harassment by the professor and the cover-up of bad behavior by administrators. This follows the Karpman Drama Triangle in many ways. The victims feel less than others and keep their victimization secret until the evidence of impropriety becomes overwhelming. The institution plays the role of persecutor, admonishing the victims for their own victimization and praising the professor in question. Some faculty members come to the rescue but cannot provide the proper support and lose their academic positions or have their reputations smeared. In the aftermath of the scandal, some faculty and administrators tarnished by the association resigned, a sexual harassment lawsuit was settled for $9.4 million, and the accused professor remains employed at the college, cleared of wrongdoing by the college's investigation (Pauly, 2017; Peace, 2017; Scoles, 2017; Wadman, 2020). The dysfunction at the University of Rochester has not abated, with sexual violence complaints increasing by 129% in 2019, just two years after the EEOC complaint became public (Mickey, 2021). At institutions where Drama Triangle behavior is predominant, larger issues such as misconduct, criminality, and abuse become more common as the dysfunction spreads unchecked. This demonstrates a systemic issue

in need of a systemic solution that addresses the root causes of such impropriety.

Conclusion

In higher education, recognition of the Karpman Drama Triangle, The Choy Winner's Triangle, and Ernst's OK Corral is crucial in understanding dysfunctional relationships that can thrive in academic settings and how to move those relationships into more functional ones. In addition, support structures can be put in place on an administrative level to ensure that victimization, persecution, and rescuing are curtailed in much the same way that harassment and discrimination policies are used to neutralize negative behavior. This is crucial as one person can prevent a drama triangle or engage in dysfunctional activities to create one. When students, faculty, and staff learn to break out of dysfunctional relationships and are encouraged into more functional ones, it will improve overall academic excellence and prepare students for successful lives outside their academic institutions.

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