

Excerpted from *Healing with Language*  
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**The Drama Triangle**

*Preconceived Perceptual Frames* (PPFs), are set at a much deeper level [than context-based perceptual frames]. For this reason, PPFs are stronger, more pervasive, and more difficult to change. People often refer to their PPFs as their *issues* or *life scripts*. PPFs are determined by what are often called archetypal patterns and karmic or past-life experiences. They may also be set by *birth trauma*, and other childhood trauma, especially in the first seven years of life.

These PPFs are responsible for what is often called the *Drama Triangle*, developed by Dr. Steve Karpman in 1968 (“Fairy Tales and Script Drama Analysis.” *Transactional Analysis Bulletin*, 7:26, 39-43).

- **Archetypal Patterns.** The archetypal patterns in the Drama Triangle—the *Victim*, the *Persecutor* (the dragon), and the *Rescuer* (hero)—produce the principal PPFs.



These roles and their variants are based on energies from the lower three chakras: root, sacral, and solar plexus, and they also reflect roles developed during a child’s first few months of life, when the infant is helpless and dependent on his or her parents for nurturing and survival. Core issues take form during infancy.



Because that stage is both preverbal and prelocomotion, the child has only his or her emotions through which to process experience. Perceived lack seems to last forever because emotions are processed in the *amygdala*, a part of the brain that is fully formed at birth and the amygdala perceives everything as being in the *eternal now*.

An infant cannot yet use language to help understand time (“Mommy will be there in a minute”) and cannot yet conceive of space, so he or she has no way of knowing how far away a parent might be or that moving through space requires time.

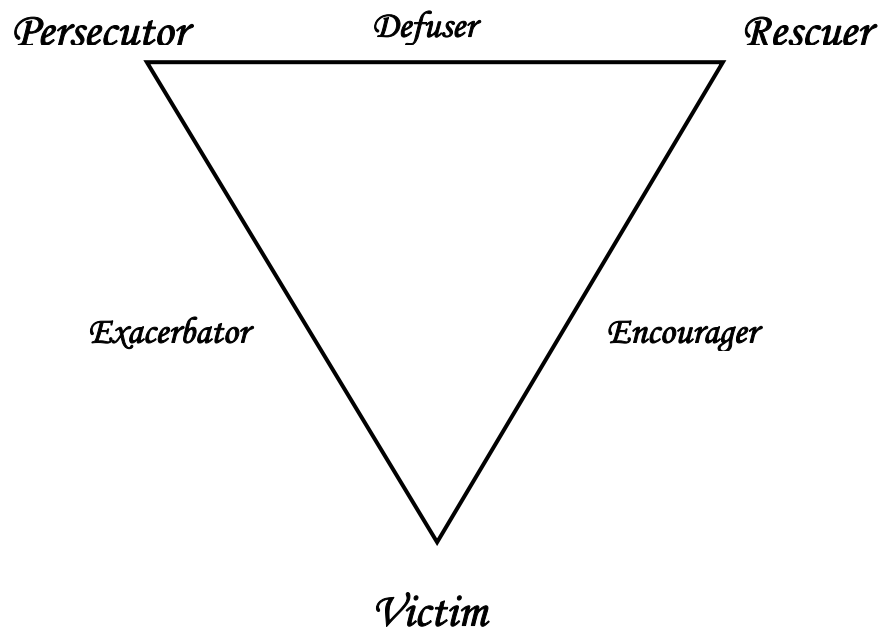
The *hippocampus*, the part of the brain that places experience in a context of time and space, however, is not

fully developed until a child is at least three or four years old. The infant perceives his or her caregivers are as good (Rescuer) or bad (Persecutor) depending on how and how quickly they meet his or her needs.

Additional archetypes are the social and interpersonal roles individuals play. Most of them are ancient and reflect or include one or more of the three basic archetypal patterns. Some are based on gender (husband, wife), and some are based on function (priest, prostitute, shaman, warrior, king, queen, and fool).

The following figure illustrates the Drama Triangle.

The Drama Triangle



In addition to the three main players on the Drama Triangle, each side of the triangle has a role that bridges between the functions. The Defuser attempts to reduce the conflict between the Rescuer and the Persecutor.

The Exacerbator attempts to amplify persecution and sense of victimization. The Encourager mediates between the Rescuer and the Victim, by attempting to persuade

the individual playing the role of Victim that he or she has the resources to rescue him- or herself.

Although the PPFs in the Drama Triangle are interrelated, the Victim is the central role. Without a Victim, neither the Persecutor nor the Rescuer can play his or her role. Each of us develops a preference for one of the roles, and it becomes the role we play most often. We also tend to have a favorite side of the Drama Triangle, and play the roles along that side more often than we do the others.



All of us, however, can and do play all the roles at one time or another. The Warrior, for example, may begin as a Rescuer who wants to save his or her homeland or right some terrible wrong. Because of the nature of war and battle, he or she may become a Persecutor. Finally, he or she may be betrayed and become a Victim.

- **Past Lives.** Whether you think of past lives as literal or as metaphorical, the experiences they represent, especially traumatic experiences, provide a long-lasting and pervasive influence on perceptual frames. We may, for example, have the sense of having been deceived previously, even without any actual deception in our personal history.

When we read novels or see movies, we over identify with characters who are being or have been deceived. We *feel* as though we have been deceived. As a result of that sense, we may consistently look for evidence of deception in our current life. This may be in interpersonal relationships, in business, or in more global contexts and may even involve extensive conspiracy theories.



- **Birth Trauma.** Whatever happens to the developing fetus, to a child during the birth process, and to him or her during the first few years of life can also greatly influence his or her PPF. Also, because children are born dependent and helpless, they are imprinted with the roles from the Drama Triangle early in life, seeing themselves as victims and their parents or other care providers as persecutors or rescuers, depending on when and how their needs are being met.

Based as it is on archetypal patterns, past life experiences, and birth trauma, the Drama Triangle is with us from birth. Childhood perceptions tend to be either/or: something is either good or bad.

Experiences through childhood and adolescence solidify those roles.



During early childhood in particular, the infant has neither language nor movement to facilitate interaction with the external environment, and he or she processes all sensory data as feelings only. Because time seems to stand still during feeling states, these early experiences are amplified by seeming to last an eternity. From the infant’s perspective, he or she cries *forever* before someone comes to help.

Once children begin to develop language and the ability to move, they begin developing a sense of time and the ability to make conscious choices about how best to solve problems, which leads to the development of the *Cognitive Triangle*.

### **The Cognitive Triangle**

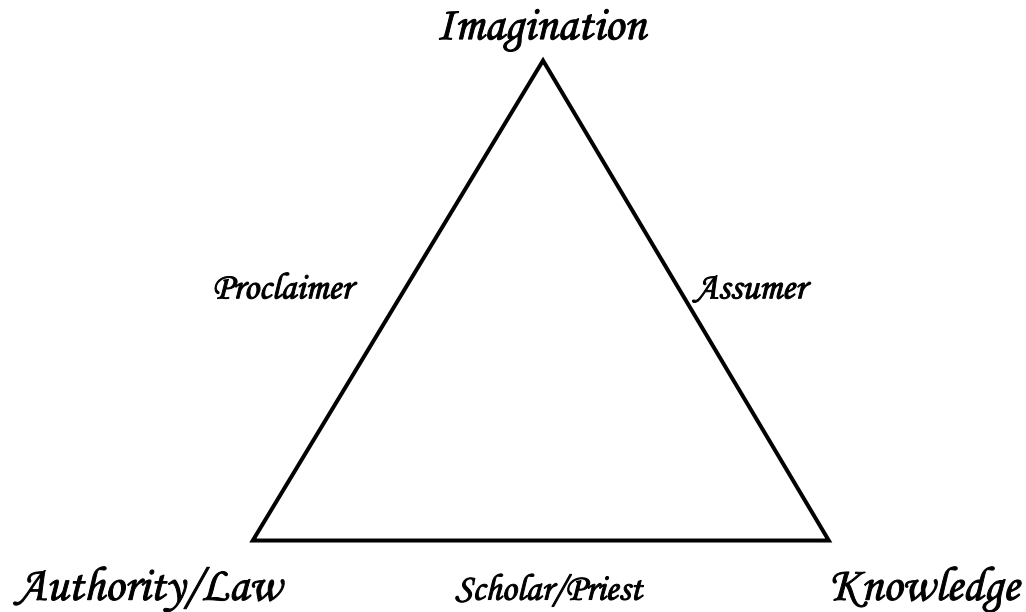
In addition to the Drama Triangle, which is ruled by the lower three chakras, we also have a Cognitive Triangle, which is ruled by the upper three chakras: throat, brow, and crown. The upper triangle is fueled by energy from the Imagination, just as the lower triangle is fueled by energy from the Victim.

The Cognitive Triangle is not totally separate from the Drama Triangle. Those playing roles on the Drama Triangle are not without cognition, and those on the Cognitive Triangle are not completely free from the fears and desires that drive behavior on the Drama Triangle.

The move from the one to the other is gradual. We learn to be more cognitive over time. Even so, just when we are feeling proud of how rational and cognitive we have become, a PPF will assert itself, and we’ll drop instantly into one of the roles on the Drama Triangle.

The following figure illustrates the Cognitive Triangle.

### The Cognitive Triangle



Imagination is the source of the ideas that provide the energy for the Cognitive Triangle. When imagination leads to investigation and discovery, it becomes Knowledge. When it leads to rules, it becomes Law.

As is true with the Drama Triangle, the three principal roles on the Cognitive Triangle have intermediary roles that bridge the characteristics of the others. The *Proclaimer* combines legalistic or religious Authority with Imagination and becomes the voice of the "Prophet Who Knows All."



The *Assumer* combines Imagination and Knowledge, while presupposing that his or her knowledge is not subject to deletions, distortions, or unwarranted generalization. The Assumer believes that his or her mental map is a completely accurate representation of the territory.

The *Scholar/Priest* combines Authority and Knowledge and lives by the *letter* of the law rather than the *spirit* or intent of the law.

The cognitive triangle begins to develop early in childhood, starting when a child is about 7 years old, and matures along with the individual, roughly corresponding with the development of the sacral and solar plexus chakras. The hippocampus has

developed by this point and provides the individual with more information based on context, allowing him or her to see a broader perspective. In addition to good and bad, black and white, the individual is beginning to see shades of gray.

Most individuals, however, remain motivated primarily by the dynamics of the Drama Triangle, because those issues are so deeply rooted. Also, the roles on the upper triangle support and reinforce the roles on the lower triangle.

Authority, for example, reinforces both the Persecutor and the Rescuer, and a person bridging between the lower triangle and the upper triangle from a position of Authority, plays the role of Enforcer. A person bridging between the upper triangle and the lower triangle from the position of Knowledge, plays the role of Savior.

Those playing a role on the Drama or Cognitive Triangle have forgotten that the map is not the territory.

Because of this interaction, the energy from the Cognitive Triangle can actually amplify the energy from the Drama Triangle. Individuals who are being motivated by the energies from the Drama and Cognitive Triangles do not recognize that they are, in fact, playing roles. In terms of their personal interactions, they have lost sight of the fact that the map is not the territory.

The roles on the upper triangle have a broader perspective than the roles on the Drama Triangle, but individuals playing those roles are still limited in their ability to recognize the ways in which the roles restrict their options.

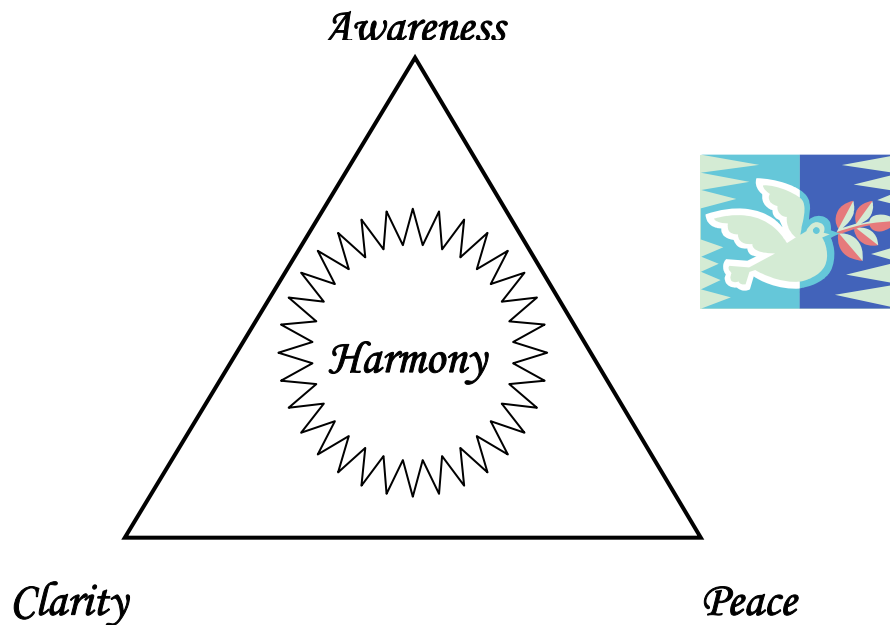
The roles on the Cognitive Triangle are governed by the intellect, and the intellect responds to rules. The ability to recognize the limitations of the roles on the Drama and Cognitive Triangles comes from the *Transrational Pyramid*.

### **The Transrational Pyramid**

The third “triangle” in the human psyche is actually a pyramid. The Transrational Pyramid is centered in the heart chakra. The roles on this triangle are *transrational* in the sense that they are beyond personality—they indicate a *meta state* in which *Awareness* of the context, of personal issues, of the thoughts and feelings of the others affected by the context combine with *Clarity* and *Peace* to produce a sense of *Harmony* with self, with the other, and with the universe as a whole.

The following figure illustrates the Transrational Pyramid.

## The Transrational Pyramid



Energy on the Transrational Pyramid allows the individual to step out of any of the roles on the Drama and Cognitive triangles and become an observer. The observer’s perspective is both caring and disinterested (without bias or judgment). The observer is free of attachment, neither fearing nor desiring a specific outcome, but wanting only what is usually called the *Highest Good* for all.

As is true for the shift from the Drama Triangle to the Cognitive Triangle, the shift from the Cognitive Triangle to the Transrational Pyramid is gradual as the individual learns that the real battles are all within, and that others are merely reflecting the issues he or she needs to work on. Those who have reached this level are able to *trust the process* of their own development and to *accept and love what is* because it is part of the All That Is.

That doesn’t mean that they have given up playing an active role in causes and activities they think are beneficial. It just means that they do so from a more peaceful and less judgmental perspective.

### Identifying Roles

Because the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with roles on the Drama and Cognitive Triangles are below the level of conscious awareness, it is easy for individuals to succumb to the

lure of a familiar role without recognizing its limitations and without even being consciously aware that they are playing a role. In most cases, when you are feeling afraid, angry, or both, you are playing a role from the Drama or Cognitive Triangle. Virtually every argument you will have is fueled by the energy from the Drama and Cognitive Triangles.

The roles on both the Drama Triangle and the Cognitive Triangle tend to operate below the level of conscious awareness. When people tell their stories about how this or that happened to them or how they did this or that to help or get even with someone, they reveal the roles that they prefer playing.

One of the first steps in identifying roles from the Drama and Cognitive Triangles is to recognize the way in which language signifies the role being played and which chakras are involved. The language for the bridging roles will reflect the main roles on which they are based.

Also, in most cases, roles from the Drama and Cognitive Triangles combine, and the language used will reflect that. The Victim role, for example, may combine with Imagination, which then amplifies the individual’s sense of how bad things can be, or it may combine with Authority/Law or Knowledge to show why things are so awful or to prove that things will get worse.

### Drama Triangle

- **Victim.** I can’t..., you won’t..., This always happens to me....
- **Persecutor.** You always..., you never..., You must..., If you know what’s good for you, you will....
- **Rescuer.** You can count on me..., Let me help you..., Let me do that for you.
- **Defuser.** It’s not that bad..., He didn’t mean it that way..., Let her do it for herself....
- **Exacerbator.** You’re right; she had no business doing that..., You think that’s bad, wait until you hear this....
- **Encourager.** You can do it..., You’ve faced more serious problems before..., It’s always darkest just before the dawn....

### Cognitive Triangle

- **Imagination.** It’s possible..., I have a dream..., Someday..., Things always go from bad to worse....



- **Authority/Law.** It’s the right thing to do..., The Bible says..., Change your oil every 3,000 miles....
- **Knowledge.** History demonstrates..., Shakespeare said..., According to Newton..., The last time this happened, 20,000 people died....
- **Proclaimer.** Jesus loves you..., Love is the answer..., Global warming will make our lives miserable....
- **Assumer.** Your only choice..., I know what you are thinking..., You did it on purpose....
- **Scholar/Priest.** St. Paul said that the wages of sin are death..., Freud proved that *Moses* was the name for a type of priest and not a single individual....

### Going Meta: Recognizing and Changing PPFs



Viewing life through a PPF often results in *unconscious communication patterns*. The players in the Drama and Cognitive Triangles forget that they are playing roles. Stepping above the current situation—as though you were in the audience watching the movie—is often called *going meta*. This is what the shaman does: He or she steps outside the particular space and time of the context and looks at universals, sees the roles that people are playing, and rewrites the script.

Such expressions as “I can’t get a grip on things,” or “I can’t get a handle on things,” are indications of needing to get above the current situation. The universal quantifiers (*always, never, all, every*) and other absolutes (*have to, must, can’t*) also indicate an unconscious communication loop based on a PPF.

Whenever you are attached to a particular outcome, you are playing a role on the Drama or the Cognitive Triangle. Playing a role limits your perspective to that of the role you are playing.

When we are playing one of the roles on either the Drama or Cognitive Triangle, we are attached to an outcome. *Going meta* requires that we recognize that the PPF and the energy of the Drama and Cognitive Triangles are showing us something about ourselves, rather than about the others involved. You can think in terms of the Highest Good only when you step outside of the role. The key is recognizing that the emotion (primarily anger or fear) is *generated within the role*.

When you step outside the role, you leave the anger and fear of the role behind and can ask the question about whether you are doing a good job of playing the role.

When a person feels trapped in a role, a submodality shift occurs in which the field of vision narrows or the perspective changes. The person may actually be able to “see” less, or he or she may view things through the eyes of a previous personality or a particular “part.”

When a person “becomes” a wounded child, for example, he or she views others and the external environment from the child’s perspective. In communicating with the wounded child, however, it is important to remember that the Victim may be behaving emotionally like a child, but he or she still filters everything you say and do through an adult intellect. Communication needs to meet the needs of both the adult intellect and the wounded child.

**When one person stops playing the game, the other person may escalate his or her insistence that the game continue. He or she may actually end the relationship to find a new person who is willing to “play.”**

While we can’t force another person to change, we can become aware of where and how we “go unconscious” in the communication process and enter the Drama or Cognitive Triangle, participating in the unconscious communication pattern. With that recognition, you can learn to modify your own behavior so that you can escape the pattern.

When you escape the pattern, you also help the other person escape. The patterns have been called *games* because it takes two to “play.”

Someone who is fully trapped in a role may insist on having a partner who is willing to play a complementary role. Persecutors need Victims who need Rescuers. A person can’t play the Victim role without a corresponding Persecutor and/or Rescuer.

The most important therapy is self-therapy. Some tools for changing PPFs and developing the skills for going meta to the Drama and Cognitive Triangles include spirit release, soul retrieval, and perceptual frame integration.