



The Three-Cornered Contract

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SECTION II: MENTAL HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS

THE THREE-CORNERED CONTRACT

Fanita English, M.S.W.

Many transactional analysts are invited by outside groups for lectures, demonstrations or workshops. Often the arrangements are made by organizers, who make one contract with the TA person and another, separate, contract with the participants. When I make such arrangements, I seek to anticipate all possible problems in establishing a clear contract about money, time and program.

Audiences and workshop participants tend to have unrealistic expectations, a tendency of the human Child. But in addition to this standard phenomenon I have often experienced, when in front of a particular group which has contracted with another party for my appearance, various additional and mutually contradictory expectations by the participants based on subtle promises that have been made deliberately or unknowingly at the time of registration. This situation opens the door for all kinds of generalized brown stamps which float around or suddenly surface indirectly from some participants who thereby poison the atmosphere for everybody.

As an antidote I have found it very useful to start workshops that are contracted for with a third party by teaching what I call "The three-cornered contract." I draw a triangle, putting the organizers at the apex, the participants and myself at the other two ends, as shown in figure 1. I point out that each one of us has a contract with the organizers, whom I identify as "the great powers," but that we really don't have a



Figure 1. The three-cornered contract.

contract with each other. Nevertheless, here we are facing each other, so now we need *our* two-party contract for what's going to happen between us during the next x number of hours. I spell out my understanding of what I have been hired for and check out with the participants about their understanding of what they came for. Sometimes I make two separate columns on the blackboard to list their realistic expectations in one column and their fantasy expectations in another and I particularly encourage the expression of fantasy expectations in order to be able to clarify what *won't* be met. Often we jokingly list brown stamps right at the beginning as though this were already the end of the workshop. There can be a good bit of Child-Child fun around this, and from there we move to a discussion of contracts in TA practice, and often on to a discussion of the Karpman Triangle¹ in showing how the three-cornered contract might move us along a sequence of roles

ending with one of us feeling Victimized. We contract that this will *not* happen, and we establish how it can be avoided without our ending as Persecutors either — even if we discover that the great powers were not absolutely realistic initially.

In addition to myself a large number of my trainees have used this concept and reported excellent results.

Fanita English, M.S.W., is both a Teaching Member and Trustee of the ITAA and is the Director of the Eastern Institute for TA and Gestalt in Philadelphia.

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