Life Script Theory: A Critical Review From A Developmental Perspective

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Abstract

Script theory is examined and expanded from the perspective of contemporary developmental research and theory. Each major script theorist is reviewed and critiqued. Script, as a comprehensive theory presented in most of the TA literature, is found to be overly reductionistic and insufficiently attentive to the formative factors in healthy psychological development.

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Great literature has always provided a balance to the lopsided preoccupation of psychological science with pathology.... In contrast to the reductionism of science, the model of great literature often enlists an interactionist, longitudinal perspective and seeks to illuminate the myriad forces at work within and without an individual. A novelist would never diminish his protagonist with a finite label. (Felsman & Vaillant, 1987, p. 303)

Shortly before his death, Eric Berne (1972), using the analogy of a piano player, wondered if he was actually playing the piano or if he was mostly sitting there while a piano roll determined the tune.

As for myself, I know not whether I am still run by a music roll or not. If I am, I wait with interest and anticipation—and without apprehension—for the next notes to unroll their melody, and for the harmony and discord after that. Where will I go next? In this case my life is meaningful because I am following the long and glorious tradition of my ancestors, passed on to me by my parents, music perhaps sweeter than I could compose myself. Certainly I know that there are large areas where I am free to improvise.

It may even be that I am one of the few fortunate people on earth who has cast off the shackles entirely and who calls his own tune. In that case I am a brave improviser facing the world alone. (pp. 276-277)

This frank and poignant personal observation is filled with fascinating contradictions and implications. Berne's comments seem to reflect his own conflicts about personal autonomy versus the authority of life script, true individual creativity versus the expression of family tradition, and the satisfactions of personal freedom versus the aloneness of autonomy. The conflict between individual expression and family and societal pressure are apparent throughout Berne's writings.

However, Berne never resolved these conflicts, even though his theory of scripts evolved over time. I think these conflicts remain, undermining the clarity and coherence of script theory and our practice as transactional analysts today. Some eighteen years after Berne's death, the music roll remains the binding image and dilemma in our efforts to conceptualize the nature of life script and to translate those conceptualizations into effective educational and clinical techniques.

What is the nature and function of life script? What are the clinical implications of the script model TA therapists present to themselves and their clients? Although transactional analysts pay careful attention to the "scripty" beliefs and behaviors of clients, do they give equal attention to their own beliefs about script, about the coherence and validity of TA script theory? Does script theory hold up under the scrutiny of developmental theories and research or other theoretical perspectives?

In this paper some key developmental perspectives are reviewed and summarized after which the ideas of major TA script

theorists are examined in light of developmental theory and research. Finally, a conceptualization of the evolution and function of the life script process is offered.

An Overview of Selected Developmental Theories

Developmental theorists attempt to delineate human development as a definable and predictable sequence of "stages," with earlier stages providing a foundation for later evolution. Whether studying cognitive, affective, social, moral, linguistic, or behavioral development, simpler levels of functioning *develop* into more complex and highly organized forms of psychological organization and function.

Freud. Within the psychodynamic perspective, Freud presented the first developmental theory. Although his work has had a pervasive and lasting impact on the clinical understanding of human development, recently his ideas have begun to yield to current developmental research. Freud (1938/1949) stated unequivocally that "neuroses are only acquired during early childhood (up to the age of six), even though their symptoms may not make their appearance until much later.... The events of the first years are of paramount importance for ... [a child's] whole subsequent life" (p. 83). Freud's (1917/1938) conceptualization of the oral, anal, Oedipal, phallic, and genital stages of psychosexual development was the first formal effort to delineate the evolution of psychological and emotional maturation. Freud's ideas were the product of his psychoanalytic reconstruction of childhood from his clinical practice and theoretical assumptions. His emphasis, and a lasting emphasis in the psychodynamic literature, was on the clinical and pathological implications of "fixation" at any one stage.

Erikson. Erik Erikson (1963), in probably the best known and most widely accepted developmental scheme, significantly altered Freud's model by shifting from a psychosexual focus, with its emphasis on libidinal cathexis, to a psychosocial orientation that attempts to incorporate societal and interpersonal influences in human evolution. Erikson's stages of development reach into adult life. His work opened the developmental perspective to a recognition of social, cultural, and historical forces that influence the developing child's construction of reality. There is great vitality in his account of human development. For Erikson (1968), periods of developmental crisis are as likely opportunities for new growth as occasions of overadaptation and acquiescence.

My first introduction to current developmental research was *Adaptation to Life* by George Vaillant (1977). The book was simultaneously exciting and disturbing. Vaillant presented vivid case studies and substantial data which indicated that the evolution of an individual's psychological construction of reality was anything but linear and certainly not cemented to the dynamics of the nuclear family. This material raised major questions about the validity of TA script theory and was the beginning of a review of the developmental literature that has culminated in this paper. The brief overview of developmental theories presented here stresses those based on direct, longitudinal studies rather than on clinical theorizing about development derived from adult psychopathology and psychotherapy.

Chess and Thomas. The work of Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas involved long-term studies of normal children, "high-risk" children and families, and children with physical handicaps. Their work presents compelling evidence of the resilience and plasticity of the psyche:

> The deaf child, the blind child, the motorically handicapped child—each can find a developmental pathway consonant with his capacities and limitations, thanks to the plasticity of the brain. By the same token, the environmentally handicapped child is not inevitably doomed to an inferior and abnormal psychological course. Whether the handicap comes from social ideology, poverty, a pathological family environment, or stressful life experiences, the plastic potential of the brain offers the promise for positive and corrective change. This central human potential for plasticity and learning bears directly on a number of issues in developmental theory—the significance of early life experiences, continuity-discontinuity over time, and sequential patterning of developmental stages. (Thomas & Chess, 1980, p. 28)

Chess and Thomas (1984, p. 293) conclude

without equivocation that simple, linear prediction from early childhood through later childhood, adolescence, and adulthood is not supported by research data. Furthermore, they challenge the reliability of a causal explanation based on clinical reconstruction of childhood from adult problems.

Instead, Chess and Thomas emphasize the importance of the individual child's temperament and capabilities and the "goodness of fit" or the "poorness of fit" with that child's family, social, and school environment. They (1984, 1986) describe psychological development as occurring in a "biosocial matrix," an ongoing, continuous, and *dynamic* interaction of the biological and the social. Their research demonstrates convincingly that significant change can occur at any time in the course of development: "The evolving child-environment interactional process was affected by many emerging unanticipated influences—changes in basic function, new talents, new environmental opportunities or stresses, changes in family structure or attitudes, and possible late emerging genetic factors" (Thomas & Chess, 1980, pp. 103-104).

Chess and Thomas emphasize the importance for future psychological health of the child's development of "task mastery" and "social competence." Using weaning and toilet training as examples, typical Freudian (and script) theory tends to emphasize the experience of loss and frustration. In contrast, Chess and Thomas view these developmental transitions as steps in social competence and task mastery, noting the potential for achievement and satisfaction as well as for loss or frustration.

Vaillant. Adaptation to Life by George Vaillant (1977) was also based on longitudinal study. It summarized the Harvard Grant Study in which 95 Harvard University students were tested and interviewed intensively during college and then followed systematically for 30 years. Vaillant emphasized the evolution and function of ego defense mechanisms in relation to psychological and interpersonal health and psychopathology.

There is striking congruence between Vaillant's view of defense mechanisms as "adaptive styles" or "coping strategies" and the functional, adaptive intent of script decisions as described in TA theory. Unlike Freud, Vaillant (1977) emphasized not the intrapsychic

meaning of defense mechanisms, but "discussing defenses as actual behaviors, affects, and ideas which serve defensive purposes" (p. 7).

However, Vaillant's account of defense mechanisms and their development is far richer and more complex than that evident in the writing of most script theorists. Vaillant disputed the Freudian emphasis on fixation and maintained that there are many corrective experiences in the course of an individual's development and many pathways to health throughout childhood and adult life. He observed that dysfunctional thinking and relating in adulthood is "rarely the fault of any one person or event, for in human development, it is the sustained emotional trauma, not the sudden insult, that does the most lasting damage to the human spirit. No single childhood factor accounted for happiness or unhappiness at fifty" (Vaillant, 1977, p. 197).

Like Chess and Thomas, Vaillant argued vigorously against linear, causal linkages between childhood experience and adult life. He concluded in his 1977 book that "successful careers and satisfying marriages were relatively independent of unhappy childhoods" (p. 300), and that "the life cycle is more than an invariant sequence of stages with simple predictable outcomes. The men's lives were full of surprises, and the Grant Study provides no prediction tables" (p. 373).

The most relevant of Vaillant's (1977) conclusions for the reconsideration of script theory are: reconstructed, retrospective explanations are fraught with distortions; isolated traumas in childhood rarely have significant impact in adulthood; adaptive (defensive) patterns change both in childhood and adulthood; psychological evolution is often discontinuous; those judged initially to have the "worst" childhoods did not always have the "worst" adult lives; and significant, close adult relationships (spouse, friends, psychotherapist) had major influences on improved quality of life. Thus the Harvard Grant Study offers further evidence of the remarkable resilience, plasticity, and unpredictability of the human psyche.

It is also important to note the work of Robert Jay Lifton (1983a, 1983b) and Robert Coles (1986a, 1986b), both of whom, while not writing specifically from a developmental perspective, based their work on the direct observation of nonclinical populations. The

work of both Lifton and Coles is rich with implications that can expand and enliven the concept of script. They have described the yearning of the human mind to *find* and *give* meaning to life, often in the face of severe deprivation or tragedy. In *The Political Life of Children*, Coles (1986b) observed:

> And, very important, a boy demonstrates evidence of moral development, a capacity for ethical reflection, even though both at home and at school he has been given scant encouragement to regard either migrants or Indians with compassion.... Children ingeniously use every scrap of emotional life available to them in their "psychosexual development," and they do likewise as they try to figure out how (and for whom) the world works. (p. 41)

Additional Developmental Theorists. It is not possible in this paper to adequately review all developmental theorists. Maslow (1954, 1962) studied primarily healthy, achieving individuals and delineated his developmental hierarchy of needs and a major theory of human motivation. Wilson (1972) provided an excellent summary of Maslow's work in the context of a critique of Freudian psychology. Piaget (1977) addressed the most basic question of "how do people know" through his direct studies of children's evolving patterns of cognition and other studies of forms of knowledge. His was an interactionist perspective—viewing the child as an active agent engaged with the environment in his or her own learning. More recently Kagan (1984) extended the study of cognitive development. Kohlberg (1984) researched moral development in children and delineated six sequential stages of morality. Kegan (1982) suggested a developmental theory that is of particular significance in relation to TA script theory. He attempted to integrate a psychodynamic perspective with the work of Piaget and Kohlberg. Central to Kegan's perspective is the ongoing and increasingly complex "meaning-making" in the child's endeavor to comprehend the world and give form to it. Gilligan (1982) challenged the pervasive influence of the masculine perspective in developmental theories stressing individuation and autonomy and argued persuasively for the recognition of the role of caring and relatedness in human development. Loevinger (1976) addressed ego

development, defining the essence of ego function as the striving to master, to integrate, and to make sense of experience. Stern (1985), after years of direct observation of infants, characterized infant development as a creative, highly interactive process. Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (1975) described pre-Oedipal development in the infant and toddler's relationship to the mother. In his most recent book, Pine (1985), in contrast to most developmental researchers, writes,

> I find it impossible not to think in terms of the events of the months and years until, say, age three as a primary determinant of psychological functioning.... All have, I believe, not only their origins, but a substantial degree of their final form established in this period. (p.4)

While the developmentalists have addressed the nature and problems of human growth from various perspectives, most would agree that it is an interactive, creative, ever-changing process. Most agree that parents are not the exclusive, or even primary, source for a child's construction of reality or coping mechanisms. Most would agree, especially those who have engaged in long-term longitudinal studies, that significant growth and change can occur at any time of life. As Chess and Thomas (1984) conclude:

> As the field of developmental studies has matured, we now have to give up the illusion that once we know the young child's psychological history, subsequent personality and functioning are *ipso facto* predictable. On the other hand, we now have a much more optimistic vision of human development. (p. 293)

Summary and Critique of Major Script Theorists

Berne. Beginning with *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy*, Berne (1961) offered this description of the nature and function of script:

> Games appear to be segments of larger, more complex sets of transactions called *scripts.* Scripts belong in the realm of transference phenomena, that is, they are derivatives, or more precisely, adaptations, of infantile reactions and experiences. But a script does not deal with

a mere transference reaction or transference situation; it is an attempt to repeat in derivative form a whole transference drama, often split up into acts, exactly like the theatrical scripts which are intuitive artistic derivatives of these primal dramas of childhood. Operationally, a script is a complex set of transactions, by nature recurrent, but not necessarily recurring, since a complete performance may require a whole lifetime. (p. 116)

Since the dominant influence in social intercourse is the script, and since that is derived and adapted from a protocol based on early experiences of the individual with his parents, those experiences are the chief determinants of every engagement and of every choice of associates. This is a more general statement than the familiar transference theory which it brings to mind because it applies to any engagement whatsoever in any social aggregation whatsoever; that is, to any transaction or series of transactions which is not completely structured by external reality.

While every human being faces the world initially as the captive of his script, the great hope and value of the human race is that the Adult can be dissatisfied with such strivings when they are unworthy. (pp. 125-126)

Thus, from the beginning script was cast in a highly deterministic mode. Script is a "household drama," with neurotic, psychotic, and psychopathic scripts viewed as "almost always tragic." Script is viewed as the projection and reenactment of an elaborate transference phenomenon.

Berne was certainly a strong advocate for the intelligence and dignity of the individual in psychotherapy. He seemed at times to be very confident of a person's capacity to change. He wrote in *Principles of Group Treatment*, "Every human being is born a prince or a princess: early experiences convince some that they are frogs, and the rest of the pathological development follows from this" (Berne, 1966, pp. 289-290). For Berne (1966), transactional treatment "aims at getting well, or 'cure,' which means to cast off the frog skin and take up once more the interrupted development of

the prince or princess" (p. 290). But how readily can a person cast off the frog skin and recreate a healthy life? Not easily, Berne implied; it was he who introduced the images of witches, ogres, and implanted script electrodes into the language of script theory, a language that suggests the individual is more a product than a producer of script.

Five years after *Principles*, Berne (1970) wrote in *Sex in Human Loving*:

Man is born free, but one of the first things he learns is to do as he is told, and he spends the rest of his life doing that. Thus his first enslavement is to his parents. He follows their instructions forevermore, retaining only in some cases the right to choose his own methods and consoling himself with the illusion of autonomy.... In order to break away from such script programs, he must stop and think. But he cannot think about his programming unless he first gives up the illusion of autonomy. He must realize that he has not been up to now the free agent he likes to imagine he is, but rather the puppet of some Destiny from generations ago. Few people have the courage or elasticity to turn around and stare down the monkeys on their backs, and the older they get, the stiffer their backs become. (p. 168)

Berne's personal optimism seemed to collapse under the weight of a deterministic sense of destiny; he even capitalized destiny and offered "The Psychology of Human Destiny" as the subtitle of his 1972 book, *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?* For Berne, the process of individuation seemed a courageous exception rather than the natural, common process it is presented to be in the developmental literature.

Much of the literature on development referred to earlier did not exist when Berne was evolving script theory. However, the work of Erikson, Piaget, and Maslow did exist, but does not seem to have influenced Berne's thinking about human development. Like many clinicians, Berne became possessed by the effort to understand psychopathology. He lost track of health. This is a criticism to be made of many clinically oriented theorists. Felsman and Vaillant (1987) emphasize, "Clinical language rarely includes the process of healthy

adaptation. What is healthy and going well is often overlooked and obscured in the shadow of illness'' (p. 302).

By the time he wrote the material later compiled for *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?*, Berne had given the developing child more choice and authorship in his or her script, but it was still a tale dominated by family drama, parents, grandparents, and intergenerational transmissions. In *Hello*, script was defined as ''a life plan based on a decision made in childhood, reinforced by the parents, justified by subsequent events, and culminating in a chosen alternative'' (Berne, 1972, p. 446). One wonders about the children Berne described—did they ever change their minds, did their parents ever change, did they have friends, a neighborhood, a culture? There is little sense of excitement and no sense of serendipity in the world as Berne described it.

Berne (1972) wrote that ''the first script programming takes place during the nursing period, in the form of short protocols which can later be worked into complicated dramas'' (p. 83), for which Berne provided a lengthy, rather nasty list of ''breast-fed titles.''

Berne's image of the helpless, needy, dependent infant, forever attached to and programmed by mother and family through a literal or symbolic umbilicus, does not hold up in light of current research. Rather, it introduces a severe and inaccurate bias to the foundation for a theory of script formation. For example, according to Chess and Thomas (1984):

> Two striking characteristics of the child's behavior in the first weeks of life are his interest in manipulatory-exploratory behavior and the active social exchange with his caretakers.... Along these lines, we have suggested that the primary adaptive goals of the neonate and young infant, for which he is biologically equipped, can be conceptualized as the development of social relations and the mastery of skills and tasks—i.e., social competence and task mastery. (p. 16)

The observations of Chess and Thomas are verified and extended by the research of Daniel Stern (1985). Stern's conclusions are based on direct observation of infant behavior; he delineated numerous contradictions between psychoanalytic literature on the therapeutical-ly ''reconstructed clinical infant'' and research on the actual ''observed infant.'' Current developmental research strongly suggests that infants influence and shape their parents as much as their parents shape them. Perhaps even more important is awareness of the child's mastery and evolving competence, an idea central to developmental theory but seriously lacking in Berne's description of script formation. The forces of submission and compromise override the experience of mastery in Berne's writing.

Although Berne did not work specifically within a developmental frame of reference, he offered his most thorough account of psychological evolution in *Hello*. He portrays, in essence, progressive acquiescence. Maturity, for Berne, brings the mortgage, literally and symbolically. He wrote, ''During the periods of maturity, the dramatic nature of the script is brought into full flower.... In fact, all struggles in life are struggles to move around the [Drama] triangle in accordance with the demands of script'' (Berne, 1972, pp. 186-187). What of the struggles between adults that result in individuation and autonomy? What of the struggles that result in the resolution of problems, in deeper understanding and attachment between people, and in sustained love and individual differentiation? If Berne's vision of maturity is accurate for most people, it seems Peter Pan and all perpetual children made logical and compelling choices.

Berne acknowledged the existence of winners, but wrote little about them, and he thought even winners were the product of more affirming and more productive parental programming and permission. Sprietsma (1978), writing from a treatment perspective, took a closer look at the ''winner's script'' and offered a diagram and language that elaborated on the concept of a winner. Although he did not challenge the concept of a ''winner's script'' theoretically, Sprietsma offered a useful clinical approach.

Allen and Allen (1972) emphasized factors outside the family sphere that can be crucial variables in a child's evolving script. Based on clinical experience, the Allens delineated a developmental sequence of eight permissions that enhance a person's ''readiness'' to interact with an ever-widening world. Their article represented a significant widening of the world of script theory. Most current developmental

presentation of a literal hierarchy of development. For example, their "last" permission is that of "finding life meaningful," although it seems clear that children are busy virtually from the start *making* life meaningful. It is the making which the Allens (1987) emphasize in a more recent article.

Groder (cited in Barnes, 1977, p. 20) repeated Berne's observation that there seems to be a self that is "script free," and noted that Berne was not very articulate on the subject. While suggesting that there can be healthy scripts or script-free health, Berne never fully explored the question, and it remains unanswered by subsequent script theorists.

In Berne's view, nearly all the force of the vectors in psychological development is from the parents (sometimes grandparents and other authority figures) *toward* the child. For Berne, the child may have some limited range of choice in the face of the forces that impinge upon him or her, but the child is by and large restricted and formed by these forces. What Berne comes to characterize as the very nature of script is often reflected in the psychological systems of severely dysfunctional families, but it is not the essential nature of script. Both the literature and clinical experience demonstrate that in severely dysfunctional families (especially those that isolate themselves from normal social interaction), a child's range of choice and expression may be drastically restricted. For example, a recent collection of articles on "resilient children" (Anthony & Cohler, 1987) vividly describes the debilitating impact of living with psychotic, neglectful, impoverished, or abusive parents. However, these articles also examine and describe the factors outside of the family and within the child's own style of coping that support resilience and health. These factors are not adequately addressed in Berne's theories of script.

In Berne's thinking there was an overwhelming sense of self-limiting adaptation and little sense of self-enhancing adaptation. There was even less sense of the child's ability to influence his or her parents and childhood environment. Although it is often striking in clinical work to note the tenacity with which people cling to patterns of "scripty" adaptation, this tenacity is not always motivated by some fearful or defiant resistance, but often by the pride and satisfaction of mastery, of self-expression, of

having solved a difficult life dilemma with some degree of success. There is virtually no accounting in Berne's writing for this experience of mastery and individuation in script formation or in the maintenance of styles of adaptation in adulthood.

Steiner. Steiner, too, seems to suggest a preponderance of conflictual compromise in the formation of script; he presents the developing child as victim to negative family and social environments. However, Steiner does give far more importance than Berne did to the social, cultural, and economic forces that influence a child's developing sense of self, autonomy, and possibility. Although a strong and eloquent advocate of individual rights and dignity, his theory of script does little to challenge the deterministic and reductionistic underpinnings of Berne's approach. Steiner (1974, p. 19) even attributed Berne's death to the influence of a life script that called for an early death of a broken heart.

Steiner's (1974) definition of script is as follows:

> The script is based on a decision made by the Adult in the young person who, with all of the information at their disposal at the time, decides that a certain position, expectations, and life course are a reasonable solution to the existential predicament in which she finds herself. Her predicament comes from the conflict between her own autonomous tendencies and the injunction received from her primary family group.
>
> The most important influence or pressure impinging upon the youngster originates from the parental Child. . . . That is, the Child ego states of the parents of the person are the main determining factors in the formation of scripts. (p. 55)

Steiner (1971, 1974) developed the script matrix, an elegant clinical tool and a major contribution to TA. The matrix, along with the three stacked ego state circles and the Drama Triangle (Karpman, 1968), provides a central image in transactional analysis. As a therapeutic tool, it is clear and impactful. As a central element in theory, however, it is restrictive and deterministic, placing much too much power within the nuclear family, with the ego states of the parents drawn above the child, script

messages literally descending on the child. Since its introduction, numerous variations on the script matrix have been presented in the TA literature, although there has been little challenge to its theoretical limitations.

For example, in the script matrix the central emphasis on the nuclear family does a disservice to our understanding of the range of factors that significantly influence human development. Even limiting the image of the script matrix to the nuclear family, it would be more accurately drawn as shown in Figure 1.
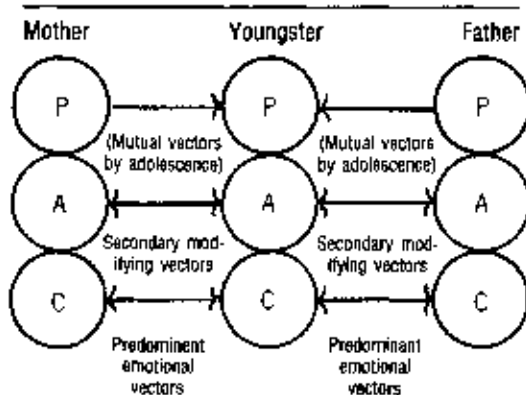

Figure 1
Mutual Vectors in Script Development

The concept of script and the images used to represent it need to include the active influence of the developing child upon the environment. Both Berne's and Steiner's conceptualizations of script are embedded in Oedipal theory and Freudian assumption, with little acknowledgement of the curiosity, spontaneity, and expressiveness of childhood. Neither children nor adults create psychological organization primarily around negative messages and experiences in childhood, as suggested by Berne and Steiner.

Levin. Within the TA literature, Levin has made a strong effort to present a developmental perspective. Ironically, however, of all the script theorists, Levin's accounting is the most deterministic. According to her:

> We record our entire personal history in our ego states. The way we were as children doesn't go away when we get older. It remains a dynamic part of us, motivating our current experiences. If we didn't get what we needed as children, we continue to seek it symbolically

through dramatic scenes enacted in the here-and-now. The scenes are taken from our "script," our personal story or collections of early decisions and unmet needs, now long forgotten. We continue to use them to program our current experiences, even without being aware of them. Scripts represent our attempts to get needs met which were not met originally. When we play out our script as grown-ups, we act in ways which are symbolic of the original unsatisfactory childhood experience. Thus, script behavior is predetermined. We are controled by yesterday, as if we were haunted by demons or hunted by witches. (Levin, 1985, pp. 29-30)

Levin (1985) describes infancy (birth to six months) as "Stage One: Being the Natural Child," and characterizes it as follows:

> The events of the first six months of our lives are crucial to all the rest of our development. The way we experience our existence for the rest of our lives is largely determined by the foundation we create while we are still helpless. Our first basic "set" or program is the building block upon which we support all our later developmental experiences and decisions. This is our basic position in life, our OKness, our right to be taking up space in the physical plane. It is our basic existential position. All the experiences from which we derive our first program are recorded in ego states which we call the Natural Child. They are on film and on file in each of us, a personal documentary of how we each arrive at our basic life position. (pp. 60-61)

This description of infancy and the establishment of a basic existential life position is not only in contradiction to the research on infant and child development, it is inconsistent with Berne's own conceptualization of the basic life position, which he saw as a phenomenon of later psychological development. Levin's emphasis on script as an effort to get "un-met" needs "met" and on needs as the primary focus of therapy distorts and severely limits our understanding of both pathological and healthy human development. A comprehensive theory of the evolution of self and script must attend to the influence of wants, desire, excitement,

hopes, dreams, chance, and culture.

In *Cycles of Power*, Levin (1980) acknowledges that "Repeating the stages of development implies that we naturally change, advance and mature even though we use the same pattern as before, building on the early skills in the same way that we build walking skills on the ability to crawl" (p. 7). At the same time, she presents "normal symptoms" which she suggests are indicative of unresolved issues at various developmental stages. Such clinical literalism is simply not supported by developmental research. In *Cycles of Power*, Levin's references are drawn almost exclusively from TA literature, virtually disregarding the vast clinical and research literature on development. This parochial approach, seen all too often in TA literature, does transactional analysis and TA clients a grave disservice.

Chess and Thomas concluded from their research that similar causes can lead to different symptoms, and similar symptoms can evolve or "be chosen" in response to different causes. Likewise, Daniel Stern (1985), in *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, also addressed some of the clinical implications of data drawn from direct observation of infants rather than from interpretive reconstruction of infantile experience from psychotherapy with adults. Stern's (1985) central conclusion was that:

> The traditional clinical-developmental issues such as orality, dependence, autonomy, and trust, have been disengaged from any one specific point or phase of origin in developmental time. These issues are seen here as developmental lines—that is, issues for life, not phases of life. They do not undergo a sensitive period, a presumed phase of ascendency and predominance when relatively irreversible "fixations" could occur. It therefore cannot be known in advance, on theoretical grounds, at what point in life a particular traditional clinical-developmental issue will receive its pathogenic origin. (p. 256)

The "theoretical infant," Stern concluded, does not exist. However, he did point out that the "clinical-developmental" literature may, in fact, offer useful therapeutic constructs or metaphors, even if these are not empirically valid. He also suggested that the "clinical-developmental" perspective (which would include much of TA script theory) may be more accurate for later phases of childhood, when symbolic functions play a more crucial role in psychosocial evolution.

The developmental literature indicates that the binding nature of psychological and emotional difficulty is the pervasiveness and the *chronicity* of the family dynamics, not a stage-specific problem. It also seems clear that even when the family difficulties are chronic, the impact of the family can be significantly altered by the child's own attitudes toward the difficulties and by extra-familial experiences. For the clinician, the developmental literature suggests that the careful, continued attention to the effectiveness of a client's present day functioning is more apt to facilitate self-enhancement than the therapeutic "re-doing" of a specific developmental period.

Babcock and Keepers. Within the TA literature that incorporates a developmental perspective, *Raising Kids OK* by Dorothy Babcock and Terry Keepers (1976/1986) is consistent with current developmental theory and research and effective in its presentation of an active, evolutionary model of script formation. The process and importance of mastery, attachment, change, and individuation are well presented in Babcock and Keepers's book. Written primarily as a child-rearing manual for parents, it makes an important contribution to the TA literature. Babcock and Keepers present life script as an ongoing formative process usually not set until adolescence, describing it as the consolidation of family patterns, the child's "favorite" and "preferred" modes of managing, and cultural and historical influences. They emphasize the psychosocial perspective on human development and a stage-specific hierarchy. They also emphasize continued learning, relearning, and change, presuming a drive toward health and satisfaction. The child's experience of mastery in social relations and task competence, central for many developmental theories, is evident throughout Babcock and Keepers's presentation, and they acknowledge the impact of the baby and growing child on the parents.

Gouldings. Robert and Mary Goulding made a major shift in script theory by demonstrating that script is the result of active decisions made in childhood rather than from injunctions imposed on (or implanted in) a developing child.

The Gouldings (1978) observed, "Although patients remembered remarkably similar early scenes and injunctions, each individual reacted uniquely. Our clients were not 'scripted.' Injunctions are not placed in people's heads like electrodes. Each child makes decisions in response to real or imagined injunctions, and thereby 'scripts' her/himself" (p. 213). The Gouldings' conceptualization of script emphasizes the "injunction-decision complex," an interactive process between the growing child and his or her parents in which the meaning the child attaches to parental injunctions and attributions is the binding force of the script.

For the Gouldings, script is flexible and changeable during its formation in childhood. The home environment is central in script formation, but the Gouldings acknowledge the influence of school, neighborhood, television, and the world environments on the life decisions made during childhood. Their observations about the importance of the child's efforts to comprehend, adjust to, and influence his or her family and social environments are much more in keeping with the findings of developmental researchers. The Gouldings' approach to script in theory and technique challenges the determinism inherent in so much of script theory. Their treatment approach also brings humor, vitality, and action to script analysis and change. They seat the client in front of the piano, place his or her fingers on the keyboard, and encourage the audience to applaud. They train therapists to work within the client's construction of reality (past and present) and to allow for important script influences within and outside of the family.

The Gouldings' approach does, however, take on a reductionistic cast in their efforts to identify ten basic injunctions. This author has heard countless TA clients and TA therapists speak of "having" a "Don't Be" injunction or a "Don't Grow Up" script, thereby missing both the subtleties and variations of an individual's childhood experience and meaning. It seems both more theoretically accurate and therapeutically useful to encourage clients to find their own words to express script conclusions, to articulate their own "meaning-making." It is also crucial *not* to restrict the analysis of script to negative, restrictive decisions.

Erskine. In his article on "Script Cure,"

Richard Erskine (1980) offers a significantly different definition of script as: "a life plan based on decisions made at any developmental stage which inhibit spontaneity and limit flexibility in problem-solving and in relating to people" (p. 102). Erskine does not reduce script to childhood and the family. Here script is presented clearly as a mechanism of psychological defense, of coping, rather than as a debilitating, unconscious strategy for life. It directly mirrors the concerns of task mastery and social competence so central in much of the developmental literature. It is clear in the developmental literature, and in clinical practice, that a person relies on defense mechanisms, however limiting, to cope with trauma or life problems that cannot be adequately managed by current skills, knowledge, and environmental supports. For example, Thomas and Chess (1980) offered the following: "Operationally, defense mechanisms can be defined as behavioral strategies with which individuals attempt to cope with stress or conflict which they cannot or will not master directly. This definition does not assume, as Freud did, that defense mechanisms are necessarily unconscious" (pp. 169-170). These difficulties are not exclusive to childhood, nor are childhood coping mechanisms necessarily more compelling or permanent than those of later life.

Consistent with most script theorists, Erskine's definition stresses the pathological nature of script. Although he makes an important addition to the concept of script by clearly indicating that restrictive life script decisions can be made during any phase of life, Erskine does not address the individual's capacity to reopen and change those decisions in subsequent phases of life (in response to new and different life experience as well as therapeutic interventions). This is a theory of pathology, not one that adequately addresses the nature of human development and spirit. Kegan (1982) is critical of the psychotherapeutic/psychopathological attitude toward life. He calls psychotherapy "unnatural therapy" and urges therapists to remember the "natural therapy"—stressing that "theories are needed which are as powerful in their understanding of normal processes of development as they are in their understanding of disturbance" (p. 262).

Groder. Perhaps the most pointed and

existential definition of script in the TA literature is provided by Martin Groder (cited in Barnes, 1977, p. 19): "Each of us has the task each morning to recreate the universe from our central focus and this responsibility is unavoidable. Unfortunately, we tend to be habit-ridden and do the same lousy job every morning. This is what scripts are all about." For Groder, the essence of script is the daily, unavoidable psychological construction and reconstruction of reality. Groder appears to agree with those authors already quoted: The script is habit-ridden, restrictive, self-limiting, and hence pathological. Interestingly, Alfred Adler (1956, p. 191), in his discussion of "the style of life," elegantly described the daily "pathology" of "being in script." He observed that once individuals settle into a "style of life," they remove aspects of thinking, feeling, and relating from "the criticism of experience." The process of script formation and "meaning-making" in life is not inherently pathological; "being in script" becomes dysfunctional when it involves hanging tenaciously on to certain beliefs about self and the world rather than allowing for the surprises and opportunities presented in actually living.

English. Fanita English is virtually alone among the major TA theorists in considering scripts to be valuable assets, another advantage humans have over other animals. English (1977) states without equivocation, "Our scripts enable us to blossom, rather than preventing us from doing so, even though they may contain certain 'conclusions' out of early childhood that can be dysfunctional or downright dangerous" (p. 288). English's conceptualization is strongly influenced by Piaget and particularly congruent with the ideas suggested by Kegan and Vaillant. As she says in "What Shall I Do Tomorrow? Reconceptualizing Transactional Analysis":

> We all need a script. The child's need for a script reflects an inborn human need for structuring the time, space and relationships that are ahead of him, so that he can conceptualize boundaries against which to test his ongoing experience of reality.... By constructing the outline of a script, he can hold together his hopes, his fantasies, and his experiences. This becomes a basic structure out of which

he can develop a perspective about his life.... During the script-structuring age period, the child experiences the intense excitement of being a living human being with ideas. (English, 1977, p. 290)

More than any other TA theorist, English captures the essence of "meaning-making" which is fundamental in much of the current developmental literature. However, consistent with many script theorists, English still places too much emphasis on childhood as the primary time for script formation and uses too literal an adaptation of developmental stages.

English (1977) does not ignore the dysfunctional, even pathological aspects of script; she contextualizes them:

> However many irrational elements there may be in script—including horrible devouring monsters, pitfalls, dangers, and even, in many cases, terrible endings for the unwary hero or heroine—there are also fairy elements of excitement, adventure, love, beautiful fantasy, and all kinds of magical tricks and prescriptions as to how calamity can be circumvented and how misfortune can be turned into good fortune. It is these latter aspects that offer clues as to how a person can fulfill himself through his script rather than in opposition to it and in fear.
>
> Even a script generated under the worst environmental circumstances contains within itself the Child's own genetic intuitions as to how he might fulfill his inner goals creatively, if certain malevolent fairies and cobwebs can be neutralized. Without a script, the Child ego state would be operating only out of a vacuum of time and space within which there would be no content from which to connect the past to the future, so he would be rootless, like a leaf in the wind. I suspect that certain cases of psychosis represent lack of script formation, as a result of which the individual has no background from which to experience the foreground and, therefore, he operates out of a condition of total disorganization. (p. 290)

There is tremendous power and vitality in English's conceptualizations. Her ideas are enlivening in the clinical context and more theoretically valid than most script theory. For

her, script formation is *determining* rather than *determined*, formative rather than acquiescent, unpredictable and creative rather than reductionistic, focused on the future rather than embedded (mired) in the past. "Survival conclusions" for English are an aspect of script, not its primary purpose.

Summary

TA as an approach to therapy stresses the dignity of people and their ability to change. This perspective is supported by developmental research which has repeatedly demonstrated the enormous flexibility and resilience of the human psyche. Unfortunately, much of script theory as it has evolved is inconsistent with this perspective on human nature.

Although TA began as a social psychiatry, it seems increasingly to have collapsed into a psychodynamic framework. The interpersonal is too often lost to an over-emphasis on the intrapsychic.

It is not the intent here to remove the intrapsychic focus from script theory. The psychodynamic perspective brings a richness and depth to clinical understanding. It is one intent of this paper to return the intrapsychic emphasis that permeates much of script theory to a place within a context of the interpersonal and cognitive/behavioral fields.

Script theory has become more restrictive than enlivening. Script analysis as it has evolved over the years is overly psychoanalytic in attitude and overly reductionistic in what it communicates to people about human development. In addition, the incorporation of developmental theory into script theory has too often been simplistic and inaccurate, placing primary emphasis on psychopathology rather than on psychological formation.

The richness, depth, and complexity of current developmental research and theory is not well-represented in the TA literature, although it has a great deal to teach TA practitioners about the contexts in which people learn and change. Developmental studies of healthy individuals and longitudinal studies of human growth and psychological formation challenge some of the basic assumptions and attitudes underlying transactional analysis. Called particularly into question is the TA emphasis on the pervasive role of childhood and family-centered experiences in determining adult behavior.

Although life script is not inherently pathological, it may be hopelessly imbued with pathological meaning in TA theory and practice. Transactional analysts need to either significantly challenge and broaden the current conceptualization of script or to introduce a second, parallel term—such as psychological life plan—to describe healthy, functional aspects of "meaning-making" in the ongoing psychological construction of reality. Perhaps it would be more inclusive to use a term such as "psychological life plan" to describe the ongoing evolution of healthy psychological development, with "life script" used to describe dysfunctional, pathological constructions.

By integrating the evidence from current developmental theory, life script could be more comprehensively defined as follows: Life script is the ongoing process of a self-defining and sometimes self-limiting psychological construction of reality. Script formation is the process by which the individual attempts to make sense of family and social environments, to establish meaning in life, and to predict and manage life's problems in the hope of realizing one's dreams and desires. Major script decisions can be made at any point in life. Times of crisis, during which a person experiences severe "self failure" or "environmental failure" or chronic "environmental failure" will likely foster more rigid, and therefore more dysfunctional, elements in an individual's script.

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