

Psychological Distance and Group Interventions

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Abstract

English's (1975) concept of the three-cornered contract is developed further by adding the idea of psychological distance and then combining these ideas with other TA concepts and group leadership theories. Four types of psychological distance and the TA concepts useful in diagnosing them are described, along with a number of possible consequences and risks linked to each type.

English's (1975) concept of the three-cornered contract can be further developed by adding the idea of psychological distance, distilled from Fiedler's (1958, 1967) contingency theory of leadership. This article combines these ideas with other TA concepts and group leadership theories. It describes four types of psychological distance and the TA concepts useful in diagnosing them, a number of possible consequences and risks linked to each type, and some appropriate corrective interventions.

This model can be used with groups in an organizational setting as a diagnostic tool and/or as a theoretical base for choosing corrective interventions. It also has proven its value as a frame of reference for the supervision of organizational and educational facilitators.

The Three-Cornered Contract and Psychological Distance

English (1975) noted that in an organizational setting it is important to clarify agreements with the organizers (Great Powers) as well as to focus on the contract between the overt parties (group facilitator and participants). As described in a previous article (Micholt, 1985) and as noted in Figure 1, this type of contracting applies to a large number of situations encountered by TA practitioners.

Psychological distance is defined here as the

perceived closeness (or distance) and clarity in the relationship between the three parties. It is a subjective measure, of sociometric origin, as experienced by each person. The observations and guidelines developed in this article are valid only when there is a significant consensus among the three parties as to the perceived psychological distance between them.

This article offers some hypotheses about the circumstances in which each of these four types of psychological distance are most likely to occur. However, the settings in which transactional analysts work often do not represent such clear-cut situations. For the sake of analysis, these observations have been organized into separate categories—causes, descriptions of the situation, and processes involved. In fact, they form a system in which each component influences the others.

Types of Psychological Distance

Figure 2 diagrams TA concepts that can be used to analyze a situation (Micholt, 1982). The identification of the phenomena represented by the TA concepts (left column of Figure 2) can be used to diagnose which type of psychological distance is occurring. A systematic analysis of these phenomena can lead to a corresponding diagnostic hypothesis.

One of the concepts in Figure 2 is *group imago*, which was defined by Berne (1966) as: "A mental image of the dynamic relationships between the people in the group, including the therapist; idiosyncratic for each individual present" (p. 364). Berne (1963) had previously given the following definition: "Any mental picture, conscious, preconscious or unconscious, of what a group is or should be like" (p. 321). However, in this article the term is used in a broader sense: The diagrams depict a group imago, not a group imago belonging to a particular individual.

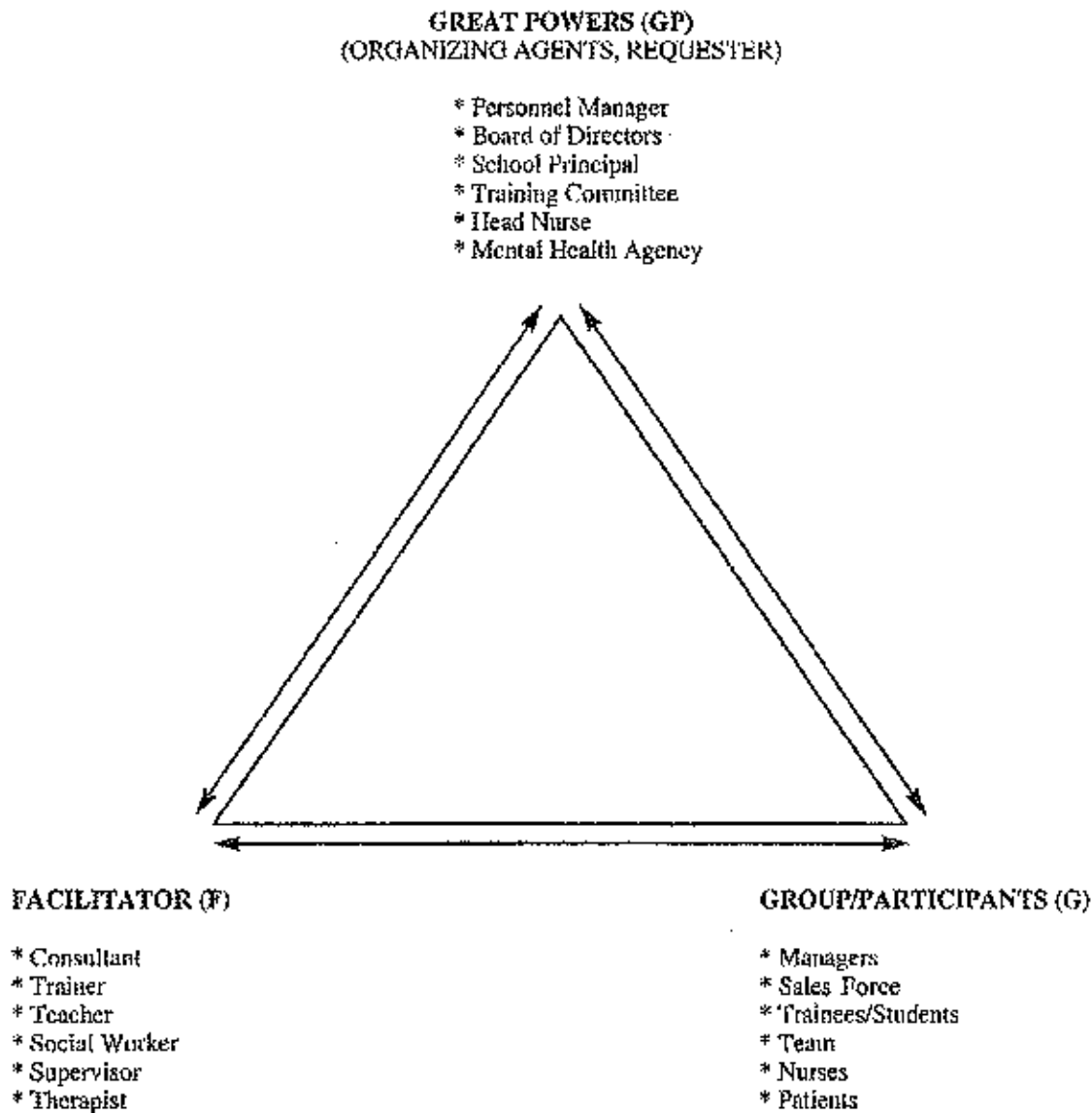


Figure 1
The Three-Cornered Contract

Type A. As shown in Figure 2A (second column of Figure 2), the distance between the three parties is perceived as equal. The contracts and expectations are clear on all sides, and there are clear role definitions for everyone. This is the ideal situation in that it implies that all partners are open, willing to collaborate, and have no hidden agendas, certainly a worthy goal. Such situations are most often the result of extensive and detailed negotiations and preparation among the parties. Specific care has been taken by the facilitator to:

a. gain extensive information about the contract with the Great Powers/group concerning

the intervention and also about the overall contract

b. clarify with each group member the contract he or she has with the Great Powers and the reasons for the intervention

c. involve group members (or some of their representatives) in the preliminary work so that they are fully involved in the negotiations concerning an intervention designed for them

Type B. The situation shown in Figure 2B (third column of Figure 2) occurs when the facilitator and participants feel that they are on the same wavelength but both feel distant from the Great Powers. The most frequent causes of

TA Concept	a)	b)	c)	d)
Behavioral Life Positions	OK, OK all parties	We're (F + G) OK, They're not-OK or We're not-OK, They're not-OK	We're (GP + F) OK, They're not-OK	I'm (F) OK, They're (GP + G) not-OK or I'm not-OK, They're OK
Major Discounts (cfr Discount-chart) (1)	No discounts	T2: significance of stimulus, existence of problem T3: possibility to change the stimulus, significance of problem, existence of options.	T2: significance of stimulus, existence of problem T4: ability to react differently, possibility to solve problems, significance of options	T2: significance of stimulus, existence of problem T5: personal ability to solve problems, reliability of options
Group imago (2) (3)				
Group structure				
		deficient internal boundary	rigid major internal boundary	rigid external boundary
Position in Drama Triangle (social level)	Out of Drama Triangle	1) GP = Persecutor F + G = Victim or 2) F + G = Persecutor GP = Victim	1) GP + F = Persecutor G = Victim or 2) GP + F = Rescuer G = Victim	1) F = Rescuer GP + G = Victim or 2) F = Victim GP + G = Persecutor
(1) Mellor & Schiff, 1975 (2) Berne, 1966 (3) Berne, 1963		GP = Great Powers F = Facilitator G = Group/Participants		
<p>Figure 2 Elements of Situational Diagnosis</p>				

this situation are the following:

a. the Great Powers are an impersonal agency, e.g., the Ministry of Education

b. the Great Powers are geographically distant, e.g., the American headquarters of a European-based branch

c. the Great Powers are uninvolved, e.g., the intervention is made at the request of one person, such as a training manager or an "enlightened" teacher. This can be a symptom of management's general uninvolvedness, a lack of coordinated policies, or a fragmentation in goals.

d. the facilitator identifies with the participants (and not with the Great Powers), who are from a similar social, cultural, or professional background, e.g., a TA trainer and a group of psychologists in a bureaucratic health organization

e. collusion of the facilitator's and participants' frame of reference (in or out of Adult awareness), e.g., "Bosses are not to be trusted"

f. when the facilitator is charismatic in the group and has only minimal contact with the Great Powers (or with just one of their representatives)

g. when the participants mistrust the Great Powers, e.g., they are not volunteers but are at the training event under real or imagined pressure, or participants have no opportunity to make contact and to receive feedback in their daily work situations (e.g., nurses with medical authorities in traditional hospital settings)

Type C. As shown in Figure 2C (fourth column of Figure 2), the Great Powers and the facilitator are clear about their common goals and actions, but there is considerable distance between them and the beneficiaries (the participants for whom the intervention is organized). Circumstances leading to this triangle include:

a. when the facilitator identifies with the Great Powers, e.g., because of lack of previous contacts with the group

b. when the facilitator belongs to the hierarchy or is employed by the Great Powers, e.g., an inspector with a group of teachers or an internal trainer

c. when the facilitator is seen as the management minion or spy, e.g., when it is unclear what the relationship is between the facilitator and the Great Powers or when the facilitator

is a personal friend of the Great Powers

d. when the facilitator evaluates the participants, e.g., the teacher who decides who passes

e. when group members belong to a different (sub)culture from that of the facilitator and the Great Powers, e.g., immigrants and a social worker employed by a neighborhood association

Type D. The situation shown in Figure 2D (fifth column of Figure 2) is clearly a problem for the facilitator. He or she is perceived as a distant outsider by both the Great Powers and the group, leaving the facilitator psychologically isolated from the people for whom he or she is working. Circumstances leading to this situation include:

a. the facilitator's culture is very different from the Great Powers' and the group's culture, e.g., technical advisors in Third World countries

b. the facilitator's professional frame of reference is different from that of the Great Powers and the group, e.g., clinicians without sufficient organizational knowledge intervening in business corporations

c. when the Great Powers and the group present themselves as idiosyncratic and/or different from the external world, such as some pressure groups or homogenous self-help groups, e.g., radical feminist groups

Risks and Consequences

Each type of psychological distance can create specific risks or consequences to the group process and further development of the facilitator's intervention. One of the consequences is the occurrence of games, as shown in Figure 3.

Interventions


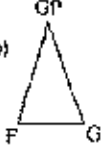
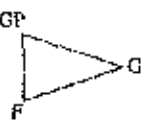
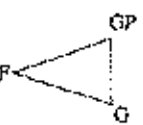
When the facilitator becomes aware of the problem in the situation, interventions can be initiated which have as their goal:

1. *Making the process transparent and clarifying its implications.* Among the ways this can be done are:

a. teaching the three-cornered contract and/or psychological distance concept and applying it to the group situation

b. clarifying the hidden (psychological) contracts of the parties involved

c. teaching game theory and the concept of

Diagram	Risks for Facilitator	Games and Pastimes
<p>a)</p> 	<p>No problems! (related to contract)</p>	<p>No games! (related to contract)</p>
<p>b)</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - forgetting the overall contract, focusing only on F-G contract. - creating a fusional or symbiotic group, group euphoria (1). - inviting coalitions against the GP (we're OK; they're not-OK). - maintaining the problem-situation or deficient frame of reference. 	<p>Facilitator and Group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Let's You and Them Fight" - "Courtroom" - "N.I.G.Y.S.O.B." - "Poor Me (Us)" - "Wooden Boss" - "Ain't They Awful" - "If It Weren't For Them" - "Cavalier" <p>Facilitator and Great Powers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Look What You Made Me Do" - "Let's Pull a Fast One on Joey" - "N.I.G.Y.S.O.B." - "Look How Hard I Am Trying"
<p>c)</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - facing passivity or aggression from group - stimulating or discounting fear and mistrust - eliciting politeness (overadaptation) 	<p>Facilitator and Great Powers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Happy to Help" - "Homely Sage" - "I'm Only Trying to Help" - "Look How Hard I Am Trying" - "Why Don't You" <p>Group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Do Me Something" - "Try and Make Me" - "Gee, You're Wonderful, Professor" - "Indigent" - "Yes, But"
<p>d)</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - eliciting passivity or aggression - reinforcing the group cohesion at the expense of the facilitator - stimulating righteousness - reinforcing the deficient frame of reference by rejecting it 	<p>Facilitator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "They'll Be Glad They Knew Me" - "Kick Me" - "Why Does This Always Happen to Me" - "Why Don't You" - "I'm Only Trying to Help" <p>Great Powers and Group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Yes, But" - "N.I.G.Y.S.O.B." - "Corner" - "Blemish" - "Gee, You're Wonderful, Professor"
<p>(1) Bennett, 1976</p>		<p>GP = Great Powers F = Facilitator G = Group/Participants</p>
<p>Figure 3 Psychological Distance: Risks and Consequences</p>		

positive payoffs (James, 1976).

2. *Clarifying expectations and role definitions.* This can be accomplished by working with participants and the Great Powers on role definitions, problem definitions, and mutual expectations (group image exercises, identifying Parent or Child projections). This might include teaching the parties how to negotiate with one another.

3. *Clarifying needs and values.* This might involve offering options for replacing games by reaching out to the needs behind the games (Rosseau, 1980). The next step is linking the game, which is an indirect expression of a need, to what is lacking in the situation and to the values involved (three-cornered contract).

4. *Recognizing the power structures in the organization.* This can be done by analyzing the way in which the power structure of the organization (Cardon, Lenhardt, & Nicolas, 1979) and the organizational script (Bennett, 1976) influence the situation (Micholt, 1982). From there all parties can look for options to bring the intervention to a script-free resolution. Under a new contract, change can then be initiated.

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