

Laurence Collinson

# Do what your parents don't tell you - And make sure you get it right!

*A subjective account of script analysis*

## Some definitions.

Of all the ways in which a therapist can perceive the work he does, I find that the one that is most comfortable for me is what I have heard Claude Steiner, one of Eric Berne's major collaborators in the pioneering of Transactional Analysis and a radical therapist in his own right, describe as 'caring confrontation'. I interpret the expression as gradually and gently helping the client to remove the more damaging layers of self-deception (Sartre's 'bad faith'; TA owes much to existential thought) that he began to accrete in infancy and which have become so much a part of him that he is not even aware that they are hiding him from himself.

Berne defines his concept of the *script* 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'. This definition embraces innumerable forms of both positive and negative behaviour. The positive aspects of the script, known as the counterscript, are those which assist a person to cope comfortably with his social environment.

The negative aspects of the script comprise the area in which the therapist helps the client to change, if that is what the client wants for himself, and these may range between what psychiatrists are pleased to call mildly neurotic and severely pathological. Martin Groder, the American psychotherapist, makes a fascinating and valuable distinction between counterscript and script messages by defining the former as the civilised (public) version of the script and the latter as the person's more secret view of the universe.

## The script and autonomy.

Scripted behaviour in 'ordinary' people is not necessarily continuous; most of us have periods during which we have no difficulty in examining the options available to us in the circumstances and in choosing that which seems most appropriate. Treatment of a client is aimed always at extending her periods of autonomy. It is my own belief that it is never possible entirely to eradicate the script; nor should we always aim to do so. Many aspects of scripted behaviour are valuable. Counterscript messages urging positive action and achievement, for example, are useful in a 'success' - orientated society - at the very least they help the person to survive; useful too may be the ways our parents taught us to nurture ourselves and others; we may also find advantageous a value-system that enhances our own life while not attempting to deprive others of their non-destructive pleasures.

## How to.

There is no one way of conducting a script analysis. My own preference nowadays - backed up by the use of other methods - is simply to observe and listen: there is almost nothing a person says or does that is not in some way a revelation of the script.

## For what purpose.

Script analysis to my mind is the simplest, fastest, and most complete way of finding out why a client believes she has to live the way she does. Once I have this information I can help her to realise that she does have other options and perhaps to choose a new way of living that is more advantageous than the old way - this is the therapy that derives from script analysis and is generally a much longer and more difficult process than getting in touch with the script.

I have two purposes in mind when I begin script analysis. The preferred *games* and the preferred (racket) feelings associated with those games are evident in the way the client comes on to me and the way he transacts in the group context. What I am searching for are the *myths* and early *decisions* that provide him with the rationale for his present *behaviour*. Although the word 'myth' in TA isn't always clearly defined, its meaning for me is 'how the client looks at the world'. We are still children; and whether we are what Berne calls princes and princesses or frogs, winners or losers, depends on the degree of intensity with which we have maintained the childhood illusions.

## Procedure.

Here is one of the ways I proceed in script analysis. In working with a client, I usually keep in touch with my thought processes, not only so that we can share our journey, but also in order to assess continually the extent of his agreement or disagreement with my perceptions. If he insists that I am wrong, I may move somewhere else with him; alternatively, if I believe intuitively that I am right or am somewhere near the truth, I may ask the group to feedback their own perceptions of the situation - a primary advantage of working in a group context; I sometimes ask the group to take the initiative in script analysis; I strongly support Berne's contention that every client needs to become his/her own therapist; I am teacher as well as therapist; in my opinion, therapy must combine with education to retain its effectiveness. If the group's view of the situation doesn't concur with mine, I'll probably start on another path. If the group concurs, then the client, though she may *discount* the whole group's reaction to what she is saying and doing here and now, is at some point going to have to consider that she *may* be acting outside her own awareness, and that perhaps her lack of awareness extends beyond the group situation. First I use:

Structural analysis. *In what ego state is the client most of the time? Is his Adult contaminated by his Parent or Child or both? Is she excluding any ego state?*

Transactional Analysis proper. *Which ego state does she mostly use in initiating transactions? From which ego state does she mostly respond to another person's stimuli? Does she block communication, and if so how? Does she tend to discount her own and/or other's statements? Are her statements congruent or incongruent with all the other signals she gives out?*

Game analysis. *What feelings are impelling him to speak or to remain silent? What response is he evoking in the other? In me? What is he feeling now that this series of transactions is over? Is this payoff what he commonly experiences?*

*Script analysis...*

## **BERNARD**

The analysis that follows is an account of the work I did with one client. I have condensed it enormously. It took place over a period of about twenty weeks: ongoing weekly groups and three private sessions. In some group sessions Bernard spoke hardly at all; in others he spoke when I presented him with certain issues. In more recent groups he participates with little or no urging from me. He is readying himself to take that small essential leap into the dangerous void of change.

(I regard myself as a radical therapist. I think most transactional analysts are, or they would not have been hooked on TA, one of the aims of which is to get the Parent off the client's back. I am with Berne [and Donne] in assuming that we do not exist and certainly cannot be understood apart from our environment. And I am with Steiner in realising that the Social and Cultural Parent includes the Political Parent; if I don't take the Political Parent into account, then I am ignoring the prejudice, the corruption, the oppression that affect me as well as my client. I am betraying myself and failing my client if I don't point out that her strivings towards autonomy are limited not only by her own fantasies but also by a society that prefers to exploit her fantasies - she will be estranged to some extent from her society if she 'gets better'. I suppose that if I am to sum up one of my basic functions, it is to subvert the *Pig Parent*, Steiner's term for that ego state which, however well-meaning and 'protective', ends up attempting to dominate, scare, and destroy the Child. To what degree can I be 'straight' in a crooked society?)

Bernard comes to me because the woman with whom he is having an emotional/sexual relationship is a former client and suggests that TA groupwork might help him overcome the depression and inertia that have been affecting his life now for some years. I learn much about his script in the preliminary interview, but I sense that he is suspicious of me and wants me to drag out of him what I need. I learn that he has been in Jungian analysis on and off for ten years.

## How he presents himself.

A big, slow, lumbering man in his early fifties. He gives the impression of being lethargic; and he speaks slowly, ponderously, with long pauses between words and phrases as if he has to be careful that whatever he says next is the right thing to say. I force myself to remember that the man in front of me was once regarded as an alert, intelligent, successful professional who, a few years back, held a key job in what is probably the most highly regarded organisation in his particular field. He is still with the same organisation but believes they keep him employed only because of his brilliance. He is now so much less effective that he expects the chop at any time.

As he expounds his difficulties I begin to feel sorry for him. He shuffles in his chair; he gives the impression of being *discomfited* at revealing himself. He has eyes that make silent appeal and his face has the expression of a large, sad, shaggy animal. His words carry a lot of self-blame yet they also imply that he is the victim of circumstances. What is he asking of me beneath the laboured phraseology? Sympathy and reassurance? I catch myself wanting to give him both, and decide to give him neither. He needs to know that I won't react according to his usual expectations. I nod. I 'give with an audible', I *listen* - I am giving him a token message that I care.

Later on, when he is in the group, I check out their responses to him. What do they experience when he talks about himself? They feel sorry for him; they too want to reassure him; his apparent helplessness engages their Nurturing Parent.

## Awareness of the game.

What is the name of the game? 'Poor me'; 'If it weren't for them'; 'See what they made me do'? Do I need to name it? I want to stroke him as well. I want to be *Rescuer* to his *victim*. Examine that. If I Rescue now, at some point I'm going to switch to *Persecutor* and/or *Victim*. Do I want to put him down? No. Do I feel *Victimised*? Yes. How? He is setting my pace with his struggle to communicate; I tell myself I mustn't hurry him along; if I do, he'll be hurt. I *am* allowing him to control me. He is pushing out his words as if they are huge boulders, making molehill sentences into mountains, investing a tremendous amount of energy in each statement. He must be exhausting himself. I feel exhausted. Why is he making such a feast out of it? Anyone else could have said the same thing in less than a quarter of the time. My impatience mounts. So I *do* want to be *Persecutor*.

Working with Bernard over a period, I found that the chief factors that emerged were: his resentment at his mother's indifference; his determination not to fail like his father; and his use of indecision and confusion as a defence (I don't have to do anything as long as I don't know what to do.) Other basic Child decisions came up, most of them with contradictory elements; perhaps they could be equally well described as *sweatshirts*:

*I'll be helpless (but help me at your own risk).*

*I can't be right (but you'll never prove I'm wrong).*

*You've got to love me (but I won't believe you when you say you do).*

## Treatment ideas.

The more I learned about Bernard's difficulties, the more inadequate I felt to treat him: how could I possibly help him to extricate himself from so many double-binds! My feeling of inadequacy was reinforced by the mute appeal to do something for him which I kept experiencing in his presence.

I felt helpless. I had to keep reiterating to myself that this was part of his game pattern:

- a] appear to be helpless;
- b] want others to help you;
- c] be pleased that they agree to help you;
- d] make sure they don't help you;
- e] payoffs: yours - triumph, theirs - angry despair.

So what happens over and over again? Bernard gets lots of strokes for appearing helpless; he can say: 'Well, I didn't really expect anything'; mummy and daddy will feel guilty at his silent reproaches.

What is his investment in attempting to engender guilt in others? I realise that mummy wanted *him* to feel guilty (and father too). As a child he sets out to penetrate her indifference, hoping to obtain positive strokes, unconditional affection. But he can't do anything right; he gets told that this was the least she expected from him anyway. He'll succeed 'just to show them', but failing is much the safer position.

*Change stroking pattern.* Help Bernard to learn to ask for what he wants, even from the people who most frighten him: mainly men in authority, and women. Learn to ask for positive strokes. Stop being (or appearing) diffident and self-discounting. Learn to accept positive strokes for being his own personable self and for even the smallest of achievements.

In a private session with him I uncover what is probably the crux of his various current dilemmas:

*IF I SUCCEED - I'M SPURIOUS*

*IF I FAIL - I'M HUMILIATED*

Any deviations from the middle way of convention and orthodoxy are an infraction of the rigid Parental injunctions. He tells me that at school his failures in both sport and classroom were derided. But after a period of failure he would grit his teeth and come first in class or win the race, though usually only once.

He wants to be a success in his field. He tries too hard and thereby fails persistently - except when he used to drink and alcohol knocked out the Parent.

The title of a popular musical come into my mind: 'How to succeed in business without really trying'. I tell him and we laugh about it; and then we explore how the words might be meaningful for him. I suggest that he stop 'trying' and allow himself the hitherto unthought of luxury of letting his life flow as it will - for a while, at any rate, but making sure that he takes care of his basic requirements.

We are on the way to an autonomy. *contract*. Succeed and stop trying to succeed; allow yourself to be you and not what you believe others want or don't want you to be. You *can* effect a compromise between Compliant Child and Rebel Child; you don't have to see life only in terms of extremes, polarities. At the same time meet the needs of the Free Child. There are no miracles, Bernard. Use the old formulae: take small steps; take small risks; and programme your days with small *real* pleasures.

Gradually increase the dose.....

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David Porter

## Three Gay Scripts

Whilst gay people continue to be oppressed many will adopt banal scripts which interfere with their capacities for intimacy, spontaneity, and awareness. Gay scripts are, in this author's opinion, determined not so much by the gay person's parents but more by oppressive social conditions such as ghettoism, ageism, sexism and so forth, as well as by banal sex-role scripting. Here are three gay scripts which I have found to be common amongst male homosexuals in western society.

### 'BEAU BRUMMELL'

*Life Course:* Beau Brummell is the modern dandy. Like 'plastic Woman', he is a fancy dresser and places considerable emphasis upon appearance and youthful looks. He is well-experienced in social etiquette, and believes himself to have power in his success in climbing the social ladder. He identifies with his oppressors by adopting the life-style of an upper-class 'man-about-town', so that his time is structured with parties, theatre outings, and elaborate affairs. Later in life he becomes an eccentric, and finds that others begin to mock him for his weird and unusual behaviour. He feels persecuted, gets depressed, and finally takes to alcohol or drugs in an attempt to relieve his loneliness and to find some kind of personal fulfilment in life.

*Counterscript:* He meets another Beau Brummell, falls in love, and enjoys a brief period of contentment. But because of society's injunctions against intimacy between