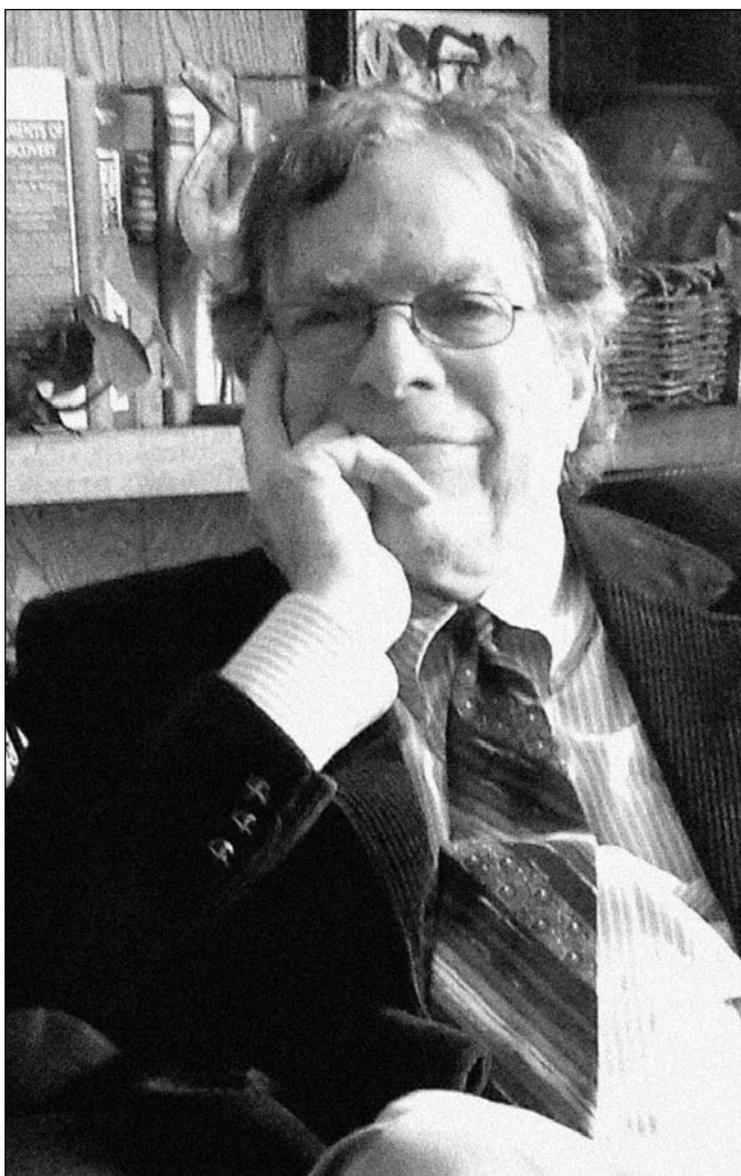


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In conversation with Stephen Karpman, page 22

## CONTENTS

### News and views:

From the Chair .....	2
Ethics Committee report.....	3
EATA Delegates report .....	3
Websites for TA ideas .....	4
From the Editor .....	4
Letters to the Editor .....	4
New Council introduced .....	8

### National Conference 2012 review:

I'm karaoke, you're karaoke <i>by Frances Townsend and Keith Morton</i> .....	11
To newbie or not to newbie <i>by Jill Rutherford and Anita Webster</i> .....	13
Keynote address: Healing brains and minds <i>by Dr Margot Sunderland</i> .....	14

### In conversation:

Stephen Karpman talks to Alastair Moodie ..	22
---	----

### Book reviews:

<i>by Jane McQuillin, Enid Welford, Hayley Marshall, Richard Ireland</i> Introduced by Dr Celia Simpson .....	26
--	----

### Column: Shared reading sabbatical

<i>by Gemma Mason</i> .....	32
-----------------------------	----

### Supervision:

<i>by Melanie Lewin, Kathie Hostick, Lin Cheung</i> . Introduced by Robin Hobbes .....	33
--	----

### In training:

Column: <i>by Mike Kitson</i> .....	36
Top tips for the CTA written exam, and Top tips for the Oral exam <i>by Lin Cheung</i> ..	37

### Column: Grace notes II

<i>by Dr Salma Siddique</i> .....	39
-----------------------------------	----

### Conference review:

TA Cumbrian Conference 2012 <i>by Richard Mottram</i> .....	40
--	----

### The business of therapy:

Keep your site in sight <i>by Ian Tomlinson</i> .....	41
--	----

<b>Advertising</b> .....	42
--------------------------	----

<b>Contact pages</b> .....	51
----------------------------	----



# In conversation with... **STEPHEN KARPMAN**

Forty years ago Stephen Karpman won the Eric Berne Memorial 'Scientific' Award for the Drama Triangle, two years later he won it again for his thinking on Options.

Stephen Karpman, talks to **ALASTAIR MOODIE** about his continuing engagement and excitement about ideas, diagrams and TA theory.

*It's great to talk to you, Stephen. I know that you've lived most of your life in San Francisco. Where are you from originally?*

I'm from Washington D.C. originally. My father was a psychoanalyst who worked in a psychiatric prison hospital. He was a Russian scientist who studied with Freud and he opened up a new field of criminal psychoanalysis. He wrote 20 books and 100 articles. My mother was a psychiatric social worker. She was Spanish; on the Spanish side I got my interest in art.

I went to the medical school at Duke University, one of the top three. I excelled at physics and I realised that I had a gift for diagrams and theories which attracted me to TA. I was already interested in psychiatry and so when I met Berne everything clicked.

*That was a really good fit for you, bringing together your love of diagrams with the clarity of the theory.*

I have a pretty long background in art. I've exhibited in places like the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Washington D.C. Corcoran and Smithsonian Institutes. There is a discipline in the field of art where you keep brainstorming a certain image until you get it right. That's how I came up with the Drama Triangle; originally

it was a sports diagram based on left and right faking in American football and basketball. I started to use the diagram with my patients. When after two years I showed it to Berne, he said, 'Write it up and people will be quoting you for 200 years.'

I was also in the Screen Actors' Guild and I liked the drama of the whole thing. He suggested that I put the victim at the top with the triangle pointing up, to show the victim controlling the action and setting up the payoff. That was a great idea but at the time there was a lot of talk about being 'one up' or 'one down', and I wanted to show the victim 'one down'. So I overruled him on that.

*I'm aware that you are very creative person, and I've seen examples of your art. You also have a gift for coming up with a form of expression like the Drama Triangle that immediately connects with people.*

I remember making a script decision at the age of eight to be an inventor. I had been given this book called *Mathematics for the Millions* written by Launcelot Hogben – with 600 pages of the mathematical analysis of almost everything; of geography, of motion, of angles of sunlight, of languages and card games using creative graphs and patterns and formulas. For some reason I was

**‘One of Berne’s rules was “Don’t say anything that has ever been said before” by someone else, like Freud. Another was “Don’t say anything that can’t be diagrammed”.’**

blown away by that. The book is still in print and my son, Eric, gave it to me for my birthday this year. I looked at it again and said, “Man, that looks like the blackboards I fill up with diagrams!”

*What else has inspired you?*

I also have the role model of my father as a high producing psychoanalyst. I had two years of psychoanalysis myself as part of my psychiatric training. In the 1960s a lot of scientific people were curious about human behaviour and were attracted to TA and Berne’s seminars. He developed his own scientific method. There was a desire to overthrow the old ideas and come up with something brand new. Berne was a very good leader. He taught us the principles of theory-making.

The vision for TA was to cure patients faster. Today I would say that the vision for TA is to cure humanity faster. Basically we were visionary people out to change the world which was what attracted people to San Francisco in the 1960s.

*Like Berne you shifted from psychoanalysis to transactional analysis.*

It was a difficult transition at first, like moving from right brain to left brain, looking more objectively at what was going on, the observable behaviour, and creating models. Now it is difficult for me to switch back when I read articles using a more psychoanalytic approach.

One of Berne’s rules was ‘Don’t say anything that has ever been said before’ by someone else, like Freud. Another was ‘Don’t say anything that can’t be diagrammed’ which would include lists and charts and formulas and diagrams. Everything has to fit with Occam’s Razor, reducing ideas down to their core essence, like a mathematician seeking the most elegant solution. I keep working on my diagrams. I reduced the games in the Drama Triangle to three. Now I’ve reduced it to two sweatshirts, by filling in the blanks of: ‘Try and ... if you can’ and ‘Let’s all pretend that ...’

*Was it your idea that there should be an Eric Berne Memorial Scientific Award?*

Right after Berne died, Claude Steiner said, ‘If TA is going to make it, it will make it as a science.’

I presented my idea to the Board of Trustees who passed it. Our first TAJ editorial board set the criteria for a scientific award.

Claude Steiner got it for the Script Matrix and Jack Dusay for the EgoGram. I did the Drama Triangle and the Gouldings did Redecision Theory with their list of Twelve Injunctions, Jacquie Schiff with the Four Passivities and Discounts and Franklin Ernst with the OK Corral, Pam Levin’s developmental stages, and many others. Everyone went out and made theories based on what we were taught about the methodology.

*At a later stage it was decided to drop ‘scientific’ from the title of the award.*

That was in the 1990s. The original people had done their theory-making and we hadn’t trained others in the method of behavioural observation. Instead they went into application. I call the process the 3 Ts – firstly the theory, then the training, and now we focus on the therapy.

At the World TA Conference in Edinburgh in 2005 I was a TSTA examiner. I asked a candidate who was relational in her approach to diagram what she was doing and she actually did a good job of it. Some people seemed put out that I had asked her to do a diagram. But I was shocked that people didn’t know that TA was about scientific diagrams.

I wrote an article, ‘Lost in Translation’ about this development away from a scientific approach. A lot of people dropped out of TA when the TAJ became more psychoanalytically oriented. They liked Berne’s behavioural science.

*I viewed your article as a piece of healthy polemic – a challenge to the TA community.*

*It is important that there is room for everybody.*

*At the ITAA Conference in Montreal in 2010*

*Vann Joines and Ian Stewart gave a great presentation which ended with the cry ‘YAMAEG!’*

*meaning ‘Yours and Mine are equally good!’ with reference to the different approaches within Transactional Analysis.*

*How can we hold the breadth of TA?*

**‘As a leader Berne demonstrated his Parent professionalism, his Adult good information and his Child fun.’**

'I still work all the time with transference which I think of as a crossed transaction when I address the patient Adult to Adult and they come back Child to Parent. I would like to see more of that analysis diagrammed in TA.'

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I think of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Thesis is the left brain and antithesis is the right brain. I see it as two TAs – the left brain TA, which is the scientific, behavioural, observable, hard, concrete, measurable approach, and the right brain TA which is more the philosophical and experiential approaches. Now the dominant TA is the right brain experiential approach. The left-brain trained person can't read those right-brain articles – just all words. But I think that the right-brain relational person can read left-brain articles.

I'm still very active in the ITAA and I put up a proposal that the *TAJ* put aside a section for the behavioural people, the left-brain scientists, and a section for the right-brain people so that everybody is represented. The Berne-trained people don't write for the journal any longer because they don't see a place for them. A lot of people submitted articles for the Berne Centenary issue and also for the Redecision issue, but otherwise they don't see that it is for them any longer.

*I'm aware that you have a lively mind and you have been developing your work on intimacy.*

From games I went to communication in relationships, and now I'm working on intimacy in relationships. At the World TA Conference in Bilbao I got 150 people to my workshop on intimacy theory and training. I want to make sure that TA still has a foot in the cognitive behavioural camp.

*What impresses me, Stephen, is your obvious enthusiasm even now for working with the theory after all these years of involvement with TA. For example, you have continued to work with the Drama Triangle and its applications. Now you have moved on to intimacy training. Your energy is impressive.*

There is no seminar in San Francisco nowadays and so I don't have people to kick around my ideas with. I keep in touch with Taibi Kahler by email. He's my best friend and I consider him a fellow 'behavioral scientist' in TA.

*I know that you were an Assistant Clinical Professor. How did that happen?*

Two of my father's trainees set up the Psychiatric Department at the University of California Hospital in San Francisco and I linked up with them and taught the psychiatric residents in group and family therapy. That was psychoanalytically oriented.

I still work all the time with transference which I think of as a crossed transaction when I address the patient Adult to Adult and they come back Child to Parent. I would like to see more of that analysis diagrammed in TA.

*What interests me is that, while you were attending Berne's seminars, in your post at the university you had to use your knowledge of psychoanalysis.*

Once a week I was supervising residents and one of the residents was Jack Dusay. He was the one who got me interested in TA and he made it sound so exciting. Hardly anyone knows that it was Jack who introduced me to Berne. We are still good friends.

In fact, then we were all very good friends together. I went down to Bob and Mary Goulding at Mount Madonna to teach TA at the weekends and I went over to Jacquie Schiff's in Oakland. We all knew each other very well and helped each other a lot. We were a merry band of theory-makers. As a leader Berne demonstrated his Parent professionalism, his Adult good information and his Child fun.

*I want to thank you, Steve, for all the fascinating insights you have shared.*

Thank you, Alastair, I have enjoyed our conversation very much.

### **ERIC BERNE MEMORIAL SCIENTIFIC AWARD**

1972 The Drama Triangle

1980 Options

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