

Transactional Analysis

What can it add to NLP



By Julie Hay

I was pleased to be invited to provide this article because it gives me the opportunity to share with my NLP colleagues how useful transactional analysis can be when the two approaches are combined.

I often think of it as the Enneagram (*The Wisdom of the Enneagram*) model of nine personality types that lets us know the nature of our real essence,

transactional analysis (TA) helps us understand how we lost touch with that, and NLP helps us make changes to get back to our real selves.

All three approaches are, of course, comprehensive in their own right and so all I can hope to do here is share a few ideas about the links that I can see between some of the TA and some of the NLP concepts.

Life script metaphors

TA includes a concept of life script, which is the notion that during childhood we all interpreted what was going on around us, including what we were being told about our own characteristics, our similarities to various relatives, what we might expect to happen to us in future.

Because we were still children, we lacked knowledge of the world and we tended towards conclusions that were sometimes wildly inaccurate and often extremely unhelpful.

By the time we were six years old, we had converted these interpretations into some kind of story, often based on fairy stories – or nowadays, probably on the videos we watch. I sometimes wonder about the life story that will emerge from watching Peppa Pig!

Basing our life on a fairy story is not as silly as it might seem. Joseph Campbell (*Hero with a Thousand Faces*) demonstrated that the multitude of fairy stories around the world can all be subsumed within six themes that also appear within ancient Greek myths. In TA these are known as process scripts.

- *Always* – as in Arachne who was condemned to spin a web for ever – which translates into someone who believes that their life will never change, often because they made a mistake years ago
- *After* – as in Damocles who knew the sword would fall after the party was over – for those who have a life pattern where they expect any pleasure to be short-lived



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- *Never* – as for Tantalus for whom everything was out of reach – meaning a pattern where what we really want, such as healthy relationships, seem always out of reach
- *Over and Over* – based on Sisyphus who kept rolling the stone up the hill and having it roll down again – for those who keep on not quite succeeding, or immediately start to tackle the next hill when they have achieved something
- *Until* – as for Hercules who could not relax until all the work was done – a pattern operated by the overly-conscientious who spend so long doing the work that there is no time left to enjoy life
- *Open Ended* – which is based on Baucis and Philemon who did their duty and were then turned into trees that would stand forever, doing nothing much – for those who live an uneventful but dutiful life.

I combine these with NLP thinking about metaphors, with the script being a mix of identity and meta-metaphor because they are so encompassing.

Rubber bands are customarily regarded as somewhat pathological

At the same time, as it is with all metaphors, there will be a sting in the tail – a way in which the metaphor may include aspects that are distinctly unhelpful.

For example, a manager who used the metaphor of a racehorse to describe an organisation that appeared to be winning a race then realised that the jockey had fallen off.

Adding the notion of a metaphor enables me to prompt individuals to consider their own life scripts, or fairy stories, in terms of what or how such a story:

- *embodies* – what do you feel when you think of or tell this story, what impact does it have kinaesthetically, how do you maintain it (and potentially keep unhelpfully reinforcing it) through your representational systems?
- *encompasses* – how widely does this story extend into your existence; what



areas of your life does it encompass; where are the areas of freedom and of autonomy?

- *entails* – what are some of the ‘hidden’ consequences of living as if this story were true; how does this limit your perceptions of your boundaries?
- *empowers* – what ‘power’ does the story provide; how could you adjust the story to make it (even) more empowering for you; how can you use the story as a basis for improvisation theatre rather than sticking to a fixed script?



► Reactions, rackets, rubber bands and resource states

Within TA, emotions tend to be differentiated into genuine *reactions* to what is going on in the here and now; substitute feelings that we have learned to display in childhood because they have the effect of manipulating others to do what we want, and which are called *rackets* based on the notion of gangsters' protection rackets where the threat of a negative outcome is used; and *rubber bands* as a label for emotional displays that are present when we regress to an earlier age.

As examples, the stereotype (i.e. common and therefore recognisable but not applicable always and not for everyone!) rackets are of male managers who emit strong indications of anger if someone tries to tell them some bad news, and hence can claim that no one told them what was happening; whereas the stereotype for females is to look as if they will burst into tears if someone asks them to do extra work.

Rubber bands occur when we feel like a small child because someone has spoken to us in a tone that sounds like a teacher, or even positively when someone sounds nurturing just like granny used to be; the problem with both is that the emotional reactions belong in the past.

Rubber bands are customarily regarded as somewhat pathological, and of only involving negative feelings.



Cells that fire together wire together

However, the NLP notion of *resource states* adds a whole new perspective, especially when we add in the notion of timelines. When I invite someone to create a circle of excellence, I typically invite them to remember a time when they felt resourceful in a way that would be appropriate for them to reproduce for some future situation.

For instance, someone about to do their first ever presentation might want to feel confident. Perhaps they felt very confident in the past when they were cooking, or swimming, or any other occasion that may well be quite specific to them.

They can recreate that same feeling of confidence by imagining they are in that situation again and paying attention to the representational systems – what are they seeing, hearing, experiencing, internally and externally.

They can then anchor this onto their imaginary circle. For me, this is the same process, albeit done through choice, as happens when something is labelled as a rubber band. The only difference is that TA has focused on it being a negative emotion.

Being aware of the process of creating

a resource state allows us to demonstrate to individuals that they now have some choices about their rubber bands. They can choose to 'scramble' their negative rubber bands by deliberately recreating them and then changing something within the representational systems.

Even more importantly, they can now choose to create positive rubber bands, by recollecting positive memories and creating a collection of circles of excellence. This lines up with neuroscience ideas about 'cells that fire together wire together' – if we focus on creating new synapses and repeating them, the 'white matter' in the brain that codes familiar pathways will dissolve from those old patterns and re-form to make the new pathways operate more readily.

We can also link these ideas to timelines. We may be able to avoid the 'paralysis by analysis' by inviting an individual to imagine their timeline on the ground, so that they can move along it, recreating different rubber bands and embedding these by taking them into the future. Before we invite them to do this, however, we need an ecology check.

Knowing that people have life scripts can contribute considerably to ecology checking – they may need to make changes to their overall story, and / or to the character they have adopted for themselves, so that these will not be in conflict with their proposed future behaviours. ●

