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Scripts and Episcritps

It is both an honor and a pleasure to have this opportunity to present to you my ideas about Episcritps.

Eric Berne published my first paper on the subject in the Bulletin (English, 1969) because he considered that the concept was a worth-while contribution to Transactional Analysis; but now when I re-read the article, I must admit it was very badly written.

Nevertheless fortunately a number of colleagues, undeterred by the confused presentation, picked up on the concept and applied it in their work. In the intervening years I have received much encouraging feedback about the use of this concept, most particularly from Pam Levin who gave me the incentive to re-write the material instead of just limiting myself to teaching it to my trainees. Although I recently incorporated the topic in my Keynote speech at MITAG, later published in the Transactional Analysis Journal, (English, 1996) this is the first time I will devote my whole presentation to the topic.

This means that I will use the first part of this presentation to define Hot Potatoes and how they are transmitted, because this is how episcritps are started. I will then define and describe episcritps, distinguish them from scripts, and add a few points about treatment. I will proceed in a question and answer form.

1. What is meant by Hot Potato transmission?

I use the term "hot potato" as an analogy to the children's game in which music is played while a supposedly hot potato is tossed back and forth between two or more players as though it's too hot to hold. When the music stops, the child who has the potato gets "burnt", and must also pay a "penalty" for holding it. This game is well known in the U.S. and references to "passing on a hot potato" have entered the vernacular, usually signifying that blame or unwelcome responsibilities have been passed on from the one who is supposed to carry them onto a relatively innocent recipient.

In other countries similar games are played with cards. For instance, in England there's the "Old Maid" game, and in Germany it's "Black Peter". Hidden cards are pulled back and forth between one player and another until the person who draws the "bad" card and is "stuck" with it at the end of the game must pay a penalty of varying severity. Can you think of a similar game in India? If so, please use the local analogy to "hot potato" for what follows.

2. What is the power relationship between players?

By contrast with games that are played for fun among equals, in my definition there is a different power relationship between the players.

The more powerful player, whom I call the "donor" symbolically passes on a "hot potato" or "bad card" to a relatively powerless "vulnerable recipient" who gets "stuck" with it and then penalized. Occasionally a vulnerable recipient may, in turn, manage to pass on the hot potato to yet another recipient who is even more vulnerable, as may happen in families or organizations.

Examples of power relationships between donors, who are the more powerful ones by position or skill, and vulnerable recipients who are either truly dependent on donors, (as are young children with parents), or believe themselves to be without recourse, are: institutionalized children with abusing teachers or priests, new immigrants with a gangster "Don", drug-dependent prostitutes with procurers, and (yes!) certain needy patients with certain therapists.

Many uneven power relationships also occur because of the respective personalities of donors and recipients. Donors tend to be Type II "Oversure" types. (English 1977a) They are dominant, rigid, and highly defended. They function excessively with a Parent ego state from an "I'm Ok you're not Ok" position. But underneath this facade they may have a very anxious Child and a fear of being exposed as less superior than they claim to be. Hence the need to get rid of any indications of flaws or inferiority.

By contrast vulnerable recipients are either children who, by definition are dependent on the care of grown-ups, or Type I "Undersure" persons who function mostly with an adapted Child ego state out of the "I'm not OK you're Ok" position. They may carry feelings of shame dating back to childhood, and are therefore easily humiliated for current errors, real or imagined. They seek direction and are more suggestible than the average person.

3. What is the process of Hot Potato transmission?

To simplify, I will limit myself to describing such transmissions within dyadic relationships between a donor and a vulnerable recipient, although the process can also occur between one donor and several recipients (for instance a teacher and pupils, or a cult leader and followers,) or between several donors and one recipient (like an only child within a family system). Also, I will generally use the masculine pronoun for donors and the feminine for vulnerable recipients because I am a woman in a society that is still patriarchal, although there are also plenty of women donors, as will be illustrated later.

Let's start with an Associated Press report dated December 21, 1996, from which I quote:

"Tracy Rhame grew up being told that she killed her 4-month old brother by (climbing into his crib) and throwing him from his crib when she was two years old.She asked police for details of her brother's death when she was 17.....Police told her it had been ruled an accident....During the next several years, Rhame contacted various authoritiesIt was determined from hospital records that the baby's injuries were inconsistent with a fall from a crib (and that) the baby died from multiple blows to the head.....Now, 25 years later, her stepfather has been indicted on charges of killing the baby and framing her."

This is what I call "gross transmission" of a hot potato because the stepfather knowingly transmitted blame onto Tracy to avoid judicial punishment. As a child, Tracy had no choice but accept blame for her brother's death after she was told the story repeatedly, and her step-father went scot-free of punishment for murder. But apparently she did not fully take on guilt about it, (as another child might have in a similar situation,) or she would have been unable to challenge the story in later years. So, as an adult, she had the courage to investigate the facts and, on learning how her brother had died, she could throw back to her stepfather the hot potato of blame and let him be punished for the murder he had committed.

Indeed this is how a recipient can liberate herself from the weight of whatever blame, shame or guilt may have been falsely placed upon her. Unfortunately most vulnerable recipients are unable to shake off false blame on their own the way Tracy did. There are many instances of children who were abused sexually by a

parent and also shamed for it. They continue to carry the blame for that parent's incestuous behavior rather than allow him to be penalized for it by seeking redress. (English, 1994)

4, Then is the process of hot potato transmission a cynical method to transfer blame or harmful consequences for a donor's behavior?

Not necessarily, although this is so in the above case, which illustrates what I call "gross" transmission of a hot potato, because Tracy's stepfather consciously and deliberately scapegoated her to avoid judicial punishment.

However most instances of hot potato transmission are of the "subtle" kind, where no concrete misdeed has taken place, and the guilt or shame transmitted by the donor is of a psychological nature. In these cases, the process operates outside the awareness of both donor and recipient, both of whom may even have a bond of affection for one another.

The donor "discards" a broad range of harmful feelings, beliefs, behaviors and obligations for the future into a recipient's psychic system. The recipient unconsciously internalizes these as her own, so she does not even know enough to try to break free of such feelings and/or assignments because she also internalizes a feeling that doom awaits her if she rejects the hot potatoes being passed to her. After he transmits a hot potato, a donor feels "liberated" (at least temporarily) from the burden of those of his inner unacceptable feelings or compulsions for destructive behavior that he has passed on.

Usually the process is an ongoing one over a certain period of time, for one transmission may be insufficient and requires reinforcement. This means that donor and recipient have continuous or very frequent access to one another. However once a hot potato is securely implanted into a recipient, it may combine with other harmful messages or other hot potatoes and develop into an episcript, as will be described later.

Either way such transmissions start out within a relationship that may be labeled as a close, loving one, like parent-child, or counselor-student, or a co-dependent couple relationship, or a tight business partnership. The donor lacks self-knowledge and is usually unaware of transmitting anxiety, inchoate guilt feelings or harmful "assignments" to the recipient as a way to free himself from dealing with such unacceptable feelings in himself.

5. An example?

The case I still remember from 28 years ago, because it was one of two cases that alerted me to my Hot Potato transmission theory, was that of a mother and her 12 year old daughter. The mother brought the child to the child guidance clinic with much concern because the girl was very depressed and had made repeated attempts at suicide. This was the era before the practice of family therapy; mothers and children were seen separately by different therapists. Even so, when the two therapists consulted, they discovered a see-saw process. As long as the girl was depressed and suicidal, the mother went about her daily life in a "normal" fashion. Yet no sooner did the girl begin to blossom again, drop thoughts of suicide and become more confident and cheerful, that the mother became severely depressed and incapacitated. She announced that she would have to withdraw the child from therapy because she was no longer able to drive her back and forth for treatment. It turned out that this kind of see-saw had happened a few times before, with other therapists. Apparently either the mother or the daughter could be well, but not both.

This time, as activist therapists, we pushed beyond the accepted practice of the time and refused to let go of the case. Fortunately the therapist who worked with the mother managed to reach beneath the mother's rigid defense system and helped her deal with her own unrecognized sense of worthlessness and severe suicidal tendencies. These came up whenever she felt unable to cope in accordance with her highly perfectionistic standards. At those times she obtained relief from repressed suicidal wishes, that threatened to crop up, by suddenly switching from affectionate tolerance towards her daughter to becoming so critical of her that the girl felt the "need" to suicide as a way out of suffering the pain of not knowing what she had done to generate such a reversal in her mother's attitude towards her. What was happening was that the mother thereby transmitted the hot potato of her own unacknowledged feelings and suicidal impulses. Then, when the daughter exhibited these feelings, the mother calmed down and became a "good" mother by becoming concerned about her daughter's "mysterious" depression and suicidal wishes, even to the point of taking her to a therapist.

Previous therapists, who had worked individually with the girl, and only occasionally saw the mother, had not realized that when the girl did better from experiencing the therapist's support the mother got the hot potato back again and that this was why she pulled her daughter out of therapy each time.

Undoubtedly the mother's defensive system, whereby she transmitted the hot potato to her daughter, protected her from a psychotic breakdown and/or suicide, and there was a risk that this might happen if the process was confronted. However the mother's therapist combined skillful confrontation with appropriate support, so this woman became able to acknowledge her fears and destructive fantasies and still accept herself without the panic that she might enact these with horrible consequences. There were moments when it was touch and go about her staying in treatment rather than revert to her time-tested method of transmitting her hot potato, but there was a happy end. I know, because I followed up the case bi-annually for many years beyond the time when therapy was completed.

6. More on subtle Hot Potato transmission?

In the the course of the many years since my early identification of hot potato transmissions, I have found that this process is much more pervasive, in many different ways, than I first thought. I also found that such transmissions can be far more subtle than that illustrated by the above case; they may occur even without identifiable changes in the donor. The vulnerable recipient, or "identified patient", as family therapists now name such, if in a family, simply exhibits symptoms that appear disconnected from behaviors of other family members.

For instance certain cases of anorexia nervosa in children are due to just this process. The child unconsciously seeks to starve herself to death to satisfy a parent's death wish, or to expiate some unacknowledged sin in the family.

Alain Crespelle has worked extensively with such families, where what he calls a "garbage-pail" child is, in effect, the vulnerable recipient of hot potatoes such as depression or psychosomatic ailments. By suffering from her symptoms the garbage-pail child expiates for secret or unacknowledged family transgressions dating back several generations. (Crespelle. 1996)

But let us remember that subtle transmissions are not only in families. Shakespeare illustrates the process beautifully in a couple. Hamlet is beset by the demands of his father's ghost; - (his own demanding Parent egostate? His own guilty conscience about his feelings about his mother or his indifference to his father's death?). He contemplates suicide to escape what may be his own murderous episcrypt, taken on earlier from his father, and starts becoming crazy. Ah, but here's Ophelia, with whom he previously had a loving relationship! After he accosts her on two occasions, she

takes on Hamlet's hot potatoes of suicide and insanity, obligingly loses her mind, and drowns herself. Thereby for a while Hamlet is "free" and becomes more functional, but Ophelia's sacrifice does not suffice in the long run, as happens in many real-life cases when the recipient of the hot potato is no longer available and a relationship with a new vulnerable recipient is not developed soon enough.

7. Specifically, how does transmission occur?

Milton Erickson and his followers have shown that hypnotic suggestions can be taken in by a recipient even when there has been no obvious trance, and that the recipient will then behave in accordance with what was suggested while believing that she acts according to her own ideas or choices. Erickson also repeatedly demonstrated how false memories can be inserted into someone without her awareness, after which she may believe that these are true. (*Gordon + Meyers, 1981*)

Of course Erickson only gave suggestions and memories for beneficial purposes on the basis of requests from his clients, although when he worked with children the implicit contract was with the parents, and not with the child. Since he was helpful in most instances, to my knowledge there have never been challenges about the widespread dissemination and application of his techniques.

Nevertheless in recent years there have been a number of cases of "false memory syndrome" where patients of certain therapists claimed to have recovered memories of sexual abuse in childhood and these were subsequently proven untrue. In some cases it was alleged that an overzealous therapist had transmitted such false memories. This was hotly denied by the therapists in question.

I do not mention all this to enter into the controversy about one assertion or another. There are undoubtedly clients who recovered genuine memories of past abuse and others who, while believing they said the truth, nevertheless came up with false memories. Furthermore these were not necessarily suggested to them by their therapists - consciously or unconsciously, although this might have happened in some cases.

My purpose in bringing up the subject is simply to say that nowadays there is convincing evidence that in everyday life - without formal hypnosis - it is possible for a donor to transmit ideas, feelings, memories, and tasks to a recipient who may never

realise that this has happened. Also, in most instances of subtle transmissions donors themselves may be unaware that this is what they are doing. So my additional purpose here is to caution therapists, particularly those using Eriksonian techniques, lest they unconsciously transmit their own hot potatoes to their patients.

Psychoanalytically trained therapists have been cautioned since Freud's time about the dangers of counter-transference when the therapist is not clear about his own conflicts. Hypnotists are seldom cautioned sufficiently about the dangers of unconscious transmission. In fact it is a recommended technique by many Ericksonians for therapists to themselves enter into a semi-trance condition when working with patients. It is said to improve unconscious communication, which I do not doubt. But the question remains: what gets communicated? As transactional analysts we would say that trance-like communication between therapist and patient are probably Child-Child transactions; they generate intimacy, which may be beneficial if the therapist is "clean." Yet Berne has shown that a "little fascist" lies low in everyone's Child, and I wonder whether this little fascist does not take charge to transmit hot potatoes through some of these transactions?

8. What kinds of feelings or behaviors are usually transmitted in subtle hot potato transactions?

Sometimes what is transmitted may be quite vague, like anxiety, anger, hatred, depression, or, as in the case above, a general sense of worthlessness. Sometimes there are phobias or suicidal or murderous feelings or fears of death or insanity or obsessions or compulsions to insanity. Sometimes these are enhanced with more specific "how to" prescriptions or complex destructive "assignments" whereby the recipient feels compelled to enact these over her lifetime. These latter form the basis for an episcrypt, as will be elaborated later.

It is important to know that in all cases of hot potato transmission there are feelings of shame or guilt about real or imagined misdeeds and consequent fears of retribution that accompany whatever else is transmitted.

9. Why does hot potato transmission offer relief to donors?

The answer is easy in the case of gross transmission, like that of Tracy's stepfather, who escaped prison as long as Tracy

carried the hot potato. But what of subtle transmissions, which are the ones of concern to therapists? Granted that a donor can unconsciously transmit hot potatoes such as murderous impulses and accompanying guilt feelings; from a rational standpoint it does not make sense that this would relieve him from internal pressure. Yet we have extensive clinical evidence that it does. Why?

Here the answer is quite complex, because it ties in to the power of magic beliefs.

Cultural anthropologists have demonstrated that in all cultures, including allegedly "rational" Western ones, religious practices and rituals are called upon to allay our deep-seated terror of pain, death, and the supernatural. Differences among cultures and individuals are only about which religious practices or rituals offer the best chance of relief and redemption for real or imagined sins. Each culture can "prove" that its religious rituals "work" to protect the individual or group.

Individuals are also subject to similar beliefs, except that sometimes instead of depending on cultural prescriptions, they unconsciously concoct their own magic prescriptions.

To be human is to be subject to all kinds of unconscious bad feelings and wishes, including highly destructive ones that the conscious mind disapproves of. Well-balanced persons can use insight to recognize such feelings without risking to be explosively overpowered by them. They can deal with the existential guilt of being human, and nevertheless develop moral standards without constantly fearing supernatural retribution for their unacceptable destructive emotions.

But persons who become donors of hot potatoes typically avoid self-knowledge. However sanctimonious or "morally correct" they may appear to be, their rigid personality structure does not give them enough leeway to deal consciously with their impulses in order to regulate their behavior. They may try to deny their impulses, but they experience nebulous guilt and anxiety about them, particularly when there is repressed envy, rage and frustration in regard to those they profess to love. They are stalked by unconscious terror of exploding, of death and retribution by un-named mysterious higher powers.

So they creatively develop a "magic" way to get relief from their psychological burden, the way someone else might use a faith cure. The hot potato transaction becomes the magical method whereby

burdensome feelings, fears or goals can be disposed of. The donor uses Child-Child contact with a vulnerable recipient to pass on the hot potato through projective identification. And, presto, as with some faith cures, unacceptable feelings, tendencies or fears are now externalised in the "other". The donor's Child becomes free of attacks from his Parent for his transgressions. Instead, his Parent can either attack the Child of the vulnerable recipient for having the symptoms of the Hot Potato, or he can even show "loving concern" about these, as did the mother in the case described above, as long as it was the daughter who carried the symptoms.

Note that hot potato transmissions can only take place as long as a vulnerable recipient is available; but donors are quite resourceful in finding voluntary or involuntary recipients. While usual recipients in individual cases are children or students or patients or marital partners or employees, involuntary recipients can also be relatively defenseless groups - for instance "welfare mothers" who are blamed for "immorality" or "stealing" by "morally" righteous recipients of corporate welfare, who thereby shed guilt about defrauding taxpayers.

The "magic" works just like a faith cure as long the donor finds a vulnerable recipient and then another when the first is no longer available. Otherwise the hot potato returns to the donor who may then himself explode into violence, as did Hamlet after Ophelia's death.

Essentially, then, a donor manages his internal fears of death and retribution by higher powers the way a schoolchild might seek to "con" a teacher. "It ain't my fault, teacher. It's Susie's. She should be ashamed of herself. Punish her, not me. Remember, I'm a good boy!"

Actually, doesn't the Bible report that Adam said something similar to God about Eve? Here the technique didn't work, and both Eve and Adam were punished. Nevertheless all human cultures are imbedded with the belief in magic practices that displace divine punishment onto scapegoats.

In fact, the word scapegoat in Western languages alludes to the very process of ritualistic "magical" hot potato transmission. The Bible describes how Abraham was ready to kill his son Isaac, an innocent vulnerable recipient, to prove himself and to avoid penalties from God. (Could it be that Abraham was unconsciously fearful of punishment because of his own destructive impulses towards Isaac?) At the last moment Abraham substitutes an equally

innocent goat and is at least temporarily liberated from his guilty feelings and fear of death by having transferred pain and actual death onto the poor goat.

Such themes are described in many ancient stories and confirmed by archeological findings from cultures as diverse as those of the ancient Greeks, the Celts and the Asztecs, where vestal virgins were routinely sacrificed in order for the powerful ruler to be spared from the wrath of arbitrary gods, or to gain their favor. For instance Homer tells of Iphigenia, King Agamemnon's own daughter, who was offered in sacrifice so the gods would bring on the favorable winds required for the fleet to sail forth to Troy.

There are also tales where the recipient herself offers herself for sacrifice. In Wagner's opera, "The Flying Dutchman", a girl yearns to be used this way. Finally the wandering mariner appears; she relieves him of his eternal curse by taking on the curse upon herself.

Apart from legend, think of the Japanese suicide bombers during the war, or the Iranian youths who were ready to die for the Ayatollah, although there the hot potato transmission was more gross, because they were promised heavenly reward.

10. Are all Hot Potato transmissions necessarily lethal?

Fortunately no. In fact many such transmissions are not even terribly harmful. My trainees have humorously coined the term "French fries" for first degree small hot potato transmissions, or run-of-the-mill "emotional contagion", which seems to occur quite frequently among persons who care for one another, precisely because transmission is a Child-Child process.

As an example, when Darlene had to take her TA clinicals, she asked her good friend Lilly, who had previously passed these exams, to share a room with her at the Conference hotel to support her. On the trip, and the days before her exams, Darlene became so convinced she would fail that she would have canceled appearing before the examiners had it not been for Lilly, who rehearsed with her into the night and up to the last minute. Outside the exam room, Lilly paced up and down while Darlene was being examined. Finally Darlene emerged triumphantly from her exams. She had passed easily! At this point Lilly broke into heavy sobs. Anyone seeing her in the hallway would have thought that she had just taken exams and failed. She had taken over Darlene's failure

anxiety to the point where she was so drained that she was unable to attend that evening's victory party for candidates who had passed. However she recovered the following day.

I have myself had the experience of being an unwitting donor. I was extremely worried about a talk I was to give to an audience which I feared would be hostile to my topic. I was determined to present it, against advice from some of my friends. I felt very nervous before speaking, but as I looked down at the audience when I began to talk, I saw my friend Marian, who, of course, knew about my intent. She looked noticeably worried and uncomfortable. At that point I remember feeling something like a physical change in my whole body; I switched from being nervous to complete self-confidence. Just let Marian be anxious about this, I felt; I'll do fine! And indeed all went far better than expected. At the end Marian told me she was quite exhausted, but fortunately she also, like Lilly, got her energy back the next day.

However I must also admit that beyond the exhilaration I felt at the time when I sensed that Marian carried small hot potato of anxiety, the later recognition of what had happened was quite sobering in alerting me to how ubiquitous is the unconscious process of hot potato transmission.

In this case, and in Darlene's case, it can be said that apparently with a one-time transmission among peers a little "French fry" can be digested or thrown away without untoward consequences for recipient or donor. Still, it is worth recognizing that hot potato transmission involves subtle, but actual, transfers of charged life-energy between donor and recipient, even in relatively minor instances. This process warrants much further examination, which I urge you to pursue.

Actually minor transmissions back and forth can occur quite frequently in loving relationships. If the two parties are relatively autonomous and capable of a certain amount of insight, even if there is some transfer of discomfort or guilt or anxiety between them because they do not maintain sufficient boundaries, no serious harm is done. In such situations the recipient eventually either returns the hot potato to the donor (who, hopefully, then himself deals with his uncomfortable feelings,) or they both find ways to throw the hot potato into thin air and let it go off like a hot air balloon.

I understand that Pam Levin has devised a number of techniques for couples when more transmissions occur than is healthy for

either. For instance she playfully confronts see-saw hot potato transactions between partners by saying: "Look who's got the discomfort!" thus helping them become more conscious of such transmissions, and then dealing with the underlying causes. (Levin, 1996). Levin also uses similar techniques in management consultation work, at least to alert participants consciously to what is usually an unconscious process.

Harmful Hot Potato transmissions occur when there is an unequal power relationship between partners and the more powerful partner is constantly the donor while the other is the recipient because of being overly dependent on the donor, literally or emotionally. If there is ongoing contact between the two or more persons involved and there is constant repetition and reinforcement of destructive Hot Potatoes, the recipient can become severely damaged and develop a harmful Episcrypt.

11. What is an Episcrypt?

Essentially an episcrypt consists of a combination of various assigned feelings and attitudes, including obsessive thoughts and compulsions, plus prescriptions about how to progressively implement certain outcomes and/or goals that are taken on unconsciously. All these are combined with various other messages and genetic tendencies that are already a part of the recipient's psychic system. Eventually an individual's episcrypt develops a distinct configuration of its own - a Gestalt or "package", if you will - consisting of feelings, attitudes, behaviors, expectations, tasks or goals which the person feels "obliged" to implement, although they may be harmful to her and others, or at the very least impede the creative development and fulfillment of her life.

Whereas hot potatoes can be taken on from donors at any age, but are maintained only when the donor and vulnerable recipient have ongoing contact, episcrypts usually start out in childhood - up to teens - and are then elaborated by the recipient herself, often by combining various hot potatoes taken on at different stages of development, sometimes even from different successive donors.

Thus an episcrypt is a far stronger and more complex determinant for the patterns of a person's life and her future behavior than is a hot potato. Furthermore the episcrypt is usually maintained and operative even after contact with the original donors of hot potatoes is broken, and even after their death.

With an episcript a person tends to operate in an absolutist manner in certain areas of life, with certain iron-clad rules, compulsive determination about them, and a sense of irrevocable obligation to fulfill certain tasks or goals at all costs, regardless of other considerations in her life.

The strange thing about episcripts is they do not necessarily become noticeable for a long time, even if the person is in treatment, because its dictates are pursued unflinchingly as a part of the person's everyday life without being experienced as symptoms. Sometimes it is only with hindsight or by coincidence that the episcript is recognized as having caused a particular problem.

For instance I remember Ellen, a bright, lively trainee who seemed to lead a great life, happily married with two fine children. The extent to which she was pressured by her episcript only came up incidentally in conjunction with a weekend event organized by her training group. No, she couldn't possibly participate, she said. She always went every weekend to visit her brother in a nearby town, 200 miles away. It always had to be weekends - no changes of schedule were possible, nor could she ever cancel visiting him even for one weekend.

It turned out that Ellen's brother, Mark, six years her junior, who was slightly retarded, now lived in a half-way house and was actually doing quite well, having developed friends and working in a sheltered job. While contact with Ellen was important, there was no absolute necessity for her to go there every weekend nor - as it turned out - for her to telephone him every single evening. (Actually Mark often resented rather than appreciated the daily phone calls which interrupted his TV programs!). Ellen's rigid schedule with Mark was something of a problem in her marriage, although over the years her tolerant husband and children had adjusted to her weekend absences because she compensated them for this in many ways. However recently she and her husband had had a bad argument about plans for the next family vacation; these had previously always been structured to allow for her weekend visits, and this time her husband balked by wanting them to take two full weeks in Hawaii.

The origin of Ellen's episcript lay in the fact that Ellen, the out-of-wedlock child of a single mother who later married another man and gave birth to Mark, was blamed throughout her childhood for her brother's retardation. There were long convoluted allegations about this, starting with her having pushed her mother

during her pregnancy and going on to how she had allegedly harmed Mark when he was young, and "he could have died". So Ellen carried a heavy hot potato from her mother who may have wished Mark dead and maybe also had resented Ellen's existence. Ellen did not realise this - what she remembered primarily is that she always had to take care of Mark after school and always on weekends while the mother held a weekend job away from home. Ellen was blamed even if Mark had so much as a cold.

Eventually Ellen developed an episcript whereby she felt that her right to be alive depended on Mark's welfare. Her weekend visits from which she could not deviate were her reassurance that she could be ok the rest of the time, and even then she had to make sure every evening that Mark was alive. That this was an episcript for which she needed help was not recognized because Ellen had even managed to convince her husband that it was essential for her to keep checking about her brother's welfare, and he had felt that he did not have the right to protest such admirable sisterly devotion.

Ellen's episcript was contained only in one area of her life, although eventually it did spread out to damage other aspects, like her marriage. Other episcripts are primarily focused on an outcome at the end. This is particularly so with lethal episcripts.

Such an example is the case of Otto, whose hot potato about achieving at all costs, but suffering throughout, was combined with an assignment to murder someone from a different ethnic group as revenge because the donor was slighted. Otto then developed an episcript by integrating within it various other influences. He fell in love with Minna, someone from the ethnic group he was supposed to revenge on; eventually he provoked her to reject him, and suffered bitterly from this. However this justified him to enact the underlying compulsion to murder for revenge, and by killing Minna he finally fulfilled the dictate of his episcript.

Greek mythology is replete with examples of episcripts whereby a curse placed on one member of a family first gets transmitted as a hot potato, then elaborated over the next generations into various tragic episcripts for each offspring.

For instance at Oedipus's birth the king, his father, ordered him killed to allay a curse against his household. Nevertheless Oedipus survived to kill his father, and, unbeknownst, marry his mother, Jocasta. She takes on the hot potato of guilt about this by hanging herself, so Oedipus does not have to kill himself. However the curse about punishment is not allayed sufficiently, so Oedipus

develops an episcrypt which is not quite as lethal: he blinds himself and goes into exile, taking his oldest daughter Antigone to be his companion. She now becomes the recipient for his hot potato about being killed violently, as do his sons, for when one of them comes to ask him for his blessing, Oedipus curses him instead. After that both sons and Antigone relentlessly move on to tragedy, each developing an episcrypt that incorporates the hot potato about getting killed. The two sons kill each other on the battlefield, and Antigone then gets herself sentenced to death for having challenged the new king's rulings. Nevertheless, (or perhaps because he managed to pass on to his offspring his own father's original intent to kill him,) Oedipus lived on into old age, and eventually his burial place became hallowed ground.

The original tale of Faust, which dates back to the Middle Ages, (before Goethe wrote the play), tells of how Faust sells his soul to the devil in exchange for becoming young again. He seduces Gretchen, an innocent virgin, and thereby passes on to her a hot potato of obligation to the devil which she transforms into her episcrypt after she becomes pregnant and disgraced; she kills her newborn infant, so as a penalty it is she who will have to suffer in hell rather than Faust, whom the devil now releases from his debt.

As in the case of Ellen, not all episcrypts are lethal, although unfortunately it is only at the point when a tragedy has happened, as in Otto's case, that most lethal episcrypts can be recognized as such. Even if they are quite pedestrian, since all episcrypts involve combinations of real or imagined guilt and compulsions about tasks or goals, the carrier has only very limited autonomy. Thus they are damaging to those who carry them because they do not allow the person to develop fully in accordance with her own talents and faculties.

For instance Bob's father was a talented musician, but lost two fingers in the war, so he worked as a frustrated bookkeeper the rest of his life. Bob had a poor ear for music, and did not enjoy it. His interests lay elsewhere. Nevertheless under his father's tutelage he trained as a musician, always hearing from his father how lucky he was to have this special opportunity. Bob worked very hard to be a good musician, hoping to compensate for his father's loss of a great musical career, but he never got to be more than an impecunious third rate cello player with growing distaste for music. Even after his father's death Bob was so demoralized by his failure that he lacked the inner freedom to change to another

career. His episcript had condemned him to mediocre achievement in a profession he hated.

Other episcripts might appear to lead to outward success - while not being what the recipient would herself have wanted. Anna married a millionaire and gained high social status, thus fulfilling her parents' upward mobile ambitions. However she was miserable with her impotent alcoholic husband, and even when he became abusive she did not dare complain or divorce, because her episcript called for holding on to the social position she had "achieved."

12. What is the difference between scripts and episcripts?

Transactional analysts have defined scripts in many ways. Here I will quote from my definition of scripts. (English...)

"Scripts contain genetic elements and patterns related to past experiences, fantasies and beliefs that are woven together into the fabric of a personal mythological story with many possible variations.A script is valuable as an organizing support structure(and) contributes to the articulation, actualization and evolution of our innate potential....It is through the interweaving of many strands of existential patterns that each individual creates the unique quality of his or her life."

With this definition in mind it becomes clear that an episcript is to a script what a cancerous tumor is to a pulsating organ. It has its own growth pattern at the expense of the organ it is attached to. For a while it may not seem to do much damage, but as it keeps growing, it interferes with the function of the organ to which it is attached, and eventually it invades and overpowers the person's whole organism unless contained or cut out.

In fact, the name "Episcript" was appropriately coined by Eric Berne after he read my original article on the subject, where I used a different label. Berne pointed out that "Epi" stands for "outside of" (as in epilogue, epicenter, epigraph) and indeed like a cancer the episcript is outside the script, though attached to it, and progressively damages the development of a person's life.

13. What are some diagnostic and treatment pointers for dealing with Hot Potato transmissions?

Unfortunately cases of serious damaging hot potato transmission seldom voluntarily come into therapy. The donor does

not want the situation to change, since he obtains relief from it, so he will resist going to therapy unless there is some threat, like removal from home of the "identified patient" by an agency in a family situation, or, in a marital co-dependent situation, if the recipient has developed sufficient physical or emotional resources to move out.

If such partners do come into therapy for whatever reason, as in the mother/daughter case described earlier, the only way there can be useful change is for both to be in treatment with the same therapist or at least with two therapists who keep exchanging information. Fortunately nowadays it is accepted practice for families to be seen in therapy as a unit and also for couples to be seen jointly.

In cases where a therapist recognizes a hot potato pattern, it is important for her not to fall into the trap of immediately identifying with the recipient as victim, for she will be hopelessly caught up in a Drama triangle. (Karpman, 1968, English, ,....) The person to whom sensitive attention must be given from the beginning is the donor, who is the more rigid one and also the more brittle one. So the therapist must find ways to get around the donor's Parent and support his Child, for this is who is being repressed. In fact the donor may himself carry an episcrypt which calls for him to transmit certain feelings or behaviors, so he may be determinedly trying to fulfill this damaging episcrypt. (Think of the example of Oedipus, who started out as a vulnerable recipient of the curse for violent death, but later became the donor for his daughter and sons!)

Of course offering support to the donor's Child does not mean "siding" with him to gang up on the recipient, yet some sympathy for the donor's Child must come through, however hard it may be for the therapist to provide it, especially the donor was physically abusive to the recipient. Yet the donor's Child must be able to trust that the therapist will not attack him, (as does his own Parent, internally, and probably the way his parents did when he was young). The vulnerable recipient can then be given support to resist transmissions and overcome secret feelings of guilt or shame. Eventually then both parties might be helped to communicate openly and avoid further hot potato transmission.

If the donor cannot be helped to develop insight about his destructive and guilty feelings and does not seem capable of using new ways to deal with them, rather than by projective identification and/or as harmful behavior, the situation cannot be

remedied by therapy. Then more drastic steps or recommendations are required, whereby the donor must be separated from the recipient or other potential recipients (for instance in a family with several children, even if only one is the identified patient.)

Here I must say a few words to case workers in children's agencies and the courts. While I am in total accord with the techniques of good family therapy, and have seen excellent results when done by skilled therapists, sometimes social workers and court personnel are overconfident about how such techniques can offer quick permanent solutions, so they hesitate to separate donors from children unless the situation is extremely violent. I believe it is important for case workers to be very cognizant of the process of repeated unconscious hot potato transmission and its dangers, so they can recognize it and realise that in many cases even temporary separation of the parties may be necessary until the vulnerable recipient grows older in another setting and has a chance to develop the strength to resist taking on hot potatoes.

14. What are treatment recommendations for Episcripts?

The analogy to cancer is a useful one in thinking of an episcript like a tumor, the location and boundaries of which must first be recognized as well as its rate of growth before a treatment strategy is devised. It makes a difference where the tumor is located, how large it is, how much and how fast it grows, whether it is still operable or has metastasized, and so on.

Similarly an episcript like Ellen's is far different from Otto's, or Bob's, or Anna's, and each would require different treatment strategies, although they all started with at least one hot potato that was combined with much else to form the tumor of the episcript.

What strategies are to be used? I will let you answer that, as skillful transactional analysts who have developed various techniques for cancelling bad internalized messages, or what I call harmful "survival conclusions." (English, 1977) Given the "magical" origin of hot potatoes and episcripts, some permission/protection strategies are often effective, as are Hot Seat Gestalt techniques whereby the episcript's configuration can be delineated and "thrown out". Hypnotic techniques can also work as antidotes, although it is important for the practitioner's Adult to be very clear about what she is doing for reasons spelled out above in regard to transmission processes.

As with cancer, early detection can make a big difference in treatment, but unlike cancer nobody comes into treatment to check whether they have an episcript, since this concept is unknown to most people, including professionals.

People come into treatment because something hurts, but like cancer, for a long time episcripts do not cause conscious pain, because they are so imbedded in the person's usual pattern of life. All I can say, therefore, is to alert therapists that regardless of the actual symptoms for which a person comes in for contractual treatment, if there is a good deal of obsessive ideation, compulsive behavior and rigid refusal to look at options, it is worth considering whether there is an episcript hidden in the background.

For instance in Ellen's case it became clear that we were dealing with an episcript from her posture, tone and rigid refusal to consider options when her fellow-trainees urged her to make an exception about her weekend plan with her brother. "I'd die if I didn't go there!" she said. It was supposed to be a joke, but she meant it unconsciously. The coincidence of discussing possible weekend plans became the equivalent to "early detection" of Ellen's episcript.

At our insistence, and with some surprise at our alarm, Ellen agreed to a treatment contract about the "absolute necessity" to visit her brother every weekend. Thereby Ellen got the help she needed to deal with her underlying panic about her brother's survival, and at least loosen the episcriptual aspects of her bond with her brother. Had there not been this coincidence, in years to come Ellen might have ended up in treatment for marital conflict, because her husband's resentment about her weekends with her brother had begun to come forth, but by that time there would have been serious damage to their marriage and it might even have been hard to identify the causative episcript.

In the course of various contacts in private life and/or consultation work with organizations I have come across a number of examples of hot potato transmissions and episcripts. Then in each instance I had to assess my role: - Friend, family member, casual acquaintance, consultant, former therapist, trainer, etc..) Sometimes I was able to sound an appropriate alarm bell that steered someone to needed treatment, but mostly not. Sadly, far too often the outcomes of deadly episcripts appear as headlines in our daily papers.

15. What is a summary of this presentation ?

I presented the concept of "gross" and "subtle" hot potato transmissions, which is how a "donor" transfers blame, guilt, shame, worthlessness and other bad feelings onto a "vulnerable recipient," who takes them on and thereby "magically" liberates the donor from responsibility for reprehensible behavior and/or unconscious guilt.

Donors always have literal or psychic power over recipients. "Subtle" transmissions occur by a process akin to hypnosis when donor and recipient are in close contact, so transmissions get reinforced.

Episcripts are developed later by recipients of hot potatoes whereby they incorporate the essence of one or more transmitted hot potatoes plus other elements to form a "package" of feelings, tasks and goals, that develops like a cancerous tumor on a healthy organ. If episcripts are identified in time, their harmful impact can be annulled by appropriate treatment.

My principal goal for this presentation was to alert you to how easily hot potatoes get transmitted by Child-Child unconscious transactions. Small hot potatoes, dubbed French fries, may not matter much, but large ones, sent over and over, cause destructive episcripts. I hope that serious research will be devoted to the process of Hot Potato transmissions in all close relationships and in cults.

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HOT POTATO TRANSACTIONS

(from New Yorker magazine)

