

## Life Scripts – wisdom and freedom in narrative form or a chain round your neck?

This was the question I asked at the ARAT (Romanian TA conference in Timisoara in 2010 – 13 years ago). I hope these notes answer that and more questions for you.

**Berne** was developing his thinking and publishing his books 50 - 60 years ago. His first book on TA in Psychotherapy was published in 1961. In this he writes about script as an unconscious life plan. As his thinking developed, he wrote the notes for what was to become his last book – What do you say after you say hello? = Which was published (1972) 2 years after his early death. In this book he describes script as:

*“A life plan based on decisions made in childhood, reinforced by parents and justified by subsequent events culminating in a chosen alternative”. Berne was clear that script was a negative influence in my phrase “a chain round your neck”.*

Since Berne first mentioned script there have been very many words written about script – When first writing this article in 2010 I found 27 TAJ (or TAB- the earlier version of the TAJ) articles developing themes specifically on script, I am sure there are many more now. There are many others TAJ articles which refer to script theory and develop the concept further.

An introduction to basic Script theory is beyond these notes however there are plenty of alternative descriptions available: See my own 101 – introduction to TA which are freely available on the YTC website: [www.psihoterapieat.ro/pdf/101.pdf](http://www.psihoterapieat.ro/pdf/101.pdf). The book - TA Today by Ian Stewart also is a very clear and easy to follow explanation of script theory.

Berne’s stated goal for TA interventions was that clients become script free. While thinking of the development of the script Berne mentioned influencing factors outside of the family although he did not expand on these significantly. He also referred to the “protocol” which he described as the early preverbal experiences which form the early versions of the script – however he did not develop this idea. Today our understanding of the importance of the protocol it is now a central construct in TA theory and practice. The unconscious, pre-verbal script narrative, which is referred to as the unforgettable and yet un-rememberable experiences that form the foundation of our script stories. See for example the TAJ article: Impasse and Intimacy – Applying Berne’s concept of script Protocol by Cornell and Landaiche – 2006.



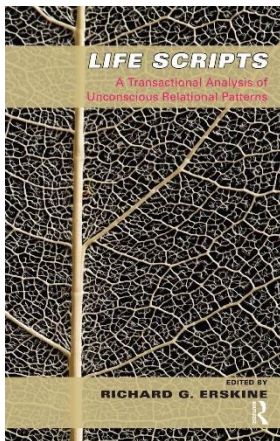
**The Protocol.... Berne**

Protocol is the largely unconscious pattern that shaped an individual's later script:

Each person has an unconscious life formulated in his earliest years.

The original set of experiences which forms the pattern for the plan is called the protocol.

In my view this is the most important development since Berne's time of writing has been the research findings which point to the importance of the preverbal experience of the infant as being fundamental in creating the foundational platform for all later decisions the child will make about his relationship to himself, others and the world around him. An excellent and relatively easy introduction to the importance of the early experience of the child from outside of TA is "Why Love Matters" by Sue Gerhardt... my view is that these findings are confirming the concept of script theory and TA even though we need to continually develop the theory considering these findings. An expansion of this idea is an important recognition that life script is an embodied process which is emotionally alive in our bodies and is not a static cognitive process – Our script evolves and grows with us.



### Life Scripts – Unconscious Relational patterns edited by Erskine: 2019

#### Script is a chain to be set free from:

The first chapter is written by Erskine: Berne, Steiner, Bob and Mary Goulding and Erskine are all leading authors who take the view that the script is pathological that needs to be dealt with in order for a person to live script free... This view was the original one developed by Berne. It is excellently presented by Erskine in the Life Scripts book, in the first chapter Erskine provides an excellent review of the development of scripts and a literature review.

Erskine describes his view as being that "life scripts are a result of the cumulative failures in significant dependant relationships. Expressed through physiological discomforts, escalations or minimizations of affect and the transferences that occur in everyday life."

He continues to define in depth psychotherapy as having the purpose of resolving the unconscious script inhibitions or compulsions in relationships with people, inflexibility in problem solving and deficiencies in health care".

He repeats this later in the chapter after discussing the importance of the physiological embodying of the script when he says that psychotherapy aimed at script cure must also identify and ameliorate the physiological restrictions, inhibitions and body tensions which interfere with good health.

In conclusion he states that "script is a desperate and creative attempt to self-regulate while managing and adjusting to the failures that occur in significant relationships through life. Scripts are a self-protective way of compensating for what was and may be missing in relationships..."

Richard is a wonderful writer, and all his many articles and books are well worth the time to look up and read, and this chapter is wonderfully clear. His description of the process of the development of the script in development and action and for the need for depth relational psychotherapy in order for the client to find "script cure".

The difficult and self-indulgent questions I am left with are:

- What life might be like in the script free world he is pointing to?
- Can I hope that one day I might achieve this state in order to be able to write more fully on this.

While Erskine provides no description of life after cure, Berne was clear that the goal was “to put a new show on the road” and for the frogs to become the prince / princesses we were born to be, therefore there is no doubt after reading the chapter that we all must now seek to follow this direction believing that the cure and enlightenment might be just over the next hill. Sadly, this is probably my “until script” in action, or is it my rebellion? Anyhow more therapy is clearly needed and then maybe I can also lead my clients to this land of script free life experience and relationships.

When I first read about TA as a young teenager, and then in my training in my twenties, this appealed to my young and idealistic sense of hope. Now unfortunately I find this a rather depressing perspective which only reminds me of the promise of salvation for those who believe. So, is there a different way?

### **Life Script – Scripts as a narrative for life:**

The writings of English, Cornell, Tosi, Stuthridge and I find maybe there is hope. Now I can go forward with hope and belief that my creatively developed script can provide me with a way to fulfilling my potential.

Shortly after the death of Berne, Fanita English developed her theory of scripts and in the TAJ in 1988, she wrote of how scripts are – “genetic, past experiences, and fantasies woven together into the fabric of a personal mythological story with many possible variations - Scripts have a non-specific ending and a script is valuable as an organising support structure originating in childhood allowing us to play with various options before converting them into life. Thus, scripts contribute to the articulation, actualization and evolution of our innate potential. Scripts unfold and evolve gradually, and each individual creates the unique quality of his or her life.” English, also considers that the lack of script actually is potentially the cause of serious mental health problems...

This view is developed further by Maria Teresa Tosi in the second chapter of the life scripts book saying that: “human beings need a story to define their own identity. Their narratives have the primary goal of integrating their experiences in a coherent story which is compatible to the culture in which they live... the person can re-author their story in a way which opens new options in their life.”

Stuthridge extends the theory of scripts further in her chapter in the Life Scripts book by describing how the script is an internal narrative process which is manifested externally by embodied emotional patterns of relating. In an important development she describes how parents with a coherent self-narrative are likely to have children with secure attachment patterns which she describes as being potentially a way of ensuring that transgenerational scripts can be prevented from being past, down to future generations, as Parents learn to create coherent self-narratives.

Cornell in his chapter in the Life scripts book asks: “whose body, is it?” He develops the important theme that script is embodied. He states that in his work with script he emphasises the conscious and unconscious efforts at meaning making and the creation of psychological structure in addition to developmental fixation and defence.

Cornell goes onto draw significantly on the work by Bucci to demonstrate how script can be seen as 3 interdependent systems of mental and emotional representations and processing – these are called sub-symbolic, symbolic verbal, and symbolic nonverbal.

The sub symbolic is referring to the affective, sensory, somatic and motoric modes of processing. The symbolic verbal is referring to languaged cognition and verbal narratives. Symbolic non-verbal is

referring to the ways of organising that while nonverbal can generate reflective meaning that can be brought into words. Cornell and Landaiche in their TAJ article in 2008 state that “the protocol is not a set of adaptive or defensive decisions like script... It is felt and lived in the immediacy of one’s body. Protocol is the embodiment of the repetitive patterns of relatedness...”

**Uta Höhl TSTA** uses the work of Fanita English, constructivism and the work of social scientist Hurrelmann to create the following positive definition of script: “Script is an individual life plan of a human being, which he/she forms and develop over their lifetime in productive assimilation of his/her inner and external reality and in interaction with his/her social environment.”

Life Scripts: Wisdom and freedom or a chain round your neck? We can readily acknowledge that the ways in which we make meaning are creative, however there is a continuum:

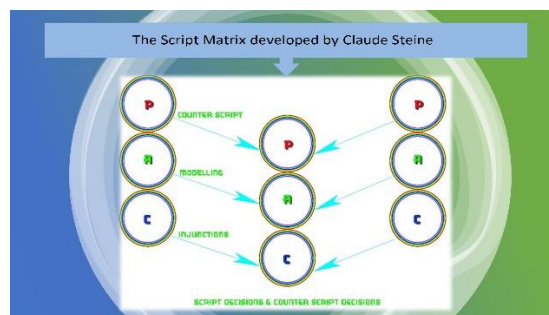
Decisions and patterns that are useful, healthy and productive inviting relationship with others and support autonomy, intimacy and spontaneity at one end of the spectrum and at the other there can be extremely destructive narratives and patterns which are harmful to ourselves and others.

Dave Spenceley TSTA

#### **A list of TA articles and books dealing specifically with script and protocol:**

1. Script and counter script: Claude Steiner: TAB 1966

Will power is a concept meaningful to individuals who find themselves driven to some form of self - destruction. Essentially, will power is the contraposition of the Parent against the demands of the script. (This is the introduction of the script matrix!)



2. Permission and Protection: Pat Crosman: TAB 1966:

By "permission" or giving permission I refer to a particular transaction that occurs between therapist and patient at a particular point in therapy, whereby the therapist effects a change in the direction of the patient's behaviour or attitude which before that time would have seemed either impossible or untenable. “Permissions are an aspect of script” the origin of the need for the 3 P's ... Potency was added later. (By Steiner)

3. Script Analysis; Introductory remarks by Claude Steiner: Tab 1966

Script analysis is the most advanced and complex stage of transactional analysis, and because of this it has been relatively inaccessible to most people. Recently there has been a surge of interest in this subject, resulting in an increased sharpening of perception and concepts, and a deeper understanding of the development and dynamics of scripts. To an outsider it may seem on the borderline of rigorous thinking and observation, and the facts and results of this procedure are indeed difficult to verify unless the clinician is willing to exercise patience. Others may brush it off with the popular slogan "I Can Recognize That," relating it to Jungian and Freudian observations which do not quite meet its

requirements. To understand script analysis properly requires the clearest and soundest possible understanding of all that precedes it: structural analysis, the analysis of transactions, and game analysis. Dr. Steiner is eminently suited to be the editor of this section because he is one of the small group of people who have been involved in the development of transactional analysis from its earliest years.

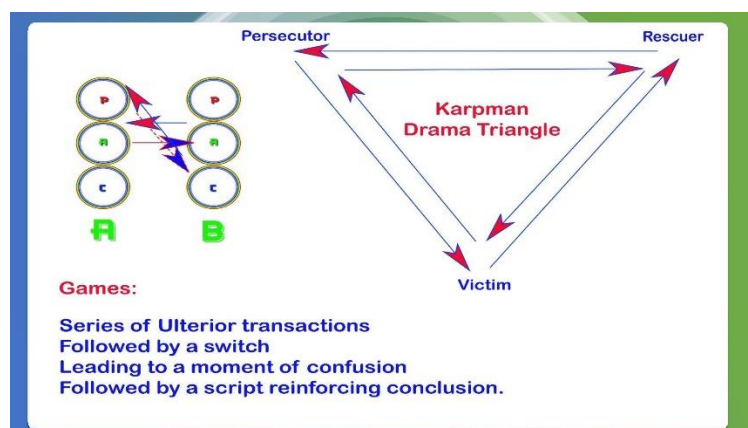
4. Script Checklist: Claude Steiner: TAB 1967

In the practice of script analysis, it becomes important to collect a certain list of items, colloquially called a script checklist (based on an idea by S. Karpman and M. Groder). Because of the various referents given to the word script, it is suggested that script properly refers to this checklist and that ideally, when talking about a patient's script, the observer is referring to the whole checklist rather than to one or few of the items. Thus, on this basis, "White's script is 'Don't think!'" will be a more accurate statement than "White's script is don't think."

5. Fairy Tales and Script Drama Analysis: Steve Karpman: TAB 1968:

Fairy tales help inculcate the norms of society into young minds consciously, but subconsciously may provide an attractive stereotyped number of roles, locations, and timetables for an errant life script. To date, the scientific structural analysis of scripts has been based on the Script Matrix (See Steiner, TAB April 1966). In this paper I will present some diagrams for drama analysis of the script, using familiar examples from well-known fairy tales. Drama can be analysed as switches in role and location on a time continuum. The intensity of the drama is influenced by the number of switches in a time period (Script Velocity) and the contrast between the positions switched (Script Range). Low velocity or range is boredom. The time for each switch varies independently from surprise through suspense.

This article is famous for the introduction of the Drama triangle and the influence it has had on Game analysis.



6. Episcript and the Hot potato game: Fanita English: 1969 TAB:

This report is a description of the episcript which is to be distinguished both from script and counterscript. The script is a life plan related to an injunction from the Child in the Parent, then integrated as an "electrode" in PC, the Parent in the Child. The episcript is generated around the same time by AC, the Adult in the Child, colloquially called the "Professor." While script injunctions are being received by the Child, AC, the Professor, wishes to fight them off. Particularly he wishes to avoid the outcome belonging to a hamartic or tragic script.

7. Decisions in Script Formation: Bob Goulding: TAJ 1972. vol 2.

When I was in Miami in October, I was sitting on one of the benches at the Airport waiting for my plane to New York. A little child, probably 9 or 10 months old, was in the stroller, parked across the aisle from me. His mother was reading the paper, ignoring him; he had a bottle in his hand. He looked at his mother, looked at the bottle, and dropped it on the floor. He then pulled at mother's pant-suit until she looked at him; she got up, with a scowl, walked to where the bottle was, picked it up, shoved it at him, and sat down to read the paper. He looked at the bottle, looked at her, pitched the bottle again, pulled on her pant-suit; she looked, swore, got up, pitched up the bottle, thrust at him, told him to "hold on to the goddamn thing" sat down, went behind her paper. He looked at her, looked at the bottle, threw it again, waited a few second, pulled at her pant-leg. She looked at him, hollered at him, got up, got the bottle shoved it in his mouth, scolded him harshly. He cried, and looked pained, she went back to her paper.

8. Scripts revisited: Claude Steiner TAJ 1972:

"On the occasion of this special issue of the T.A. Journal devoted to scripts, I am asked to write an editorial comment on the several pages which are included. Those of us in Transactional Analysis who see ourselves in the dual role of scientists and practitioners of psychotherapy are always in quest of better explanatory models for the understanding of human behaviour on the one hand, or improved applications in our everyday work in psychotherapy of these models as we develop them."

9. Scripts: The role of Permissions: James R. Allen, Barbara Ann Allen: TAJ: 1972.02

Scripts, as Berne pointed out, are designed to last a lifetime. They are based on continually reinforced parental programming and on firm childhood decisions. These decisions, in turn, are based on four interdependent sets of factors: (1) those parental messages which the child accepts, (2) his existential position, (3) his limited life experience, and (4) his level of cognitive development.

10. The Miniscript: Taibi Kahler, Hedges Capers: TAJ 1974

The purpose of this article is to present a concept that furthers counterscript theory; defines sequences of not-OKness; focuses on second-by-second interlocking 2. script behaviour, 3. as well as on second by second individual scripty behaviour; links second by second behaviour with the life script, 4. and finally suggests a theory of specific, transaction by transaction, script In Games Alcoholics Play Steiner, 5. defines the counterscript as "an acquiescence to the cultural and social demands that are transmitted through the Parent,6 Steiner further reports that since the witch mother or troll father injunctions are more potent than the counterscript, the counterscript never succeeds. When Berne discusses a winner's script in What Do You Say After You Say Hello? he suggests that the basic rule seems to be that such a script payoff comes from the Nurturing Parent through the counterscript slogans. "A non-winner gets his payoff from the controlling Parent through injunctions. A loser is led down the path to a bad payoff by the provocations and seductions of his parent's crazy Child, which tempts his self-destructive demons."

11. Cultural Scripting: Jerome D. White, Terri White: TAJ: 1975.

The ways in which the young individual perceives his world are based on his early biased perceptions of his experiences. This is script. It is the decisions about life and the expectancies about life that he has come to feel defend him and set the world into a safe frame of reference. He will survive in successively expanding worlds by satisfying his script expectancies. The symbiotic confines of the mother-child world will expand to the mother-father-child triad and then to the larger family community and on to the immediate neighbourhood community. The extensions will continue until, ultimately, the individual is part of a larger cultural system, or possibly several cultural systems simultaneously.

12. Drivers: The key to the process of scripts: Taibi Kahler TAJ: 1975.03

Eric Berne has defined a script as an unconscious life plan, a blueprint for existence, that is adopted in the preverbal years. In *Sex and Human Loving* Berne discussed six lifetime-structure scripts: "Never," 2) "Always," 3) "After," 4) "Until," 5) "Over and over (Almost)," and 6) "Open end." Berne himself has invited some confusion by labelling various fairy tales "scripts." Imprecise language has hindered our understanding of script theorists' work. The following is a list of expressions which are used colloquially and therefore contribute to confusion, together with their technical counterparts:

13. Injunctions, Decisions, and Redecisions: Robert Goulding, Mary Goulding: TAJ 1976.01

One summer weekend in 1966, while sitting beside the swimming pool at our old Menlo Park marathon house, Bob and I began talking about injunctions. We recognized that we kept hearing the same relatively few injunctions and decided to classify them. Our list today is approximately the same list we devised during 1966 and 1967: Don't be; Don't be you (the sex you are); Don't be a child; Don't grow; Don't make it; Don't; Don't be important; Don't be close; Don't belong; Don't be well (or sane); Don't think; Don't think about X (forbidden subject); don't think what you think, think what I think; Don't feel (don't feel X (mad, sad, glad, etc.); don't feel what you feel, feel what I feel.) At first, we did not recognize the distinction between injunctions and Child decisions; during this period, like other TA therapists, we looked for "exact words" of the injunctions and an "exact scene" in which the injunction was given. We saw that, although patients remembered remarkably similar early scenes and injunctions, each individual reacted uniquely. Our clients were not "scripted." No one is "scripted." Injunctions are not placed in people's heads like electrodes. Each child makes decisions in response to real or imagined injunctions, and thereby "scripts" her/himself.

14. Let's not call it script when it Ain't: Fanita English: TAJ 1977.02

Berne accurately observed sequences of transactions which he called games. He also noted that there are players who apparently escalate such sequences to "3rd degree" (lethal) levels, often culminating in tragedy (Berne, 1964). Unfortunately, he drew inaccurate conclusions from these observations. He assumed that players engage in games in order to advance their scripts-and the implication followed that tragic "third acts" of scripts are pre-decided in childhood because of stroke-associated injunctions from "witch-mothers," and so forth. This is an unproven-and, I think, incorrect-hypothesis, except in rare cases of deliberate malevolent episcripting (English, 1969).

15. What makes a good therapist? Fanita English TAJ 1977.02

A good therapist is a good technician, an artist, a loving human being, and an individual who values self-examination about her own motives and behaviour. When I first thought of these attributes, I put "loving human being" as the first one, in that a loving therapist can concern herself with others and be of help just by radiating a special kind of warmth which attracts even mistrustful people. But there's the catch! And this is why I list technique and art ahead of lovingness when I discuss a therapist rather than a person. To be a loving human being is a prerequisite for a therapist. However, without solid technique and a certain artistic flair, a therapist can be engulfed by the problems of her patients, and she can end up crucified or devoured by their cannibalistic needs when they seek ways to fill a certain emptiness within themselves.

16. Protocol: David Steere: TAJ: 1985.04

Protocol is defined as an observable scheme of bodily behaviours that appears in consistent sequence underlying the larger movements of the client's script. Evidence is presented pointing to its existence in nonverbal displays surrounding script signs. Clinical material illustrates how protocol serves as the unifying link between the client's behaviour in various games and rackets. Its roots in primitive sensorimotor schemes developed in the preoperational period are discussed. Methods are presented for intervening in existing patterns of protocol to invite mastery of the original situation.

17. Scripts and Marathons Maggie White, Jeff White TAJ: 1986.01

The use of a particular process of brief script-taking at the commencement of a treatment marathon is described. This format has evolved over a number of years and has been found valuable both for the information it provides and for establishing a potent, open, and safe atmosphere for the ensuing marathon.

I use this as the basic script questionnaire and teach this on the TA 101's – as I write I will be working with this material tomorrow with a small group of trainees.

Script questionnaire – the origins of the script narrative

10 questions --- answer with first answer  
imagine mum / dad with you and telling you  
do this for all parent figures – aunts / grandparents /  
teachers / gods.

1) What should you do (did you do) to please mum?

2) What should you do (did you do) to please dad?

3) What did you do that upset / anger / scared dad?

6) What did you do that upset / anger / scared dad?

4) What did you then do / feel and think?

7) What did you then do / feel and think?

5) Your conclusions about life, self, and others?

8) Your conclusions about life, self, and others?

9) What is the title of your mums biography, that describes her life.

10) What is the title of your mums biography, that describes her life.

18. Closing Escape Hatches: Decisions for healthy living: Laura Boyd: 1986.04

This article reviews published data for closing personal escape hatches and expands it with a fourth decision that encompasses and extends beyond the original three escape hatch decisions. Various forms of suicide in addition to physical suicide are addressed. A distinction is made between crisis situations of depression, clinical depression which may lead to suicide, and crisis situations of despair which result in other forms of "not living." An example of the fourth escape hatch decision is provided.

19. Script Cure? A diagnostic Pentagon of different types of therapeutic change: Petruska Clarkson: TAJ: 1988.03

Although there are scattered references to different psychotherapy outcomes through-out Berne's work, nowhere does he bring them together for comparison, contrast, and confirmation; nor does he show how possible psychotherapy outcomes can be systematically identified and described. This article presents five possible outcomes: Script Cure, Making Progress, Disintegration, Disillusionment, and Counterscript Cure. These "faces of change" are discussed as five separate systems with their own frames of reference, including idiosyncratic motivations for seeking/avoiding future changes, characteristic response patterns, and differing capacities in managing stress. Each is associated with an archetypal or mythological image which may aid the psychotherapist in distinguishing, defining, and recognizing the five types of outcome so that he or she can facilitate life script changes that are genuine, stable under stress, and provide a fertile and resilient ground for future growth. A pentagon diagram summarizes these major points.



20. Life Script Theory: A critical review from a developmental perspective: William F. Cornell: TAJ 1988.04

Script theory is examined and expanded from the perspective of contemporary (note this was published in 1988) developmental research and theory. Each major script theorist is reviewed and critiqued. Script, as a comprehensive theory presented in most of the TA literature, is found to be overly reductionistic and insufficiently attentive to the formative factors in healthy psychological development.

21. Whither Scripts: Fanita English: TAJ 1988.04

Script theory, on careful examination, has become restrictive, simplistic, and inaccurate. The author connects Berne's narrow deterministic view of scripts to his erroneous view of games. Existential Pattern Therapy (EPT) (English, 1987), the author's own form of script analysis emphasizing creativity and the balance of unconscious drives, is described. A case presentation using EPT is discussed following which an evaluation of the relationship between unconscious drives (survival, creative, restful), stroke economy, and the ego states concludes the analysis.

22. Organizational Scripts: Rosa R. Krausz TAJ: 1993.02

This article discusses the use of script theory in organizational settings and in the understanding of unconscious individual and group processes that may impair organizational effectiveness. The concept of organizational ideology is proposed as an alternative way to analyze external adaptation and internal integration in organizations. Four basic types of organizational scripts are presented.

23. Impasse and Intimacy – Applying Berne's concept of script Protocol by Cornell and Landaiche – 2006

#### Reading list for Body work and Scripts from the TAJ's

1. William Cornell: Wake up Sleepy: Reichian techniques and script interventions: TAJ: April 1975 TAJ 5.2

One aspect of the rapid growth of transactional analysis has been the continuing exploration and integration within the TA treatment structure of techniques developed in other therapeutic modalities. This paper considers the use of body-oriented methods of therapy, derived from the work of Wilhelm Reich and his students, within the theoretical framework of TA. It is not the purpose of this paper to describe the Reichian techniques themselves in any detail; ample sources are available for this information. Awareness of a client's gestures; posture and nuance of expression has always been important to transactional analysts. Steiner, in referring to Berne's attention to sphincters and Reich's concept of character armour, suggests that postural patterns may be learned to support adherence to parental injunctions. Berne describes relationships between various muscle groupings and their movement to the ego states and their functions. Transactional analysts use observations of a client's bodily movement and musculature for primary diagnostic purposes. Reichian techniques, on the other hand, work directly on the client's body to soften muscular restriction and to trigger emotional discharge.

2. Richard Erskine: Script Cure: Behavioural, Intrapsychic, Physiological.  
TAJ: Vol 10, April 1980

Script is a life plan based on decisions which limit a person's ability to problem-solve and relate intimately with people. An integrative therapy view of script cure emphasizes changes in overt and internal behaviour, the cognitive processes, the emotional experiences and the physical restrictions carried within the body.

3. Suzanna Ligabue: The somatic component of the script in early development: TAJ 21, Jan 1991

This article integrates transactional analysis theory and neo-Reichian perspectives. Following a developmental model, the author describes how the child may tense and relax the body physiologically in a comfortable and healthy environment, one with an optimal level of frustration. Traumatic experiences and excessive or unpredictable frustrations are linked to chronic muscle contraction and retraction. The child establishes a gestalt, with specific feelings, thoughts, muscle tone, and levels of energy that maintain the script in its structural form. Clinical manifestations of body scripting and phases of treatment are considered. A case example is provided to illustrate this process.

4. K. Cecilia Waldekranz-Piselli: What do we do before we say hello? The body as the stage setting for the script. TAJ: vol 29, Jan 1999 This is an excellent article and is the key article which reviews all previous work in the TAJ's and adds significantly to the understanding of body orientated TA.

An exploration of how one can change our script t its core by being aware of how one emotionally and physically structures, enters into contact with the world. A consideration of body orientated interventions and defences.

Books:

- a. What do you say after you say hello: Eric Berne
- b. Scripts people live: Steiner
- c. Changing lives through Redecision therapy: Bob and Mary Goulding
- d. Transactional Analysis: Woollams and Browns
- e. TA today: Stewart and Joinnes
- f. Integrative Psychotherapy in Action by Erskine and Moursand
- g. Life Scripts - A transactional Analysis of Unconscious Relational Patterns – edited by Erskine – published 2010