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Transactional Analysis and Character Disorders:  
Script Elements of Bank Robbers vs. Non Bank Robbers

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## Transactional Analysis

### Abstract

Script analysis is a transactional analytic technique for ascertaining the type of life plan an individual has decided upon. This research tested the proposition that bank robbers operate from a different set of script beliefs than do non bank robbers. ~~The samples were drawn from a midwestern federal penitentiary.~~ The sample consisted of 40 volunteers: 20 incarcerated male felons who had committed at least two bank robberies and 20 incarcerated male felons who had no bank robbery convictions on their record. ~~After explaining the study and obtaining a signed consent form,~~ <sup>E</sup> <sup>volunteer</sup> each individual completed a version of the script form questionnaire (Berne, 1961). A chi-square analysis was performed on the data and supported the hypotheses that bank robbers; identified more frequently with real individuals who operated outside the law, preferred childhood games of the chase, elude and catch theme and preferred fictional characters who were engaged in games with cops and robbers themes. The results were discussed in terms of their contradistinction to biological/structural deficit hypotheses to the understanding of character disordered behavior.

Transactional Analysis and Character Disorders:  
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Transactional analysis is one of the most recent derivatives of psychoanalytic theory. It was formally introduced to the general public in 1957 by Eric Berne. The purpose of this research was to empirically test hypotheses drawn from transactional analytic theory regarding the relationship between childhood heroes, games and dramatics; and current criminal career patterns.

According to transactional analytic theory, most persons' major decisions regarding the course of their lives are formed in childhood. This concept is formally designated as the life script (Berne, 1961). The aphorism "script" was selected since the life plan is viewed as a drama, preordained by early childhood decisions. According to this perspective each person selects the characters who must assume the various roles in his/her drama, and engage in the various games and transactions which will further the script (Berne, 1972). These concepts are similar to the neurotic interaction concept which has been observed and reported by others. One individual's neurotic behaviors and beliefs feed a second individual's neurotic behaviors and beliefs in a personally debilitating but mutually compatible symbiosis. The theory further postulates that there is a genus of scripts which are hamartic

((from the Greek hamartia; tragedy resulting from a characterological defect or; hamartetikas, prone to failure (Steiner, 1972)). One tragic ending for a hamartic life script is penal incarceration, resulting in isolation, segregation and, in a real sense, social death, the script of the character disorder.

Groder (1970) has studied the character disorder personality extensively and reports, among other things, a high need for notoriety, drama strokes and the typical "unexplained failure" cited by Cleckley (1941). One of the premises of a transactional analytic approach to understanding crime is that some criminals engage in crime primarily for the notoriety and not the profit. Vold (1958), summarizing the psychoanalytic position on the etiology of criminal behavior, notes similar phenomenon with crimes being committed primarily from excessive guilt and a need to be punished. These criminals leave clues, are overly concerned with whether or not the newspaper spelled their name correctly and generally enjoy the "chase" more than the "caper." They are actually disappointed if they are not caught. Obtaining recognition in this way is considered a game in transactional analytic theory. Berne (1964) defined 3 major underworld games, i.e., games played by persons with character disorders; Lets Pull a Fast One on Joey, How Do I Get Out of Here and of particular interest to this study, Cops and Robbers.

One of the high status crimes among the criminal population is bank robbery. Roebuck (1967) defined bank robbery as the greatest source of quick money, and other than violent assaultive crimes bank robbery is penalized most heavily-- a standard sentence is 25 years.

Since bank robbery has many of the elements of the Cops & Robbers game, high notoriety and extensive drama strokes, we hypothesized that bank robbers ought to have similarities in their scripts (psycho-histories) in terms of (1) similar preferred childhood games, (2) similar childhood heroes, and (3) a preference for stories, fairy tales and dramatic presentations with tragic protagonists when compared with non bank robbers.

#### Method

Subjects. The subjects were 40 incarcerated, adult, male, felons obtained from the population of a U.S. Federal Penitentiary. Over (160) subjects were polled to obtain the 40 volunteer subjects who participated without remuneration. Several subjects withdrew their data when they decided that this data might be used in some way by the "establishment." The bank robber group (N=20) was randomly selected from a population of 195 bank robbers on the basis of at least two convictions for bank robbery. That is, a list was created by random numbers and each entry was asked to participate until 20 subjects volunteered. The non bank robber group

(N=20) was selected in the same way from the remainder of the population on the basis of no convictions for bank robbery. The only subjects excluded from the study were two from the bank robber population who had been involved in transactional analytic treatment groups.

Procedure. The subjects met with the experimenter, the study was explained and a signed consent form was obtained. Following his consent to participate each subject was given a brief biographical sheet (race, age, marital status and number of siblings), and a life script questionnaire. They were asked to complete the entire questionnaire.

Instrument. The life script questionnaire used was a 38 item variation of a script checklist created by Berne (1961). The questionnaire is designed to provide data relevant to transactional analytic diagnostics, (eg. questions such as; What was Mother's main advice to you?, What did you want to be when you were a kid?) The items of interest for this study were: What were your favorite games as a child?, What famous person would you most like to be like?, What was your favorite childhood story, book, fairytale, or T.V. program?

### Results

The samples were comparable in terms of the demographic variables of age, race and number of siblings in the family.

They did differ with respect to marital status. The bank robbers had a higher incidence of divorce, a finding which was not expected.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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The first hypothesis to be tested was that the early childhood games engaged in and preferred by bank robbers would be of the Cops and Robbers variety when compared with the preferences of the non bank robbers. Berne (1964) stated that early childhood games such as hide and seek were either variants or precursors of Cops & Robbers. Tag and Cowboys and Indians are also variants of the chase, elude and catch theme. The results supported the hypothesis.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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The Bank Robbers reported a higher preference for chase, elude and catch games and the non bank robbers preferred athletic games (see Table 2).

The second hypothesis stated that Bank Robbers would have a significantly higher preference for fictional or dramatic characters involved in cops and robbers themes when compared with non bank robbers. The results of the

analysis support the hypothesis. Bank Robbers selected characters who operate outside the law such as Robin Hood ten times to the non bank robber's two. Non bank robbers preferred characters on the side of the law such as Zorro, Batman and Superman twice as often as the non bank robbers sample did (see Table 3).

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Insert Table 3 about here

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The third hypothesis stated that Bank Robbers, when compared with non bank robbers, will state a higher preference, for famous persons they would most like to be like, who are/were engaged in nefarious activities or who have gained their notoriety from antisocial rather than prosocial acts. The results support this hypothesis. Nine of the bank robbers identified with persons who gained their notoriety through criminal activities. Jesse James, (N=2) Genghis Kahn, (N=2), Butch Cassidy, John Dillinger and three known "Mafia" members comprised the person most like to be like category. Also of interest is the finding that for the bank robber sample the miscellaneous category contained four rich persons, Howard Hughs, Howard Hughs' only son (a little humor), J. Paul Getty, Hugh Hefner, two war heroes, (General Patton and Audie Murphy) and one "my father." For the non bank

robbers the miscellaneous category contained (one) my father, my guru (yoga instructor) and Bobby Fischer (National Chess Champion), no one in the non bank robber group identified with criminals.

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Insert Table 4 about here

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The results support the three hypotheses tested in this study. Bank Robbers, when compared with non bank robbers, stated a higher preference for childhood variations of Underworld games, and dramatic/historical characters with criminal themes. The bank robbers also stated that they identified more frequently with known criminals.

#### Discussion

When dealing with self-report data, especially when drawn from character disorders, there is always the chance that the data have been purposely distorted in one direction or another. It is possible that these results are of that nature. Two factors argue against that possibility. First, the task is of the semi-projective variety and the correct, or acceptable, answer is not known. Second, if they are purposely distorting the data then there is some congruence in the direction taken by their respective pathologies. That is, if we are looking at a distortion, then it is a systematic and a different one for each sample.

These data are consistent with and support hypotheses drawn from transactional analytic theory. They support the contention that some of the psychic elements (psychic history/script) of character disorders are shared within a specific criminal career pattern. These results support the contention that bank robbers do share similar script elements which are different from other criminal career patterns (non specified in this study). Future research may substantiate other transactional analysis constructs such as drama strokes and script injunctions.

This study has demonstrated that inferences drawn from transactional analysis, when tested empirically, can stand the test of science. It is quite possible that other diagnostic categories such as anxiety states, depressive reactions, etc., will share similar cognitive elements such as those found for one sub-sample of the character disorder population. This mode of analysis may provide a useful nosology not just for criminal careers, but also, for other dysfunctional mental hospital careers. Transactional analysis does suggest specific interventions tied to these commonalities in a patient's scripts. It now remains for transactional analysts to empirically verify other aspects of their theory and to verify, in the form of appropriate therapeutic outcome studies, the efficacy of their intervention strategies. Several therapeutic communities are operating from this frame of reference and

report very respectable recidivism rates. The United States Penitentiary (Marion, Illinois) Asklepieion Therapeutic Community was in operation for eight years and has a reported recidivism rate of only 11%.

These results shed some light on the reported recalcitrance on the part of character disorders to benefit from treatment. Our previous model suggested some irreparable structural or functional deficit (Hare, 1970) which made it difficult, if not impossible, for them to profit from treatment. If, however, they are operating from a script, a belief system which dictates the course of their lives rather than a structural/functional deficit, then psychotherapy directed at redecisions rather than structural or biochemical (medical) interventions are the treatment of choice. Yochelson and Samenow (1976) have arrived at a similar conclusion.

Table 1

Chi Square Comparison of Marital Status Between  
Bank Robbers and Non Bank Robbers

	Married	Divorced	Widowed/ Single	
Bank Robbers	4	13	3	20
Non Bank Robbers	11	4	5	20
Total	15	17	8	40

$X^2 = 9.02, df = 2, \underline{p} < .05$

Table 2

Chi Square Comparison of Preferred Childhood Games:  
Bank Robbers vs. Non Bank Robbers

	Cops & Robbers Themes	Athletic Games	Misc.	
Bank Robbers	16	1	3	20
Non Bank Robbers	6	13	1	20
Total	22	14	4	40

$X^2 = 15.82, df = 2, \underline{p} < .05$

Table 3

A Comparison of the Favorite Childhood Story, Fairy Tale, Book, T.V. Program or Hero for Bank Robbers and Non Bank Robbers

	Cops	Robbers	Neither or Unclear*	
Bank Robbers	5	10	5	20
Non Bank Robbers	9	2	9	20
Total	14	12	14	40

$X^2 = 7.616, df = 2, \underline{P} < .05$

\*Unclear category includes preferences such as "Untouchables" without the hero specified as either the cop or robber.

Table 4

A Comparison of Responses for the "Famous Persons I Would Most Like to Be Like"  
 Category Between the Bank Robber and Non Bank Robber Samples

	Infamous Criminal	Humanitarians/ Politicians	Athlete Entertainer	Misc.	
Bank Robbers	9	4	0	7	20
Non Bank Robbers	0	8	9	3	20
Total	9	12	9	10	40

$X^2 = 20.93, df = 3, P < .05$

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