



**COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES**  
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**LINKING CURRENT, PAST AND TRANSFERENCE RELATIONSHIPS  
(triangle of person)**

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Definition: Pointing out of common links among ways in which the patient relates to his/her significant others, parental figures in the past, and the therapist.

Elements: The therapist seeks common factors across the ‘triangle of person’ across: a) current relationship difficulties, b) earlier relationships, especially with parents, and c) how s/he relates to the therapist (transference). The therapist then interprets such links, often along one or other ‘side’ of the ‘triangle’ (e.g. link of significant others to therapist: ‘*Your descriptions of tentative connections with your boyfriends remind me of the cautious way in which you approach me*’).

Related procedures: *Transference interpretation*; describing overgeneralisation (part of *cognitive restructuring*), using the ‘triangle of defense’.

Application: Individual and sometimes group psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

1st Use? Malan (1976)

References:

1. Malan D (1976) *The Frontier of Brief Psychotherapy*. New York: Plenum.
2. Malan D & Della Selva P (2006) *Lives Transformed: a Revolutionary Method of Dynamic psychotherapy*. London: Karnac.
3. Abbass A (2002) Short-term dynamic therapies in the treatment of major depression. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 47: 193-2004.

Case Illustration (Holmes, unpublished)

Naomi sought help for depression triggered by the failure of her 3rd marriage. In session 4 the therapist pointed out that she seemed to accept almost unthinkingly the contractual arrangements – times, session frequency, use of the couch - without considering whether this form of therapy and this therapist were right for *her*. She replied – “oh, but I’ve Googled you and you tick all the boxes”. It emerged that she had also chosen her husbands by their CVs – tall, handsome, successful – rather than asking herself whether she really liked or trusted them. As a child Naomi had gained her mother’s attention by bending to her every wish and becoming the clever, well-groomed, socially adept girl that her mother insisted one had to be in order to succeed in life. Feelings were irrelevant, approval and appearances were what mattered. The therapist then suggested there was a common theme linking her 3 failed marriages (current problem), her childhood relationships, and her relationship with her therapist (transference). He suggested that, to her ultimate detriment, she gauged people by their external features (their curriculum vitae) rather than by her own spontaneous reactions to them. He linked her unquestioning acceptance of her therapist and each husband to her mother’s over-valuation of appearances and ignoring of feelings. Her task in therapy was to learn to identify and trust her feelings and use them as a guide to action. In session 7 she began speaking of how she had found a house which she really liked, and

despite some difficulty in raising the money, she had decided to follow her instincts and go ahead with it, especially as it was very suitable for her beloved cats.