The ‘agency triangle’ in NCT

When practitioners are too close to their assessors, or the assessor is too heavy-handed, an imbalance arises which could result in parents losing out on a good service from NCT, writes tutor Cathy Evans

Some practitioners will probably be very familiar with the ‘agency triangle’ model, but I first came across this idea in a book by Julie Hay a couple of years ago while doing research on NCT’s mentoring scheme.¹ Hay was talking primarily about coaches employed by organisations to work with individuals, and how a coach needs to be aware of psychological distances between the three parties concerned.

I traced this idea back to an article by Fanita English in 1975 about a ‘three-cornered contract’ between an event organiser, the attendees, and herself as a visiting speaker on transactional analysis.² Nelly Micholt developed the idea further by adding in the idea of psychological distances, pointing out that an equal distance between parties is required for a ‘successful intervention and outcome.’³
I have adapted Hay’s triangle diagram into something that mentors could use. It has since been used in training all of NCT’s senior practitioners (assessors, supervisors and mentors), as well as tutors and other staff members, and dubbed ‘the agency triangle’.

**Use within NCT**

We approach the idea by remembering that NCT and the parents it supports are part of any interaction between practitioners and a senior practitioner (SP) or tutor. All parties are stakeholders in the interaction. For example, during an assessment of practice, in which a practitioner is being assessed by a senior colleague, the stakeholders are the practitioner, the assessor, NCT, and of course, parents. NCT here refers to the organisation. Even though we are all part of the organisation, when distances are in a psychological balance, there should be no feelings of ‘them and us’.

When the psychological distances are balanced, each stakeholder benefits; the NCT retains a committed practitioner, the assessor has balanced the needs of parents, NCT and the practitioner, and the practitioner feels supported and enabled to develop her practice. Parents benefit from this win-win situation with an excellent service (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1.** In a), when practitioners, SPs and NCT are held in the same regard, all parties are considered with respect and feel an equal psychological distance. This is the scenario that ultimately best serves the parents’ interests.

Issues arise when the psychological distances become unbalanced.

In b) the SP is identifying more with the practitioner than with the organisation; the distance between them is shorter than between either of them and NCT. This may happen when the individuals are emotionally close, or when the practitioner appears to be a victim in some way. The practitioner is at risk of not being enabled to take responsibility for her actions or development. For parents it means that the courses may not be up to the standard required, and for both NCT and the practitioner, that a complaint may be made. Parents may not receive a good service as a result.
There have been many discussions among tutors and senior practitioners as to whether all SPs work in exactly the same way with practitioners, and the jury is still out. There might be a case for saying that assessors have to be more pattern c) than any of the others, whereas some supervisors have said that they feel they are more pattern b). However, many have disagreed over this! It may be the case that SPs slide along the psychological distance, initially having to meet the practitioner somewhere in order to balance the triangle. Ultimately, a balance is needed for all parties to feel valued and to benefit from the interaction.

**Implications for practitioners**

What does this mean for individual practitioners? Perhaps it may encourage you to see the wider picture beyond your immediate feelings about being assessed, or the difficulties of finding the time to work with a supervisor or mentor. The aim of all these interactions is to benefit parents.

It can be a useful model to reflect on interactions with senior practitioners. For example, following your last assessment, did you feel part of a balanced relationship? Did you feel that parents were placed at the centre, benefiting from a balanced interaction?

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**References:**