

Where's that flip chart?

Joanne Garner introduces a core concept of transactional analysis

A picture is worth a thousand words – and transactional analysis (TA) uses lots of pictures! The drawing of pictures, or diagrams, to illustrate abstract concepts is a key feature of TA.

The historical context of TA

Along with other Human Potential Movement thinkers like Abraham Maslow, Fritz Perls, Will Schutz and Carl Rogers, Eric Berne founded TA and developed his ideas in the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

The combination of pictures, emphasised by the colloquial language Berne chose in order to avoid 'long words', gives TA a particular usefulness in time-limited work, such as EAP sponsored and occupational counselling. When time is of the essence, the ability to portray a complex concept with an apparently simple diagram offers high value. This is equally true in coaching and training.

Berne's stated intention was to 'put ideas on a practical level which will give as clear and simple a picture as possible of complicated happenings ... In order to understand anything in this world, we have to ask first, how is it constructed? and second, how does it function?'²

This basic premise is well illustrated in his theory of ego states, in which he offers a theory of the structure of personality (the 'what' it is), and of the 'how' it functions.

Berne defined an ego state as a 'consistent pattern of feeling and experience directly related to a corresponding pattern of behaviour'³. His basic diagrammatic representations of them can be extensively expanded to explore different aspects of communication and relating. The classification

and analysis which his pictures encourage serve as excellent platforms for decisions to change. TA diagrams can support the decisions that underpin change, and act as a visual aide memoire for what has been decided.

A diagram that can be applied equally to personal and professional contexts is useful for workplace counsellors. A client may present with issues of (say) partner relationship difficulties, and the same diagram can be used to develop conversations around team working, which may be an accompanying difficulty.

Those three stacked circles

Figure 1, taken from Stewart and Joines³, shows the three stacked circles that Berne used to illustrate his model of ego states. This diagram provides a useful summary of the 'what' (the content or structure) of ego states. (When referring to ego states, they are distinguished from their biological equivalent by using initial capital P, A and C.)

Berne's intent in proposing the model was, initially, to classify the data. This enables analysis, followed by decisions to modify, adapt, change or maintain the status quo. Parent and Child ego states classify stored memories and strategies; the strategies may require updating or discarding and replacing, depending on their effectiveness in handling current realities, and this is carried out in the Adult state.

Using the ego state diagram in counselling

*Counselling for toads*⁴ is an imaginative and humorous pastiche of Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the willows*. In the tale, the counsellor (called Heron, naturally living on the riverbank) is the one to whom the depressed Toad is urged to go by his friends Ratty, Mole and Badger. They despair of Toad's ability to recover from the crippling misery that seems to afflict him following his adventures with the Motorcar.

In the first session, Heron draws for Toad the three stacked circles of Berne's ego state model, to support Toad in telling his story. The model helps Toad to quickly gain insight into his relationship patterns: with his father, and with other authority/paternalistic figures, like Badger. Heron's use of diagrams continues throughout the book, as Toad explores the anger and grief underlying his depression.

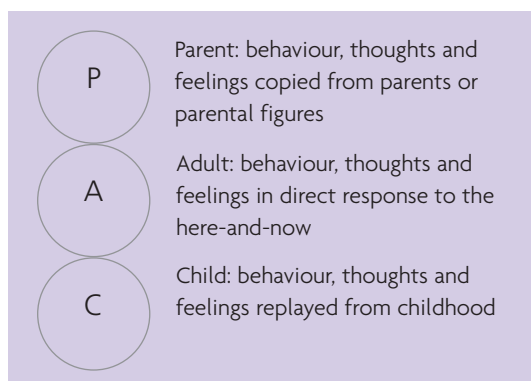


Figure 1. Berne's model of ego states

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Examples of ego state content

When I am in my Parent ego state, I will be thinking, feeling and behaving in ways I learned from my biological parents, primary care givers of other authority figures like grandparents, uncles, aunts, older siblings etc. To these basic role models (positive or negative but probably a combination of both), I may later add teachers, shopkeepers, the police, employers, and managers at work. There will also probably be characters from favourite stories, myths, fairytales, TV programmes etc.

As a manager, if I speak to my team from my Parent ego state as my father used to speak to me, I may thereby invite a response from their Child. This could result in their feeling patronised, and so the necessary objective problem-solving that results from an Adult to Adult discussion does not take place. I can identify which state I am in by observing my gestures, tone and words; by observing the response of others; and by being very aware of how I am feeling and thinking, and if that seems a replication from the past.

The advantage of this analysis is that I can then choose whether I wish to replicate my parents' behaviours, or my childlike reactions, or whether I wish to do something more contextually appropriate.

When I am in my Adult ego state, I will be responding directly to the reality of here and now as myself, not as my father. I am assessing the situation and deciding how to address it, selecting from a range of options, calculating the probability of success of those options. I can draw on data supplied by my Parent or Child states to inform my decision making but I will not be controlled by them.

When I am in my Child ego state, I will be responding in a way that replicates my own personal experience as a child. I may feel scared, excited, joyous or angry, exactly as I did when I was young.

Typical experiences that lodge particularly in my somatic memory will be events such as my first steps (and the reactions of the grown-ups around), my first day at school (and my feelings in response to the teacher). It is not difficult to see how my first day in a new job could remind me of these early scenarios, and set the scene for my behaving in a way that is irrelevant to the reality of my current status.

The first time I receive praise or blame from my manager at work, or the first time I make a presentation to colleagues, I may find myself remembering those earliest times. It will be important to deal with current reality and not imagine myself back in the school playground confronting a bully, or trying to please teacher.

Toad felt invited into his Child ego state by Badger's continuously stated opinion that Toad behaved irresponsibly. These reproaches served as a constant

reminder to Toad of his father's disappointment in him. As a result, even though his father was long dead, Toad still felt guilty and bad about his apparent inability to please anyone. He sunk deeper into low self-esteem with accompanying depression.

Clients presenting with issues of bullying at work can use the ego state diagram to enable a speedy insight into their reactions, and to support a rapid Adult review of their options. Choices can be made to move out of old (historic) behaviours because an adult has full resources at their disposal and can respond to criticism with assertiveness, which may not have been an option to the child.

Being in any of the ego states is not intrinsically good or bad, right or wrong. The context and requirement of the situation is the guiding principle in assessing its usefulness to me. Does being in this or that ego state make things better or worse? Does it invite a positive or a negative response from others? How do I feel about myself and others when in this ego state?

Delving deeper

Figure 1 can be expanded as in figure 2 (the author's own adaptation of Berne's model) to illustrate a deeper exploration of the detailed content of a client's personal ego states.

A series of 'mini' PAC structures within the Parent circle denote all the authority figures stored there. Inside the Child circle, a series of circular

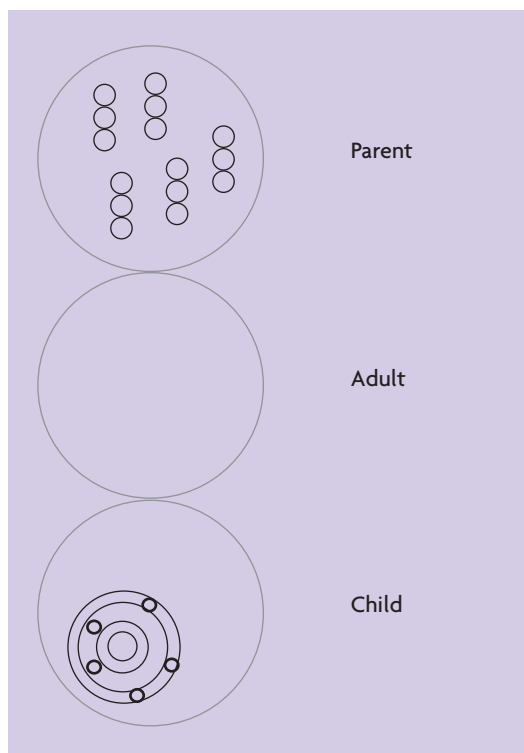


Figure 2. The content of ego states

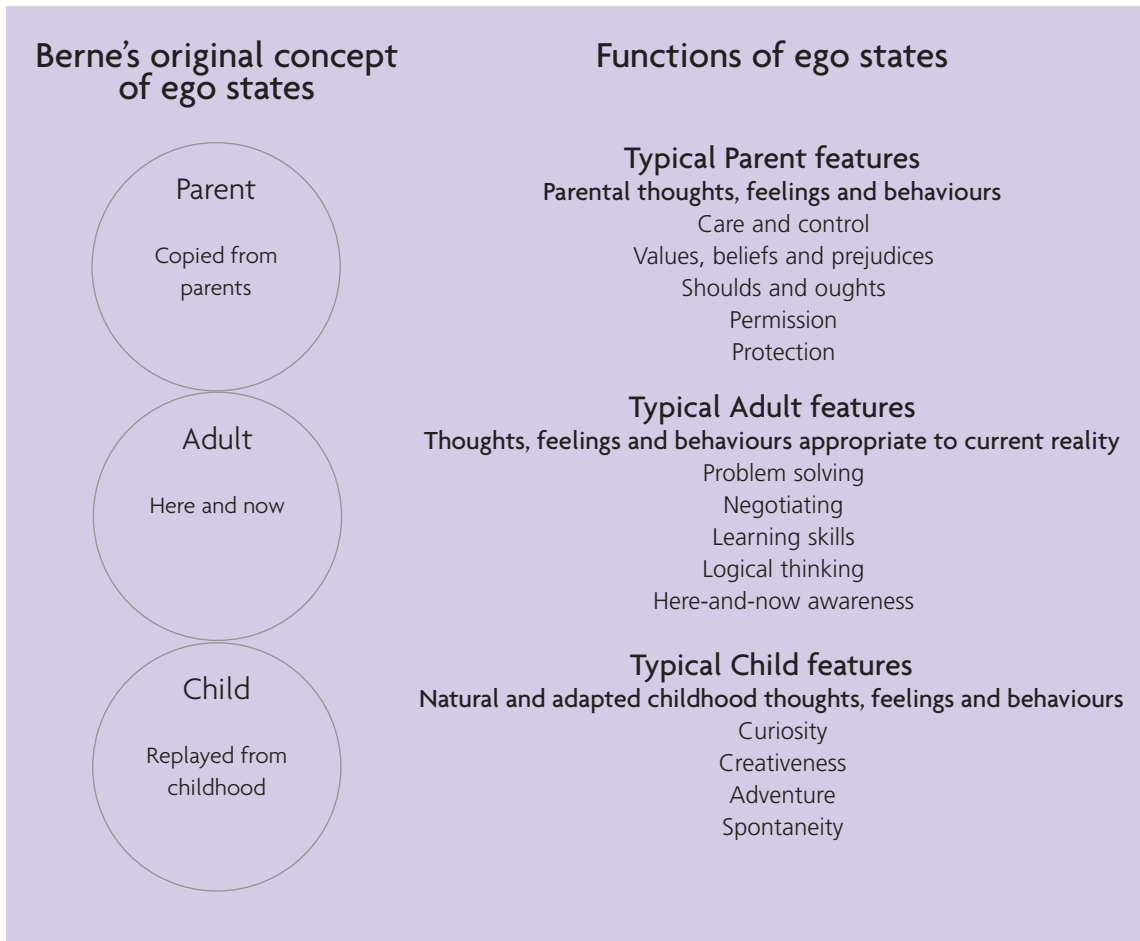


Figure 3. Summary of ego state structure and functions

lines, rather like the rings of a tree trunk sawn in half, denote the developmental stages of childhood and the building of experience on experience that occurs. Finally, there are some tiny circles on the tree rings, rather like knot holes. These represent particularly memorable events. The memories of these events are likely to act as triggers when something happens in the present that reminds me of the past. Suddenly I feel as if I am back in that situation. Another term could be 'pressing my buttons'.

Each trigger, or button, identified during a client narrative can be annotated with its own story and used as a springboard to explore desired changes.

Figure 3 shows Midgley's⁵ summary of the structure and function of ego states.

The 'how' of functioning

Berne also intended to illustrate the functioning of personality, its process of operating⁶. Figure 4 shows how he did this. Here, the Parent ego state is subdivided into two aspects, termed Controlling and Nurturing. When functioning in Controlling mode, I will be imposing my own values, beliefs, attitudes

and wishes. I will be giving structure and shape through boundaries and rules of my choosing, taking a parental role in deciding how things will be done.

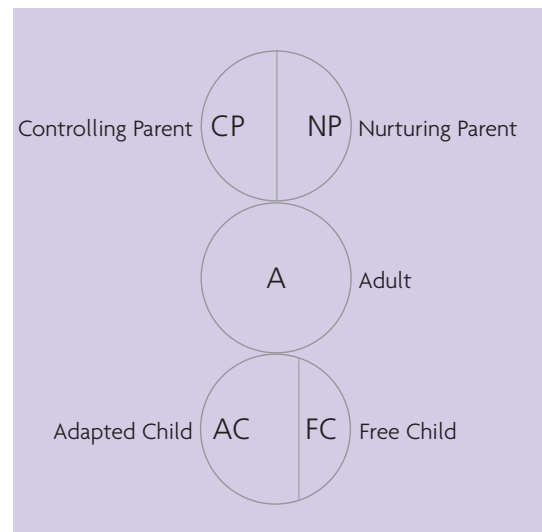


Figure 4. Functional model of ego states

Depending on the soundness of my judgment, I may do this with positive or negative effect! The impact of my Controlling Parent will also be affected by the recipient's experience of previous parent figures. I may be encouraging or critical, I may offer praise or blame. Much will depend on my own experience of my parents as leaders, and whether I decide to imitate them or modify their role modelling.

When functioning in Nurturing mode, the same principles apply: I may nourish, protect, care for and serve the interests of others in contextually appropriate ways, or I may smother and diminish them by my actions of over-protectiveness or indulgence.

There is no good or bad, right or wrong judgment intrinsic in the terms Controlling or Nurturing – either may be positive or negative. The terms 'critical parent' or 'inner critic' are sometimes heard – these apply to the negative aspect of Controlling.

A TA therapeutic treatment plan may include a proposal for the therapist to support the client to rebuild their own inner Parent, to provide the ability to achieve a sound balance of Controlling and Nurturing functioning to take care of themselves and others appropriately. This is sometimes referred to as 'self re-parenting'⁷.

The Adult ego state in diagrams is never sub-divided in either Structural or Functional models, because Adult functions in the moment as a data processor. Some writers take the view that the Adult is entirely without affect and comprises only cognition but Berne's own definition states that in my Adult, I am processing information using my

thinking and my feelings, and behaving accordingly.

In the Functional model, the Child ego state is sub-divided into two, and again no judgment is inferred about good or bad, desirable or undesirable. On the left-hand side is shown the Adapted mode where the Child adapts to Parent messages. Adapted Child may be further sub-divided into Compliant (following Parent instructions without demur) and Rebellious (protesting either overtly or covertly at Parent instructions). There may be times, albeit rare, when a Rebellious Child mode would be helpful in protecting the person. However, mostly that mode is likely to be unhelpful. The client may be supported in using their Adult to explore how that may be.

The right-hand side is labelled Natural, or Free Child. This describes the spontaneous functioning of the Child unrestrained by Parental controls or messages. Free Child functioning will include curiosity, creativity, and play. It also includes uncensored affect and instinctive responses to pleasure, fear or anger.

Interpersonal patterns of communication

Berne used his ego state model to illustrate interpersonal communication patterns, as in Figure 5⁸. He drew vectors across the spaces between two sets of stacked circles to illustrate what he called 'transactions' – a stimulus/response exchange of interpersonal, verbal or non-verbal communication.

Using the diagram thus, conversations between people can be sequentially captured and tracked, offering an opportunity to choose where and how

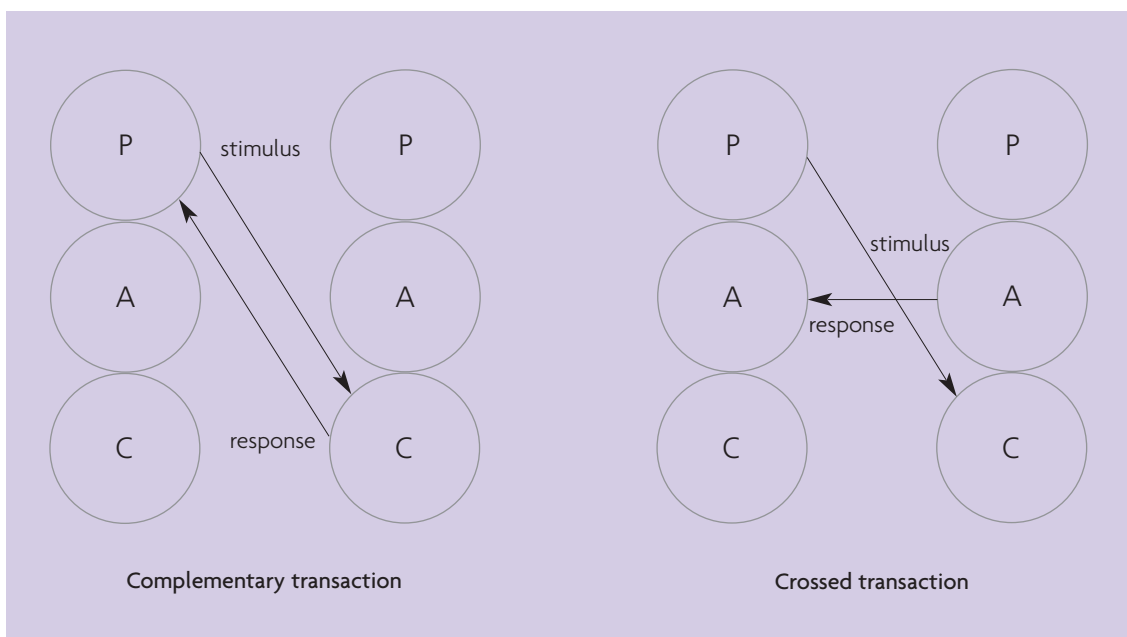


Figure 5. Communication process

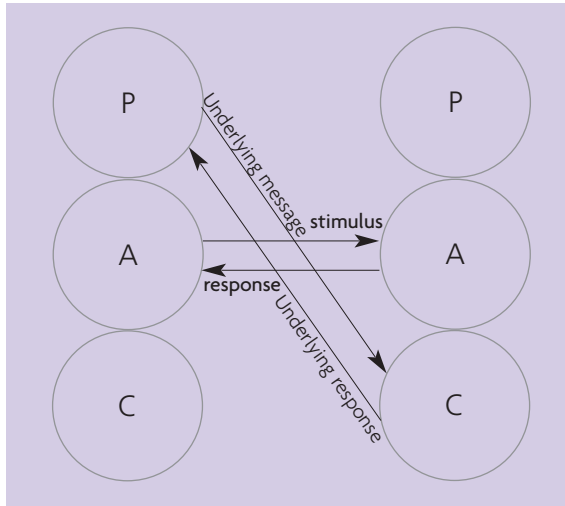


Figure 6. Example of an ulterior transaction

to change the sequence: for example, changing conversations at work from a confrontational Parent to Child to a cooperative Adult to Adult response.

The left-hand pair of stacked circles shows transactions that may continue indefinitely (when the vectors are drawn in parallel, or shown as complementary to each other) unless interrupted. The right-hand pair show where the stimulus intention is 'crossed' by the response, to invite the first speaker into Adult instead of Parent.

Figure 6 shows a covert (or 'ulterior') message as a response. This diagram is very useful as it enables both overt and covert messages to be clearly shown alongside one another.

Conclusion

I hope this brief review of some ways in which the TA concept of ego states can be applied in the workplace has encouraged readers to revisit what TA has to offer.

Qualified TA practitioners specialising in all four fields of application (psychotherapy, counselling, educational and organisational) may be found via two UK websites: www.ita.org.uk and www.institda.org.uk ■

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Qualitative approach

Chris Athanasiades and **Allan Winthrop** propose a systematic research methodology

There is a general acknowledgement of the usefulness of workplace counselling, however there is little understanding about why it is useful or the ways in which it is useful'. McLeod and McLeod² assert that further evidence is needed with regards to:

Which counselling approaches are most appropriate in the workplace setting? Under what conditions is it best to utilise in-house or external models of service provision? Are there different client needs (and counselling interventions) associated with gender, patterns of sickness absence or job role? What impact does organisational culture have on counselling utilisation and effectiveness?

Hill¹ concedes that research into workplace counselling has not had much success in addressing these issues because workplace counselling has been looked at from the perspective of the medical model which is rather limiting in its outlook. On corollary, the methodologies that have been used have been trying to locate change within the individual employee. However, employees are part of dynamic organisations and change should be viewed within the wider context of organisational change and development. On the basis of this, it would be reasonable to suggest that research in workplace counselling would benefit from the use of appropriate methodologies that are able to capture the richness of employee experiences. Qualitative approaches are credited with the ability to provide fuller and denser accounts of people's experiences³. In recognition of this, there has been a call for the use of more such approaches in counselling and psychotherapy research⁴, as well as in the area of work psychology⁵ including workplace counselling⁶.

Qualitative research is a prolific area and further reading is required if one is to obtain a comprehensive overview of it. The ideas put forward in this paper mainly relate to social constructionism a popular type of interpretative qualitative research.

A case for qualitative research in workplace counselling

The perusal of journal articles attests to the dominance of experimental studies in published research⁷. Experimental studies concentrate on the acquisition of numerical and statistical evidence in the wider