

Notes on Transactional Analysis

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Transactional Analysis - Berne's Three Ego States

In addition to the analysis of the interactions between individuals, Transactional Analysis also involves the identification of the **ego states** behind each and every transaction. Berne defined an ego state as

"a consistent pattern of feeling and experience directly related to a corresponding consistent pattern of behavior."

(Berne E 1961 p13)

As a practicing psychiatrist in Carmel, California in the early 1950s, Berne treated hundreds of patients. During the course of their treatment, he consistently noted that his patients, and indeed all people, could and would change over the course of a conversation. The changes would not necessarily be verbal - the changes could involve facial expressions, body language, body temperature, and many other non-verbal cues.

In one counseling session, Berne treated a 35 year old lawyer. During the session, the lawyer (a male) said "I'm not really a lawyer; I'm just a little boy." But outside the confines of Dr. Berne's office, this patient was a successful, hard-charging, attorney. Later, in their sessions, the lawyer would frequently ask Dr. Berne if he was talking "to the lawyer or the little boy." Berne was intrigued by this, as he was seeing a single individual display two "states of being." Berne began referring to these two states as "Adult" and "Child." Later, Berne identified a third state, one that seemed to represent what the patient had observed in his parents when he was small. Berne referred to this as "parent." As Berne then turned to his other patients, he began to observe that these three **ego states** were present in all of them. As Berne gained confidence in this theory, he went on to introduce these in a 1957 paper - one year before he published his seminal paper introducing Transactional Analysis.

Berne ultimately defined the three ego states as: **Parent, Adult, and Child**. It should be carefully noted that the descriptions of these ego states do NOT necessarily correspond to their common definitions as used the English language.

The following are detailed descriptions of the three ego states:

Parent - The parent represents a massive collection of recordings in the brain of **external** events experienced or perceived in approximately the first five years of life. Since the majority of the external events experienced by a child are actions of the parent, the ego state was appropriately called Parent. Note that events perceived by the child from individuals that are NOT parents (but who are often in parent-like roles) are also recorded in the Parent. When Transactional Analysts refer to the Parent ego state (as opposed to a biological or stepparent), it is capitalized. The same goes for the other two state (Adult and Child)

Examples of recordings in the Adult include:

- "Never talk to strangers"
- "Always chew with your mouth closed"
- "Look both ways before you cross the street"

It is worth noting that, while recording these events, the young child has no way to filter the data; the events are recorded without question and without analysis. One can consider that these events are imposed on the child.

There are other data experienced by the child that are not recorded in the Parent. This is recorded in the Adult, which will be described shortly.

Child - In contrast to the Parent, the Child represents the recordings in the brain of *internal* events associated with external events the child perceives. Stated another way, stored in the Child are the *emotions* or *feelings* which accompanied external events. Like the Parent, recordings in the Child occur from childbirth all the way up to the age of approximately 5 years old.

Examples of recordings in the Child include:

- "When I saw the monster's face, I felt really scared"
- "The clown at the birthday party was really funny!"

Adult - The Adult is the last ego state. Close to one year of age, a child begins to exhibit gross motor activity. The child learns that he or she can control a cup from which to drink, that he or she can grab a toy. In social settings, the child can play peek-a-boo.

This is the beginning of the Adult in the small child. Adult data grows out of the child's ability to see what is different than what he or she observed (Parent) or felt (Child). In other words, the Adult allows the young person to evaluate and validate Child and Parental data. Berne (1961) describes the Adult as being "principally concerned with transforming stimuli into pieces of information, and processing and filing that information on the basis of previous experience". One of the key functions of the Adult is to validate data in the parent. An example is:

"Wow. It really is true that pot handles should always be turned into the stove" said Sally as she saw her brother burn himself when he grabbed a pot handle sticking out from the stove.

In this example, Sally's Adult reached the conclusion that data in her Parent was valid. Her Parent had been taught "always turn pot handles into the stove, otherwise you could get burned." And with her analysis of her brother's experience, her Adult concluded that this was indeed correct.

In an attempt to explain Transactional Analysis to a more mainstream audience, Dr. Thomas Harris developed the following summary. Although this is a very good tool for beginners to learn, keep in mind that this is a wildly simplified approach, and can

have the effect of "dumbing down" Transactional Analysis. The summary is as follows:

*“ Parent - taught concept
Child - felt concept
Adult - learned concept”*

(Harris T 1967 p12)

Analyzing Transactions

When two people communicate, one person initiates a transaction with the *transactional stimulus*. The person at whom the stimulus is directed will respond with the *transactional response*. Simple Transactional Analysis involves identifying which ego state directed the stimulus and which ego state in the other person executed the response.

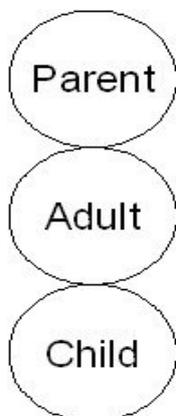
According to Dr. Berne (1961), the **simplest transactions are between Adults ego states**. For example, a surgeon will survey the patient, and based upon the data before him/her, his/her Adult decides that the scalpel is the next instrument required. The surgeon's Adult holds out his/her hand, providing the transactional stimulus to the nurse. The nurse's Adult looks at the hand, and based upon previous experiences, concludes that the scalpel is needed. The nurse then places the scalpel in the surgeon's hand.

But not all transactions proceed in this manner. Some transactions involve ego states other than the Adult.

This leads us to Parent - Child transactions, which are almost as simple as Adult-Adult transactions. Quoting Dr. Berne in *Games People Play*:

"The fevered child asks for a glass of water, and the nurturing mother brings it."

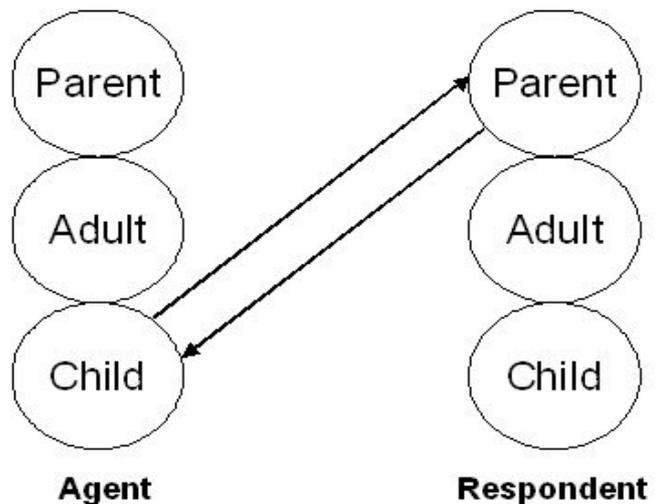
(Berne E 1964 p24)



In this, the Child of small child directs an inquiry to the Parent of his/her mother. The Parent of the mother acknowledges this stimulus, and then gives the water to the child. In this example, the small child's request is the stimuli, and the parent providing the water is the response.

One of the tools used by a TA practitioner is a **structural diagram**, as represented on the left. A structural diagram represents the complete personality of any individual. It includes the Parent, Adult, and Child ego states, all separate and distinct from each other.

Transactional Analysts will then construct a diagram showing the ego states involved in a particular transaction. The transaction to the right shows a Parent - Child transaction, with the Child ego state providing the *transactional stimulus*, and the Adult responding with the *transactional response*.



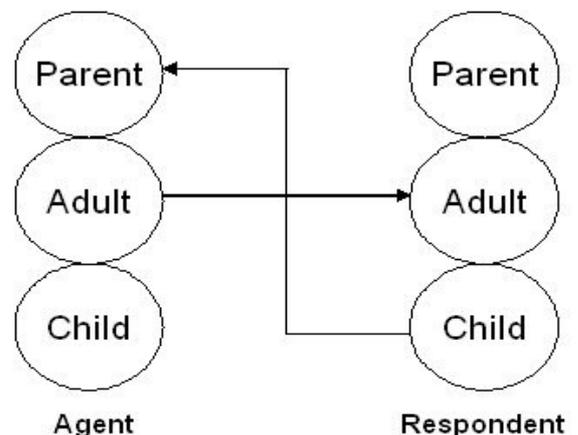
This transaction matches the Parent - Child example listed above, with the fevered child asking his/her mother for a glass of water.

So far, the two transactions described can be considered **complementary transactions**. In a complementary transaction, the response must go back from the receiving ego state to the sending ego state. For example, a person may initiate a transaction directed towards one ego state of the respondent. The respondent's ego state detects the stimuli, and then that particular ego state (meaning the ego state to which the stimulus was directed) produces a response. According to Dr. Berne, these transactions are healthy and represent normal human interactions. As Berne says in *Games People Play*

"communication will proceed as long as transactions are complementary."

(Berne 1964 p24)

However, not all transactions between humans are healthy or normal. In those cases, the transaction is classified as a **crossed transaction**. In a crossed transaction, an ego state different than the ego state which received the stimuli is the one that responds. The diagram to the right shows a typical crossed transaction. An example is as follows:



Agent's Adult: "Do you know where my cuff links are?" (note that this stimuli is directed at the Respondents Adult).

Respondent's Child: "You always blame me for everything!"

(Berne 1964 p31)

This is one the classic crossed transactions that occurs in marriage. Instead of the Respondent's Adult responding with "I think they're on the desk", it is the Respondent's Child that responds back.

It is important to note that when analyzing transactions, one must look beyond *what* is being said. According to Dr. Berne (1961) , one must look at *how* the words are being delivered (accents on particular words, changes in tone, volume, etc.) as the *non-verbal signs* accompanying those words (body language, facial expressions, etc.). Transactional Analysts will pay attention to all of these cues when analyzing a transaction and identifying which ego states are involved.

References

Berne, Eric. *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy*. Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1961.

Berne, Eric. *Games People Play*. Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1964. Page 29

Harris, Thomas A. *I'm OK - You're OK*. Harper Collins Publishers Inc., New York, 1967. Page 12.

Further Reading

Stewart, Ian and Joines, Vann. *TA Today: A New Introduction to Transactional Analysis*. Lifespace Publishing, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. 1987.