

## Strengthening the 'Adult' in therapy: Transactional Analysis theory

Sometimes a client's Child or Parent ego state can dominate or overwhelm that person's way of being. For instance, fuelled by their Child ego state, the client might be emotionally overly reactive, with little capacity to analyse a situation before responding. In extreme cases, it can be hard to detect the presence of any Adult thinking and/or feeling. Alternatively, a client might be overly repressed/oppressed and oppressive to others, indicating in turn, dominant critical injunctions from a Critical Parent. The Parent ego state may also represent the actual parent's own vulnerability where their Adult is similarly driven by Parent or Child needs – a dynamic that may be replicated in a trans-generational field. (This historical focus which considers personality development over time is explicated by what is known as a second-order structural model of TA - Stewart & Joines, 1987).

At a less extreme level, we may find Child or Parent ways of being leaking into the client's Adult ego. If, out of the client's awareness, unhelpful Child neediness and/or Parent judgements creep into Adult reasoning, we say the Adult is 'contaminated' by Child or Parent (Berne, 1986; Clarkson, 1992). For instance, the view that "I can't write academic essays" may be spoken from Child or Parent shame, while "We'll be happy once we have a baby" could be said to indicate Child '*magical thinking*.' Similarly, it is possible that apparently 'rational' statements such as "immigrants can't be trusted" or "I have to support the Islamic State as I believe in Islam" may contain some Parent prejudice and Child fear. As the client grew up, perhaps with little experience to go by, they may have believed these various social (and perhaps inter-generational) messages, which they now see as 'fact.' In these ways, childhood situations are mistaken for grown-up reality (Stewart & Joines, 1987).

Given the way the Adult mediates between Child needs and Parent demands, reinforcing and strengthening the client's Adult ego is useful as a central therapeutic strategy. Here the boundaries between the ego states are clarified, including separating the Adult from introjected Parent and/or archaic Child ego states. The goal is to facilitate and empower the person to engage their Adult ego state mindfully, in the here and now, so that the person can choose to employ the positive aspects of whatever way of being is most appropriate to any given situation. But how exactly do we help clients achieve this?

Following Berne (1961/1986) and others, I find it useful to think of a three-pronged (often sequential) approach: 1) decontaminating the Adult from Parent prejudices; 2) deconfusing the Child ego state; and 3) nourishing the Integrating Adult. (See figure 1). In his integrative approach to TA, Erskine (1991) presents a similar three-pronged strategy: i. Amending or decommissioning the extereopsychic (i.e. Parent) ego states to resolve internal conflicts; ii. deconfusing the archaeopsychic (i.e. Child) ego states and relaxing fixed archaic defenses; iii. Facilitating the integration of life experience into a neopsychic (i.e. Adult) ego. Taking a more psychodynamic line, Hargaden and Sills (2002) build on Menaker's (1995) work by presenting three categories of transference: projective, introjective and transformational. In contrast to Erskine's work, the latter transference relates more to working with projective identifications than with those of the neopsyche.

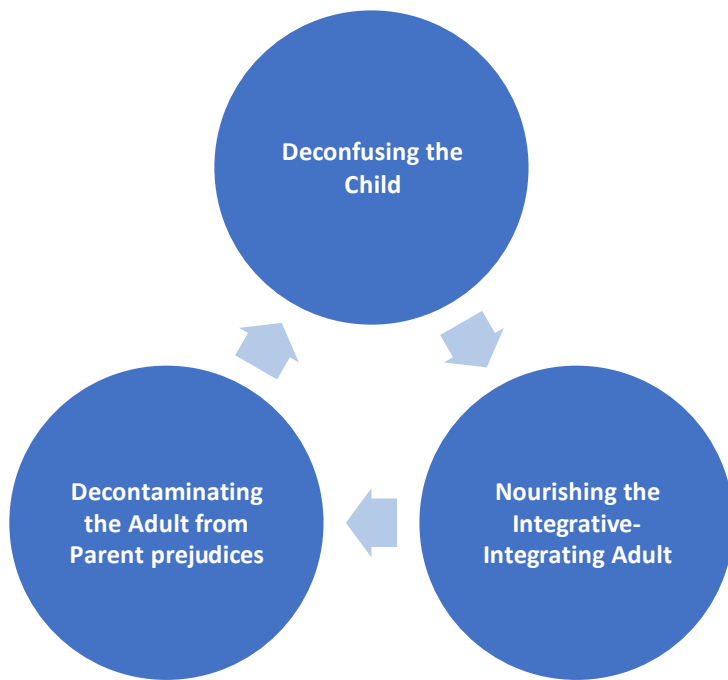


Figure 1 Three ways to work with the Adult ego state

## References

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